NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Italian Paintings of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

Lorenzo Monaco
Florentine, c. 1370 - c. 1425

Madonna and Child

1413

tempera on panel
painted surface: 113.5 × 52.8 cm (44 11/16 × 20 13/16 in.)
overall: 116.3 × 55.6 cm (45 13/16 × 21 7/8 in.)
framed: 127 x 66.2 x 11.4 cm (50 x 26 1/16 x 4 1/2 in.)
Inscription: on the Child's scroll: EGO S[UM...];[1] across the bottom: AVE.G[RATIA?] ... AN[N]O.D[OMINI]. M.CCCC.XIII
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.13

ENTRY

The painting presents Mary with her son according to an original version of the iconography of the Madonna of Humility.[1] Here, instead of being suckled by the Virgin in a recumbent or seated position, the child stands on Mary's knees, turning towards the spectator while supporting himself with one hand on her shoulder in an affectionate gesture and holding her veil with the other.[2] Clearly, the artist, though using an iconographic type very common by then in Florence, wished to place the emphasis not so much on the humility of Mary as on her grace, the elegance with which she presents her divine son to the faithful. It was probably her much elongated and slightly curving torso—the line of the curve continued in her bowed head—that suggested the idea of representing the Christ child standing, his body slightly inclined towards her; this permitted the painter to fuse mother and child together in a single harmonious group [fig. 1]. Lorenzo Monaco was perhaps the first to combine the motif of the standing Child, widespread in Florentine painting of the period in representations of the Madonna and Child Enthroned, with the iconographic scheme of the Madonna of Humility. He did so in paintings dating for the most part to the phase of his full maturity.[3]

Ever since its first appearance in the art historical literature (Sirén 1905), the panel has been commonly recognized as an autograph work by Lorenzo, with the sole

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exceptions of Marvin Eisenberg (in Shapley 1966, citing Eisenberg verbal communication; and Eisenberg 1989) and Bruce Cole (1980).[4] The former scholar, initially (1954) inclined to accept the authorship of the Camaldolese artist, later judged the painting "scarcely worthy of Lorenzo" and finally concluded (1989) that "the painter of the National Gallery *Madonna* would seem to have been a distinctive assistant to Lorenzo Monaco who used the design of the master for the principal contours of the Virgin, but introduced an opposing rhythm and a less traditional technique."[5] Cole (1980), while recognizing that the quality of the painting is very high, decided, for reasons not otherwise explained, to classify it as a product of Lorenzo's *bottega*.[6] In actual fact, the execution of the panel shows all the customary accomplishment and finesse of Lorenzo's technique, diminished only by the damage and overpainting it has undergone; Eisenberg's opinion might have been influenced by the painting's compromised condition.[7]

While the presence of a barbe, and thus of engaged frame moldings, around the entire perimeter of the image might suggest that the Washington Madonna was an independent devotional work, its size and its tall and narrow proportions differ considerably from those of other self-standing images of the Madonna and Child painted by Lorenzo. The painted surfaces of the latter generally measure just under one meter high, while their width, in contrast to that of the Washington Madonna, generally exceeds half the panel height. There are therefore good reasons for supposing that our panel originally formed part of a relatively small triptych, destined for the altar of a side chapel in a church. We may presume that the Madonna and Child would have been flanked by paired saints on either side, as in the triptych dated 1404 in the Pinacoteca of Empoli, whose central panel similarly presents an image of the Madonna of Humility. A possible candidate as the left lateral of the National Gallery of Art panel could be the panel of Saints Catherine and John [fig. 2] now in the Princes Czartoryski Foundation Collections in Krakow.[8]

Although the dark blue of the Virgin's mantle has now altered, almost to the point of looking black, the delicate palette of the painting is still striking and testifies to Don Lorenzo's total emancipation from tradition in his choice of colors: the customary red dress of the Virgin is here abandoned in favor of a lilac damask, while the transparent white veil is transformed into azure. To this is added the delicate salmon red of the child's tunic, combined with the light blue of his long undergarment (matching that of the Madonna's veil), the deep golden yellow of the lining of her mantle, and the pale green of the marble pavement on which the

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Virgin's cushion is placed.[9] Precedents for the composition can be identified in such works as the central panels of polyptychs no. 468 in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence, dated 1410, and that in the Galleria Comunale at Prato,[10] perhaps slightly later in date. In both panels we also encounter the tendency to prefer suffused colors that have been combined with great delicacy. Both are images of the Madonna and Child Enthroned accompanied by angels, in which one of the painter's preoccupations seems to have been to fill all the available space, either with the architectural structure of the throne or with the figures of angels and the cloth of honor they support. In the color scheme of both paintings a decisive role is assigned to Mary's blue mantle, always complemented and enlivened—as in our painting—by the sudden flash of the brilliant yellow silk lining exposed by its undulating hems.

About 1413, at the time he painted the Washington Madonna, the artist not only accentuated the slenderness of his figures and the aristocratic elegance of their movements but also simplified the design and added spaciousness to his compositions. Angularities and brusque changes in direction of the contours are now eliminated, and a smoother, more placid rhythm is given to the outlines, here and there enlivened by the small curlicues or serpentine undulations of the hems. The figures, moreover, at least in part, are now delineated directly against the gold ground and invested with a more monumental character. In this phase, the artist seems to have preferred colder hues; he thus matched the blues of varying intensity with delicate green. We find this combination also in the Madonna of Humility dated 1415 in the church of Sant'Ermete at Putignano (Pisa)[11] and in the versions of the Madonna Enthroned in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid,[12] the Bonnenfantenmuseum in Maastricht,[13] and the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh,[14] to cite some of the more significant examples of paintings produced in or around the middle of the second decade.[15]

The stylistic data that characterize the panel in the Gallery and the Madonna painted two years later in the Pisan church thus represent valuable points of reference for a correct historical evaluation of the abovementioned works, which, in contrast to what is sometimes affirmed, ought not to be far removed in date from the middle of the second decade. They are the results of a phase in which the charged tension of design and harshness of modeling are gradually abandoned. At the same time, the distinctive features of Lorenzo's late style are slow in appearing: an emphasis on smooth sweeping lines, crescent- or sickle-shaped drapery folds, and extreme lightness of modeling that dematerializes the physical substance of

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flesh. Nor do we yet find in the paintings of this phase the unusual combinations of pale pastel shades privileged by the artist in the latter years of his life.

Miklós Boskovits (1935–2011)

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Detail, Lorenzo Monaco, *Madonna and Child*, 1413, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

fig. 2 Lorenzo Monaco, *The Saints Catherine and John the Baptist*, 1410–1415, tempera on panel, Czartoryski Museum, The Princes Czartoryski Foundation Collections, Krakow

NOTES

[1] On the iconography of the Madonna of Humility, see cat. 22, n. 7.

[2] Dorothy C. Shorr, *The Christ Child in Devotional Images in Italy during the XIV Century* (New York, 1954), 28, observed that "the frontal posture of the Child standing on his mother's knee is not seen before 1315, when it is represented by Simone Martini," alluding to the *Maestà* in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena dating to that year. However, albeit in a not entirely frontal pose and not blessing but supporting himself on his mother's shoulder in a

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way very similar to what we see in Lorenzo Monaco's painting, the Christ child is represented standing in the left lateral of a triptych by Duccio in the Royal Collection of England, Hampton Court, Surrey, painted within the first decade of the fourteenth century; see Luciano Bellosi, in *Duccio: Siena fra tradizione bizantina e mondo gotico*, ed. Alessandro Bagnoli et al. (Cinisello Balsamo, Milan, 2003), 188–195.

[3] The motif of the standing child appears in the Madonna of Humility of the Perkins bequest in the treasury of the basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, probably still dating within the first decade of the fifteenth century, and hence in works more chronologically advanced—such as the panel no. 1123 formerly in the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum in Berlin; that of the abbey of Cava de' Tirreni (Salerno); or that formerly in the Schaeffer Galleries in New York, in which the Madonna of Humility is transformed into a celestial vision set against the gold ground and appearing to a group of saints.

[4] Osvald Sirén, *Don Lorenzo Monaco* (Strasbourg, 1905), 88–89, 169, 186; Fern Rusk Shapley, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: Italian Schools, XIII–XV Century* (London, 1966), 89; Marvin Eisenberg, *Lorenzo Monaco* (Princeton, 1989), 172–173; Bruce Cole, *Sienese Painting from Its Origins to the Fifteenth Century* (New York, 1980), 69–70.

[5] Marvin Eisenberg, *The Origins and Development of the Early Style of Lorenzo Monaco* (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1954), 313 n. 31; Marvin Eisenberg, *Lorenzo Monaco* (Princeton, 1989), 173.

[6] Bruce Cole, *Sienese Painting from Its Origins to the Fifteenth Century* (New York, 1980), 69–70.

[7] In particular, Marvin Eisenberg's observation that "a technique visible in the Kress panel that is foreign to Lorenzo Monaco is the modeling in light and shade of the Virgin's face and the entire head of the Child" raises the suspicion that he was deceived by the skillful inpainting that has altered the painting's original effect in these areas. Marvin Eisenberg, *Lorenzo Monaco* (Princeton, 1989), 173.

[8] On the Krakow panel, see Marvin Eisenberg, *Lorenzo Monaco* (Princeton, 1989), 92, fig. 153.

[9] It is difficult to know what color the Virgin's dress and the Christ child's tunic would have been originally, because the pigments, especially the red lake pigments, have faded considerably. The green of the pavement was heavily restored by Mario Modestini but seems to follow surviving traces of the original color.

[10] See Marvin Eisenberg, *Lorenzo Monaco* (Princeton, 1989), 163–165, where the polyptych was considered a product of Lorenzo's *bottega* and dated c. 1412–1414. In my view, it is a substantially autograph painting that should be dated only slightly later than the polyptych in the Accademia.

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[11] Marvin Eisenberg, *Lorenzo Monaco* (Princeton, 1989), 160–161; Daniela Parenti, in *Lorenzo Monaco: Dalla tradizione giottesca al Rinascimento*, ed. Angelo Tartuferi and Daniela Parenti (Florence, 2006), 202–203.

[12] Marvin Eisenberg, *Lorenzo Monaco* (Princeton, 1989), 146–147, with a dating to c. 1422–1423; Miklós Boskovits and Serena Padovani, *The Thyssen–Bornemisza Collection: Early Italian Painting 1290–1470* (London, 1990), 114–119, with a dating to 1415–1420. Angelo Tartuferi rejected the latter proposal, but his argument puzzles me, in particular when he compared the painting now in Madrid with what can be regarded as the paradigm of Don Lorenzo's final period, namely the *Adoration of the Magi* in the Uffizi, Florence. Cf. Angelo Tartuferi, in *Lorenzo Monaco: Dalla tradizione giottesca al Rinascimento*, ed. Angelo Tartuferi and Daniela Parenti (Florence, 2006), 224–226.

[13] See Marvin Eisenberg, *Lorenzo Monaco* (Princeton, 1989), 136, (as workshop of Lorenzo Monaco, c. 1418–1420), whose opinion was also confirmed by C. E. de Jong-Janssen and D.H. van Wegen, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings in the Bonnefantenmuseum* (Maastricht, 1995), 66–67. The Maastricht painting, which has in the past suffered various maltreatments, is no longer easy to assess, but in my view there are no cogent reasons to attribute it to a hand other than Don Lorenzo himself or to detach it from the group of paintings being discussed here.

[14] See Marvin Eisenberg, *Lorenzo Monaco* (Princeton, 1989), 93, with a dating to c. 1418. Tartuferi recognized that the Edinburgh panel was earlier than the Thyssen-Bornemisza Madonna in *Lorenzo Monaco: Dalla tradizione giottesca al Rinascimento*, ed. Angelo Tartuferi and Daniela Parenti (Florence, 2006), 226.

[15] Among the various paintings belonging to the same phase as the Washington Madonna of Humility, I would like to cite at least the magnificent group of four patriarchs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. They are also typical products of the phase of transition between Don Lorenzo's initiation in the late Gothic style and that more simplified in design but more probing in expression that began towards the end of the second decade. Art historical assessment of these panels has varied: Marvin Eisenberg suggested a date of c. 1408–1410, and Laurence Kanter also substantially accepted that suggestion, adding to the group the Saint Peter formerly in the Feigen collection in New York (recently the painting has passed into the Moretti collection in Florence). This latter hypothesis, though well argued, does not entirely convince; the Saint Peter, which is also iconographically inconsistent with the figures of patriarchs, could be a slightly later work than the four panels in New York, which seem to me datable to c. 1410 or shortly after. See Marvin Eisenberg, *Lorenzo Monaco* (Princeton, 1989), 151–153; and Laurence B. Kanter, in *Lorenzo Monaco: Dalla tradizione giottesca al Rinascimento*, eds. Angelo Tartuferi and

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Daniela Parenti (Florence, 2006), 186–190.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting was executed on a single-member panel with vertical grain; the wood was lined with fabric below the white gesso ground. Red bole preparation was applied to the areas to be gilded. The original frame is lost, and the panel has been trimmed along all the edges, though the presence of a barbe around its entire profile indicates that the image remains intact. Stephen Pichetto treated the painting between 1940 and 1941, at which time the panel was thinned and cradled.[1] The flesh is painted over a green underpainting. Initially the artist painted the blue veil to cover Mary's forehead, but later he changed his design to allow her red-gold hair to reappear beneath her cloak. The pale blue of the veil is still visible where her hair is parted. The halos, panel border, and cushion were decorated with incised and punched designs. Mordant gilding was used to create the gold designs on the clothing and the inscription.

The painting has suffered from neglect and also from deliberate vandalism: deep vertical gouges are present in the figure of Christ and in the face of the Virgin. In addition, many of the pigments have faded.[2] In 1905, it was reported to be much darkened by dust and opacified varnishes. This state is probably shown by a Giraudon photograph revealing the paint film worn and much darkened, with small, scattered paint losses and scratches both in the figures and in the gold ground. A reproduction published in 1909 likely illustrates an undocumented treatment that took place in the meantime.[3] After Pichetto's 1940–1941 treatment, the painting was treated again in 1956 by Mario Modestini.[4] Inpainting is especially heavy in the faces of the Madonna and child, as well as in the green pavement.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:274. Stephen Pichetto also might have trimmed the edges at this time.

[2] The NGA scientific research department analyzed the painting using FORS spectral analysis, x-ray fluorescence spectrometry (XRF), reflectance spectroscopy, luminescence spectroscopy, and infrared reflectography at

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0.4 to 2.5 microns. Infrared reflectography was performed using a Santa Barbara Focalplane SBF187 InSb camera with H, J, and K astronomy filters and a Sony XC77 Si-CCD camera (see report dated October 27, 2010, in NGA conservation files).

[3] In describing the painting, Osvald Sirén noted that "die Farbenstimmung dürfte dadurch gelitten haben, dass das Bild bis zum Herbst 1904 mit einer verhärteten Schicht von Schmutz und Firnis bedeckt gewesen ist" (the appearance of the color suffered because until the autumn of 1904 it was covered with a hardened layer of dirt and varnish). Osvald Sirén, *Don Lorenzo Monaco* (Strasbourg, 1905), 89. This is the situation apparently shown by the Giraudon photo no. 6491.

[4] Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:274, reported that Mario Modestini cleaned, restored, and varnished it.

PROVENANCE

Masson collection, Amiens, by 1904.[1] (Édouard Larcade, Paris), by 1927. (Count Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi, Florence), by 1938;[2] sold September 1939 to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York;[3] gift 1943 to NGA.

[1] Osvald Sirén, *Don Lorenzo Monaco*, Strasbourg, 1905: 88-89.

[2] Raimond van Marle (*The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting*, 19 vols., The Hague, 1923-1938: 9[1927]: 162) notes that at that time the painting was no longer in the Masson collection. A manuscript annotation on a photo of the painting in the archives of the Biblioteca Berenson at I Tatti, Florence, dated 30 November 1927, states it then belonged to E. Larcade, Paris. Expertises by Giuseppe Fiocco and Wilhelm Suida written in English (apparently for Contini-Bonacossi in expectation of the sale to Samuel H. Kress; copies in NGA curatorial files) are dated May 1938. George Pudelko ("The stylistic development of Lorenzo Monaco," *The Burlington Magazine* 73 [1938]: 237-248 and 74 [1939]: 76-81) describes the painting as belonging to Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi.

[3] The painting was included on a bill of sale between the Kress Foundation and Contini-Bonacossi dated 1 September 1939, where it is described as "formerly in

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the Musee Masson, Amiens and in the Larcade Collection, Saint Germain" (copy in NGA curatorial files).

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1900 Possibly Musée du Louvre, Paris, early 1900s.[1]

2006 Lorenzo Monaco (1370-1425), Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, 2006, unnumbered catalogue.

EXHIBITION HISTORY NOTES

[1] Adolphe Giraudon's photograph (Giraudon number 6491) is annotated with the information that the painting was in the Musée du Louvre, Paris; perhaps it was temporarily exhibited there.

INSCRIPTION FOOTNOTES

[1] Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings*, 2 vols., Washington, DC, 1979: 1:274, reads "EGO S[UM LU]X M[UNDI]," i.e., the words of John 8:12, but what actually remains of the inscription does not allow more than an informed conjecture about the original text. In Don Lorenzo's Monteoliveto altarpiece of 1410, now in the Accademia in Florence, and in the more or less contemporary altarpiece in the Galleria Comunale at Prato, the scroll reads "EGO SUM VIA VERITAS ET VITA" (John 14:6).

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