Signorelli’s *Madonna and Child*: A Gift to His Daughter

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Luca Signorelli’s *Madonna and Child* in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 1) is an exquisite picture, eloquently and intelligently appreciated by Roger Fry in 1910:

[Signorelli’s] *Madonna* is a great and profoundly original creation. At first sight one is inclined to complain that the elaborately decorated gold background, an imitation apparently of a gilded leather hanging, is too assertive, that the rich golden flesh tones are not sufficiently relieved; but as the eye gets accustomed to the unusual treatment one not only gains intense satisfaction from the marvellous drawing of the gold decoration, with its intreccia of aggressive *putti* and scroll-work, but one realizes that the figures of the Madonna and Child maintain their due predominance by the unparalleled amplitude and simplicity of their forms. The simplification here is such as only a few of the greatest draughtsmen have ever attained to. It is as surprising as Piero della Francesca’s, and yet the line seems to imply the control of a more tumultuous, nervous force. The color, too, with its suggestion of archaic and Byzantine originals, is one of the most daring and successful experiments in Italian art.

The painting measures 51.4 by 47.6 centimeters and was first recorded in the Tommasi collection in Cortona in 1857. It had been sold to Robert Benson by 1893 and passed (via Duveen) to Jules Bache in 1928. The Metropolitan Museum acquired the picture in 1949, as part of the Bache Collection, and it is frequently referred to as the *Bache Madonna*. The painting has been accepted as an autograph work by Luca Signorelli (ca. 1450–1523) in most modern scholarship and is generally dated about 1505–10.

One can read biographies of fifteenth-century artists without ever learning whether they married or had children. In the case of the *Bache Madonna*, however, Signorelli’s private life sheds light on his picture. An overlooked, but not unknown, document in the State Archives in Florence effectively establishes that the *Bache Madonna* was given by Luca Signorelli to his daughter Gabriella in April 1507. This provides a charming provenance, a confirmation of the date, and some explanation of the appearance of the picture. It is also one of the rare occasions in the history of Italian Renaissance art in which a domestic picture can be related to a contemporary document.

Luca Signorelli was born in Cortona about 1450 and died there in October 1523. He married Galizia Carnesecchi soon after 1470 (when Galizia was described as still unmarried), and she predeceased him in September 1506. Four of the couple’s children lived into adulthood: Antonio, Tommaso, Felicia, and Gabriella.

The eldest, Antonio, appeared before the Priors in Cortona in 1490 to explain his father’s absence elsewhere (almost certainly in Volterra). He became an assistant to his father, and in 1494 he apparently collected a payment for Signorelli in Città di Castello. In February 1497 Antonio witnessed a document in his father’s workshop in Cortona, but his only documented activity as a painter was a pair of candelabra, which had been commissioned from Luca in 1495. Kanter has cautiously advanced that Antonio’s hand might be found in the *Assumption of the Virgin* in the Metropolitan Museum (acc. no. 29.164), and in the earliest frescoes at Monteoliveto Maggiore, painted about 1498–99.

But before Antonio could develop into an independent artist he died, almost certainly of the plague. He was still alive on July 2, 1502, but was dead by July 23, when Signorelli, acting as his heir, returned some land which had been part of the dowry that Antonio’s wife had brought to the Signorelli estates. Signorelli’s second son, Tommaso, was not a painter, but was named as the artist’s heir from 1502 onward (following the death of his elder brother). He duly inherited his father’s property in 1523 and died in 1529.

Signorelli also had two daughters, both of whom married and had children. The elder, Felicia, married Luca Boscia in October 1500 with a dowry of 220 florins. She had a daughter, Bernardina, but died before Signorelli drew up his first surviving will, in August 1502. If, as seems likely, she died in the same bout of plague that claimed Antonio Signorelli, we can probably infer that Luca’s will, which he made on
August 1, 1502, was a response to this family tragedy (both at the level of the morbid thoughts that were probably provoked by the death of his children and to vary the terms of his will in order to install Tommaso Signorelli as his universal heir).  

Signorelli's second daughter, Gabriella, married Mariotto di Antonio Mazza (also from Cortona) sometime before August 1502, and the couple had three daughters. There are a few scattered references to Gabriella. The first is oblique. In December 1492, Signorelli bought new dresses for his daughters from a Cortonese tailor, Pavolino di Mariotto, and one of these was probably for Gabriella.  

She was mentioned in his will of 1502, and when Signorelli renewed his will in October 1504, Gabriella was bequeathed a mourning dress worth 7 florins (the same value, inci-
dentally, as a tondo that he painted in 1505). In Signorelli’s final will of October 1523, this bequest to Gabriella was extended to mourning dresses for her two unmarried daughters, Felicia and Diana. And Gabriella was also remembered in her mother’s will. In which she was left 4 florins.

The gifts to Gabriella that concern us are not, however, these items of cash and clothing, but some paintings that the artist gave to his daughter on April 10, 1507. In a notarial act (Figure 2) which was drawn up in the church of Santa Margherita in Cortona by Ser Noferi Laparelli, Signorelli gave his one surviving daughter various possessions. The reason for this gift was not stated, but the death of Luca’s wife (and Gabriella’s mother) in the previous year may provide the context of the gift. Alternatively it may have been intended to celebrate the birth of a child. The gift included a length of green cloth from Orvieto, a dark purple cloak (camurra), a coverlet that had belonged to Gabriella’s mother, and 2 gold florins, which were owed to Bernardino di Mariotto (Cortonesi). The gift also included two paintings. The first is unidentified. It was “an image of the Virgin Mary full-length with two figures to the side.” No indication of scale is given, except that it was called a quadro and was presumably larger than the second picture (which was described as a quadrettum). The only surviving picture which fits this description is a fragment of an altarpiece at Lucignano, but this picture does not have a provenance that can reasonably be traced to Signorelli’s family and it is unlikely to have been a domestic picture. It was probably not the same picture that was given to Gabriella.

The second painting was a “small picture with a
half-length image of the Virgin Mary with her son in her lap with an elaborate gold background" (unum quadrettum cum media imagine Virginis Marie cum puer in ulnis cum campo auri elaborato). There is little doubt that this picture was the Bache Madonna. Although the document does not state that Signorelli was the author of this picture, the implication seems reasonable, and this painting is Signorelli's only known gold-backed Madonna. The Bache Madonna is also surprisingly small, given the forceful impact of the figures. The extraordinary gilded background points to a specific moment in the artist's career: the first decade of the sixteenth century. Although it has been dated as early as the 1480s (Van Marle) or the 1490s (Dussler), most commentators (Salmi, Scarpellini, Zeri, and Kanter) have associated the Bache Madonna with the decorative tendency seen in the Cortona Lamentation, the Matelica altarpiece, and the Arcevia polyptych and have plausibly dated the picture about 1505–7. The Matelica altarpiece is securely dated 1504–5, and there is a clear connection between the Bache Madonna and the severe profile and the glazed putti painted on a gold background in the draperies of one fragment from this altarpiece, the Four Standing Figures in an English private collection (Figure 3; foreground left). There are also connections with the Virgin and Child of the Arcevia polyptych of 1507 (Figure 4). The decorative motifs of the Virgin's draperies in this picture can again be compared with the Bache Madonna, and the Virgin and child are closely comparable, although I would argue that this group at Arcevia develops out of the solution for the Bache Madonna (and not vice versa).

The unique gold background and the stylistic dating both support the conclusion that the Bache Madonna was Signorelli's gift to his daughter, and the provenance of the picture may support this view (and certainly does not undermine it). We do not know how the picture entered the Tommasi collection, where it was first recorded in 1857, but there is no evidence that the family ever acquired fifteenth- or sixteenth-century pictures outside Cortona. By the mid-nineteenth century the family owned several pictures by Signorelli, and all of them appear to have been painted for Cortonese families or churches. While these examples suggest that the Tommasi actively acquired pictures that were available in Cortona, the Bache Madonna might have entered the collection in another way. Felicia Signorelli married Luca Boscia in 1500. The Boscia line merged with the Tommasi in the early seventeenth century (with subsequent generations of the family tracing themselves to both lines). The Bache Madonna might have entered the Tommasi collection if, for instance, Felicia's
daughter, Bernardina, had inherited the picture when Gabriella's daughters died without issue. This is, however, pure speculation.

On balance, the unique gilded background, the scale, the date, and the provenance of the Bache Madonna all point to its identity with the picture that Signorelli gave to his daughter in 1507. It would, in that case, have been familiar to Signorelli's nephew and artistic heir, Francesco Signorelli (ca. 1490/95-1553). This may help to explain the genesis of another picture which is sometimes attributed to Luca Signorelli but has more recently been assigned to Francesco: the Virgin and Child in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (Figure 5). This picture is very badly abraded and was extensively overpainted in the past. Although the Liverpool picture is slightly larger than the Bache Madonna (it measures 59.1 by 50.1 cm), the two pictures appear to have been executed on the basis of the same cartoon, and Kanter has suggested that the Liverpool version was probably painted by Francesco Signorelli, possibly before Luca's death and under his supervision (ca. 1515?). The fact that the colors of the Virgin's draperies are identical in both versions also suggests familiarity with the Bache Madonna.

Signorelli's painting in the Metropolitan Museum is exceptionally well preserved, although it is slightly abraded and has a few localized repaints. It is a beguiling image and there are few comparable works by other artists. The most unusual elements in the picture are the decorative motifs and the putti (both winged and wingless) of the gold background. These putti are painted in thin red, blue, and green glazes on gold leaf and reflect Signorelli's decorative interest in the first decade of the sixteenth century. Fry suggested that the background is meant to recall a "gilded leather hanging," a type of decoration known to have existed during the Renaissance (e.g., in the Palazzo Medici, Florence). Alternatively this background can be compared to intricate bookbindings or to the quadratura of fifteenth-century illuminated manuscripts, but the scale is unusual and this explanation of...
the picture’s appearance is not very satisfactory. Another possibility, which was suggested to me by Keith Christiansen, is that this background recalls a window made out of stained-glass roundels. The way in which these roundels are apparently joined to one another by small loops recalls window construction, and if Signorelli’s house had windows of this type there is no reason why he could not have decorated the panes of glass with glazes.

Another unusual feature of the picture is the two coins, or medals, with their wreathed portraits of Roman emperors. The medal in the top left corner shows Domitian (r. 81-96) and is inscribed: S·P·Q·R DOMICIANVS IIIM / S / C (The Senate and the People of Rome. Domitian Emperor in the Second Year of His Reign, by Decree of the Senate). The medal in the top right corner shows Caracalla (r. 211-17) and is inscribed: S·P·Q·R· CHA·CHAL·IM·AN·HIII M·III / I / C (The Senate and the People of Rome. Caracalla Emperor in the Third Year and the Fourth Month of His Reign, by Decree of the Emperor). These medals are, however, Renaissance fantasy rather than copies after the antique, and their inscriptions are similarly made up. The proportions of the heads to the fields is also unrelated to ancient Roman coins, and they are no more than generically all’antica.

In addition to his sensitivity to the nature of the background, to the role of color and of line, and to the primacy of the Bache Madonna over the Liverpool version, Roger Fry was also keenly aware of the simplicity of the Virgin Mary in this picture. She is more plainly dressed than most of Signorelli’s other Madonnas—and she has not been given a halo. She is the Mother of God and may have been painted, with loving care, at a moment when Signorelli had lost his wife and the mother of his children. If so, this gift to his surviving daughter was particularly poignant, and the Bache Madonna’s charm may have found a partial explanation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Guido Tommasi-Aliotti (1926-1996), who was the passionate guardian of his family archive and founder of the Associazione fra i Proprietari di Archivi di Carattere Domestico in Cortona. He facilitated my researches into the provenance of the Bache Madonna, which was owned by the Tommasi family in the nineteenth century; I am also indebted for her assistance to his widow, Grazia Tommasi-Aliotti. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Metropolitan Museum in February 1999, and I am very grateful to Keith Christiansen for inviting me to speak and for welcoming me to New York. My transcription of the document of April 1507 was kindly corrected by Caroline Elam.

ABBREVIATIONS

ASCC
Archivio Storico Comunale, Cortona
ASF, NA
Archivio di Stato, Florence, Notarile Antecosimiano
Mancini 1903
Zeri and Gardner 1980

APPENDIX


Aprilis
[note in margin] Donatio facta domine Gabrielle filie magistri Luce


Egregius et excellens vir et Pictor magister Lucas Egidii de Signorellis civis Cortonensis ex certa eius scientia etc. omni meliori modo etc. per se et suos here-des et successoribus causa et titulo donationis facie inter vivos dedit tradidit et donavit domine Gabrielle filie dicti magistri Luce et uxori ad presens Mariotti Antoni Mazze et mihi notario infrascripto pro dicta domina Gabriella stipulanti et recipienti ac pro suis heredibus et successoribus unam imaginem Virginis Marie inte-
vel circa pro ea solutione et pagamento quod apparet
Virginis Marie cum puero in ulnis cum campo auri
April
in libris quondam Bernardini Mariotti de Thomatis
pavonazii obscuri veterem, unum foderum domine
ciopi urbevetani. Item eodem titulo unam camurram
dicto titulo donavit eidem brachia octo panni viridis
gre cum duabus figuris a latere in uno quadro. Item
dicto titulo donavit eidem brachia octo panni viridis
cioi urbevetani. Item eodem titulo unam camurram
pavonazii obscuri veterem, unum foderum domine

ciopi urbevetani. Item eodem titulo unam camurram
dicto titulo donavit eidem brachia octo panni viridis
gre cum duabus figuris a latere in uno quadro. Item
dicto titulo donavit eidem brachia octo panni viridis
cioi urbevetani. Item eodem titulo unam camurram
pavonazii obscuri veterem, unum foderum domine

ciopi urbevetani. Item eodem titulo unam camurram
dicto titulo donavit eidem brachia octo panni viridis
gre cum duabus figuris a latere in uno quadro. Item
dicto titulo donavit eidem brachia octo panni viridis
cioi urbevetani. Item eodem titulo unam camurram
pavonazii obscuri veterem, unum foderum domine

NOTES


2. It was seen in Cortona by Otto Münßler, September 8, 1857: “Caval” Luigi (or Luca?) Tommasi has several pictures by Signorelli. . . . A Virgin and Child by the same artist, is more delicate, and preferable; yet extremely dirty, 1 f. 6/ in. w. 1 f. 8/ in h.” (Carol Togneri Dowd, ed., “The Travel Diaries of Otto Münßler 1855–1858,” Walpole Society 51 (1951), p. 165). The picture was also described by Charles Eastlake, “Notebook” (in the archive of the National Gallery, London), 1857, vol. 1, fol. 5v.


4. The career of Luca Signorelli is well described by Charles Eastlake, “Notebook” (in the archive of the National Gallery, London), 1857, vol. 1, fol. 5v. Luca Signorelli’s career was also described by Charles Eastlake, “Notebook” (in the archive of the National Gallery, London), 1857, vol. 1, fol. 5v.

5. Signorelli’s date of birth is unknown. For his death, see Nicola Fruscoloni, “Quattro documenti inediti per la vita di Luca Signorelli,” *Annuario dell’Accademia Etrusca di Cortona* 21 (1984), pp. 175–89, esp. p. 188.


avere adì dicto lire una et soldi quindice tanti sono per dipin-
tura de uno paio de candellieri, quali depinse per la Compagnia
di bachca inbrunata; monta lire 1, soldi 15, denari.
12. Laurence Kanter, "Signorelli, Siena and the Griselda Master,
paper given at a conference, "Signorelli, Raphael, and the
Other Artists in the Stanze of Julius II," at the Courtauld
13. Luca Signorelli was extracted to serve as a Prior on June 23,
1502, but was excused "habebat familia morbo epidemie
depressam"; ASCC, Lib. Q. 5, fol. 97r (25.6.1502); Mancini,
Notizie sulla Chiesa del Calcinaio, p. 89. Antonio was still alive at
this date, and this probably refers to Luca's daughter Felicia.
14. See Mancini 1903, pp. 137-38, and ASF, NA 20989g (formerly
V 142), Cristoforo Venuti, 1497-1516, fols. 61v-63r (23.7.1502).
16. ASF, NA 15272 (formerly N 178), Paolo Ferrantini, 1499-1502,
fols. 1337v-1357 (14-10.1500); referred to by Mancini 1903,
p. 130.
17. Felicia was apparently still alive in June 1501, see ASF, NA
15272 (formerly N 178), Paolo Ferrantini, 1499-1502, fol.
134v (19.6.1501); referred to by Mancini 1903, p. 130.
18. ASF, NA 5596 (formerly G 692), Pietro Coppi, 1497-1504,
fols. 57v-59r (1.8.1502); referred to by Mancini 1903, p. 139.
Signorelli's wills are the principal source of information about
the artist and his family.
19. ASCC, Lib. G. 1, "Liber dei Ricordi de Pavolino de Mariotti
Sarto, 1491-1518," fol. 11r (1.12.1492): "Maestro Luca den-
penditore di dare adì predetto di sopra per fatura di tre giubarele
del filole monta I, 20 S, 6g," Unpublished.
20. ASF, NA 11417 (formerly L 51), Noferi Laparelli, 1501-7,
fols. 141r-146r (31.10.1504); referred to by Mancini 1903, p. 144:
"... unam Giovannf sive vestem lugubre panni monacchini
valoris et communis exstimationis florenorum septe auri boni et
iusti ponderis comunis cortone." For the tondo, see Laurence
Kanter and David Franklin, "Some Passion Scenes by Luca
Fry saw the pictures together in 1902 and was the first to dismiss
the Liverpool picture as "merely a school piece"; see Fry, "The
Umbrid Exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club," p. 268.
Ralph Fastnedge, "A Restored Work by Signorelli at Liverpool,"
Burlington Magazine 95 (1953), pp. 72-74.
Fry, "The Umbrid Exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts
Club," pp. 268-73. For the gilded leather wall hangings of the
Palazzo Medici, see John Shearman, "The Collections of the
Younger Branch of the Medici," Burlington Magazine 117
See Anthony Hobson, Humanists and Bookbinders (Cambridge:
See Giovanni Bembo's letter to his friend, "Giovanni Bembo
23. This act is published in full here in the Appendix.
24. "Unam imaginem Virginis Marie integre cum duabus figuris
a latere in uno quadro," see Appendix.
25. See Luitpold Dusser, Signorelli, Klassiker der Kunst 34
(Berlin and Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag-Anstalt, 1927), pl. 152.
Raimond van Marle, The Development of the Italian Schools of
Painting, vol. 16 (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1987), pp. 28, 32; and Dusser,
Signorelli, pl. 56.
26. Mario Salmi, Luca Signorelli (Novara: Istituto Geografico De
Agostini, 1953), pp. 32, 61; Pietro Scarpetini, Luca Signorelli
(Milan: Edizioni per il Club del Libro, 1964), pp. 59, 135; Zeri
and Gardner 1980, pp. 91-92; and Laurence Kanter, The Late
Works of Luca Signorelli and His Followers 1498-1539, Ph.D. diss.,
New York University, 1989 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1991), pp. 139-
41. Of course, the picture mentioned in the document could
have been painted at any time before April 1507.
27. See Kanter and Franklin, "Some Passion Scenes by Luca Sig-

norelli after 1500," pp. 171-91; and Tom Henry, Signorelli in
British Collections, exh. cat., National Gallery, London (London:
E.g., the Adoration of the Shepherds (now Accademia Etrusca,
Cortona), the Virgin and Child with Saints Joseph and Onuphrius
(formerly in the Canepa collection, Rome), the Incredulity of
Saint Thomas and a Donor (formerly in a private collection
in Italy but destroyed by fire in 1995), and the Virgin and Child with
Saints Peter, Paul, Benedict, and Vincent (now Castel Sant'Angelo,
Rome). The Nativity now in the Galleria Sabauda, Turin, is also
said to have come from the Tommasi collection, and pictures by
Signorelli with a Tommasi provenance are also to be found in
the Uffizi, the Fiocco collection in Padua, and in the Detroit
Institute of Arts and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
For documentation of the Signorelli-Bosci marriage, see note
16 above. Luca Boscia's relationship with Signorelli is suggested
by several additional references. In May 1497 Boscia acted as
fideiussore when Signorelli served as a Prior (ASCC, Lib. Q. 4,
fol. 319r). In February 1502 he acted as the artist's procurator
(ASF, NA 5764 [formerly C 685], Bernardino Cortonesi, 1502,
fol. 22v), and Signorelli was his fideiussore in May 1504 and again
in November 1519 (ASCC, Lib. Q. 5, fol. 18r, and Q. 8, fol. 255v).
Boscia was Signorelli's fideiussore again in May 1520 (ASCC, Lib.
Q. 8, fol. 300v).
I could not have made this connection without the assistance of
the late Guido Tommasi-Aliotti. According to his "Schema
genealogica della famiglia Boscia Tommasi" (Tommasi-Aliotti
archive, Cortona), the connection between the families can be
dated to the marriage in the early fifteenth century of Francesco
di Battista Boscia and Giovanna di Giovanni Tommasi.
Laurence Kanter, "Francesco Signorelli," Arte Cristiana 82
Fry saw the pictures together in 1910 and was the first to dismiss
the Liverpool picture as "merely a school piece"; see Fry, "The
Umbrid Exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club," p. 268.
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Younger Branch of the Medici," Burlington Magazine 117
See Anthony Hobson, Humanists and Bookbinders (Cambridge:
See Giovanni Bembo's letter to his friend, "Giovanni Bembo