



Susanna Zanuso

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and Milan Cathedral:
*new works***

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Italian Text

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Cristoforo Solari and Milan Cathedral: *new works*

The Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano, the authority in charge of Milan's cathedral, hired Cristoforo Solari, known as Il Gobbo or the Hunchback, (c. 1467–70 – 1524), in February 1501 when, then in his thirties, he was already one of Italy's most celebrated sculptors. He had travelled to Rome on more than one occasion, he had worked in Venice where his reputation reached the ears of Sieneese Cardinal Francesco Piccolomini, a collector of Classical statuary and a patron of both Andrea Bregno and Michelangelo, and he had been the duke's sculptor and architect when Ludovico il Moro held sway in Milan¹.

His contract described his "expertise, knowledge and talent as much in sculpting figures as in architecture and other spheres", and went on to state that Solari "is the greatest honour and glory here in Milan, where he was born, there being no sculptor to match him in the city". Despite the prestige surrounding his name, however, there is virtually no written record of Solari's work on the cathedral site on account of the absolutely exceptional and very favourable terms on which he agreed to work there, offering him almost total freedom of action and thus allowing him to ignore the stringent bureaucracy regulating all other contracts drawn up by the Fabbrica².

As the cathedral authorities were well

aware – and indeed they were eager to underscore the fact in Solari's contract – there was no other sculptor in Milan at that time as capable as Solari of combining the deep antiquarian knowledge he had acquired in Rome and Venice both with an interest in Leonardo's studies and with an unrivalled mastery of technique. As recent scholarship has abundantly shown, Solari's work at the turn of the century in the fields of both sculpture and architecture (for instance, the courtyard of Santa Maria presso San Celso which he designed in 1505) played a crucial role in the renewal of local art. The classicism of his sculptures, fuelled by his first-hand knowledge of Classical work, was to influence the best artists of his own generation from Benedetto Briosco to Andrea Fusina, but it was also to attract the attention of the younger Agostino Busti, known as Bambaia, although the latter was not to appear on the art scene in Milan until some time after 1512³.

Given Solari's renown, there are numerous statues in his style in Milan cathedral, yet their relationship with the master's own hand is often difficult to determine in view of their position, of their condition and, last but not least, of the absence of good photographic reproductions to make up for the fact that it is impossible

to inspect the works themselves from close up. Thus it is precisely thanks to the recent restoration of the Altar of the Presentation (fig.1) situated in the south transept (known as the Vimercati Altar from the name of its patron and dedicated in the 16th century also to St. George, St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Martin) and to the new photographic campaign devoted to the statues adorning it, that the first part of this paper can set out to reconsider, in Solari's favour, the traditional attribution to the school of Bambaia of the statues of *St. John the Baptist* and *St. Paul* situated on the outside of the coping⁴ (fig.5-6).

In the second part of the paper I shall be discussing another statue which we feel should be attributed to Solari (fig.32-33-36-39-58-59). The statue in question, which has recently appeared on the antique market, depicts a figure with a turban, possibly a *Prophet*, and is carved in marble from the quarry at Candoglia, a quarry owned – then as now – by the Fabbrica del Duomo. Even though we cannot be absolutely sure, this circumstance certainly suggests that the statue should also be associated with the cathedral construction site, given not only that most of the work carved there, barring a handful of exceptions, was carved in that material but also because, outside of the cathedral site and other sites closely connected with it, the

marble in question was rarely used for statues on account of its pinkish hue and of the difficulty inherent in using it to carve with.

In both cases we are looking at statues that are no longer in their original setting, a fate they share with other statuary carved before Charles Borromeo ordered a radical overhaul of the Cathedral interior in the second half of the 16th century. This renovation entailed the destruction of existing altars and either the reallocation or the dispersal of the older statues⁵: these were moved for the most part to niches in the capitals of the piers, in other words at a height at which they could barely be seen; another group of early 16th century sculptures was moved to an equally inaccessible location on the exterior ledges of the transept apses; while yet others were repositioned in other areas inside and outside the building. In actual fact, the practice of moving statues to cater for the new requirements which the cathedral authorities found themselves facing from time to time is recorded well before Borromeo's intervention. It was at the turn of the 15th century, for example, that a majority of the sixty sculptures of varying date and provenance was "shrewdly and harmoniously used"⁶ to adorn the galleries on the drum of the lantern tower.

In the absence of exhaustive photographic

coverage of these statues dispersed to a wide variety of new locations, it is difficult today to associate individual works with what little information we can glean from the chief sources, such as Charles Borromeo's first pastoral visit in 1566 describing the situation before the demolitions began, the various manuscripts drafted by Cathedral Canon Francesco Castelli prior to Borromeo's visit or the diary of Giambattista Casale, all texts which are extremely short on detail when it comes to describing the works of art in general and the sculptures in particular⁷. As we shall see, a review of these sources has allowed us to track down information useful for narrowing down the time period in which the statues of *St. John the Baptist* and *St. Paul* appeared on the coping of the Altar of the Presentation, but no certainty can be gleaned regarding the provenance of the *Prophet*. Mere uncertainty, however, cannot in itself be taken as evidence that the statue was situated elsewhere, because as we have seen, the sources generically refer to altars "with several marble statues" or "with marble statues on them" and signally fail to provide the name of the sculptor. There are a handful of exceptions, of course, one of them concerning a "marble image of Our Lord Jesus Christ at the column" which Francesco Castelli saw on the Altar of St. John of

Damascus. The statue in question is, in all likelihood, the *Christ at the Column*, a signed work by Solari, now in the Capitular Sacristy. The Altar of the Four Crowned Martyrs also had "marble statues on it" but the phrase in Castelli's manuscript contains a word which is difficult to read but which could be "Job". If it is, then it could well be the original position of another signed statue by Solari now in the Museo del Duomo, which Ugo Nebbia has argued depicts *Job* rather than *Lazarus*⁸ (fig.12).



1. Altar of the Presentation of the Virgin, Milan, Cathedral.

The Statues of St. John the Baptist and St. Paul

A search through the archives undertaken by Camilla Anselmi ahead of the restoration of the Altar of the Presentation (or Vimercati Altar)⁹ (fig.1) has partly clarified the troubled history that began with the will of 1543 in which Canon Andrea Vimercati expressed the wish that an altarpiece be commissioned from Bambaia depicting the *Presentation of the Virgin*, a job for which the sculptor received payment on 20 April 1546. Subsequent developments in the story can be very briefly summed up as follows: both the patron and Bambaia having died in 1548, other figure sculptors must have worked on completing the altarpiece in the following years, but the documents fail to reveal their names; in the course of his pastoral visit in 1566, Charles Borromeo describes the altar, which had been consecrated the previous year, as being adorned with “marble statues and columns and other ornaments”. Other sources, as unambiguous as they are patchy and incomplete, tell us that the altar was modified after 1577 to bring it into line with the other altars in the cathedral in the context of the work ordered by Borromeo and undertaken by his architect Pellegrino Tibaldi¹⁰. Further alterations are reported

in the course of the 17th century (this, in particular, was the moment when the central altarpiece was tinkered with) and again in the 1860s when the altar table was rebuilt and the altar frontal with the *Birth of the Virgin* carved by Antonio Tantardini was added to it. All in all, a very troubled history, borne out by an investigation of the materials and of their workmanship which has confirmed that the various parts of the monument were carved in marble of different origin sculpted by different artists at different moments in history.

Modern scholars, for their part, had been questioning Bambaia’s wholly autograph role in the surviving statues for some time, mooted the intervention of other sculptors in completing the altar by 1566¹¹. Now, thanks to what we know of the transformations undertaken in the last quarter of the 16th century, we can entertain the hypothesis that what we see today is the product of changes made after that date. In addition to doubts concerning the period in which the altarpiece with the *Presentation of the Virgin* and the statue of *St. Martin* in the niche to its left were carved, it needs to be said that the *St. Catherine*, rightly attributed to Cristoforo Lombardo, sits awkwardly in the right-hand niche in which it has been set, the niche being too small for the statue, and so it

may well have been placed there at a later date¹².

Setting aside for the moment the numerous question marks still hanging over the rest of the altar's sculptural decoration, I would like here to confine my investigation to the five statues on the coping, regarding which archive documents have revealed no specific information. Restoration, on the other hand, has shown that while the figures of *St. Paul* and *St. John the Baptist* (fig.5-6) were



carved with a highly sophisticated display of technical skill in white Carrara marble, the three so-called *Virtues* (fig.2-3-4) are of inferior quality and were carved in Candoglia marble. Moreover, of these three statues, all of them devoid of attributes permitting their correct identification, the central one is unquestionably *St. Cecilia* (fig.2), as we can read in the inscription engraved in capital letters on the base. Oddly, Anselmi fails to



record this fact, but the unexpected presence of a statue of *St. Cecilia* in an altar dedicated to the *Presentation* and to *St. George*, *St. Catherine of Alexandria* and *St. Martin* seems to offer further proof of the fact that statues originally intended for a different setting were reused here. Even if we consider these facts alone, there is sufficient evidence for us to harbour reservations regarding the hitherto unquestioningly accepted contention that the



five statues on the coping have also formed part of the complex from the outset.

Confirmation of this comes from a hitherto untapped source which tells us that when *St. Charles* described the Altar of the *Presentation* as having "marble statues and columns and other ornament", he could actually see only three statues carved in the round, because the coeval manuscript drafted by *Francesco Castelli* between 1565 and 1568 tells us that the Altar of the *Presentation* had "three statues made of marble"¹³. *Castelli* may be referring to the three female figures placed on the pediment, the only statues that are homogeneous in both style and material and possibly the only ones then still in situ, but in any event he is unlikely to have been referring to the *St. Paul* and *St. John* which were older statues carved by a sculptor whose hand cannot be found in any of the other figures on the altar.

By the time *Giacomo Valeri* (1572-1651) drafted the 17th century manuscript there were five statues on the coping¹⁴. Currently the most plausible hypothesis appears to be that *St. Paul* and *St. John the Baptist* were added on the right and left of the three female figures following the changes made to the altar after 1577. This would seem to be confirmed by the fact that there are five statues on the coping of the Altar of *St. Praxedes*, which

2. Lombard sculptor,
St. Cecilia,
Milan, Cathedral,
Altar of the *Presentation*
of the *Virgin*.

3. Lombard sculptor,
Virtue (?),
Milan, Cathedral,
Altar of the *Presentation*
of the *Virgin*.

4. Lombard sculptor,
Virtue (?),
Milan, Cathedral,
Altar of the *Presentation*
of the *Virgin*.

FOLLOWING PAGES
5. *Cristoforo Solari*,
St. John the Baptist,
Milan, Cathedral,
Altar of the *Presentation*
of the *Virgin*.

6. *Cristoforo Solari*,
St. Paul, Milan, Cathedral,
Altar of the *Presentation*
of the *Virgin*.



7. After Cristoforo Solari,
St. John the Evangelist,
 Milan, Cathedral,
 North transept apse.

8. After Cristoforo Solari,
St. John the Baptist, Milan,
 Cathedral, North transept apse.

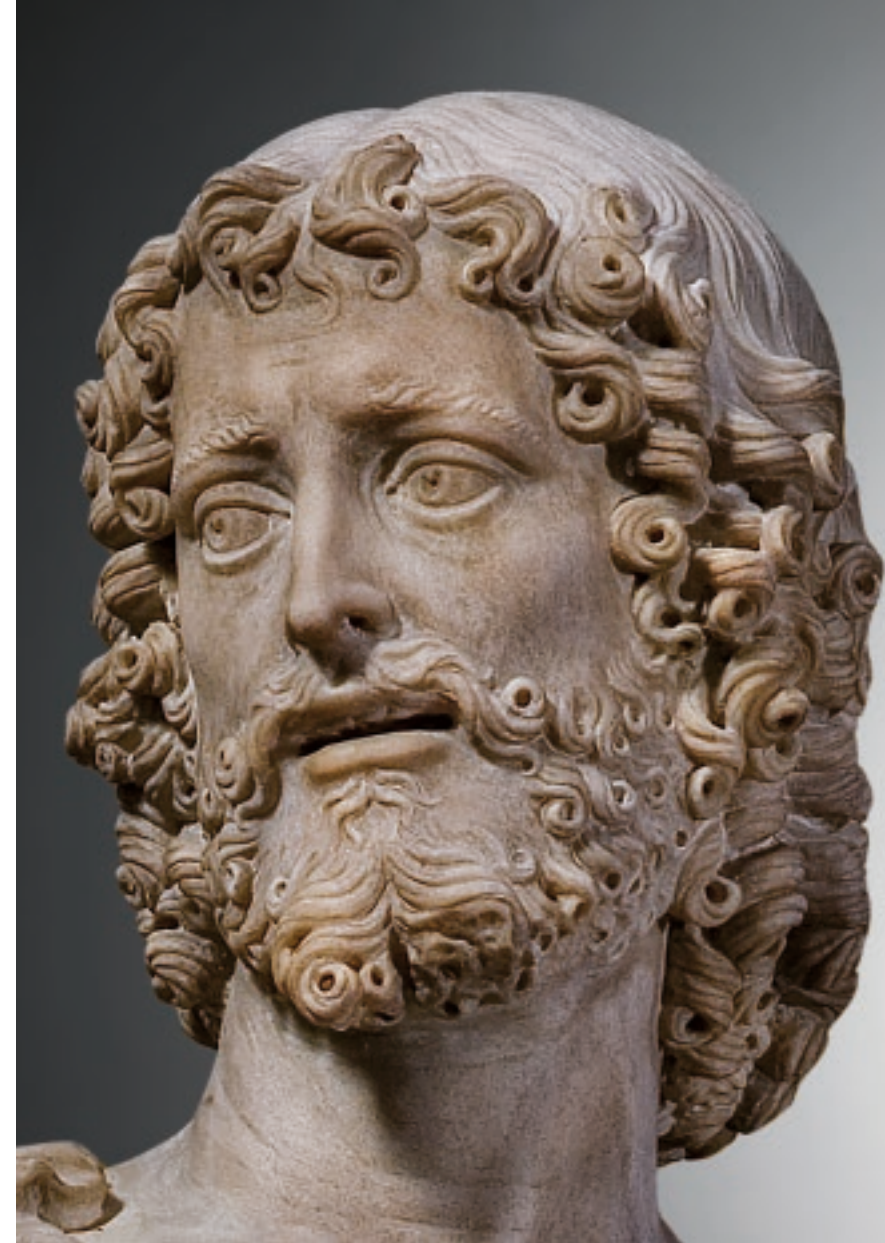


stands symmetrical to the Altar of the Presentation in the north transept, and that the contract for its construction in 1590 specifies that it should be identical to the Altar of the Presentation¹⁵.

Modern scholars have tended to consider

the five figures together (and, it has to be said, without much enthusiasm) as sculptures alternately “by the school or hand of [Cristoforo] Lombardo and of Busti”, “probably by an assistant of Bambaia”, or by “Bambaia’s workshop”¹⁶. Apparently only Rossana Bossaglia, writing in 1973, made a clear distinction between the weaker female figures, *St. Paul* and, above all, the “fine figure of the *Baptist*”, also publishing an illustration of a detail of the latter statue and proposing to attribute it to Bambaia himself on account of its obvious quality and of its “affinity with the kindred statue on the Birago monument” (fig. 25) (a recorded work by Bambaia completed in 1522)¹⁷.

Making up for the paltry interest devoted to it by most recent scholars and testifying to the fortune of *St. John the Baptist* (fig. 5) at least inside the Cathedral, where the memory of its sculptor had probably not been lost, there is an unpublished smaller marble copy (approximately 100 cm tall, according to restorer Camilla Mancini) which was once partly gilded (fig. 8). By its side in the same place there is also a smaller copy of *St. John the Evangelist* (fig. 7) praised in old sources as being a work by Solari and recently identified with the life-size statue placed on the Cathedral’s exterior north side¹⁸ (fig. 62). In the copy, the *Baptist*’s hand, which has been lost in the



original statue, rests somewhat awkwardly on the drapery where it is bunched up in a disorderly manner, and the entire forearm is only vaguely related to the larger statue (the elbow bends at a very different angle). Thus the copy cannot give us an idea of what the original was holding. The original, in its turn, has not only lost its hand and wrist but is broken into several pieces which were reassembled with copper brackets at an unspecified date, pointing to a serious accident which may have occurred while it was being moved.

While we agree with Bossaglia that the two

saints are carved in a far more sophisticated fashion than the three female statues, we do not believe that the sculptor who carved *St. John the Baptist* should be sought either in Bambaia’s circle or among his followers working in the mid-16th century. Comparison of the *Baptist*’s face (fig. 9–10) with that of *Lazarus/Job* signed by Cristoforo Solari is sufficient in itself to show that we are looking at two statues carved by the same hand.

In fact the comparison is so eloquent that there is no need to dwell further on the similarities between the two figures, other than to stress that the use of Carrara marble

9. Cristoforo Solari,
St. John the Baptist, detail,
 Milan, Cathedral,
 Altar of the Presentation
 of the Virgin.

10. Cristoforo Solari,
Lazarus or Job, detail,
 Milan, Museo del Duomo.

Figure Swathed in Classicising Robes (a Prophet?)

As mentioned above, it is once again to Solari that we feel we should attribute an unpublished Candoglia marble statue 110 cm. in height (fig. 32-33-36-39-58-59), whose history prior to its appearance on the antique market in the late 1980s is unknown³⁵. As far as we can tell today, the statue seems most likely to have come from the cathedral, because while Solari was involved in other projects in addition to the cathedral site in the first decade of the 16th century, none of them, as far as we know, called for statues of such figures in Candoglia marble. For example, he was involved in the design of a now lost funeral monument to Erasmo Brasca in the church of Sant'Eufemia, but according to the documents the sculptures, including "four small statues equally in white marble", surrounding Brasca's urn, were carved by the Lorenzo da Muggiano with Andrea da Saronno and Giovan Pietro Ghisolfi, while Solari is given credit only for the drawing with the design of the monument attached to the contract³⁶; in 1502 and in 1504 Solari worked for Marshal Giangiacomo Trivulzio³⁷ and in 1503 for Simone Crotto³⁸ producing as yet unidentified works; and in July 1509 he pledged to carve a very elaborate

funeral monument in "pure, white, clear Carrara marble" for Charles d'Hautbois, the Bishop of Tournai, of which however no trace remains³⁹.

The male figure, which we shall provisionally label a "Prophet" for want of any attributes allowing us to identify the subject with greater precision, is dressed in the Classical style with a short, knee-length tunic and a turban covering his head; over the tunic he sports a long mantle reaching down to his feet, its broad folds, inspired by those commonly adopted in imperial Roman portraits (fig. 35), caught up on his left forearm before falling away to side and back; on the right, his other hand holds the opposite end of the mantle so as to keep the hem from trailing on the ground; on his bare legs he wears sandals with cross-garter straps rising to cover his shins. The statue is incomplete, the most obvious losses being the entire left hand, formerly grafted onto a lead dowel still in place, which may have been added in an early attempt at restoration, and the ankle and foot on the right leg; the left leg, which is broken at the ankle, has been glued back onto the foot. It was probably in the course of the latter operation that the original stand, the only visible part of which is the part on which the left foot is resting, was incorporated into the modern



32. Cristoforo Solari, Prophet, Milan, Walter Padovani.



33. Cristoforo Solari, *Prophet*,
Milan, Walter Padovani.

34. Cristoforo Solari,
David with the Head of Goliath,
Milan, Cathedral.

base. Other minor drops and abrasions may be observed at the tops of the folds on the drapery and in the face, chipping in particular affecting the more protruberant features such as the front curls in the beard or the tip of the nose (made good in a recent restoration), a fact which suggests that the most significant damage was the result of a fall. But aside from the drops and abrasions, the marble surface is in generally good condition, without the porousness or erosion typical of works exposed to the elements, nor has it ever been subjected to aggressive cleaning.

Compared to the many vaguely classicising statues carved for the cathedral in the first half of the 16th century, the *Prophet* immediately captures our attention thanks its monumentality, the complexity of its drapery, the softness of its pose, its intense expression and the sculptor's skilled use of the drill. It appears to have been designed to be viewed from below. The slight disproportion between the more developed upper part and the short legs, the motif of the folds enveloping the right arm squashed against one another in such a way as to suggest a deeper space than was actually available, and the careful finishing of the legs in the part covered by the tunic (invisible unless seen from below) are all elements prompting us to





35. *Portrait of Augustus Caesar (Octavian)*, 1st c. BC - 1st c. AD, Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme.



36. Cristoforo Solari, *Prophet*, Milan, Walter Padovani.

draw the conclusion that the statue was meant to be positioned aloft. Thus the sculptor, who was clearly at home with the rules governing perspective, took the observer's viewpoint into account when building his figure. The right-hand side of the cloak is extremely rich (fig.36), its folds revealing deep undercutting, which tells us that this side was intended to be seen. Designed to stand against a wall (if we consider that the drapery on the back received a rougher degree of finish (fig.59), the *Prophet* is likely to have been facing slightly more to the left than was realised by whoever positioned it in its current, excessively full-frontal pose on its modern base.

At first glance the expressive tension of the face, its gaze at once distant and lost in thought, recalls the intense pathos in the face of Cristoforo Solari's *Adam* (fig.37-40-41) who "is still holding a hoe on the handle of which he leans his elbow and he looks much aggrieved over his grave error". This description was provided in around 1550 by Simone Del Pozzo⁴⁰, who manages to convey in writing the sense of absolute innovation which the figure of *Adam* continued to conjure up decades after it was carved. With his *Adam* Solari built himself a cast-iron position as the leading player in the renewal of Lombard sculpture reflecting not only Classical statuary but also – indeed, above



37. Cristoforo Solari, *Adam*, Milan, Museo del Duomo.



38. Leonardo da Vinci,
Studies for Six Figures,
London, The British Museum.

39. Cristoforo Solari,
Prophet,
Milan, Walter Padovani.

all – the work of Leonardo da Vinci, some of whose drawings he is thought to have owned. While his affinity with Leonardo is generally perceived only in the figure's sweet facial expression, it also informs the natural, antirhetorical pose which is reminiscent of a pose in a sketch by Leonardo showing a young man leaning on a stick, now in the British Museum⁴¹ (fig.38). The *Prophet* shares with *Adam* the pose of the head inclining slightly towards the left, and if we consider the details of the two sculptures, we can detect a striking similarity in the way the

nose is attached to the forehead, in the shape of the half-open mouth and the eyes with their chiselled irises, and in the design of the moustache which, while less thick in the younger *Adam*, ends in both cases in thin, separate curls at the sides of the mouth (fig.40-41).

The obvious relationship between the two sculptures inevitably prompts further comparison. The idea of one edge of the mantle being held in one of the figure's hands while the other is draped over his forearm to form a rounded profile is found, in a mirror image, in one of the *Armed Men* (the *Man with the Mace*) (fig.44) which Bramante and his assistants painted in the palazzo of Gaspare Ambrogio Visconti in Milan in c. 1487-8. That celebrated fresco cycle, now in the Pinacoteca di Brera, not only marked a turning point in the Milanese school of art in general but it was also to have an exceptionally strong impact on the young Solari's development. Solari was, in fact, to become Bramante's most intelligent disciple and interpreter, especially in the field of architecture, and certainly the only one to bring Bramante's later "Roman" manner to Milan in the first decade of the 16th century, transcending once and for all the local 15th century tradition represented by the school of Amadeo⁴². It is also worth noting that





40. Cristoforo Solari,
Prophet, detail,
Milan, Walter Padovani.

41. Cristoforo Solari,
Adam, detail,
Milan, Museo del Duomo.

the particular way in which the edge of the drapery is rounded (fig.42), a feature we also find in Bramante's fresco (fig.44) – in both cases we are looking at an almost literal interpretation of the so-called *umbo* which, together with the *sinus*, is a codified motif in the drapery found on Classical statuary – is a common feature of Solari's sculpture. We see it, for instance, in the figure of *Temperance* from the Dragan Altar (fig.45), in *Lazarus/Job's* loincloth (fig.43) and in the *Christ at the Column* in the cathedral.

Similarly, we can compare the drapery held in the *Prophet's* right hand (fig.49) with the loincloth worn by *St. Sebastian* in the cathedral (fig.46-48) – it, too, a signed work which a very recent discovery suggests may be dated to c. 1502⁴³; also, the knot in the *Prophet's* mantle (fig.47) and the knot in the young martyr's loincloth (fig.48) are similar both in their finished aspect and in the manner of their execution.

The complicated Classical sandals leaving the foot bare while enclosing the shins in cross-garters are also a recurrent feature of Solari's work. They are to be found on a more elaborate scale, for example, in the figure of *Justice* on the Dragan Altar and in *David with the Head of Goliath* in Milan Cathedral (fig.34-53).

David and the *Prophet* share an identical pose and, in that sense, the two sculptures are very

