



# Images and stories of saints in the regional territory and in its museums

Bevagna, Pinacoteca Comunale

## Ascensidonio Spacca

(Bevagna 1560-1646)

Casket of the Blessed Giacomo: on the left, *Resurrection of Maurizio, a mason who fell from a bell-tower*; in the centre, *Miracle of the blood that spurted from the Crucifix onto the blessed Giacomo*; on the right, *Transformation of water into wine on the point of his death*

Oil on wood; 40.5 x 66.5 cm each

Casket size: 76 x 240 x 72 cm

The walnut casket comes from the Chiesa dei Santi Domenico e Giacomo, which stands on the ancient oratory of San Giorgio, bestowed in 1291 on Giacomo Bianconi, who founded a church and the Dominican convent there.

It was crafted at the Community's expense in 1589 to house the mortal remains of the Blessed Giacomo Bianconi (1220 - 21 August 1301), who was a reputed performer of miracles and prophet. Until that time the body had been preserved in the church later known as the Chiesa dei Santi Domenico e Giacomo in a Roman sarcophagus, modified in 1302 to fulfil its new function. The remains were transferred in 1686, after his beatification (1632), to a gilt bronze urn, placed beneath the high altar and restored in 1930. On that occasion the casket was moved into the sacristy, where it is still recorded as being in 1864, shortly before it passed into the civic collections.

Patron saint of Bevagna, together with saints Joseph, Vincent and Philip Neri, this Dominican friar of local origin studied theology in Spoleto, Perugia and Cologne, where in all likelihood he associated with Albert the Great. His work was aimed primarily at restoring customs and public morals in Bevagna, founding institutions of a religious-social nature (monasteries of Santa Margherita and Santa Lucia) and eradicating the heresy of the Nicolaitanes. He played a leading role in the pacification of the town, divided between Guelphs and Ghibellines and devastated in 1249 by order of Frederick II. He was prior several times and one of his brothers in the Orvieto convent was Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Ascensidonio Spacca, known as Fantino, is the author

of the paintings on the front part of the casket, which in the respective panels illustrate three episodes from the life of the blessed soul: *Resurrection of Maurizio, a mason who fell from a bell-tower*, or to be precise from the scaffolding of the new building of San Domenico in Bevagna, and saved through the intervention of the blessed Giacomo; in the centre, *Miracle of the blood that spurted from the Crucifix onto the blessed Giacomo*, in which the blood that flows from the chest of the crucified Christ sprays the kneeling Giacomo, whilst the Redeemer's voice reassures him with the words "sanguis iste sit in signum tuae salutis"; on the right, *Transformation of water into wine*, a miracle worked by Giacomo on the point of death with water from the well in the cloister of the church of San Domenico. The best known of the three episodes is without doubt that of the Crucifix, whose depiction was particularly common in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the cult of the blessed soul reached its height. The subject is replicated several times in the church of San Domenico, which houses the miraculous crucifix, whose workmanship should be seen in relation to contemporary Perugian sculpture, and which according to tradition was acquired in Perugia by Bianconi himself, together with a *Virgin and Child* from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century (both in the Pinacoteca at present). By way of example, the twenty-six lunettes in the cloister painted in 1640-41 by Giovan Battista Pacetti narrate as many stories of the Blessed Giacomo Bianconi, and each one bears a coat of arms of the principal families and guilds.

The author and date of the paintings have never been in any doubt, not least because Fantino was born, in 1560, in Bevagna itself. In this town, as in many others in Umbria, the artist propagated his own personal idiom, assimilated locally but toned down with inflexions of more markedly Roman stamp and in keeping with the climate of the Counter-Reformation. His special predilection for domestic environments, rendered with eloquent realism through a simple, linear and didactic syntax, recurs in many of his paintings.

