

## Angela Merici vision at Brudazzo An iconographical approach

*Angela Merici (1474?-1540) founded the Company of St Ursula in Brescia, in 1535, a new, almost revolutionary, foundation because of the emancipation of women that it implicitly affirmed. Considering the condition of women, her foundation opened a conclusive breach in the established system of the time, as much in the Church as in society. In the centuries that followed, the Ursulines devoted themselves to the education of women.*

A major event in the life of Angela Merici, on the truth of which everyone is agreed, was her vision of “the ladder”, at the place called Brudazzo, both a founding and a prophetic vision of her mission.

According to the work *Angela Merici, Contribution towards a biography*<sup>1</sup>, the first to give testimony of this event was Father Francesco Landini who was confessor to the virgins of the Company of Brescia. He reports how, at harvest time, at the siesta hour which followed the meal, Angela went aside to pray. “One day, enraptured in God, she seemed to see heaven open and coming from it a procession of angels and virgins, in alternate pairs. The angels were playing various instruments and the virgins were singing. The tune of that song remained so imprinted in Angela’s memory that she could even sing it. And as the procession files past, behold her dead sister appears, and tells Angela about her future mission”: to found a company of virgins like those in the vision.

This vision constitutes one of the major themes of Merician iconography. We are familiar with a great number of representations (paintings, engravings, sculptures) which use the language of images of the time to try to make accessible Angela’s inexpressible spiritual experience. Generally they show Angela contemplating one ladder which symbolically links heaven and earth, with angels and virgins ascending and descending. Less frequent are the representations with two ladders, like the painting and the two engravings analysed in this article.

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**The painting**, oil on canvas in a gilded wooden frame, is on show in the “Chapelle Saint Michel” of the old Ursuline convent of Tours (17<sup>th</sup> century); it has just been restored care of the “Association Touraine Canada”, the owner. It is not signed, but bears a date, 1744, which could be that of the making of the canvas.

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<sup>1</sup> Angela Merici - Contribution towards a biography. L.Mariani-E.Tarolli-M.Seynaeve. Editrice Ancora Milano, 1989 p.125



The engravings can be seen in the General Archives of the Ursulines of the Roman Union (AGUUR) which has two originals. They are signed by German engravers, one by Rugendas, the other by Göz and Klauber. Although different, they are similar both in their overall composition and in their texts and Latin quotations.



The painting, in all likelihood, was inspired by one or both of these engravings and was without doubt commissioned by a community of Ursulines. Note that at the bottom of the three representations, an inscription in Latin which points to Angela as the central character: the engravings have: “Blessed Angela, foundress of the Society of St Ursula”; the painting has “Blessed Angela Merici of Brescia at Desenzano, foundress of the Ursulines”; the painting specifies and gives Angela’s family name (Merici) and the names of the two towns where her life pursued its course (Brescia and Desenzano). The inscription of the painting seemed to have been added (it is stitched on to the canvas) and was certainly not a part of it at the beginning. The painting includes other variants compared to the engravings, thus lending interest to a comparative study. This is our starting point.

### The centre of the painting

The centre of the painting shows the bust of a religious on a conch. She is wearing the Ursuline habit. For those who know the numerous canvases which can be seen in the convents of the German speaking Ursulines (Germany, Austria) and which represent Angela at the time of other events of her life, the similarity of the style of the face and the habit is striking.

In her left hand, she holds a crucifix: Christ on the Cross is surrounded by a white lily, the symbol of virginal purity.

We know, from her Writings, that Angela had a great devotion to the Passion of Christ and that she put the love of Christ expressed by consecrated virginity at the heart of her new Company.



In her right hand, she holds out an open book on which we can read three Latin inscriptions, in translation: 1) The first is exactly the inscription on the engravings: “Blessed Angela, foundress of the Society of St Ursula”. This confirms the affirmation that the inscription at the bottom of the painting is an addition which was not part of the original and which now is shown as a kind of double.

2) The second inscription reproduces a biblical verse taken from the book of Genesis and gives the reference: Gen 28.

3) The third inscription, which follows the biblical text, but which does not belong to it, has only two words: "love God" and appears curiously truncated ...

A close examination of the engravings will allow us to uncover the meaning. It is true that, on the engravings, this verse of Genesis is not found on the book, but at the bottom of the picture; while on the book, we find the two words "love God", no longer truncated this time, but completed by the following: "Love God more than everything and your neighbour more than yourself". This quotation, which takes us back to the New Testament, takes us also to the Constitutions of the Ursulines: in keeping to this maxim, the Ursulines, contemplatives and apostles in the following of Angela, show the twofold love which animates them, love of God and love of others. Writing only the two first words of the quotation, the painter was conscious of addressing a specific public who would know how to perceive in them the full meaning.

The key to reading the whole painting is given to us in the biblical reference written on the book which Angela holds out: the book of Genesis, chapter 28 (Gen. 28). This chapter is the one which describes Jacob's dream and the divine words which accompany this vision. Verse 12 is quoted: "He saw a ladder planted on the ground with its top reaching to heaven; and God's angels were going up and down on it". It is important to read the whole chapter to take in, in its entirety, the message the painting would give.

Around the central image of which we have just been speaking, the painting, like the engravings, is organised with a perfect symmetry: the part above and the part below, each part with two pictures which correspond on the right and on the left.

**The upper part of the painting** illustrates Angela's founding vision.

The painter, following the engraver, has wanted to represent two visions, two ladders.

On the left, Jacob's ladder is the literal illustration of the verse from Genesis: at the foot of the ladder, Jacob asleep receives the visit of an angel, he has a dream and sees a ladder which, symbolically, links earth and heaven, the angels of God go up and are welcomed by the Eternal Father who opens his arms to them.

On the right, Angela is the subject: another ladder stands in the same way. It is leaning against a hill; the engravings show three crosses planted in the earth, clear allusion to the Crucifixion's hill at Jerusalem where we know that Angela went on pilgrimage and where she received the grace for the foundation of her Company. The three crosses, essential elements in Merician iconography, are missing from the painting. The restoration could not go as far as the first level of paint. But the Mediterranean vegetation of the Holy Land, a palm tree, clearly appears. On the ladder which leads to heaven, virgins and angels ascend; a group of women welcome them; one of them is crowned and carries in her right hand a standard and an arrow. It is surely St Ursula who was martyred and died pierced by an arrow. According to the Golden Legend of Jacques de Voragine, she took with her a group of ten virgins, converts, to Rome. It was her whom Angela chose as patroness of her new foundation, the Company of St Ursula.

Clearly, in the upper part of the painting, Angela is presented as a type of new Jacob and we are invited to read chapter 28 of Genesis as a word which applies also to her. Could it be this that emerges from the text on the book which seems almost to make Angela the grammatical subject of the verse from Genesis: "Angela....saw a ladder....".



**The lower part of the painting** illustrates the prophetic character of Angela's vision.

Angela's vision was at the same time, a founding vision and a prophetic vision, as the announcement contained in verse 14 of the chapter from Genesis leads us to think: "Your descendants will be as plentiful as the dust on the ground; you will spread out to west and east, to north and south, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants." The lower part of the painting, an illustration of this verse, relates the expansion of Angela's foundation both in Europe and in Canada, both represented allegorically.

On the left, Europe is allegorically represented by a young woman in a coloured dress supporting the conch with the bust of Angela; she seems to want to offer it, as in a relay hand-over, to Canada who holds out a hand to receive it. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, foundations of Ursuline convents spread rapidly throughout Europe.

On the right, Canada is personified by a dark-skinned individual, clothed in a loincloth and a headdress, representing the Amerindian tribes of North America. With Marie of the Incarnation, Ursuline from the convent of Tours, who left Dieppe for Canada in 1639, the Ursulines were the first to go toward these tribes. Interesting detail: the headdress of the young Indian is not made of feathers but of the prickles of the porcupine; fixed on to a light wooden structure they form the everyday headdress.



Between the two figures, the countryside opens on to the sea, on which float two boats, symbolising the Ursulines' voyage to a new world. It is possible on the engravings to distinguish in one boat one religious and in the other two. This theme of the boat takes us to the iconography of Ursula and her companions; it also evokes the voyage Angela Merici made to the Holy Land before the foundation of her Company; it is also suggestive of the crossing made by Marie of the Incarnation and her companions a century later, the first consecrated women to cross the ocean on a voyage of no return to New France.

To finish let us note that three biblical quotations in Latin are found on the two engravings which are not found on the painting as it is today:

The first stands as a kind of title: "Viderunt eam Filiae, et Beatissimam praedicaverunt": "Her daughters have seen her and proclaimed her Blessed." (Cant. 6)

The two others seem to descend from the sky towards Angela: one like a word coming from the Eternal Father: "Docete Filias": "Teach your Daughters" (Jerem. 4); the other coming from St Ursula: "Gloria ejus Filiae": "Her daughters are her Glory" (Ps. 44).

The three quotations mention "Daughters" of Angela, emphasizing the fact that she is a foundress who has begun a work, with a posterity to continue it. The first affirms again that these Daughters already consider her Blessed. The painting is dated 1744; Angela's beatification only took place 24 years later. But we know that the young Mother Marie Louise Schiantarelli, of the Ursuline convent of Rome, had begun, several years before, a meticulous work of document research and of awareness raising of all the monasteries of Europe and even beyond, with a view to obtaining Angela's official beatification which took place on 30 April 1768. It would be legitimate to think that it was in this atmosphere that these representations of the vision of Angela were commissioned from the engravers and the painter.

Tours, June 2012. Colette Lignon, OSU

### **Complementary Notes**

#### **The German context of the engravings and the painting of Angela's vision.**

The two engravings, which date approximately from the same time, were very likely the source of inspiration for the painting. Copying was common in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, as a technical exercise or as a source of inspiration. Artists built up portfolios of engravings from which they drew inspiration or which they reproduced in their entirety. The notion of intellectual property would only appear in the second half of the 18th century.

One of the engravings is signed Rugendas, name of a family of German artists, painters and engravers. It was probably Jeremias Gottlob Rugendas (1710-1772), son of Georg Philipp, the Elder. Jeremias worked at Augsburg and was known for his religious subjects and engravings of pictures.

The other is signed Göz and Klauber. The Klauber were also a family of engravers in Augsburg. The two brothers Joseph Sebastian (1710-1768) and Johann Baptist (1712-1787) went into partnership in 1737 with Gottfried Bernhard Göz (1708-1774) to create a Catholic publishing house in Augsburg. They produced a number of engravings of religious inspiration and a series of pictures.

We have already mentioned how the wide ranging movement which, starting from the convent of Rome, brought together all the Ursuline monasteries to invite them too to become active promoters of Angela's official beatification which would take place in 1768. It was in this context that many German Ursuline monasteries in the region of Augsburg could give commissions and could give to the artists the exact biographical, historical and spiritual elements which made possible the iconographic representations of which we have spoken. The date written on the painting and the dates of the artists who made the engravings correspond exactly to this period. Recent research by the Ursulines of the German speaking

Federation led to the discovery in the archives of the convent of Landshut, the nearest to Augsburg, of a little picture, which is also a faithful copy of the engravings, in colour, probably design done by a religious of this convent.



### The provenance of the painting.

An interesting question to follow up is that of the origin of the painting of the Angela's vision.

This work was bought in 1964, at the same time as an Adoration of the Sacred Heart, by the "Association Touraine-Canada" from the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Aix en Provence, when it had adorned the chapel.

"Les Cahiers du Patrimoine N° 30" published in France (Tours, décor et mobilier des édifices religieux et publics, Vincent Droguet et Marie Thérèse Réau, A.R.E.P Centre éditions) tell us the "the tradition, handed on by the Oblates and the members of the association, would say that they come from the old chapel of the Ursulines of this town. Considering their subjects, this origin is more than plausible, but it must not be forgotten that during the Revolution, the convent of Aix, became the "dépôt des Andrettes" and served as a place of conservation for works which had been seized. The paintings could come from the convent of Aix itself or from another Ursuline convent in the region where they had been seized before being stored at the "Andrettes". In fact there is a *Sainte Angèle* in the list drawn up "le 19 germinal an XI" of *objects left at the "dépôt des Andrettes" to be kept there.*"

Considering the German context of the painting as well as the style, also German, of the face of Angela and the Ursuline habit she wears, it could be asked how this painting could have been found in a convent in the South of France before the Revolution. Could the canvas have been executed in Germany and given afterwards to a monastery in France? Or was it a work done in Provence from the engravings of Augsburg which would have circulated among the Ursuline convents? We can recall the calling on all the monasteries of the Order in the years preceding the beatification, an invitation which crossed frontiers, fed by a vast network of exchange of letters. We know as well that artists travelled a lot from Germany to Italy and to France. The question remains open!

## **Saint Angela and Marie of the Incarnation**

The hypothesis has sometimes been voiced that the central figure in the painting could be Marie of the Incarnation. We do not think so. Too many historical and iconographical elements converge in favour of Angela Merici.

It is interesting, however, to recall how present are the Tourangelles Marie of the Incarnation and her companions behind the allegory of Canada and to realise how much her fame had crossed borders in Europe and spread into the German monasteries.

In the period of the engravings and the painting, a century after her arrival in Canada in 1639, the French presence in New France began to meet with difficulty with the advance of the British. However, the missionary spirit which had carried Marie of the Incarnation across the seas to evangelise the Amerindian peoples and to create the first girls' school of the New World continued to be seen by the Ursuline monasteries as a major event and an exemplary reference point for their evangelical mission.

As for Marie of the Incarnation herself, she clearly sets her mission within the extension of Angela's foundation since she wanted to give her name to one of her most fervent neophytes: "I had her given the name of our first mother, St Angela, thinking it was her due, since it was in a house of Angela's daughters she was converted." (Letter LXV to the Superior of the Ursulines of Tours, 29 September 1642 in Marie of the Incarnation 1599-1672 Correspondence, translated by Sr St Dominic Kelly OSU from the French edition by Dom Guy Oury, Abbaye Saint Pierre, Solesmes, 1971).