

RTP 32m

To Salomea Reissel
in homage and admiration

Richard Offner
OFFNER

a Saint Jerome by Masolino

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A SAINT JEROME BY MASOLINO

THE basin of foreground rocks with the trees stuck up symmetrically at the sides, something in the tone, the proportions, and the pattern, of Professor Mather's St. Jerome might on innocent view seem more than derivations from Lorenzo Monaco. But beyond these resemblances our picture is a clear advance in those particular respects in which Florentine art was progressing at the time of its painting. In fact the degree of deviation from Lorenzo Monaco establishes a measure, more or less reliable, for its dating. Lorenzo's setting is a visualized abstraction: the landscape forms are felt and seen in silhouette, and the design declares itself in a single plane. But for the traditional gold background which serves for a sky, our picture aspires towards an amplification of spatial and formal effects and the chiaroscuro, if not carried as far as it can go, follows its own law anxiously.

The figure and landscape are illuminated by a light that strikes in from the left (in accordance with Cennini's instruction), leaving only those surfaces that are turned from it in shadow. The masses of rock taper towards the centre, retreating at the same time into the picture, and take us by definite stages, from the foreground past the loom of dun rolling hillside in the middle-distance to the sun-favored slope at the horizon. The basic symmetry and the gradual perspective draw the eye towards the figure at the centre, which rises up solidly into a field of trackless gold, while the verticals of the trees and the saint sweep it upward. And above what our eye can see, the imagination follows the long reach of the heavenward glance.

An ecstasy of adoration almost draws the figure up off the ground, against which its weight is light. It detaches itself with distinctness from the close-drawn semi-circle of rocks, its light and dark set against their opposites. The level sky heightens the relief of the foreshortened and roundly modelled head. We move from the foremost plane of the right arm, past its shadow, jump the gap between arm and bosom to the shaft of the form, encircling it from the broad plane at the left toward the right and from the right shoulder inwards toward the right, and from the right shoulder inwards toward the left, and from the lighted parts of the head into the deep shadow on the right. Weight and structure have been so

NOTE. I owe Professor Frank J. Mather, Jr. of Princeton University infinite thanks for the privilege of publishing this important picture, and for a number of excellent suggestions.



MASOLINO: ST. JEROME

Collection of Prof. Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., Princeton, N. J.

intimately realized that the bent neck produces an effect of internal effort and pressure. The stretch of the rope while it expresses the form enhances the illusion of its resisting solidity. Even the hands occupy a determined place within the plastic scheme, the right one particularly, and for iconographic reasons, being relieved and accentuated against the white stone. With all this we wonder that the lower part of the structure has not been better understood, that the legs hold the body but indifferently, and that the general *désinvolture* should be marred by the ungainly tension of the left arm.

A warm grey and a mellowed gold enrich the harmony of the picture.

We should, accordingly, incline to put it in a stage of collective evolution beyond Lorenzo Monaco, a stage wherein perspective was beginning to be recognized as the law by which some objects seem farther removed from the eye than others, wherein the illumination cut them into their constructive and complementary elements of light and shade; and wherein the calligraphy of pose gave place to the structural logic of pose. Professor Mather's painting represents the beginning of an emancipation of the form, which here declares itself in the dynamic relation between the parts, and detaches itself from its environment in an effort towards plastic articulation of the aesthetic idea. This isolation of our figure intensifies the ecstatic calm.

Now these phenomena appear for the first time consistently, if only generally, in the Brancacci chapel and to some extent in the closely related frescoes of the Collegiata and the Baptistry in Castiglione d'Olona, and in the chapel of St. Catherine in S. Clemente in Rome.

The resemblance of our St. Jerome to some of the figures in the Brancacci chapel is so close that the absence of cast shadow need give us no pause, especially as it occurs in some of the frescoes only. But its resemblance to Adam in the Fall amounts to proof of an identity of hand.

Cumulative demonstration of morphological correspondencies if carried far enough and cautiously applied might easily localize our painting. But such proof would not be necessary. Barring the head, the posture has been repeated, though a physical tension not present in the loosely organized Adam runs through the trunk, limbs and arms of our figure. And the posture reappears—sometimes varied a trifle—in the Christ of Masolino's Baptism at Castiglione d'Olona, in the turbaned figure in the Raising of Tabitha, in the Christ of the Empoli lunette and in the Executioner at S. Clemente. St. Jerome's

attitude is an imaginable consummation of Adam's movement. The chiaroscuro is identical. Everywhere the same turn, the same habits of facture, the same shape, the same intention as in the Adam, only more explicit, more pronounced, more learned. The one material difference is the use of a very marked outer contour in our saint, but this difference is inherent in the disparities of Masolino's fresco and tempera technique and of distinct aesthetic intention. Note particularly the rounding plane of the right arm with a narrow stripe of black shadow within the lower edge that holds it well clear of the body; and the make of the unserviceable leg constructed in light and shadow, with its faulty articulations at the knee.

The mask, too, with the furrow inside and the depression under and round the cheek-bone, is moulded on the same model as Adam's, as a number of the male heads in the Raising of Tabitha, as the four heads in the group on the extreme left in the Crucifixion in S. Clemente and as almost any of the old men at Castiglione d'Olona. The straight ridge of the nose occurs again and again in the Brancacci chapel and in related works. Of upturned faces, handled similarly, there are abundant examples in the Brancacci chapel, and though differently posed, the Baptist in Prison at Castiglione d'Olona and one of the heads on the left in the Crucifixion of S. Clemente are variations of the same ultimate image. With the exception of an angel's head in God the Father Surrounded by Angels in the Baptistry at Castiglione d'Olona, our saint's head is the only one in this group of works that is posed almost frontally, and handled in a way which reveals a plastic vision and the possession of respectable means of its communication. It is with the exception of the angel mentioned the only one among these, and the only part of our figure that is foreshortened, which is the same as saying that its volume not only fills space but moves back and forth in it. But it is primarily its sheer relief that we feel. And this substantiates a sentiment akin to the ingenuous absorption of the Annunciate in S. Clemente. The scanty vegetation that languishes about St. Jerome's feet occurs in the Baptism and in Christ and the Baptist at Castiglione d'Olona. The scroll¹ too appears with frequency in the Castiglione d'Olona frescoes with the same Roman characters.

It is not unlikely that our saint is the earliest instance of this posture of exaltation, which rising to such pitch of fervor with Dome-

¹ The legend might be rendered "Subdue your flesh with fasting. A monk should fly wine like poison and the acceptance of cooked victuals he should account luxury."



nico Veneziano and Castagno became formulated into languid pietism by Perugino, and dropped finally into easy and showy sentimentalities with the later Bolognese.

Assuming that Mr. Mather's picture bears close stylistic affinities to the works I have indicated in the Brancacci chapel, in Castiglione d'Olona, in S. Clemente, in Empoli, all respectable criticism does not reckon them homogeneous enough to be assigned to a single hand. It would be united in dividing them between Masaccio and Masolino. The difficulty, however, is that while the Masacciesque Masaccio and the Masolinesque Masolino stand clearly enough defined by their permanent characteristics, there remains a Masolinesque Masaccio and a Massacciesque Masolino who overlap and constitute an intermediate personality, about which agreement has been and is perhaps forever impossible. It is to this personality that I would, on the basis of the above demonstration, attribute Mr. Mather's St. Jerome. As our attribution hinges mainly upon the authorship of the Masolinesque portion of the Brancacci chapel it will be necessary to inquire whether its assignment to Masolino is more tenable than that to Masaccio.

The Brancacci chapel was consecrated on April 19, 1422 and the painting of it, if by Masaccio alone² (leaving Filippino's part in the decoration out of account), would have to be put between that date and 1428. Now if we set all his works on one side, the accepted Brancacci things, the Trinity, the Academy and the Montemarciano Virgins, the Sutton Madonna, the Pisa, Berlin and Vienna fragments, the Naples Crucifixion, the Berlin birth-plate, we should find such profound uniformity among them that the disparities between them and the Masolinesque paintings would force them into the end of that period. But the Montemarciano and Academy Virgins are on the one hand, by so much, less deliberate expressions than the Sutton Madonna, on the other, so obviously Masolinesque that if the last-named picture is indeed part of the 1427 Pisan alterpiece according to Mr. Berenson's suggestion (favored by its likely chronology), they should have to be earlier by a few years, and the first of them, the Montemarciano Virgin, the most Masolinesque of all his works, could

²The view that Masolino participated in its decoration held by Gaye, Venturi, and Berenson, boasts the venerable lineage, of Antonio Manetti (who writing probably after 1484 distinguishes three different hands); of Albertini (1510, who is first to mention Masolino by name as part painter of the chapel); of the Codice Magliabecchiano (middle of the sixteenth century); of Vasari (1550); of the Codice Stroziano (ca. 1580); of Baldinucci (1681). Against this view stands a much smaller company, of more recent origin, headed by Crowe and Cavalcaselle, and Schmarsow.

hardly be dated later than 1422. This would approximate it chronologically to the earliest frescoes in the Brancacci, of which the Fall would be a representative example. Now, if we stop for a moment to measure the homogeneity of these two contemporary paintings against the homogeneity between the Fall and the Empoli lunette (1424?) we should find that, in the former pairing, in spite of similar facial expression, the same, sweet swimming eyes in St. Michael and Eve, the structural thrusts, the directness of statement, the original formal concept of the one, and the loose timid make of the other, involve a fundamental antithesis; whereas the forms in the Empoli and Brancacci frescoes have been drawn from the same visualized treasure, the same composite image, by the same hand. If we now set the Fall or any other of the Masolinesque frescoes in the Brancacci chapel beside the Masacciesque frescoes, the discrepancy will be still greater. It is irreconcilable.

The synthetic energy that informed Masaccio's works was inaccessible to the painter of the ambiguous frescoes. Masaccio is fundamentally plastic and *serré*, and his form yields a sense of inner power through dynamic coördination, seldom equalled by Michelangelo. His vision is architectonic: the solid volume and the empty volume are in complementary relation: the figure bestows a determinate reality upon the space and the space heightens the plastic illusion of the figure. The duality of picture and content is the spectator's subjective distinction, for with Masaccio content is an emanation of a certain rhythmic conformation of masses, and repose and gesture are revelations of form and structure, and not symbols of purport or substance. The action is neither explicit nor emphatic, and it would little matter if the figures were headless. It is plastic manifestation of reality rather than individualization that he is primarily concerned with. He is dramatic only where a situation constrains him: in the Expulsion, and even there agonized grief does not merely distort the face; it cries out through the whole body, and passion is not merely a mode of conduct of the figure, it precipitates the rhythm. The lyric exaltation of our St. Jerome is unimaginable in Masaccio, whose ideas are more naturally disposed to plastic representation.

It is a different matter with the Raising of Tabitha, St. Peter Preaching, and the Fall. They are discursive, lyrical, dramatic and literary. The narrative unfolds itself progressively like a pictograph. The composition is in each case a series rather than a synthesis: the



principle of unity does not proceed from within the visible elements, but lies in the flux and variety of circumstances. The fresco representing St. Peter preaching is a statement with inherent beauties to be sure, but is not an externalization of plastic vision; and the action, admirable in itself, has none of the inevitability which comes of organic cohesion of all the active aesthetic factors, such as we find from the very beginning in Masaccio.

The same profound and eternal disparity distinguishes the figures of the two masters. The planes of Masaccio's form rotate and encircle it, creating a free space round it within which the solid form declares itself. With the Masolinesque figures, in spite of knowing modelling, it is always a single plane bent inward at the edges beyond which it never passes. It turns with difficulty, and the imagination is never forced to an acceptance of its volume.

But if the Masolinesque frescoes in the Brancacci chapel are far removed from Masaccio they are by so much closer to the works of Masolino at Castiglione d'Olona³ and to those at S. Clemente, still questioned by some. All are projections of the same fundamental pattern, the same taste, the same temper. The discrepancies sometimes bewildering, are what we might after all expect in works of different periods, produced in collaboration with assistants. Take features, the most obvious only, common to all these paintings and present in our St. Jerome: the wide arc of the iris set in a field of white so that its outline is almost parallel to the lower edge of the eye, the ear and its high and straight setting, and the shadow which has the same way in all of these paintings of searching, and emerging from, the hollows, and the same way of rounding the cheek-bone!

With so much favoring my attribution of St. Jerome to Masolino, its formal and plastic superiority to any figure by him increases the slight possibility of Masaccio's authorship. The rocks, unlike the soaring formations of Masolino, possess something of the shape and solidity of the rocks in the Berlin predella. The magnificence of the head also, the columnar neck, might incline us for the greater of the two masters. But the Masacciesque analogies are outweighed, and besides, as easily accounted for as the Masolinesque Christ in Masaccio's masterpiece, *The Tribute Money*. We too often forget in our eagerness for unqualified conclusions, that each of these two masters working long and closely together might easily have bor-

³ The Nativity in the choir of the Collegiata is signed
MASOLINUS DE FLORENTIA PINSIT.

The attribution to Masolino of the frescoes in the Baptistry has never been questioned.

rowed or absorbed those features of the other's art each felt urged to by the necessity of his temperament.

But, if by Masolino, is there a place for Mr. Mather's saint in his development? And if so in what part of it? On the internal evidence alone, already covered at the outset, we feel satisfied that it was painted immediately before Masaccio's painting in the Carmine, before the predella to the Pisan altarpiece (1426-1427). There Masaccio handles the cast shadow perhaps for the first time with such learning. The profound affinities with the Adam of the Fall (painted pretty certainly before 1426 and after 1424), with the Empoli lunette (probably 1424) and with the Castiglione d'Olona frescoes, the earliest of which date from ca. 1423, draw our picture into the period between 1423 and 1426.

One bit of external evidence may help us to settle this conjectural dating. The presence of the two stemmi, the sinister of the Ridolfi, the dexter of the Gaddi, while improving the already high probability of the Florentine origin⁴ of our picture proves it to be a commemoration of a "husband-wife" event, a marriage or a birth. The sex of the saint and the substance of the inscription, however, led me to favor the notion of the birth of a male child destined perhaps for the church, and very probably one named Girolamo, as Professor Mather suggests. The name, he tells me, is a common one in the Gaddi family a century later. Now the Archivio di Stato, Carte Dei, Sec. XVIII records a marriage between Maddalena di Niccolò di Antonio Ridolfi and Agnolo di Zanobio Gaddi⁵ under the date 1424. It is difficult to doubt that our picture was painted on the occasion of the birth of the first man-child of this union, in fact our picture and our conclusions respecting its chronology might almost be adduced in proof of the birth of a son between 1424-1426.

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⁴ The picture has been privately attributed to Sassetta.

⁵ This valuable information was brought to light by Mr. Rufus G. Mather of Florence and kindly forwarded to me by Professor Mather.