

Gigetta Dalli Regoli

TRINITY FINE ART



The Master of San Miniato
The Madonna and Child

**THE MASTER OF SAN MINIATO
(LORENZO DI GIOVANNI DI NOFRI)**
(Florence, documented from 1465 – d. 1512)

The Madonna & Child with St. John the Baptist and Mary Magdalene

tempera on panel, 66.5 x 48.5 cm, 26 ¼ x 19 ⅛ in

Provenance

Bardi Sale (n. 33);
Max Bondi Collection, Milan;
Galleria Lurati Sale, Milano,
9-20 December 1929, No. 33
(as School of Ghirlandaio,
attributed to Bartolomeo di
Giovanni);
Mocenigo Sale, Florence,
1933, lot 120;
Serristori Collection,
Florence

Literature

B. BERENSON, *Pitture italiane
del Rinascimento*, Italian
translation by E. CECCHI,
Milan 1936, p. 551;
B. BERENSON, *Italian Pictures
of the Renaissance*, II ed.,
Florentine School, vol. I,
London 1963, p. 146;
G. DALLI REGOLI (ed.), *Il
«Maestro di San Miniato»*: lo
stato degli studi, i problemi,
le risposte della filologia,
Pisa 1988, cat. n. 49, pp. 102,
238, reproduced fig. 183.

A large group of mainly small scale works were grouped and catalogued under the the name “*Maestro di San Miniato*”, up until the end of the last century, these mainly consisted of smaller domestic-scale images of the Madonna and Child: a grouping in which a clear distinction emerged between two groups of related works, and other pieces of more uncertain reference. Now however, after a complex critical, historical and art historical investigation, the two personalities linked to these related but distinct bodies of painting can be at last recognised as Lorenzo di Giovanni di Nofri (called *Maestro di San Miniato*) and Domenico di Zanobi (called *Maestro della Natività Johnson*), two painters connected by many similarities of style but nevertheless distinguishable from each other through the compositional choices they made and the specific types of representation they depicted. The careers of these two artists developed in parallel, and it is perhaps not merely coincidence that their most important works (The altarpiece of San Domenico by Lorenzo di Giovanni, and the altarpiece for the Oratorio del Fortino by Domenico di Zanobi) have been preserved in San Miniato from the time they were painted up until the present day.





The identification of the then anonymous “*Maestro di San Miniato*” started with an investigation by Berenson in 1913¹ who grouped eight paintings under this title, taking as the central pivotal work, the *Sacra Conversazione* in the church of S. Domenico in San Miniato.

The choice of this altarpiece as the point of departure for his investigation has even more justification when one considers that the aforesaid work is the most significant and complicated commission the artist undertook, which comprises one of the most popular thematic types in the 15th century and includes all the appropriate iconography of such a scene, the sacred personages flanked by saints and with donors. Moreover in concert with the first selection of works, we have a second partially overlapping selection indicated independently by Kessler in 1925². There were some additions to this corpus of work by De Francovich³ (1927), in whose essay two of the many long lines of investigation are already identified and along which many erroneous attributions have accumulated through the years, which veered towards on one hand the figure of Biagio d’Antonio, and on the other towards a ill defined group of artists whose work depended on compositional models by Filippo Lippi, Pesellino & Pollaiuolo; and is revealed to be a group of interdependant artists to whom various names were given, from “*Maestro della Lunetta della Via Romana*” (Offner) to “*Maestro degli Argonauti*” (Fahy), with associated problematic attributions and suppositions, as with the case of *Familiare del Boccati* by Roberto Longhi.

It was the same Berenson who after the positive initial start to his investigation into the *Maestro di S Miniato*, started to complicate the situation (1932)⁴: by attributing to him a group of works belonging instead to the hand of an artist who only in recent times has received the correct recognition under the name of *Maestro della Natività Johnson*, and from this point then extended the investigations and attributions to include names such as Lippi, Pesellino and Pollaiuolo whilst veering towards other more thorny art historical problems, using the then fully accredited name of *Maestro di San Miniato*. In fact in this list Berenson also inserts some works of very high quality but of difficult attribution such as the *Sacra Conversazione*-ex Woodward and the *Pieta* in the collection of the Duke of Norfolk at Arundel Castle. After a re-evaluation by Van Marle (1937⁵), which excluded the more difficult cases and proposed

¹ B. BERENSON, *Catalogue of a Collection of Paintings and Some Art Objects, I: Italian Paintings*, John J. Johnson, Philadelphia 1913, pp. 23-24.

² J. H.H. KESSLER, The Master of S. Miniato, in «The Burlington Magazine», XLVI, 1925, pp. 230-235.

³ G. DE FRANCOVICH, *appunti su alcuni minori pittori fiorentini della seconda metà del secolo XV*, in «Bollettino d’Arte», VI, 1926-27, pp. 529-547.

⁴ B. BERENSON, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance*, Oxford 1932, pp. 347-349.

⁵ R. VAN MARLE, *The Development of Italian Schools of Painting*, The Hague 1923–1938; XVI, 1937, pp.196-203.

⁶ B. BERENSON, *Un codice illustrato dal Maestro di San Miniato*, in «Rivista d'Arte», 26, 1950, pp. 93-101.

integrating others, thereby reducing the total number works included in the attribution, the addition of new works to this group started to slow and become less numerous overall. However, even at the start of the 1950s Berenson⁶ attributed to this artist, a series of miniatures belonging to the school of Fra Angelico, and in his index in 1963 brought the total number of works attributed to the *Maestro di S Miniato* to over sixty. From this point onwards the additions



Fig. 1: The Master of San Miniato (Lorenzo Di Giovanni Di Nofri), *Madonna and Child with Saints*, San Miniato, church of San Domenico

to this corpus of work got much rarer, in the Art Historical literature at least, since the attribution of works to this master in the auction house catalogues were frequent, in opposition to the more studious publications which were in the process of diminishing the total works attributed to him. One of the first investigations which tended towards this policy of trimming and reshaping



⁷ E. FAHY, Some Notes on the Stratonice Master, in «Paragone», 197, 1966, pp. 17-28.

was that of Everett Fahy⁷ (1966), who in a small note after an article about the problems of attribution encountered in the painting of Lucca, compiled a catalogue ascribed to an anonymous artist to whom he assigned the name *Maestro della Natività Johnson*, including amongst work attributed to him, some paintings which Berenson had assigned to the *Maestro di San Miniato* in the most recent edition of his book *Italian Pictures*; the same Fahy then gave even more weight to his grouping by the addition of one of the most



Fig. 2: The Master of San Miniato (Lorenzo Di Giovanni Di Nofri), *Madonna and Child with Saints*, private collection

⁸ E. FAHY, Some Early Italian Pictures in the Gambier-Parry Collection, in «The Burlington Magazine», CIX, 1967, pp. 128-139.

emblematic paintings amongst those preserved in S Miniato namely the *Pala della Misericordia*. Other changes were proposed by Fahy (1967⁸, 1976⁹) re-attributing works to the numerous followers of Domenico Ghirlandaio, an anonymous artist known as the *Maestro dell'Epifania di Fiesole*. Through other investigative channels Federico Zeri gathered a cogent and related group of works centering around the painting of the Madonna ex-Blumenthal in the catalogue of the Metropolitan Museum (1971), and grouping them under the

name of the *Maestro di San Miniato*, in fact Zeri isolates and extracts from Berenson's catalogue an artist of more elevated talents who he named «*The Master of San Miniato at his best*»; and this decision was confirmed in the catalogue of the following year (Fredericksen – Zeri¹⁰), where in the exiguous group ascribed to the *Maestro di S Miniato*, the Madonna in the Metropolitan does not appear. This group was already partially attributed in a previous essay by Busignani (1959¹¹), where precise investigation alternates with disputable hypotheses, but which nonetheless brought to the fore the need to discuss and dispute the grouping of paintings carried out at the start of the century and even went so far as to suggest-perhaps with some irony-the existence of the «*Maestro del Maestro di San Miniato*». Two contributions by Matteoli (1953¹², 1967¹³) then enshrined the separation of two previously grouped paintings which corresponded to two distinct and separate artistic personalities, namely the *Conversazione di S. Domenico* and the *Incoronazione della Vergine della Misericordia*. The professor reached very significant conclusions in relation to the two works, however she didn't confront the problem of the wider corpus of works attributable to the two artists. Other acquisitions were obtained from the catalogues of the museums-amongst these the last edition of *Avignon*, *Musée du Petit Palais* by Laclotte & Moggetti (1987¹⁴) – or from investigations which dealt with subjects related to this other than those undertaken by the researchers previously mentioned. Looking at the art historical literature of the last decade it seems only right to mention above all Anna Padoa Rizzo for the frequency of her interventions; and also Paolo Dal Poggetto, Luciano Bellosi, Antonio Paolucci, curators of those exhibitions and museum collections which have highlighted problematic sides of this aspect of the Tuscan Quattrocento. In 1988 a volume curated by Gigetta Dalli Regoli¹⁵ sought to take stock of the situation by bringing together in two parallel series the most significant works of the two masters. In the book, entitled *Il Maestro di S. Miniato*, there is an essay by the researcher dedicated to the fictitious names assigned to the anonymous artists, a second contribution concerning painting from Valdarno and Valdelsa in the 15th century (P. Richetti) and two monographs dealing with the two masters we are concerned with here (S. Castri, G. Landolfi).

⁹ E. FAHY, *Some Followers of Domenico Ghirlandaio*, New York & London 1976.

¹⁰ B. FREDERICKSEN, F. ZERI, *Census of Pre-Nineteenth-Century Italian Paintings in North American Public Collections*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1972, p. 135.

¹¹ A. BUSIGNANI, *Note su alcuni fatti minori del secondo Quattrocento fiorentino*, in «Arte Figurativa», 7, 2, 1959, pp. 20-25.

¹² A. MATTEOLI, *Il «Maestro di San Miniato» e la sua tavola d'altare nella Chiesa samminiatese dei P.P. Domenicani*, in «Bollettino dell'Accademia degli Euteleti», XVI, 27, 1953 (1951–52), pp. 45-49.

¹³ A. MATTEOLI, *La pala d'altare della venerabile arciconfraternita della Misericordia di San Miniato (Pisa) proveniente dal locale oratorio di Santa Maria al Fortino*, in «Bollettino dell'Accademia degli Euteleti», XXX, 39, 1967, pp. 11-42.

¹⁴ M. LACLOTTE, E. MOGNETTI, *Avignon, Musée du Petit Palais*, Paris 1987 (3° ed.).

¹⁵ G. DALLI REGOLI (ed.), *Il «Maestro di San Miniato»: lo stato degli studi, i problemi, le risposte della filologia*, Pisa 1988. The part dedicated to the Maestro di San Miniato is by Serenella Castri.

¹⁶ A. BERNACCHIONI, *Lorenzo di Giovanni, un "pittore di madonne" del Rinascimento fiorentino*, in P. BISCOTTINI e N. RIGHI (ed.), *Museo Diocesano, lascito Schubert, San Vito di Leguzzano (VI) 2014*, pp. 41-47.

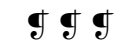
Following this, successive studies conducted by Annamaria Bernacchioni¹⁶ have enabled a clarification of the authorship, provenance and donors of the eponymous altarpiece of the Maestro di S Miniato, namely the *Sacra Conversazione* depicting the Madonna & Child with Sts Sebastian, John the Baptist, Martin and Roch in the Church of S Domenico in San Miniato. In addition to this, thanks to a document discovered by Ludovica Sebgondi,



Fig. 3: The Master of San Miniato (Lorenzo Di Giovanni Di Nofri), *Madonna and Child with Saints*, Pomino (Rufina), Church of San Bartolomeo

Annamaria Bernacchioni has proposed that the figure of the Maestro di San Miniato be identified as Lorenzo di Giovanni di Nofri. In contemporary documents, Lorenzo di Giovanni di Nofri is requested to carry out restorations on a painting executed a few years previously in 1468, depicting the *Madonna delle elemosine*, and attributed to the Maestro di San Miniato. Due to the brief

time period between the execution of the painting and its restoration, Bernacchioni has put forward the proposition of unifying the two figures. As noted by Annamaria Bernacchioni, Lorenzo di Giovanni, who died in 1512, was the son of a saddler who lived in Florence in the quarter of Santa Maria in Verzaia, near to the Porta San Frediano. Between 1465 and 1466 he frequented the atelier of Neri di Bicci, being mentioned on a number of occasions in Neri's memoirs, from which we learn that he was the only one out of Bicci's numerous apprentices to entirely execute a work by his own hand. Later in 1472 he is documented in an atelier next to the Servite monastery, close to the church of the Santissima Annunziata, which was a centrally located close to the cathedral and in which many Samminiatese families did business, such as the Bonaparte and the Chellini, the latter of whom owned buildings which they rented out to store wood and oils and also as studios for artists.



The "Master of San Miniato" now known as Lorenzo di Giovanni, was a prolific painter active in Florence and its region in the second half of the 15th century. He is documented as being apprenticed to Neri di Bicci (1465-66), and then as an independant painter from 1472, and he received his artistic formation in a milieu which stood squarely between art and artisanship and which tended to cater primarily for commissions from individuals of more modest social standing and cultural formation. The stylistic models to which artists from this circle looked were those of Filippo Lippi & Francesco Pesellino, both accomplished and much in demand painters who worked for patrons of refined taste and high social standing but whose work was also appreciated by a wider public. These artists favoured a wide variety of ornamentation in their work, and compositions in which the subjects were linked to each other by a strong emotional interplay, using a rich and varied compositional language from which inspiration could be drawn, enabling other artists to reduce the more sophisticated aspects of this genre and adapt it to the expectations and pockets of a clientele of simpler tastes and lesser economic means. The present painting, previously in the Serristori Collection, can be placed

in an artistic environment focusing on the genre that best characterises the work of Lorenzo di Giovanni, namely the production of small scale works for private domestic devotion. There are more or less two compositional types; one with the Madonna seated, or less frequently standing, who exchanges affectionate gestures with the son seated in her lap; the second with the Madonna & Child placed centrally and flanked by two saints as in the present example. There are very few works of large dimensions, such as the *Sacre Conversazioni*, images which represented the heavenly order (divine personages accompanied by saints and angels) and were designed to be placed on an altar, three are attributable



Fig. 4: Masaccio (and Masolino?), *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, Florence, Uffizi

¹⁷ See S. CASTRI, in DALLI REGOLI 1988, cit., cat. n. 1, p. 211, reproduced fig. 123.

¹⁸ See S. CASTRI, in DALLI REGOLI 1988, cit., cat. n. 32, p. 229, reproduced fig. 122.

to Lorenzo: the most important is that of the church of S. Domenico at S. Miniato (fig. 1), another is in the church of S Bartolomeo¹⁷ in Pomino (Rufina, fig. 3), and a third which passed through the salerooms of Sotheby's, London in the 1950s and is now in a private collection (fig. 2).¹⁸ There are few other works which provide iconographic and structural exceptions to Lorenzo's habitual artistic output and into this very reduced group can be put a small altarpiece in Arezzo, a remarkable *Madonna della misericordia* recently shown in an





exhibition in Palazzo Strozzi¹⁹, some panels depicting the kneeling Madonna adoring the infant Christ and three predella panels whose original provenance remains unknown.

¹⁹ *Denaro e Bellezza. I banchieri, Botticelli, e il rogo delle vanità*, ed. L. SEBREGONDI, T. PARKS, Florence 2011-2012.

Returning to the *Madonna ex Serristori* which deserves particular attention since it stands out from the artist's unusual oeuvre due to the unusual composition which although corresponding to a well-known typology, differs from it in the treatment of the figure of the Magdalene who is somewhat constrained in the pictorial space (The saint's attribute, a perfume jar, is somewhat squeezed in the space available), also of note is the composition which thrusts the Madonna and Child into the foreground close to the viewer whilst the two flanking saints are situated on the other side of a large parapet. This carefully considered composition, which renders the work more spacious and gives it depth, sets it apart from the other numerous devotional pictures produced by the artist and moreover is reminiscent of the layout of the large *Sacra Conversazione* altarpiece in the church of San Domenico in S. Miniato (fig. 1): also here the artist has with great ingenuity and determination, positioned the protagonists at various levels in the picture plane on a variously stepped base (The donors in the foreground and at a certain distance behind the Madonna & Child with accompanying saints)

In the present work the positioning of the figures is supported by the fact that the Madonna is shown as standing, and it is this erect position which allows her to "advance" out of the pictorial space and also allows her to offer the Child, who lifts one hand in benediction, for the devotion of the viewer. We will never know whether this composition was requested by the donor or was an innovation of the artist but whatever the reasoning it allows the viewer to get closer to the personages depicted thereby admirably fulfilling its role as a conduit for private devotion. It is also not mere coincidence that the most developed painted passage in this work is the positioning of the hands of the Madonna which create a shell like form extending to almost form a cradle for her son. Those hands which both carry and offer the child to the viewer have as their model and illustrious predecessor the painting of *S. Anna Metterza* by Masaccio (Uffizi, fig. 4)), wherein the hands of the Madonna cradle and open in a V-shape forming the same cradle/shell form whilst cradling the tenderly rendered body of her child.

Further confirmations of the coherence of this work within the total body of work of this Master are found the composition which is divided into three, a popular solution much used at the time in smaller works, and the typology of the figures depicted with faces framed by undulating, curled hair, and close features around small bow-shaped mouths which give the figures a slightly quietly grave air, accentuated by the measured gestures and relatively unadorned clothes, with rare exceptions; some tiny descriptive digression occurs where the Child holds a bird or a fruit between his fingers, and when the shoots of a rose garden appear behind the characters: fragile survivors of conventional attributes from which the symbolic power has all but fled. In this panel wherein the Madonna is flanked by the infant St John and the Magdalene (Perhaps included in the composition to evoke the names of two members of the family who commissioned it), the two saints are identifiable by their attributes (a processional cross and a container for perfumes); both are pushed towards the back of the pictorial plane and the two dominant figures are the Madonna & Child, who are almost close enough to touch for the onlooker and form tangible, credible presences who are presented as disposed to hear the prayers offered in front of them.

Within a large catalogue of works, which has the tendency to grow with the passing of time, this painting more than others, best represents the response of a Master, catering to the devotional needs of clients who desired engaging images in line with traditional iconography whilst at the same time being less costly. Thus we can see yet again the analogous careers of both Lorenzo di Giovanni and Domenico di Zanobi who already were united by Bernard Berenson under the fictitious name of the *Maestro di S Miniato* and who embody the artists engaged in the widespread work of bridging the gap between the urban elite and the wider population, between Florence where they studied, trained and had their studios and those localities in the surrounding countryside where local merchants and artisans of modest means aspired to procure for their houses and chapels, a small fragment of the sophistication and brilliance which shone so brightly in the sacred images kept in the churches and palaces of Florence.