

# TRINITY FINE ART



**Giulio Cesare Procaccini**

(Bologna 1574 – Milan 1625)

*Holy Family with the Infant Saint John and an Angel*

Oil on canvas, 155 x 128 cm/ 61 x 50 in

**Provenance:** Lucca, private collection

**Literature:** H. Brigstocke, O. D'Albo, Giulio Cesare Procaccini. *Life and Work with a catalogue of his paintings*, Turin 2020, p. 386, no. 166.

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In this elegant composition, the Madonna is seated at the centre of the scene, turning her face in the direction of the viewer and her gaze heavenwards, while Saint Joseph, behind her, leans forwards looking at her with tenderness. The vivacious Christ Child, standing by his mother's knees, tries to get her attention by pulling her mantle, as if he were looking for her breast and she, to reassure him, holds his chin in her hand while stroking it, with a thoughtful and spontaneous gesture. In the background an angel, intently carrying a basket of fruit, watches the scene, while the infant Saint John, kneeling on the right, looks devotedly up at the Virgin and offers the young Jesus an apple, symbol of original sin.

This remarkable *Holy Family*, first reported by Hugh Brigstocke in January 2018 and seen by the author shortly afterwards, comes from a collection in Lucca,<sup>1</sup> but its previous whereabouts are unknown. Published for the first time in the monograph on Giulio Cesare Procaccini written by Hugh Brigstocke and the present author,<sup>2</sup> the work can without doubt be traced back and placed squarely amongst the artist's oeuvre.

The grandiloquent composition, the palette which plays with earthy colours and the strongly incised rendering of the figures are indicative of the latter phase of the artist's career, coming after his painting of *Constantine with the Relics of the Passion* in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, signed and dated 1620.<sup>3</sup>

Starting from this work, a turn towards a greater attention to the value of drawing can be seen in the paintings of Procaccini, as well as a more sober colour palette, which most likely represent his stylistic response to the trends impressed on Milanese taste by the opening of the Accademia Ambrosiana, promoted by Cardinal Federico Borromeo, in 1620. In addition to the external context, it should be noted that in the last five years of his life, Giulio

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<sup>1</sup> H. Brigstocke, O. D'Albo, *Giulio Cesare Procaccini. Life and Work with a catalogue of his paintings*, Torino 2020, p. 386, n. 166. With regards to the fate of the painting, it is useful to point out that an old copy is known, of slightly larger dimensions, held at the Capodimonte in Naples, the history of which is traceable from only the '30s of last century. P. Leone De Castris in *Museo e Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte. Dipinti dal XIII al XVI secolo. Le collezioni borboniche e post-unitarie*, P. Leone De Castris and N. Spinosa (eds), Naples 1999, p. 203; Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 386.

<sup>2</sup> Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 386, n. 166.

<sup>3</sup> Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 372, n. 134.

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Cesare took up his sculptural practice again, which he had largely abandoned at the beginning of the century, in order to finish *Saint John the Baptist* and *Saint Matthew* for the Duomo of Cremona, commissioned in 1597 and delivered, after long disputes, shortly before his death in 1625.<sup>4</sup> This circumstance helps to explain the strongly three-dimensional and sculptural character of the figures, typical of this late phase, to which our *Holy Family with the Infant Saint John* can most effectively be compared.

In the painting, the figures emerge from the background in an almost agitated manner and are compressed in a restricted space, which accentuates the emphasis on their gestures and postures. Their well-executed, elegant physiognomies and curved bodies increase the refinement and energy of the ensemble.

The brilliantly conserved condition of the pictorial surface allows the viewer to appreciate the freshness and rapidity of the composition, especially of the diaphanous, vigorously curled hair, which gives the impression of being soft to the touch. Quick and broken brushstrokes outline the splendid white cloth which, falling from the Virgin's knees into the foreground, illuminates the whole scene. Through its great confidence of execution, this piece brings to mind the "bozze" and "macchie" (rapid strokes of brushwork), for which the artist was most celebrated by his collectors, which Procaccini continued to paint even in the final phase of his career, for example in the *Mysteries of the Rosary* around the main altarpiece of San Pietro al Rosario in Novara, done between 1620 and 1625.<sup>5</sup> The sweetly emphatic expression of the Madonna, with her brown hair gathered in an elaborate hairstyle, can also be found in the same figure in the *Annunciation* at the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan (fig. 1)<sup>6</sup> and in *Susanna and the Elders* at Christ Church in Oxford (fig. 2),<sup>7</sup> datable to between 1620 and 1625. In his forceful emergence from the shadow, the powerful physiognomy of Saint Joseph is very close, with his proud attitude, to the *Saint Simon* (or *Saint Jude*) kept in Palazzo Rosso in Genoa (fig. 3),<sup>8</sup> a part of

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<sup>4</sup> H. Brigstocke, *Giulio Cesare Procaccini: His Life and Work*, in Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, pp. 400-1, n. 197.

<sup>6</sup> Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 388, n. 170.

<sup>7</sup> Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 379, n. 152.

<sup>8</sup> Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 376-3, n. 144.

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the series of apostles painted by Procaccini between 1620 and 1625 for the Genoese nobleman Giovan Carlo Doria.

Works such as this *Holy Family* best highlight Procaccini's ties to the painting of Correggio and Parmigianino, whose heir he was claimed to be from the start of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This is owed to Girolamo Borsieri, who wrote a letter to Scipio Tosio in 1621 – the famed patron of the *Painting by the Four Hands* at the Brera, executed by the artist together with Cerano and Morazzone – in which he stated that Giulio Cesare “*having passed from sculpture to painting, was able to become proficient in the manner illustrated by Parmigiano and Correggio in just a few days.*”<sup>9</sup> Onto this great Emilian inheritance, the artist grafts the emphasis and the grandiosity of the painting of Rubens, which renders his creations majestic. These stylistic characteristics, combined with the fact that Procaccini was Bolognese and that Malvasia writes his biography in *Felsina Pittrice* of 1678, allow us to better understand the great success of his paintings in numerous European collections, even in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>10</sup>

Of the painter's compositions, those most appreciated by collectors are above all his variations on the theme of the *Holy Family*, painted from 1620, amongst which the present work sits coherently. Some of these have ended up in prestigious European collections, such as the *Holy Family* at the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden (fig. 4)<sup>11</sup> and that in the Royal Collection at Hampton Court (fig. 5),<sup>12</sup> while on the Italian front, two works in Milan can be referenced, in the Castello Sforzesco (fig. 6)<sup>13</sup> and the Saibene collection (fig. 7)<sup>14</sup> respectively.

In these compositions, and in our *Holy Family*, Procaccini uses his extraordinary ability to restore, in ever-changing formulae, the grace and the delightfulness of the dialogue between the Virgin and the Christ Child, around whom Saint Joseph and the angel revolve. In particular, at the centre of the present painting, the gesture of the Virgin, who caresses the Child's face

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<sup>9</sup> In P. Vanoli, *Il “Libro di lettere” di Girolamo Borsieri: arte antica e moderna nella Lombardia di primo Seicento*, Milan 2015, p. 207.

<sup>10</sup> On this argument, O. D'Albo, *Sulla fama del “Correggio Insubre”. Un primo sguardo alla fortuna di Giulio Cesare Procaccini nelle collezioni europee tra Seicento e Ottocento*, in *Lombardia ed Europa. Incroci di storia e cultura*, D. Zardin (ed.), Milan 2024, pp. 189-217.

<sup>11</sup> Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 382, n. 159.

<sup>12</sup> Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 383, n. 160.

<sup>13</sup> Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 386, n. 167.

<sup>14</sup> Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 385, n. 164.

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holding it between her thumb and index figure, an extremely natural, almost domestic gesture, is splendid. The infant Jesus responds to this affectionate caress by moving his legs and turning his body towards her, as if he wanted to climb into his mother's lap, at the same time establishing a subtle dialogue with the young St John, with his delicate and expressive profile.

The *Holy Family* therefore testifies to the success achieved, at the height of his career, by Giulio Cesare Procaccini, who imposes himself as a sensitive and elegant interpreter, capable of uniting the grace of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Emilian painting with the energy of the incipient Baroque period promoted by the magisterium of Rubens.

Reggio Emilia, 12 January 2026



Odette D'Albo

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Fig. 1. *Annunciation*, oil on canvas, 212 x 130 cm (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan)

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Fig. 2. *Susanna and the Elders*, oil on canvas, 200 x 125.5 cm (Christ Church Picture Gallery, Oxford)

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Fig. 3. *Saint Simon (or Saint Jude)*, oil on canvas, 122 x 90 cm (Palazzo Rosso, Genoa)

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Fig. 4. *The Holy Family*, oil on panel (Gemäldegalerie, Dresden)

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Fig. 5. *The Holy Family with Angels*, oil on panel, 116.7 x 71.2 cm (Royal Collection, Hampton Court, London)

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Fig. 6. *Madonna and Child with St Joseph and Two Angels*, oil on canvas, 186 x 158 cm (Castello Sforzesco, Milan)

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Fig. 7. *Holy Family*, oil on panel, 159 x 113 cm (Saibene Collection)