

TOMASSO BROTHERS

FINE ART



Domenico di Bartolomeo Ubaldini, known as il Puligo (1492-1527)

Madonna and Child, c. 1525

Oil on panel

68.5 cm (27 in.) high
51.5 cm (20 ¼ in.) wide

A contemporary of Jacopo Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino, Domenico di Bartolomeo Ubaldini, who came to be known as il Puligo, is believed to have entered the workshop of Ridolfo Ghirlandaio in the first decade of the sixteenth century and remained there, according to Vasari (1568), "for many years". He entered the Compagnia di San Luca in 1525. He appears from the start to have focused on paintings for private settings such as portraits, representations of historical figures - Lucretia, Cleopatra or saints such as Mary Magdalene and St. John the Baptist - and devotional images depicting mostly the Madonna and Child. The only known work by Puligo to be signed is the Portrait of a man writing now in Firlle Place, Sussex, dated 1523. Like this gentleman, Puligo's characters all feature an assorted, inward-looking gaze, presenting themselves to the viewer in an idealised, rarefied dimension. Notwithstanding this marked "preference" for private commissions, Puligo also executed a number of altarpieces of splendid quality, such as the Deposition from the Cross in Anghiari, datable to 1515 and now in the Propositura di Santa Maria delle Grazie, though originally conceived for the headquarters of the Confraternity of the Cross.

Notably, the Cistercian order were prominent patrons of Puligo, entrusting him with the now lost decoration of the cloister of their Badia di Santo Stefano, where he also executed the Madonna and

Child with saints altarpiece now in the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, and various works for the Badia di San Bartolomeo al Buonsollazzo in Mugello, where Giovanni della Robbia was also engaged. Other works by Puligo connected to the Cistercian order are the Vision of Saint Bernard now in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore – which was described as “the best painting Domenico ever achieved” by Vasari, who saw it in the house of Giovan Gualberto and Niccolò del Giocondo – and the lovely Madonna and Child with St John the Baptist and Saint Bernard known through a photograph in the archives of the Longhi Foundation. For the Cestello church in Florence (now Santa Maria Maddalena de’Pazzi), which once belonged to the Cistercian monks from Settimo, he painted one his masterpieces, the altarpiece for the Da Romena chapel of 1526-27, still in situ and set into its original frame by Baccio d’Agnolo.

Puligo was a member of the Compagnia del Paiuolo (Company of the Cauldron), a merry brigade founded alongside the Compagnia della Cazzuola (Company of the Trowel) upon the return of the Medicis to Florence in 1512. Giovan Francesco Rustici served as head of the Company and hosted its meetings in his workshop by the Sapienza, and Andrea del Sarto was a member. Vasari records how the latter often visited Puligo in his atelier, dispensing generous advice and offering the younger artist his own drawings. The influence of del Sarto on Puligo is indeed manifest, so much so that his works have in the past been attributed to the mentor, yet the hand of our artist is always distinctive and characterised by a very personal vocabulary, visible in the idiosyncratic use of sfumato and in the intimately inward-looking emotional cipher of his figures.

The present panel represents the Madonna in three-quarter length, embracing the Christ Child who sits on her lap and gently drawing his head next to hers. The infant, wearing a light transparent tunic, turns towards his mother while laying a hand on her arm and tilting his head to one side. The background suggests an interior, with a green curtain on the right.

In the nineteenth century the painting was part of the collection of Sir George Armytage (1819-1899), fifth baronet of Kirkstiles in the county of Yorkshire, and was then attributed to Andrea del Sarto, as recorded in the catalogue of the 1868 Leeds National Exhibition of Works of Art, where it was displayed. The label to this day visible on the lower edge of the panel’s reverse most likely dates from that period, although its fragmentary nature means it could have borne an alternative attribution to Rosso Fiorentino (1495-1540) and thus date to another exhibition.

This beautiful Madonna and Child must in fact be ascribed to Domenico Puligo, as stylistic comparison with other works by the artist dating from the third decade of the sixteenth century suggests. These include the Madonna and Child with St. John the Baptist in the Pitti Palace’s Palatine Gallery (inv. 1912 no. 145), the Madonna and Child with St. John the Baptist and the Annunciation in the background formerly in the Benedict collection in Paris (presented in 1993 by Richard L. Feigen at the Biennale dell’Antiquariato in Florence), the beautiful painting of the same subject in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, and the Holy Family also in the Palatine Gallery. The characteristics that these paintings share with the present panel are the soft and warm style, the sculptural modelling of the forms, the elongated figures, the languid and sinuous poses, the robes falling in broad creased folds, the soft light that caresses the surfaces with sudden accents of radiance on the faces, the vivid colours out of which stands the crimson of Mary’s dress, the pictorial technique consisting of even brushstrokes and subtle layering (also visible in the reflectography of the present work), which create a gentle chiaroscuro effect and give the impression of the figures gradually emerging towards the viewer. To these stylistic similarities can be added figurative parallels, such as the languid physiognomies of the faces, the outlining of the hair (in blond ringlets for the Child and in softly wavy locks for the Virgin), the small mouths with red fleshy lips, the rounded chins, the eyes with subtle red outlines, the complexions with green undertones and rosy cheeks, the long and slender hands, the partly clenched fingers and, overall, the rarefied atmosphere, the sweetness in the gazes, the internalized expression.

In addition to this, the present panel displays evident compositional similarities to the Madonna and Child in the Palatine Gallery, specifically in the figure of the Virgin and in the positioning of the Child’s legs. With minor variations, this pose is a recurring motif in the paintings of Puligo and his workshop (Madonna and Child with St. John the Baptist in a landscape, Rome, Galleria Borghese; Madonna and Child, formerly Basel, private collection, then Sotheby’s London, March 24, 1976, lot 19; Madonna and Child, San Miniato, Pisa, Cassa di Risparmio di San Miniato; Holy Family, Pitti Palace, Palatine

Gallery, inv. 1912 no. 294). The demeanour of the Child, who, eyes looking up and lips gently parted, tilts his head backwards and to one side, infuses the figure with an sentimental connotation typical of Puligo's mature period, also visible in the Feigen Madonna, in the Holy Family with St. John the Baptist in Columbus (Museum of Art, inv. [57] 31 287), in the Madonna of the lilies versions in Hartford (Wadsworth Atheneum) and Genoa (Galleria di Palazzo Spinola), in the Budapest Cleopatra (Szépművészeti Múzeum) and in other autograph variations on this theme. This attitude, which has its distant roots in the pathos of Hellenistic art, is mediated in Puligo's compositions by the example of contemporaries such as Andrea del Sarto, Jacopo Pontorno and Rosso Fiorentino, who share with our artist the language of the Florentine Maniera, declined by each according to his own sensitivity and vocabulary. Typical of Puligo's poetry of emotions, which tends towards a strongly internalized intimacy, are the soft light, the almost immaterial quality of forms, the "sfumato" of Leonardesque inspiration (the "fog" that hides the contours mentioned by Vasari as the principal element of the painter's style) that transforms shapes and leads towards a sense of idealised and melancholic yearning. The more restless aspects of the Child in works such as Pontorno's Pucci Altarpiece from 1518 are purified by our artist of their most daring notes, in favour of a more poised and composed representation.

The figure of the Virgin in the present panel is emblematic of this language, with its delicate and sensitive features and its intense gaze, veiled by sweet sadness, directed towards the observer. These characteristics appear repeatedly in the female figures of Puligo's maturity, such as the aforementioned Madonna in the Palatine Gallery, the Portrait of a Lady for the Arciconfraternita della Misericordia, and the Mary Magdalene in the Accademia Albertina in Turin, portraits and "heads" of saints and other individuals, which Puligo was famed and highly appreciated for. The parallels appears particularly evident with the Madonna depicted in the centre of the Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple with saints, painted by Puligo shortly before his death in 1527 for the church of Santa Maria degli Angiolini in Florence, where the work is still preserved: the similarities in the features, in the pose and in the rendering of the drapery are indeed manifest, and suggest a similar date for the present panel.

To conclude, the present Madonna and Child represents an important new addition to the corpus of Puligo's works intended for private devotion. As noted by Vasari, Puligo dedicated himself to "paintings of Our Lady, portraits and other heads" rather than "larger commissions", a choice that the biographer laments, given the artist's mastery and exceptional skills. The core compositional arrangement that Puligo devised to respond to the demands of commissions for private devotion is clearly exemplified in the present painting, alongside the works mentioned above today in Munich, in the Palatine Gallery, in Hartford and in Genoa. A further example - closely related to our panel yet presenting significant variations in the pose of the Child and in the robe of the Madonna, and featuring the addition of St. John and an outdoor setting - appeared in Genoa in 1976-77 and is known through a photograph in the archives of the Federico Zeri Foundation.

The composition focusing on the embrace between Mother and Son, as the former draws nearer to the latter in a protective gesture, echoes the arrangement developed by Raphael in his Madonna della seggiola (Florence, Pitti Palace, Palatine Gallery) and especially in his Madonna della tenda (Munich, Alte Pinakothek). This theme has its roots in the fortunate iconographic tradition that developed in Florence in painting (Filippo Lippi) and sculpture (Donatello, Ghiberti, Luca della Robbia) throughout the fifteenth century, and continued into the early sixteenth century in the sculptures of Giovan Francesco Rustici and Jacopo Sansovino.

The painting is in very good condition and is not altered by repainting, or by invasive interventions. The surface is integral and reveals an excellent quality of the paint layers.

Dr Elena Capretti
Florence, 2016

Provenance:

Sir George Armytage (1819-1899), 5th Baronet Kirklees, Kirklees Hall, Clifton, Yorkshire
Thence by descent until 2013

Exhibitions

National Exhibition of Works of Art, Leeds, United Kingdom, 1868 as "Andrea del Sarto", no. 89