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Annotations and Additions to the Iconographic Corpus of Blessed Michele Carcano from Milan - Observant Franciscan Preacher

Michele Carcano from Milan (1427-1484) was one of the most famous Observant Franciscan preachers of the 15th century. While preaching in Lodi he was seized with an illness that led him to death in the local Observant convent. His reputation as a preacher and the allocation of some miracles quickly earned him the popular veneration, especially in the Lombard region and the cult within the Order of Minorites. Three images of this preacher, dating from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, had been hitherto recorded. The most significant is the votive portrait, once in Chalandon collection, which bears a long inscription that identifies and celebrates the character. Completing this group of images is a votive fresco in the church of San Nazzaro della Costa in Novara and the portrait bust in profile in a clypeus in the Sagramoso Library in the convent of San Bernardino in Verona.

Iconographically, the former Chalandon table presents a complex image, which becomes clear only in part by reading the accompanying text. Blessed Michele, for example, wears the cloak over the tunic to emphasize the character of his itinerant preaching. Even his hands, covered by the sleeves of the robe and the hood up over his head, are iconographic details that refer to the daily practice of the Minors. The painting was commissioned certainly under the influence of a strong personal devotion, perhaps as a votive, and yet, through a peculiar choice of iconographic details, it has blessed the first as a preacher, not as a miracle worker.

We can add to the above mentioned images one in the form of the portrait by the author of a manuscript of Carcano, a fresco in the Milanese church of San Bernardino alle Monache and a small panel of the Lombard school that depicts a portrait of the Blessed Franciscan with a cap.

In the Milanese fresco the imposing figure of Carcano shows remarkable similarities with the physiognomic votive portrait. Carcano holds a closed book, wears a cap on his head and a pair of clogs. The book refers to the significant production of texts for preaching that the Blessed has composed and his intellectual activity, while the clogs are the symbol of belonging to the Observants. The cap refers instead to a garment that really wore the monk, and was kept as a relic in the church of Santa Chiara in Milan.

The tablet of the Lombard school portrays the Blessed who wears his cap. The physiognomy of the face, strongly draws on the portrait, bears strong similarities with the effigies of Michele Carcano in the votive panel and Milanese fresco, allowing us to recognize his portrait. For the lack of iconographic attributes in this painting the hat is a strong element of identification of the character. The client and the audience of this picture should have belonged to the same group of people who had personally known Carcano and who had desired to keep alive the memory of him and his teaching through a real portrait.

The iconography of Michele Carcano has been supplemented by some new attributes: a closed book, clogs and especially a cap. These are details that are skilfully combined, along with physiognomic features recognizable to highlight the theological culture, the untiring efforts in preaching and affiliation to the Friars Minor, instead of his miraculous gifts.