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GIOVANNI BATTISTA BRACELLI'S *BIZZARIE DI VARIE FIGURE*: METAPHOR AND CAPRICCIO

Аннотация. Статья посвящена анализу серии офортов Джованни Баттиста Брачелли «*Bizzarie di varie figure*» с точки зрения ее принадлежности к той или иной жанровой традиции. Определение жанра представляется крайне важным, так как именно оно дает возможность среди бесконечного поля возможных интерпретаций произведения выбрать условно верное и обосновать этот выбор. С точки зрения автора, *bizzarie* является ответвлением жанра *каприччо* — в понимании, заданном произведениями Жака Калло. Доказательством этой гипотезы служит разбор титульного листа и посвящения серии, представленный в статье. Так, слово *bizzarie*, читаемое на титульном листе, сходно по смыслу со словом *каприччо*; значения этих слов претерпели с течением времени те же изменения. Посвящение же представляет серия как интеллектуальный продукт, подчеркивая, однако, спонтанность его появления. Именно исходя из особенностей жанра *каприччо* следует трактовать значение листов «*Bizzarie di varie figure*», являющегося принципиально разомкнутым произведением, не предполагающим единого нарратива. Таким образом, интерпретация серии Брачелли как зашифрованного послания, смысл которого скрыт от непосвященных, подобно аллегорическим портретам Арчимбольдо, не представляется возможной.

Ключевые слова: Джованни Баттиста Брачелли, Жак Калло, гравюра, офорт, *capriccio*, *bizzarie*, Медичи, метафора

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GIOVANNI BATTISTA BRACELLI'S *BIZZARIE DI VARIE FIGURE*: METAPHOR AND CAPRICCIO

Abstract. This article is devoted to the analysis of *Bizzarie di varie figure*, a set of etchings by Giovanni Battista Bracelli, in terms of its inclusion in a particular genre tradition. Determining the genre is extremely important, since it makes it possible to choose a provisionally correct interpretation of a work from among an endless field of possible variants and to justify this choice. I view *bizzarie* as a filiation of the capriccio genre, in the sense of the term formed in the writings of Jacques Callot. This hypothesis is supported by the analysis, presented in this article, of the title page and the dedication of the set. The meaning of the word *bizzarie*, which is found on the title page, is similar to a great extent to the term *capriccio*, and has undergone the same changes over time. The dedication, on the other hand, presents the set as an intellectual product, emphasizing, however, the spontaneity of its creation. The plates of *Bizzarie di varie figure* should be interpreted according to the characteristic features of the capriccio genre and the whole set should be seen as a fundamentally open text, not based on a consistent narrative. For this reason, it is not possible to interpret Bracelli's set as an encrypted message, similar to Arcimboldo's allegorical portraits, whose meaning is hidden from the uninitiated.

Keywords: Giovanni Battista Bracelli, Jacques Callot, print, etching, capriccio, bizzarie, Medici, metaphor

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Extravagant even for modern taste, *Bizzarie di varie figure*, a set of etchings published in 1624 by the little-known Italian artist Giovanni Battista Bracelli (active 1616–1649), is often seen by the audience as an unsolved cipher, a hidden message, the meaning of which may be found, if not now, then someday and by someone else (Fig. 1–3). It is unknown whether this effect corresponds to the author’s intention (and what exactly was his intention), however, we suggest that this set is not so much a riddle without a solution but a fundamentally open work, one not based on a consistent narrative or *historia*.

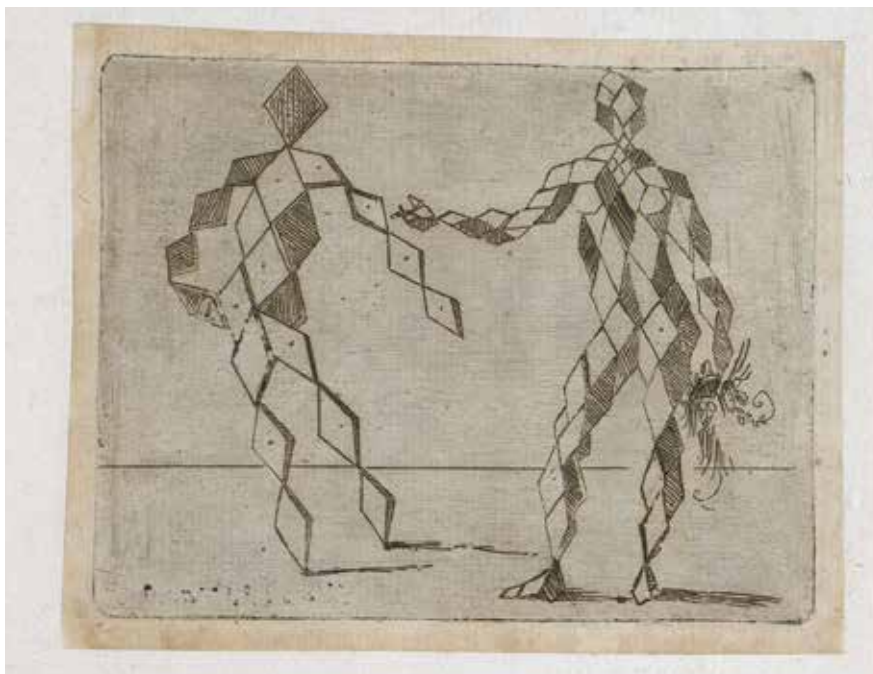


Fig. 1. Giovanni Battista Bracelli. Plate 14 from the set *Bizzarie di varie figure*. 1624 Etching. State Hermitage (Number is given according to the Rosenwald exemplar of the set)

Why could not *Bizzarie di varie figure* be a coherent statement like the allegorical portraits of Giuseppe Arcimboldo¹, even though Bracelli’s set was clearly inspired by the composite heads of the Milanese painter? From our point of view, the negative answer to this question can be justified by the genre or genre tradition of capriccio, to which this series of prints belongs. Moreover, Bracelli himself² indicates this affiliation on the title page and the dedication to his set.

¹ For details about the symbolic program of Arcimboldo’s paintings see [Kaufmann 1976: 275–296; 1989: 119–122].

² Little is known about the life of Giovanni Battista Bracelli, but the available information is rather contradictory: several people with this name appear in the sources. Most likely, his short career developed in Florence, where he studied at the Academy of Disegno, then in Livorno, Rome, and Naples [Martini 1986: 42–44; Reed 1989: 230–233].

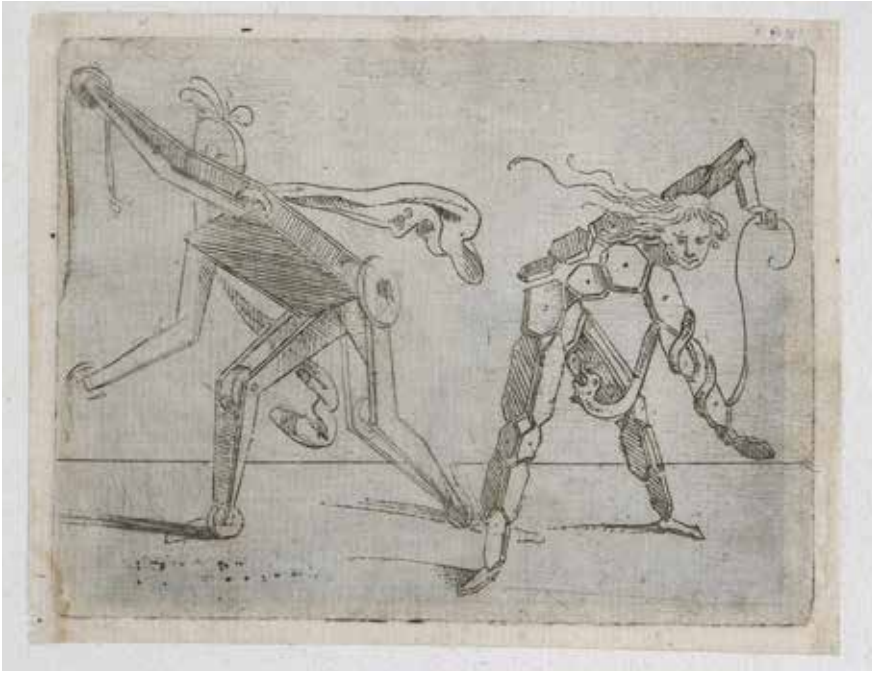


Fig. 2. *Giovanni Battista Bracelli. Plate 24 from the set Bizzarie di varie figure. 1624 Etching. State Hermitage*

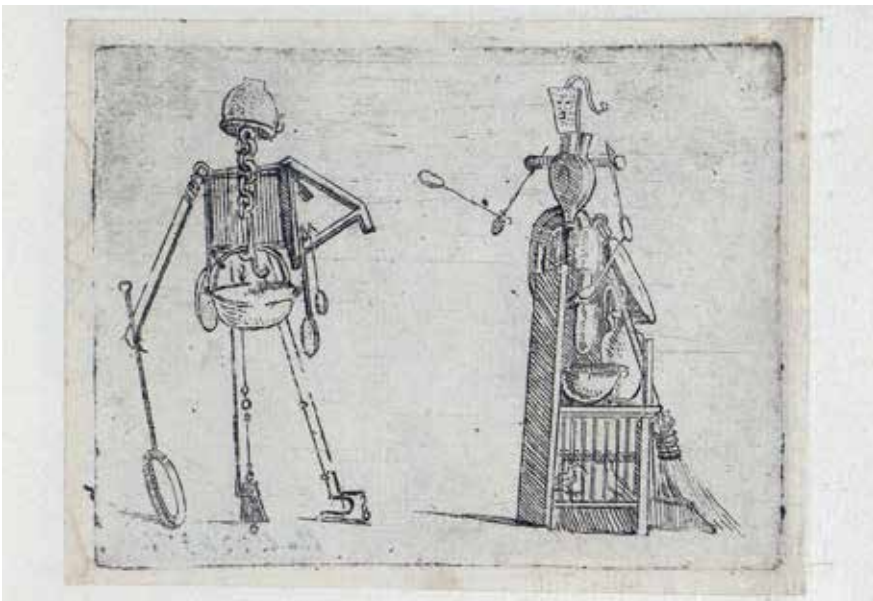


Fig. 3. *Giovanni Battista Bracelli. Plate 45 from the set Bizzarie di varie figure. 1624 Etching. State Hermitage*

The title page of *Bizzarie di varie figure* (Fig. 4) refers to the tradition established by the set *Capricci di varie figure* by Jacques Callot [Meaume 1860: 768–867]³ (Fig. 5–8), published for the first time in 1617 and extremely popular in Italy in the first third of the 17th century. Both plates formally present a figured frame with the text of a title, supported by semi-fantastic characters. The full texts of the titles are also almost identical: *Bizzarie di varie figure di Giovanbatista Bracelli pittore fiorentino, All' Ill^{mo} [ustrissimo] Don Pietro Medici and Capricci di varie figure di Icopo Callot All. [Ustrissi] mo & Ecc. [Ellenti] s. imm o don Lorenzo Medici*. This tradition also includes such sets of prints as *Capricci e habiti militari* (1610–1630) by Filippo Napolitano [Bartsch (38), No. 2–13], *Caprice Faict par De La Bella* (1641), *Varii capricci militari* (1641) and *Diversi Capricci* (1647) by the most famous follower of Callot Stefano della Bella [Baudi di Vesme 104–117, 258–263, 128–152] (Fig. 9), as well as the lesser-known set *Capricci di Varie figure* (after 1620) by Melchior Gherardini [Bartsch (21), No. 1–50, 127–133]. It is worth to note that the Gherardini's set is stylistically more than others dependent on Callot's etchings and the most technically imperfect of all above mentioned. At the same time its thematical diversity brings it closer to the *Bizzarie di varie figure*. In Gherardini's set we find allegorical figures, landscapes, and compositions on military themes. This probably could be explained by the fact that Gerardini, when creating his set, was inspired not specifically by Callot's *Capricci di varie figure*, but by his entire oeuvre.



Fig. 4. *Giovanni Battista Bracelli. Title of the set Bizzarie di varie figure. 1624 Etching. State Hermitage*

³ See the list of catalogs below.

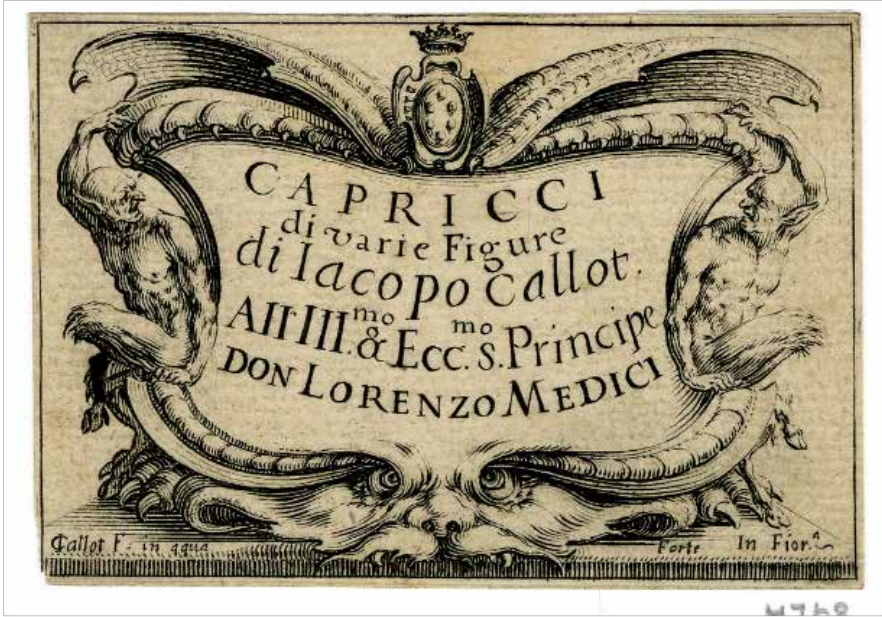


Fig. 5. Jacques Callot. Title of the set *Capricci di varie figure*. 1617
Etching. (Meaume, 768; Lieure, 214)



Fig. 6. Jacques Callot. Plate from the set *Capricci di varie figure*. 1617
Etching. (Meaume, 800; Lieure, 230)



Fig. 7. Jacques Callot. Plate from the set *Capricci di varie figure*. 1617
Etching. (Meaume, 838; Lieure, 248)



Fig. 8. Jacques Callot. Plate from the set *Capricci di varie figure*. 1617
Etching. (Meaume, 784; Lieure, 222)



Fig. 9. Stefano della Bella. Plate 20 from the set *Diversi capricci*. 1647
Etching. (Baudi di Vesme 147. IV. Published by Pierre Mariette)

Since the title of the set differs from its prototype only by the presence of the word *bizzarie*, which is close to the term *capriccio*, we would like to analyze the meaning of these two words and their evolution. The word *capriccio*, which in the modern language has the meaning of ‘caprice’ or ‘whim,’ has a long history⁴. Etymologically, it goes back to the Latin word *caporiccio*, and it, in turn, comes from the word *capo* — the head. It initially appeared in Italian literature at the end of the 13th — beginning of the 14th century, and its meaning was strikingly different from the modern one: ‘strong fear or desire’. When used to describe the physical state of a person who is overwhelmed by these feelings, the word meant trembling or fever. During the 14th and 15th centuries, its meaning gradually changed from fear to desire, and then to inspiration, with special emphasis on its spontaneity with relevance to the person’s internal state, both psychological and physical. In Vasari’s *Vite*..., the word *capriccio* is somewhat more conceptualized. He uses the related adjectives to describe individual elements of the work, in which he saw some kind of innovation in technology or subject, so to characterize the creative process itself. For Vasari, the term *capriccio*, associated with fantasy and opposed to mimesis, adjoins the concept of *disegno*. In addition, Vasari in *Vite*... uses the word *capriccio* to describe the “indescribable,” thus leaving a space for the reader to fill in according to his own

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the evolution of the meaning of the word *capriccio*, as well as the eponymous artistic phenomenon and discussion of dating the Neapolitan’s set, see [White 2009: 14–21].

understanding and taste⁵. In the 17th century, the word *capriccio* in the modern sense was applied to music and poetry to emphasize its subjectivity and the spontaneity of its creation. Jacques Callot was the first who made the word *capricci* the part of the title for a work of fine art. Thus he conceptualized the term even more, and formed the tradition whose roots can be seen in the cartoons and sketches *Diverse Figure...* by Annibale Carracci⁶.

The term *capriccio (caprice)* in the titles of Callot's sets and those of his circle emphasized the intentional subjectivity of the authors and the spontaneity of the creative process, thus foregrounding the sketchiness and non-narrative character of the sets. The absence of *historia* allows the freedom to choose and to combine different motifs that structures the sets as variations on a theme. It is worth pointing out some contradictions peculiar to Callot's *Capricci di varie figure* that confirm the intentional choice of the set's title and style. The set is executed in a sketchy light manner, brought into focus, but the technique of etching required remarkable efforts and technical skill. It is also worth noting that *varie* ('various') here underlines the multiplicity and variety of objects of one type. This word may be considered as the opposition to the word *diverse*, found in the title of the abovementioned suite of Carracci, which refers to completely different objects or to objects different in general. Thus, the name *Capricci di varie figure*, "The caprices of various figures", should be understood as emphasizing subjective sketches of different types of motifs of the same type. A characteristic feature of the *Capriccio* genre tradition, which also commenced with Callot and could not be explained by the title, is the small size of the plates. As a result it implies looking as a slow individual experience. Later, in the 18th century, the word *capricci* would once again change its meaning and start to define a certain genre of fantastic images not associated with any particular prototype.

Although *Bizzarie di varie figure* adjoins this tradition, it stands apart from it. The word *bizzarie* also has a long history, and its meaning has undergone changes similar to those that occurred with the word *capriccio*. In the 14th century, it was used in the meaning of 'uncontrollably angry, quick-tempered, recklessly brave' — in this meaning it was used by Dante⁷. Academic discussions regarding the Spanish (or rather Basque, connected with the word *bizza* — 'beard' as a symbol of strength and courage) or the Italian origin of this word ultimately ended with the victory of the "Italian" version. It derives the radix *bizza* from the Latin word *invidia* ('envy'), to which later was added a suffix typical for words of Etruscan origin⁸. In the 16th

⁵ ...*Sopra il quale capriccio, come si disse allora molte cose, così se ne potrebbe anco da noi dire altre; ma le tacerò per lasciare a ognuno sopra cotale invenzione credere e pensare a suo modo* [Vasari 1569: 251].

⁶ The full version of *Diverse Figure Al numero di ottanta, Disegnate di penna Nell'hore di ricreazione Da Annibale Carracci Intagliate in rame, E cauate dagli Originali Da Simone Giulino Parigino. Dedicata A Tutti i Virtuosi, Et Intendenti della Professione della Pittura, e del Disegno* was published in 1646 by L. Grignani, however, up to this moment, individual published plates were already extremely popular.

⁷ *Divina Commedia / Inferno / Canto VIII.60–63. Tutti gridavano: "A Filippo Argenti!"; / e 'l fiorentino spirito bizzarro / in sé medesimo si volvea co' denti* [Dante Alighieri 1991–1997 (1): 211].

⁸ See [Corominas 1954 (1): 467–468; Bursch 1974]. Although both authors insist on the Italian origin of the word, Bursch calls the hypothesis about the connection of the radix *bizza* with the Latin *invidia* hasty and unreasonable.

century it acquires the meaning “strange, eccentric, fantastic, different from others” [Cortelazzo, Zolli (1) 1979–1983: 147; Olivieri 1961: 85]. This transition also occurred, as in the case of capriccio, due to a shift of emphasis to the internal, physical state of a person experiencing an attack of anger, which can also cause him to do strange, odd things. When writing in his *Vite...* about the works of Pontorno, Salviatti and others, Vasari uses this term in the sense of “strange” [Britton 2003: 666]; a century later, the Venetian artist, engraver and art historian Marco Bosquini (1602–1681) [Gherzi 1999: 460] characterized as *bizzar* the paintings of Tintoretto. Moreover, in the middle of the 17th century the art historian and Vasari’s “successor” Filippo Baldinucci uses the term *invenzione bizzarrissima* to describe caricatures [Baldinucci 1767–1774. (16): 154]. It is worth emphasizing that *bizzarie* (‘oddities’) are not quite *capricci* (‘caprices’), despite the closeness of their semantic fields in relation to art (capricious — fanciful — strange) and the possibility of applying both of them to the same image. The title *Bizzarie di varie figure* should be understood first of all as “Oddities of various figures”, i. e. as strange correspondences of various objects, and only after that as a kind of indication of the image style in the sense of “extravagant images”. We also should note that the phrase *Bizzarie di varie figure* includes the whole range of meanings of the genitive case and can also be translated as “oddities of various kinds” and “oddities made with various figures”. Thus, it is possible that we are dealing with wordplay that includes several meanings at the same time.

The dedication plate also helps to understand the set’s pragmatics (Fig. 10). The addressee of Bracelli’s set was Pietro di Pietro dei Medici (1592–1654), governor of Livorno, the booming port of the Florentine Republic, from 1619 to 1627. According to one version, Bracelli came to the city with his teacher, the Florentine artist Jacopo da Empoli (1551–1640)⁹, who received an order for the wall paintings of the city’s cathedral, the decoration of which has not survived to the present day. It is here and then the set was published. However, Pietro dei Medici’s previous activities were mainly focused on the military and diplomatic spheres. The surviving part of his correspondence relates mainly to diplomatic and entertainment subjects [MAP. V. 2146, Doc ID: 14930, 14963 14945; V.4179; Doc ID: 19742]. In archive sources we can find no direct indications of his engaging in patronage of the arts. In any case, he had fewer opportunities for that than Callot’s patron, the great Duke of Tuscany Cosimo II Medici. However, Callot’s *Capricci...* was dedicated to Cosimo’s younger brother, Lorenzo Medici (1599–1648), who at that time was eighteen years old. When *Bizzarie...* were published, Pietro Medici was twenty-two years old. In dedicating his innovative etching set to a young man as a potential patron, Bracelli probably was following not only the artistic tradition set by Callot, but also trying to repeat his extremely successful economic strategy. Most likely his enterprise was not successful.

⁹ The only indication that Pietro di Pietro dei Medici was interested in art in a broad sense is provided by his letter, preserved by Medici Archive project. In this document, sent from England to his permanent correspondent, the influential Florentine courtier Andrea Chioli (1673–1641), Pietro Medici was writing about a book by a Jewish-Turkish poet (*mezo hebreo e mezo turco*) and books in Spanish, which he was sending together with the letter. MAP. V.1351. F.152.

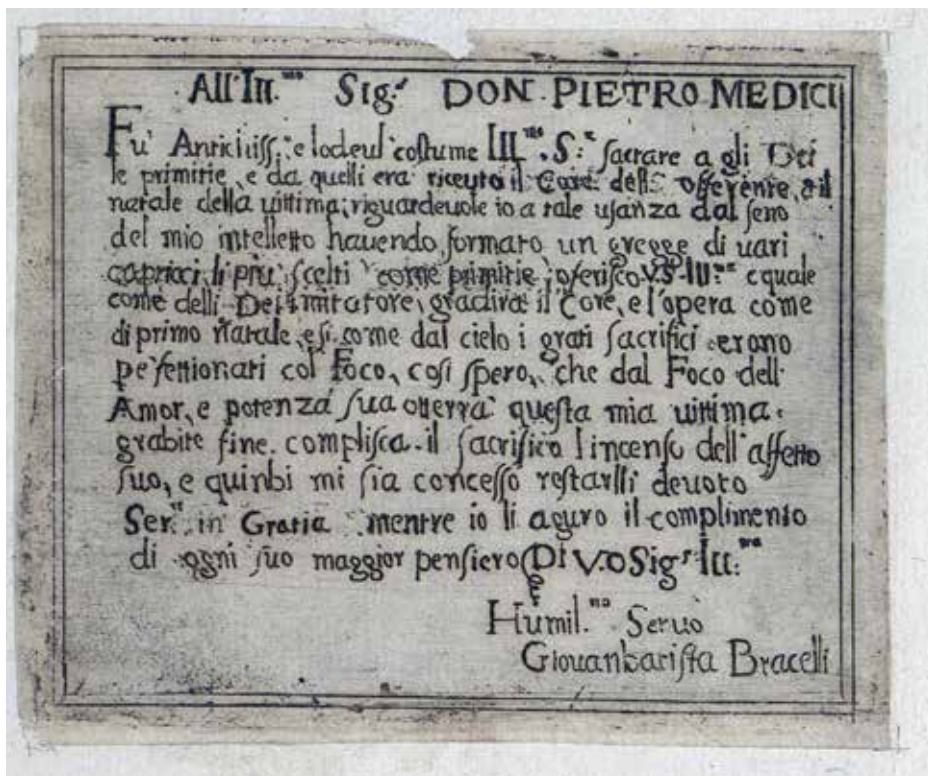


Fig. 10. Giovanni Battista Bracelli. Dedication to Pietro di Pietro dei Medici
Plate 3 from the *Bizzarie di varie figure*. 1624. Etching. State Hermitage

The set's dedication is barely readable, partly due to imperfections in the imprint, partly due to Bracelli's low level of calligraphic skills (Fig. 10). The text reads:

*All Ill. [ustrissi]^{mo} Sig^o DON. PIETRO MEDICI
Fu' Antichiss^o. e lodeul costume Ill [ustrissi]^{mo} S[egnior]^e sacrare a gli
Dei le primitie, e da quelli era riceuto il care dell offernete e il natale
della uittima riguardeuole io a tale usanza dal seno del mio intelletto
formato un gregge di uari capricci lui piu scelti come primitie oferisco
V. S. Ill [ustrissi]^{mo} c quale comé delli Dei imitatore gradiva il Core, e
l'opera come di primo natale e si come dal cielo i grati sacrifici erono
pe'fettionati col Foco, cosi spero, che dal Foco dell' Amor e potenzá sua.
ouerra questa mie uittima grabitè fine complisca il sacrificio l incenso del
affetto suo, e quinbi mi sia concesso restarlli devoto Ser^{ve} in Gratia mentre
io li aguro il complimento di ogni suo maggior pensiero DI V.O Sig[nio]^r
Ill [ustrissi]^{mo}*

*Humil [lissi]^{mo} Servo
Giovanbatista Bracelli*

To the Most Illustrious Lord Don Pietro Medici

It was a most ancient and praiseworthy custom, most illustrious lord, to sacrifice first fruits to the gods, who thus received the heart of the offerer and the birth of the victim. I, respecting such a usage, and having formed a flock of various caprices from the depths of my mind, offer the choicest, your most illustrious lordship, as first fruits, with which, like the imitators of the gods, my heart will be found pleasing along with the work, like a first born. And just as their welcome sacrifices were perfected with fire, so I hope that with the fire of your highness' love and might this, my victim, will obtain a pleasing conclusion, and the incense of my love for your highness will complete the sacrifice; and that thence it will be granted me to remain your devoted servant in grace. Meanwhile I wish for it the compliment of your highness' every greater thought. Your Most Illustrious Lordship's

Humblest Servant,
Giovanbatista Bracelli¹⁰

The message and composition of Bracelli's ornate text depend on Callot's dedication of *Capricci...*¹¹. Both artists state that they are humble and insignificant servants, bringing to their masters their feeble gifts. Callot writes about "the first flowers that he gathered on the field of his barren mind" (*i primi Fiori che io ho colti nel campo del mio sterile ingegno*), and Bracelli about "the first fruits" or "a flock of various caprices born in the depth of his mind" (*primitive; dal seno del mio intelletto havendo formato un gregge di vari capricci*). Then there follows a comparison of the "illustrious Don" with God, indications of his generosity, and a veiled request for a reward. It is important that Bracelli in the text of the dedication calls the plates of his set *capricci*. Filippo Baldinucci does the same, giving the information about Bracelli's biography in his *Notizie...*:

There was also a certain Giovanni Battista Brazze, a disciple of Jacopo Empoli (1551–1640), nicknamed "Gray" <...> he created some *capricci* that depict built-up people, some composed from different fruits, others from kitchen utensils, mason tools, and the like. It was said that he himself engraved a number of copper plates using the eau-forte technique¹².

¹⁰ English translation of the text is cited according to [Reed 2000].

¹¹ *All' Ill. mo et Ecc. mo Sig. PRINCIPE / DON LORENZO MEDICI. / Le Stampe Ecc. mo. Sig. re che io umilmente presento all' Ecc. za vra, sono, per così dire', i primi Fiori che io / hò colti nel campo del mio sterile' ingegno. Accetti / benigni' il dono o, per dir meglio, le primizie' della mie fatiche', / douute' a lei per obbligo di seruitu; esele pare' il luogo / doue nati sono, atto a produrre' qualche' frutto di / virtuosa operatione', si degni con i raggi della sua grà / di fecondarlo che quanto mi saprà porgere' le sarà / da me' reverte. consecrato, Bacio umilte. a V. E. la Veste', / e le prego da Dio il colmo d'ogni felicità. / Di V. Ecc. za. / Humil. mo e Deuot. mo Seruo / Iacopo Callot.*

¹² *Ancora fu discepolo dell'Empoli un tale Gio. Batista Brazze, ditto il Bigio, che operò in Livorno e per la Compagnia de' Sarti in Firenze fece una tavola di S. Huomobuono, ed un' altro Santo Limosiniere, la quale fi vede a mano manca all'entrare: questi fu inventore di certi capricci dipingere uomini fatti, e composti altri di diverse frutte, altri d'instrumenti da cucina, da muratore e simili; e dicesi, ch'egli medesimo ne intagliasse all'acqua forte una quantità di rami, che vanno attorno stampati. Questo Gio. Batista si morì in giovanile età nella Spedale di S. Maria Nuova assai poveramente [Baldinucci 1767–1774 (8): 19].*

Despite the fact that the dedications rely on courtly formulas and clichés, it is important to note how these artists characterize their works, emphasizing their intellectual basis, calling them “first fruits” or “flocks of various caprices born in the depth of the mind”. There are other examples of such a metaphor. Bracelli uses the same scheme in the dedication of the set *Figure con instrumenti musicali e boscarecci*¹³, he calls his work “figures that appeared prematurely as part of his weak mind”. The same emphasis is made in the dedication of the previously mentioned etching set by Melchior Gherardini, addressed to Cardinal Borromeo (1564–1631). Gherardini’s text is based on completely different metaphors due to artist’s intention to underline the connection between him and the patron of the Ambrosian library, but the plates of the set are called *merce de ingegno*, which literally means “products of the mind”, and, in this context, can be translated as “labor of the mind”.

Probably, we are dealing here with a reference to the classical apologetics of fine art, which portray drawing and painting as humanistic endeavor, rather than a craft. For example, Vasari, denoting an understanding of art based on Plato’s ideas, with an emphasis on drawing, thus defined *disegno* as its basis:

...seeing too that from this knowledge there arises a certain conception and judgment, so that there is formed in the mind that something which afterwards, when expressed by the hands, is called design (*che poi es con le mani si chiama disegno*), we may conclude that design is not other than a visible expression and declaration of our inner conception (*concetto*) and of that which others have imagined and given form to in their idea (*nella mente imaginato e fabricato nell’idea*) [Vasari 1569: 43; 1907: 205].

As mentioned above, for Vasari the concepts of *disegno* and *capriccio* were close, and despite the fact that this genre tradition implied some spontaneity and randomness of the creative process, this did not at all exclude its intellectual basis.

Summing up, it should be said that the genre tradition or form of *capriccio* and its filiation *bizzarie* imply a structure of theme and variations. In turn, its pragmatics, presented in the dedications of the above-mentioned sets, involves entertainment of noble enlightened Lords and underlines the intellectual base of the *capriccios*’ images.

Bizzarie di varie figure by Bracelli and the allegorical portraits of Arcimboldo look similar (and in some way really are) as they use a common “dictionary” or a set of parts from which metaphors are constructed. This “dictionary” is more usual for the middle of the 16th century and somewhat asynchronous for the first third of the 17th century. But the system of interactions of these parts, the “grammar” in Bracelli’s set fundamentally differs from the Neoplatonic Arcimboldian system. Bracelli designs his plates according to the principle of themes and variations, which correspond to the *capriccio* genre tradition and confront the genre of allegorical portrait of the ruler, which leads to the endless and free assemble or reassembly of parts for the creating of new meanings. In Callot’s *Capricci di varie figure* the “grammar” and the “dictionary” coincide, and that is probably why this set is perceived more unambiguously.

¹³ ...mie figure de strumenti musicali, aborti piu presto, o sconciature chi parti del’ mio debile ingegno... See for details reproduction of the set [Préaud 1975: 72].

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