BECCAFUMI

Holy Family

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Domenico Beccafumi

*Holy Family with the Young St. John the Baptist*

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Contents:

Domenico Beccafumi:
Holy Family with the Young St. John the Baptist
p. 4

Domenico Beccafumi:
a short Biography
p. 11

Cataloguing notes
p. 15
This painting, recorded by Romagnoli as being in the Bargagli household before 1835, was shown in the 1904 exhibition as a work belonging to Girolamo Bargagli. Considered by Damiani, Judey, Venturi and Berenson to be an autograph work by Beccafumi, its whereabouts are given as "unknown" by both Sanmiantelli and Baccheschi. Scholars tend to date it to some time between 1525 and 1530.

Sricchia Santoro (followed by Guiducci) has likened the panel to the Fall of the Rebel Angels in the church of San Niccolò al Carmine (Fig. 1) and to the Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine of Siena in the Chigi Saracini collection (Fig. 2), dating it to c. 1528. In addition to the typological similarities in the figures, in particular the facial features of the Christ Child and the Young St. John the Baptist, which are close to those of the rebel angels in the Carmine altarpiece, this work reveals the same renewed interest in the models of Raphael and of other classicising Florentine artists that we see in Beccafumi’s output in this period, possibly reflecting
Baldassarre Peruzzi’s presence in Siena at the time, which was undoubtedly an important moment for Beccafumi. Like the two altarpieces mentioned above and other smaller panel paintings such as the Holy Family in the Museo Horne\textsuperscript{11} (Fig. 3) or the Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine of Siena with Saints in the Galleria Doria Pamphilj in Rome\textsuperscript{12} (Fig. 4), the painting offers a balanced, symmetrical composition in which the figures, constructed in broad swathes of colour, take up their positions with solemnity; the action of the light, falling obliquely onto the group of the Virgin and Child while leaving the figures in the background in the shade, creates an effect of luminescence and of barely hinted dappling on the broad, compact areas of vibrant colour.

Simple and solemn in its construction, the painting’s iconographical pattern was adopted by the artist and his workshop on other occasions. We know of several replicas that are close in style and quality to this picture, for instance a tondo formerly in the Tortolini collection\textsuperscript{13}, a tondo in the Lindenau Museum in Altenburg\textsuperscript{14} (Fig. 4) and a rectangular panel sold at Christie’s\textsuperscript{15} and mentioned by Bisogni\textsuperscript{16}, while the Chigi Saracini collection has a copy which, while still 16th century in date, is of lesser quality\textsuperscript{17}.

\textsuperscript{11} Torriti 1998, see literature, cat. no. P54.
\textsuperscript{12} Torriti 1998, see literature, cat. no. P59.
\textsuperscript{13} Torriti 1998, see literature, cat. no. P58.
\textsuperscript{14} Torriti 1998, see literature, cat. no. P60.
\textsuperscript{16} Torriti 1998, see literature, cat. no. A19.
In Beccafumi’s vast output of paintings designed for private devotion, many of which are unfortunately now lost and are known only through old photographs, it is particularly important that we have been able to track down this painting — still in the hands of its original Sienese owners — which restoration specially commissioned for the exhibition now allows us to appreciate in full. The picture’s original polychromy is virtually intact, aside from a certain amount of colour abrasion on the Virgin’s face and on the hand of the Young St. John the Baptist, while three vertical tears that were splitting the panel down its entire length have been repaired. The painting’s iconography must have proven fairly popular because we know of at least three replicas of the same subject that are close to this picture also in terms of their quality: a tondo formerly in the Tortolini collection which subsequently appeared on the antique market in Frankfurt18 and which Berenson mentions as belonging to a collection in Leghorn; a tondo in the Lindenau Museum in Altenburg; (Fig. 4) and a rectangular panel painting sold by Christie’s and mentioned by F. Bisogni19. Though Sanminiatelli and Baccheschi failed to discover its whereabouts, the picture under discussion here was mentioned as long ago as in Romagnoli’s study (“the Bargagli residence close to Sant’Agostino has a Holy Family which is not perfect in its draughtsmanship but which is coloured with the skill of a great master by our Mecherino”); it subsequently resurfaced at the 1904 exhibition where it was labelled as belonging to Girolamo Bargagli; it was known to Dami (who errs with regard to its shape, calling it a tondo), to Judey and to Venturi; and Berenson also included it in his lists as an autograph work in 1968. Fiorella Sricchia Santoro’s recent suggestion that it should be dated to the same period as the Chigi Altarpiece (Fig. 2) and the Fall of the Rebel Angels (Fig. 1) in the Carmine appears to be sound. The two children’s faces echo those of the adult angels in the Carmine painting while the face of the Virgin, tenderly

18 Baccheschi 1977, see literature, no. 82.
 nuanced by the half-shadow, reveals in its elongated oval, with brushstrokes of suffused light, those same faces' calm yet conspiratorial familiarity. The palette, too, opts for vibrant yet compact colours applied in broad swathes of ultramarine, gold and deep pink like the Chigi Altarpiece, and only the Virgin's tunic in lighter tones alludes to a barely hinted dappled effect. Well centred and balanced by the two figures on either side, the group unfolds in rhythmic symmetry constructed in slanting light, gracefully alleviating the sense of classical solemnity which the scene would otherwise convey. The panel shares many similarities with pictures of comparable subject matter painted in the same period, for example the Horne Tondo (Fig. 3), both works being the product of a moment in which the renewed appeal of classicising compositions shines through in Beccafumi's unique style, possibly as a result of Baldassarre Peruzzi's return to Siena. The Chigi Saracini collection in Siena has a copy which, while still 16th century in date, is of lesser quality.
Domenico Beccafumi: a short Biography

Domenico Beccafumi, known as Mecherino, was born in 1486.

An examination of his earliest surviving work indicates quite clearly that his artistic training must have taken place in a Florentine cultural environment.

The time that Vasari tells us Beccafumi spent in Rome from 1510 to 1512 to see the frescoes of Michelangelo and Raphael as well as to study Classical antiquities must have been of the utmost importance. His first recorded works that have come down to us, painted in 1513–14, are in the Chapel of the Mantle in the Hospital of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena. The paintings reveal a style that is already well defined, the first certain instance of Mannerism in Tuscany (we should remember that Beccafumi was roughly ten years older than Rosso and Pontormo and that he was one of the very few artists to see the Sistine Chapel ceiling and the Stanza della Segnatura "while the paint was still wet").

This marked the start of a long and very prolific career played out almost entirely in Siena at a moment in the city's history much troubled by warfare and constant civil strife. In the course of that career he was to develop the principles of light and colour that are its fundamental features with growing freedom. His work datable on stylistic grounds to before 1518, the year in which his frescoes in the Oratorio di San Bernardino in Siena are known to have been painted, include two altarpieces: St. Catherine Receiving the Stigmata (c. 1514) in the Pinacoteca di Siena and St. Paul Enthroned (c. 1515) in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, also in Siena. We should also mention a tondo with the Holy Family (c. 1514–15) in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich and a panel with Deucalion and Pyrrha (c. 1514) in the Museo Horne in Florence.

The decoration completing the floor right up to the high altar in Siena cathedral kept him busy at intervals throughout his life, allowing him to build up a well-deserved reputation even in his own lifetime.

The suggestion that Beccafumi travelled to Rome again in c. 1519 is perfectly plausible. The most remarkable instance of this new direction are the frescoes that he painted on a ceiling in Palazzo Bindi Sergardi in Siena (c. 1523–5), while we find ever more surprising evidence of his vivid imagination in the first version of the Fall of the Rebel Angels painted in those same years and now in the Pinacoteca di Siena, which is his most compelling attempt to shake off the bonds of tradition in a large work. Beccafumi's style subsequently veered in the direction of an almost sculptural conception of volumes in relation to space and light.

In preparation for the Emperor Charles V's visit to Siena, the city fathers commissioned Beccafumi to fresco the vault of the Sala del Concistoro in the town hall in 1529, although the fresco cycle was only completed in 1535 when the Emperor's much-postponed visit to the city finally took place.

Beccafumi must have dwelt in Genoa, to fresco the two now lost stories in the palazzo of Andrea Doria described in Vasari's account, between 1533 and 1535.

The pictures that he painted for Pisa cathedral in 1537–9 and his frescoes depicting two groups of Apostles and Angels in the apse of Siena cathedral (c. 1539–40) are the best examples of the direction impressed on his style by the growing influence of Michelangelo, which led to his second Mannerist phase.

The admirable altarpiece depicting the Birth of the Virgin in the Pinacoteca di Siena, painted in the early 1540s, reveals the vibrancy with which Beccafumi succeeded in conveying the images conceived by his restless
imagination. This imaginative freedom was to be a constant feature of all his later painting. A powerful attempt to dissolve the compact nature of his volumes into vibrating light is the aspect that distinguishes the master's last works, as we can see quite clearly in such pictures as the *Holy Family* in the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

His death in 1551 marked the passing of the last worthy representative of a painterly tradition that had proven capable of expressing the unique spirit of the city of Siena with extreme consistency of style and often with lofty results for three hundred years.

**PROVENANCE**

Girolamo Bargagli, Siena; Private collection, Siena

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