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Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio
A Rediscovered Tondo

Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio
(Florence, 1483 – 1561)

Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist

Oil on panel, Ø 84 cm.
c. 1508–10



A Rediscovered *Tondo* by Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio

This painting, which can be attributed without question to Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, may be compared with a tondo with the same subject and composition (albeit with certain differences in structure and proportion) now in the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin (Fig. 1). The Dublin painting is attributed in the Fototeca Zeri¹ to Mariotto Albertinelli with mention of an earlier attribution to Giuliano Bugiardini, yet neither name appears plausible today, because the manner of those two Florentine masters has been far more clearly defined in recent years. Albertinelli, in particular, affects a draughtsmanship characterised by sharper profiles and a lesser penchant for classicism, while Bugiardini's summary draughtsmanship results in a simplification of form and anatomy that is invariably recognisable. Both these approaches are extraneous both to the painting under discussion and to the Dublin picture, where Raphael's influence is clear and is grafted onto an earlier interest in Leonardo, resulting in a calm and harmonious construction of figures echoing the later work of Domenico del Ghirlandaio and Fra Bartolomeo's still late 15th century paintings.

Where the Dublin picture is concerned, we should immediately point out – although the museum does not appear to have accepted the proposal – that Matteo Ganeselli has published it with a correct attribution to Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio². The author dates the tondo to the years immediately after Ridolfo's apprenticeship with Fra





Fig. 1: Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, *Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist*, Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland, inv. no. NG11090

Bartolomeo on account of the echoes of certain specific models by that master, such as a *Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist* in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 2). The same applies to the tondo under discussion here, which was painted, clearly for two different patrons, at the same moment as the Dublin picture and is of the same quality. Its close dependence on Fra Bartolomeo is evident in the design of Mary's attire, almost identical in the green overtunic on her lap and in the relationship between the





red tunic and the blue-purple sleeve. Gianceselli dates the Dublin tondo to the end of Ridolfo's apprenticeship with Fra Bartolomeo, which must already have come to an end by *c.* 1503 when Ridolfo enrolled in the Compagnia di San Luca. Ridolfo's first certain altarpiece, a *Madonna and Child with St. Francis and St. Mary Magdalen* now in the Museo del Cenacolo di Foligno in Florence (Fig. 3), is dated precisely 1503. The painting is characterised by a strong Flemish influence and powerful shadows, which probably point to the influence of Piero di Cosimo. The *Madonna and Child*

Fig. 2: Fra Bartolomeo *Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist*, New York, Metropolitan Museum



Fig. 3: Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, *Madonna and Child with St. Francis and St. Mary Magdalen* 1503, Florence, Museo del Cenacolo di Fuligno

under discussion here and the Dublin tondo, on the other hand, reveal a search for a more harmonious composition accompanied by a more luminous and simpler painted surface, which I believe indicates that they should be dated a few years later, towards the middle of the first decade of the 16th century. A comparison with coeval or slightly later work by Ridolfo will allow us to understand the manner in which he built his compositions and bolster our certainty that his picture is by his hand. As we have seen, the most direct parallel is with the kindred tondo in the museum in Dublin, yet once we get past the initial impression that the two paintings are identical, closer observation shows that the two compositions were achieved by combining different drawings (evidently stored

in Ridolfo's workshop) whose proportions do not coincide. In the tondo under discussion here, the group of the Madonna and Child has a greater monumentality in relation to the landscape than the Dublin picture. This enlargement has required not only that Mary's legs be curtailed but also that her hand be superimposed on the feet of Joseph, who is shown under a ruined arch in the background. The landscape, both outside the window on the left and in the area with St. Joseph, is also broader in this tondo than it is in the Dublin picture. And the marble column incongruously resting on the window sill has disappeared, to be replaced by a *pietra serena* stone sill in which the artist has deliberately painted small cracks to differentiate it from the plaster. The entire composition of both pictures was probably achieved by combining two different drawings with different proportions, and Ridolfo must have been especially fond of the idea of St. Joseph beneath the arch because he revived it in a panel with the *Adoration of the Shepherds* in the Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, in Indiana³ (Fig. 4) – a painting that can be dated *c.* 1510 on the strength of its further simplification, resulting in more elongated figures and leading Ridolfo to look beyond the classicism of Raphael that had been such a feature of his work in the second half of the first decade of the century. In this picture too, Ridolfo appears to have used the same drawing that he used for the two tondos, yet once again he plays with variations by altering St. Joseph's gesture, by removing the ox and by imparting greater substance to the bushes sprouting from the ruins, while a staff placed crossways on the architecture imparts a sense of perspective to the space.

We should remember that Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio's career spanned the first half of the 16th century in its entirety, without making a lot of noise and with very little stylistic variation, thus embodying that tradition that was a distant descendant of the Quattrocento and that survived through all the political and cultural turbulence of Florence for decades. He ran an important workshop in which he



Fig. 4: Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, Indiana

trained his most faithful follower, Michele di Jacopo Tosini, who was to prove capable of updating his master's style and of promoting well beyond the middle of the century the popularity of a dynasty of artists that sank its roots in the Quattrocento⁴. While, on the one hand, these choices explain Ridolfo's reputation among his contemporaries and the many commissions that he received both from the aristocracy, for example from the House of Medici, and from leading religious institutions, on the other hand, the seeming



absence in his work of the formal unrest so popular with 20th century scholars has led modern critics to display a certain lack of interest in his work, which has been only partly rescued from oblivion by the work of David Franklin, who has reconstructed a timeline for his output stretching as far as the 1530s⁵.

Yet despite this, Ridolfo's work is far better known and recognisable up to the first two decades of the 16th century, up to the moment when Michele Tosini began to frequent his workshop, his arrival coinciding with a reduction in his master's output. Even though Ridolfo lived on until 1561, we know of fewer and fewer works by him after 1530, and in fact we know of almost none painted in the last two decades of his life⁶.

This tondo, in which we can still clearly detect the elements of a broad cultural stratification dating back to the transition between the 15th and 16th centuries, thus stands at the start of a long career which was to reach a peak with Ridolfo's close bond with Raphael during the latter's time in Florence.

Ridolfo's interest in Raphael's innovative work during the years he spent in Florence, between 1504 and 1508, is borne out by the bond of esteem and proximity of style that has led in the past to the attribution to Ridolfo of work by Raphael, such as the *Portrait of a Woman (Pregnant)* in the Galleria Palatina, and to Raphael of work now correctly reassigned to Ridolfo, such as the *Portrait of a Woman (the Nun)* in the Uffizi.⁷ The memory of this proximity probably led to the choice of Ridolfo to restore the *Madonna of the Goldfinch* after it was damaged in the collapse of Palazzo Nasi in 1547⁸.

Vasari himself tells us that Ridolfo drew so close to Raphael while the latter was in Florence, that when Raphael left for Rome, he let him "finish the blue drapery and other little things that were wanting in the picture of a Madonna that he had painted for some gentlemen of Siena", which some scholars now identify as *La Belle Jardinière* in the Louvre. But when Raphael, appreciating Ridolfo's manner, sought to persuade him to come to Rome as his assistant, Ridolfo,



"having never been out of sight of the Cupola, as the saying goes, and not being able to reconcile himself to living out of Florence⁹", always refused to leave the city. This episode, recounted by Vasari, may have occurred between 1508 and 1512, when Raphael was working on the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican.

In a small portable tabernacle painted by Ridolfo with *The Nativity with Saints*, usually dated 1512 and now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York (Fig. 5), he once again resorts to the ruined arch with St. Joseph, clearly using the same cartoon as he had used

Fig. 5: Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, *The Nativity with Saints*, New York, Metropolitan Museum



for the tondo under discussion here some ten years earlier. Yet he builds a number of variants into the same compositional pattern, removing the ox and ass which would be consistent with the Nativity theme, while adding a shepherd and a lamb to remind us that it was precisely the shepherds who were the first to adore the newborn Christ Child; and while he has not changed the position of St. Joseph, he has painted his face in profile, a ploy which, though minimal, is yet sufficient to vary the significance of the scene. Thus the discovery of this fine tondo has made it possible to add a new piece to the puzzle of Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio's early years and has increased our understanding of the working methods adopted in his workshop, where the use of cartoons meant that the proportions of the figures could be varied on the basis of designs imbued with his balanced, harmonious manner in early 16th century Florence.



Notes

¹ The panel measures 89 cm. in diameter and is recorded in the archive of the Zeri Photographic Library under no. 33646 with an attribution to Mariotto Albertinelli and a reference to an earlier attribution to Giuliano Bugiardini.

² M. Gianceselli, *Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio (1483-1561) et son atelier: entre ancrage traditionnel et tentation anticlassique*, “La Revue des Musées de France”, 63, 2013, 5, pp. 24-37.

³ The painting is also mentioned by M. Gianceselli, op. cit. , p. 30. See this link: https://raclinmurphymuseum.nd.edu/assets/516583/snite_selected_works.pdf

⁴ See *Ghirlandaio. Una famiglia di pittori del Rinascimento tra Firenze e Scandicci*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Annamaria Bernacchioni, (Scandicci 2010-11), Florence 2010.

⁵ See D. Franklin, *Towards a new chronology for Ridolfo Ghirlandaio and Michele Tosini*, “The Burlington Magazine”, 140, 1998, pp. 445-455; See also D. Franklin, *Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio negli anni Venti e l’esordio di Michele Tosini*, in *Ghirlandaio. Una famiglia...*, op. cit., pp. 53-67.

⁶ See M. Gianceselli, *La “parlata classicista”, proposte per Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio e la sua cerchia*, in “Arte cristiana”, 99, 2011, 865, pp. 295-302.

⁷ A. Natali, *La coperta della monaca*, in ibid., *La piscina di Betsaida. Movimenti nell’arte fiorentina del Cinquecento*, Florence-Siena 1995, pp. 117-137; C. Falciani, *Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio*, in *L’amore, l’arte e la grazia. Raffaello: la Madonna del Cardellino restaurata*, exhibition catalogue, ed. M. Ciatti and A. Natali, Florence 2008, pp. 81-89 with earlier bibliography. For Ridolfo’s friendship with Raphael, see A. Natali, *Madonne fiorentine, Raffaello, amico di Ridolfo*, in *L’amore, l’arte e la grazia...*, op. cit., pp. 25-44.

⁸ See A. Natali, *Madonne fiorentine, Raffaello, amico di Ridolfo*, in *L’amore, l’arte e la grazia...*, op. cit., pp. 25-44.

⁹ G. Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori coll’aggiunta de’ vivi et de’ morti, dall’anno 1550 al 1567*, (Florence 1550 and 1568), ed. R. Bettarini-P. Barocchi, Florence 1966-1987, V, text, 1984, p. 438.

