

NON59 slate and stucco

Nicholas Bellin of Modena, c. 1490-1569

A painter, sculptor and stucco-artist, Nicholas Bellin came to England as an asylum-seeker and helped King Henry VIII fulfill his dreams of building the finest palace in Europe. Born in Modena, Nicholas spent his early life in France as one of a group of outstanding Italian artists patronised by King François I. The decoration of Fontainebleau palace was their finest achievement. Suspected of defrauding François, Nicholas fled to London but so impressed Henry VIII with his talent and knowledge of the latest Renaissance style that the king refused to return him for trial. Besides designing the slate ornamentation of Nonsuch ('The Incomparable') palace, he worked on Henry's tomb at Westminster.

Key events in his life

- c. 1490: Born, Modena in northern Italy
- 1516: Working in France for King François I and described as a 'painter'
- 1532: Working at Fontainebleau with Primaticcio and other Italian artists
- 1537: Fled to England, suspected of defrauding the French king
- 1541: Became an English citizen
- 1541-5: Working at Nonsuch palace for King Henry VIII
- 1546-53: Working mainly on set design and props for court masques or revels
- 1550: Son, Thomas Modyn, christened
- 1569: Died. Buried at St Margaret's church, Westminster

Political asylum

A native of Modena in Italy, Bellin was employed as an artisan craftsman alongside his fellow countryman, the painter and designer Francesco Primaticcio (1504-70) on the frescoes and painted ornamentation of the Galerie François Ier at Fontainebleau. In 1537, Modena's work at Fontainebleau came to an abrupt end when he was implicated in a case of criminal deception against Francis I. Modena sought sanctuary in England and his reputation as a skilled craftsman soon attracted the attention of Henry VIII, who refused all demands for his extradition. By 15 August, Modena had joined the group of foreign 'Artificers' and 'Masters of Buyldings'

engaged in Henry's service and he received a salary of £10. 20s per year (later increased to over £20).

The King's Works

Modena was soon employed on various royal building projects in and around the capital and by 1541 he had received letters of denization and a patent which entitled him to take two apprentices and employ four servants of any nationality. Surviving bills show that he was working on the decorative scheme at Nonsuch by 1541/42, and in September 1542 he received £8 for 'mastyke vernyshe and oyle with other necessaryes for the pollishing setting and vernysing' of the gilded slate to preserve them from the weather. Traces of these materials have survived on some 750 fragments of slate recovered during excavations on the site of Nonsuch Palace in 1959-60.

Nonsuch Palace

On 2 September 1543, Modena submitted a new bill 'for the guylding and hatching of dyuers peces of the kynges armes badges Roses batons and other devyces cutte and kervyd in slate for the garnysing of tymber worke of the kynges manor of Nonesuche as also coulors mastyke vernyshe patrons and all other his demaundes and requestes.' The account specifies the 'guyldyng of 48 batons' and 31 'grete Roses' covering 18 square feet and 30 square feet respectively, and the payment of 16d per foot suggests that the calculations were based on the size of the area covered rather than the intricacy of the work or design. Examples of the gilded slate batons and roses have survived (see objects in case 25 in the Medieval London Gallery).

After a gap of a year when the slate carvers at Nonsuch seem to have been off site or at least engaged in other work, they returned for a final stint of seven months from 1 November 1544 to 23 May 1545. A last recorded payment to Modena and 'dyvers other workmen in Slate' at Nonsuch was made in November 1545 although the actual cost of the 204 day's work is unspecified.

Although the only surviving documentary accounts to Modena's work at Nonsuch concern the carving and gilding of the slate and directing a team of carvers, he

undoubtedly played a key role in the overall design scheme and probably introduced a range of skills and techniques hitherto unknown in England. It is noticeable that the stucco work at Nonsuch is remarkably similar to the stuccoes in the Galerie François Ier at Fontainebleau and this might be directly attributable to Modena's influence.

While the building of Nonsuch was in progress, Modena was evidently employed on other royal projects, and this included work on the Banqueting House in the privy garden at Whitehall which was also embellished with stucco. By 1544 Modena was involved in work for the tomb for Henry VIII in Westminster and lived nearby in the aptly named 'Tombe House'. He continued as an 'Artificer' on the King's Works until his death in 1569.

Further reading

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