

TRINITY FINE ART

Master of the Judgement of Paris

Active in Florence in the first half of the 15th century

Madonna and Child Enthroned with St. John the Baptist, St. James, St. Anthony the Abbot, a Female Sainted Martyr and Two Angels

Tempera and gold leaf on panel, 77 x 45 cm; (30 1/4 x 17 3/4 in.).

This panel is a small altarpiece designed for private devotion. Such items were part of the standard décor in the homes of wealthy Florentine merchants and bankers in the 14th century, but they might also be owned by ranking ecclesiastics for their own private prayer. The choice of saints depicted in the altarpiece includes St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of Florence, suggesting that the owner of the altarpiece is likely to have been a resident of that city, while St. James, on the other hand, is linked to the profound and widespread devotion to that saint whose shrine in Santiago de Compostela was one of the most popular destinations for pilgrims at the time. And finally, the cult of St. Anthony Abbot was generally associated with his alleged healing powers, including the healing of animals, and he was thus enormously popular in cities and rural areas alike.

The painted surface is in very reasonable condition, considering the painting's age. The Virgin is seated on a monumental architectural throne, of which we can see the base and the concave back pierced by tall, narrow slits. The figures of the saints and angels on either side of the throne are smaller in size than those in the central group, a ploy used to emphasise the central group's divinity. The strongly foreshortened geometrical design of the floor suggests that the artist was bent on conveying the depth of the painted space, even though he had absolutely no knowledge of the rules governing the depiction of geometrical perspective. His cultural and visual horizon was the Late Gothic style which, in Florence in the first half of the 15th century, was the only possible horizon for many painters, some of them of the highest rank, such as Lorenzo Monaco and Gentile da Fabriano, others less celebrated, like the artist who painted this panel. And this, despite the humanistic studies, the rediscovery of classical art and the attendant innovations of Masaccio, Brunelleschi, Donatello and others.

TRINITY FINE ART



1. *Master of the Judgement of Paris, Saints John the Baptist and Margaret of Antioch, private collection, Milan*

An unpublished work whose early history is unknown, this small altarpiece figures in Federico Zeri's Photographic Library (fact sheet no. 11465) correctly attributed to the Master of the Judgment of Paris, a painter whose identity is not known to us but who worked in Florence in the first half of the 15th century. Its inclusion in the artist's corpus of work is justified by a comparison with paintings known to be by him, first and foremost the tondo depicting the *Judgment of Paris* (Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello) after which he was named, in which we can recognise the same facial features and the typical handing of drapery gathered into long, sharp-edged folds that accompany, indeed almost contrast, the sinuous silhouettes of the edges. An equally convincing parallel may be drawn between the figure of St. John the Baptist and that of the same saint in a panel now in a private collection in Milan (L. Mattedi, in Federico Zeri 2021, pp. 50-55), or that of St. Sebastian in a sophisticated panel, likewise intended for private devotion, now in Avignon (Musée du Petit Palais, inv. MI 429). The features of the Master of the Judgment of Paris's figures are fairly idiosyncratic and easily recognisable, thus there are numerous parallels that can be drawn to bear out Zeri's attribution, one in particular being worth mentioning for its extraordinary sophistication, namely the angel musicians on a pair of organ doors now in Kansas City (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, inv. 35-26). Another example of the Master's creativity is the highly original architecture of the throne, in which Renaissance elements such as the sharp edges and polished surfaces of the marble serve as props to flesh out what is, in effect, a thoroughly Late Gothic fairytale scene. The same stylistic ploy is also found in a panel with the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with St.*

TRINITY FINE ART

Peter Martyr and St. Francis, with Stories from the Life of the Virgin, now in Cambridge (MA, Harvard Art Museums, Fogg Museum, inv. 47.24).



2. Master of the Judgement of Paris –
St Sebastian (Musée du Petit Palais, inv. MI 429)



3. Master of the Judgement of Paris – *The Madonna & Child enthroned between Sts Peter Martyr & Francis* (Cambridge MA, Harvard Art Museums, Fogg Museum, inv. 47.24)

This painter's career continues to be one of the most intriguing conundrums in the field of Late Gothic painting in Florence in the first half of the 15th century. It is now universally accepted that while the innovations of Masaccio, Brunelleschi and Donatello constituted a revolution that enjoyed widespread admiration among the more progressive art patrons, they left plenty of room for the work of artists still solidly bound to the Late Gothic style, who were active until roughly the middle of the century. The Master of the Judgment of Paris was one such. The leading 20th century scholars, from Osvald Sirén (1914, pp. 36-40) to Roberto Longhi (1928, pp. 34-35; 1940, p. 186 note 23), Georg Pudelko (1935) and Federico Zeri (1951), all grappled with the reconstruction of his career, while more recently, Enrica Neri Lusanna attempted a comprehensive, in-depth reconstruction of that career in 1989. These studies have resulted in the drafting of a uniform group of works which suggest that the painter devoted his energies primarily to producing small devotional altarpieces, bridal chests and birthing trays for the homes of the wealthy Florentine bourgeoisie of his day, while also placing his creativity at the service of such literary themes as the Judgment of Paris and the novels in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, both in his paintings on panel and in his sophisticated illustrations for manuscripts.

TRINITY FINE ART

He also dabbled in fresco painting, as we can see, at the very least, from his decoration of the small dome over the altar in the sacristy of San Lorenzo. This particularly learned and sophisticated work is dated to shortly after 4 July 1442 on the basis of the constellations it depicts, making it the latest work in the Master's known career (Lapi Ballerini 1986). He is likely to have embarked on his career some time in the 1410s, his early work reflecting the influence of Lorenzo Ghiberti. The solid modelling of his figures' features suggests that, while he could not ignore the painting of Lorenzo Monaco or Gherardo Starnina, he nevertheless sought to imbue his figures' flesh with a more modern, more substantial quality.

Unfortunately, we have yet to discover his name. Enrica Neri Lusanna, writing in 1989, failed to reach any definite conclusion, yet she managed to reconstruct a career that is compatible with the little we know about a mysterious artist called Giuliano d'Arrigo, known as Pesello. It is difficult to formulate any kind of definite proposal, because even Vasari was somewhat confused, merging the careers of two different painters – Giuliano Arrigo, the son of Giuocolo Giochi (b. 1367 – † 1449) and Francesco di Stefano, known as Il Pesellino (Florence, c. 1422–57) – in the biography of 'his' Pesello (Vasari, 1568, ed. 1971, pp. 370-373). The paintings of the Master of the Judgment of Paris appear to match the career of the elder of the two, whose declarations to the Catasto, or Land Registry, have survived from 1427 to 1442. The information contained in these declarations does not relate to any monumental commissions. It points, rather, to an intense and well-paid career played out in the context of a workshop which, in 1431 at least, comprised fully six painters who shared their commissions and their earnings (Jacobsen 2001, pp. 576-578).

Sonia Chiodo

TRINITY FINE ART

Cited Bibliography:

G. Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori* in the 1550 and 1568 editions, ed. R. Bettarini, commentary by P. Barocchi, vol. III, Milan 1971.

O. Sirén, *An early Italian Picture in the Fogg Museum in Cambridge*, in 'Art in America', III, 1914, pp. 36-40.

R. Longhi, *Ricerche su Giovanni di Francesco*, in 'Pinacotheca', I, 1928, pp. 34-48, reprinted in R. Longhi, *Edizione delle Opere Complete, IV, 'Me pinxit' e quesiti caravaggeschi*, 1928-1934, Florence 1968, pp. 21-36.

G. Pudelko, *The Minor Master of the Chiostro Verde*, in 'The Art Bulletin', XVII, 1935, pp. 71-89.

R. Longhi, *Fatti di Masolino e di Masaccio*, in 'Critica d'arte', V, 1940, issue 25/26, pp. 145-191.

F. Zeri, *Inediti del supposto Cecchino da Verona*, in 'Paragone', II, 1951, 17, pp. 29-32.

I. Lapi Ballerini, *Considerazione a margine del restauro della cupolina dipinta nella Sagrestia Vecchia*, in Donatello-Studies, in 'Italienische Forschungen', 3, vol. XVI, Munich 1986, pp. 102-113.

E. Neri Lusanna, *Aspetti della cultura tardogotica a Firenze: il 'Maestro del Giudizio di Paride'*, in 'Arte cristiana', LXXVII, 1989, pp. 409-426.

W. Jacobsen, *Die Maler von Florenz zu Beginn der Renaissance*, Berlin 2001.

Federico Zeri e Milano. Giornata per giornata nella pittura, catalogue ed. A. Bacchi and A. Di Lorenzo, Cinisello Balsamo 2021.

