an early Signorelli in Boston
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AN EARLY SIGNORELLI IN BOSTON

By Bernard Berenson

THE Boston Museum of Fine Arts has recently acquired a panel ascribed to Piero della Francesca (Fig. 1).

It represents a lady of homely features and sensitive expression—suggesting at once an early Copley and a late Ming portrait—posed stiffly but with dignity. To one side sits a naked infant, as solemn as a Buddha, as ventripotent as a Daikoku, as uncertain as an Harpocrates. Almost diagonally opposite to him appears a dwarf with smugly folded arms, who, but for scratches on the background that students of Christian Art recognized as wings, would be taken rather for one of Velasquez' "Meniñas" than for a boy angel.

The spatial relations of the different volumes are not over clear. Presumably Our Lady sits behind a low table covered with brocade, on which is placed the toy chair that serves for the Child. The parapet behind is intended no doubt to come forward less than it seems to do.

But for the pictographic wings, one would scarcely take this group for a Madonna with the Blessed Babe and an Angel. Considering the attribution to Piero della Francesca, considering the sickly, sensitive, almost peevish but aristocratically restrained face of the woman and the most unusual way of seating the infant, one would be tempted to speculate whether the group did not represent the Duchess of Urbino, whose profile, now in the Uffizi, Piero painted in 1466, with her only child, Guidobaldo, born in 1472.

There is no antecedent improbability to prevent the attribution of this distinguished work of art to Piero della Francesca. Notwithstanding, I venture to question it. To my sense this is the effort of a gifted but immature artist. He is not yet sure of himself. He is tentative, hesitating. The disciple is doing his best to equal his master. He betrays his individuality in the only way that a pious pupil can, by his shortcoming, his failure to reach the master's standard.

It might be argued that this Madonna was a youthful and immature work of Piero, as indeed Senator Corrado Ricci does when admitting into the canon of this painter's authentic works the two panels so like ours in spirit and quality, I mean the Madonna in the Villamarina Collection in Rome and the Madonna with Angels in the Library of Christ Church at Oxford.[1] But even if the argument could be

[1] See p. 10 of text to Domenico Anderson's altogether admirable album of reproductions after Piero's works. Rome, 1910.

sustained that these pictures, no matter by whom designed, were executed prior to the great achievement of Piero's maturity, his frescoes at Arezzo, I should not yet feel compelled to accept them as his autograph works, although my dissent might be hard to justify, and I should have to appeal to the few initiates of the Apollinian Mysteries. So I am glad to find, as I venture to believe, that data of a nature intelligible to every archaeologist establish that the Boston Madonna, to which we shall confine ourselves for the present, must have been painted after and not before the frescoes at Arezzo.

We may begin by asking what peculiarities that may date it are to be found in the picture, and we shall not discuss abstract matters like spiritual or material significance, but restrict ourselves to easily intelligible details.

A striking peculiarity is the V-shaped opening of the Virgin's tunic under a bare throat. You will look for it in vain in Piero's undisputed paintings until you come to a work certainly later than the Arezzo frescoes, namely the Nativity of the National Gallery. There Our Lady, as well as one of the Angels, can be seen with such an arrangement over the breast.

And lest this be a mere accident, let us enquire a bit into the history of the V-shaped opening in Italian costume. So far as I can discover this kind of an opening begins to appear in paintings toward 1450 only, and then rather as an embroidered pattern over a bodice or tunic that reaches fairly high up on the throat. Then the throat gradually gets barer, and the dress tends to have a deeper and deeper V-shaped opening. Before 1470 it is seldom — if indeed ever — as conspicuous as in the Boston Madonna. In the last quarter of the Quattrocento, on the other hand, it is of frequent occurrence, more often than not being laced across.

This is not the place for an exhaustive study of this item of Quattrocento costume. I must beg fellow students to accept my statement, with the further consideration that a change of fashion will not appear first in a solemn image of the Mother of Our Lord. Such an innovation will of course be recorded years earlier in furniture painting, such as chest-fronts, cupboard panels, birth-plates, etc., and in miniatures and engravings. What I mean to say, therefore, is that I question whether such a conspicuous V-shaped opening over the chest will be found in any Central Italian image of Our Lady much before 1465. In Piero's own work, as I have said, it occurs but once in the National Gallery

Fig. 1. Signorelli: Madonna and Angel
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Fig. 2. Piero della Francesca: Joseph and Shepherds From the Unfinished Nativity
National Gallery, London

Nativity, an unfinished and late work (Fig. 2), and there the opening of the Virgin's dress is nothing like so pronounced as in our Madonna.

Another conspicuous feature in the Boston panel is the coiffure. The hair is combed tightly back, with the least bit of a wave to right and left, and is confined in a sort of net of ribbons, or, if you prefer, in a cap with such big rectangular holes in it as to leave nothing but a few strips. Among the undisputed works by Piero, again, I find but one fairly close parallel to this arrangement, and that on the head of Our Lady in the Brera Altarpiece (Fig. 3), which was painted after 1469.

These two items of costume furnish sufficient proof that the Boston Madonna could not have been designed before Piero finished his Arezzo frescoes, and its divergencies from his unquestioned paintings cannot be explained by placing it in that limbo of larvae, the prenatal days, so to speak, of an artistic personality.

We may observe further the significant differences there are both in type and in style between this performance and any of Piero's post-Aretine achievements. Note how massive, how robust are the personages in any of these designs. It does not occur to you to ask what health they are enjoying, what they are feeling or what they are thinking. They are beyond such considerations, being pure essences, timelessly incarnate, although graciously condescending to such temporalities of feature and dress as would make the theophany acceptable to Tuscans of a given moment in the fifteenth century. And then turn to the Boston Madonna. Far is hers from the Buddha-like head of the Brera (Fig. 3), sunk in fathomless depths of contemplation. As we observed earlier, she is aquiver with sensitiveness, all but ready to weep, and appealing for sympathy.

Nor will questions of style and execution serve to bridge the differences. I will not make an inventory of subciliary capsules, lachrymal glands, auricular canals, digital phalanges, retinas, corneas and all the other touch-stones of the most advanced postneo-Morellian school, but will have the courage to say in untechnical terms that where Piero is round our painter tends to be edgy, where the first is full ours is flat, where the former conveys a sense of weight, the latter avoids it. Piero is dead certain of his forms and values; our master is tentative. Piero has contours, the other outlines, etc., etc.

II

If Piero della Francesca did not paint the Boston Madonna, who did? If I had no answer to suggest, I should not be composing this

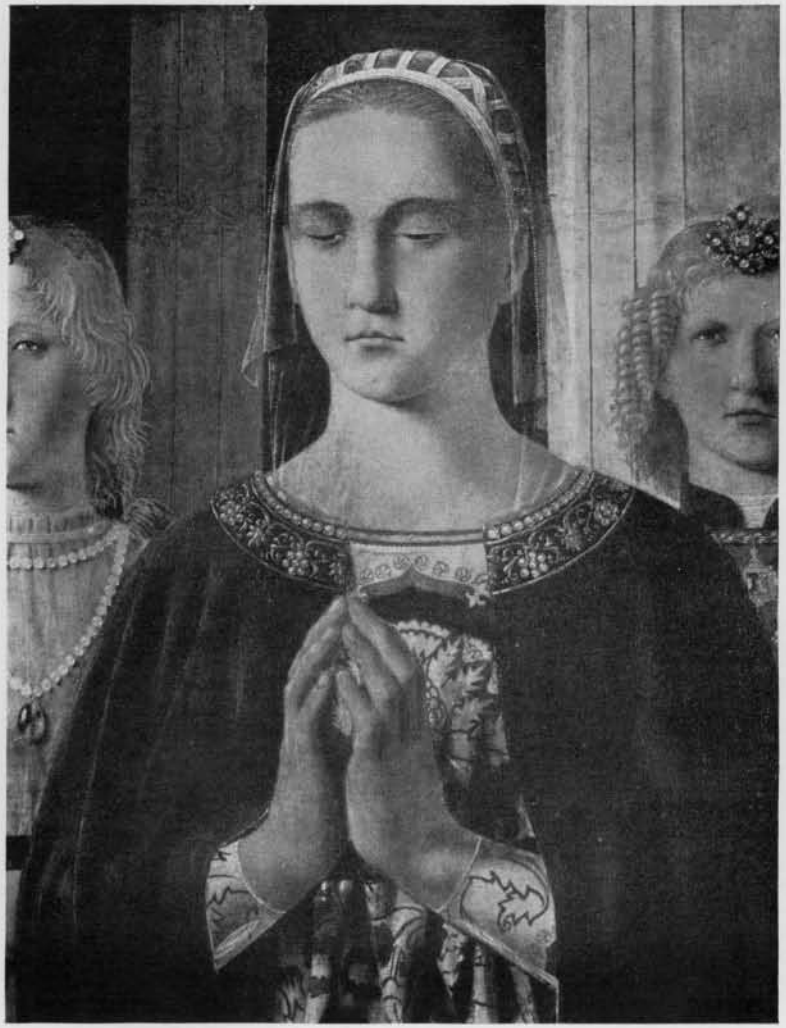

FIG. 3. PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA: HEAD OF THE VIRGIN FROM ALTARPIECE
The Brera, Milan

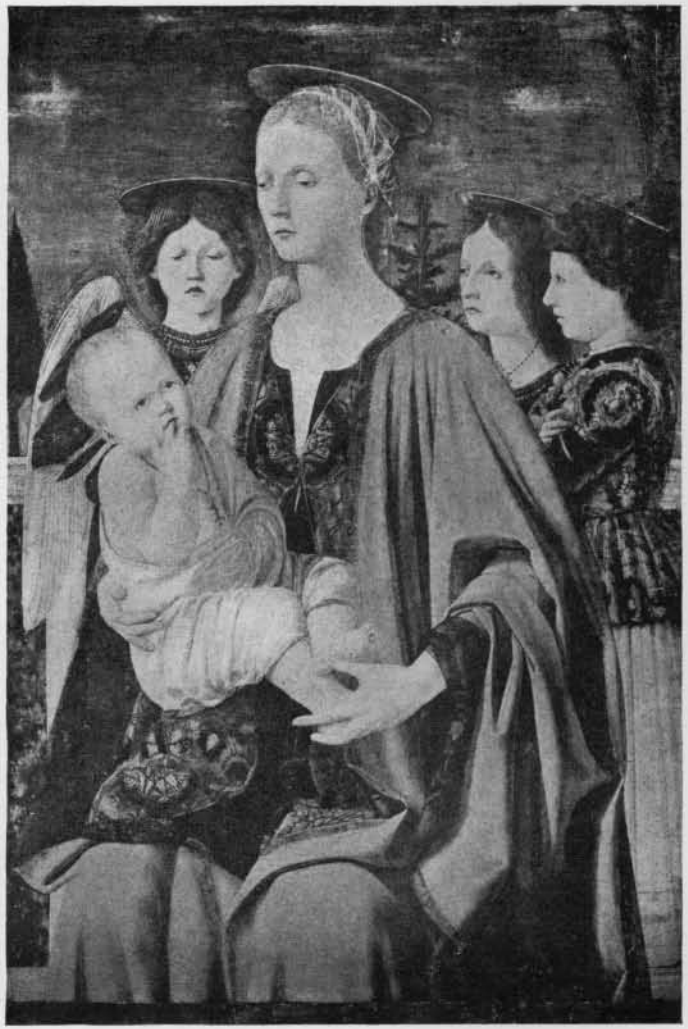

FIG. 4. SIGNORELLI: MADONNA WITH THREE ANGELS
Christ Church Library, Oxford

article. But first it will be well to enquire whether other paintings exist which are sufficiently like this one to seem by the same hand. If there are any, they cannot fail to contribute towards consolidating or dissipating the suggestion that I have in mind. As luck would have it, there are two other panels which may without arousing dissent be ascribed to the author, whoever he was, of the Boston Madonna.

One of them is a well known and much admired, indeed almost popular work. It is the famous Madonna with three Angels in the Library of Christ Church at Oxford (Fig. 4), ascribed, of course, to Piero himself. And in some respects it is, as a matter of fact, nearer to this genius than is the Boston panel. It is grander, more monumental, more aloof. But is it not self-conscious, is it not an appreciation of a phase of Piero and an attempt to interpret this phase by manifesting it a trifle too obviously? I am inclined to believe that it is such a comment on the painter's master rather than a direct creation. And is it not as an interpretation made by a spirit nearer to our turgid egoes, that this picture pleases us perhaps more than any by Piero himself?

In detail, however, the Oxford Madonna is farther away from the Master than the Boston panel. The types of the Child and of the frontal head of an Angel, the bony hands, the draperies of the Virgin's mantle — perhaps Verrocchiesque — the deliberate geometricality of her volume, are what I have in mind. Yet with the Boston Madonna the Oxford one has enough in common to persuade me that they are by the same hand. The heads are like enough, despite differences; the mouths are cut and the noses outlined in almost the same way, and the ears of the Madonnas are identical. The hair on the frontal Angel is lit up exactly as in the Angel of the Boston picture, and the wings of the two were done with the same touch. The bare throat and cut-open bodice of Our Lady, her coiffure, the Child with finger to mouth, the smug Angels with folded arms — reminiscent of the late Piero from Sinigaglia — are of course striking and, in the circumstances, significant resemblances.

The other painting which has been coupled with the Christ Church one is the Madonna in the possession of the Villamarina family, last signalled as being in Rome (Fig. 5). It is a fascinating picture. The Madonna is very distinguished, but she does not capitalize this quality as great ladies were portrayed doing a hundred years later. Her breeding, her line, may be enjoyed even while we go on to discuss her origin.

FIG. 5. SIGNORELLI: MADONNA AND CHILD
Villa Marina Collection, Rome

FIG. 6. SIGNORELLI: ANNUNCIATION
Fresco in chapel of Casa da Monte, Gragnone, near Arezzo

It is easy to understand that these heads, this volume, these draperies should impose a sense of identity with the Oxford picture, and I need not labor to show that it is no less certainly by the Master who did the Boston Madonna. We can not but be struck by similarities in the hair, the eyes, the mouths, the hands, and we see the V-shaped opening on her chest and the same rather flat arm wearing a slashed sleeve, while, most significant of all, the parapet comes forward in the same way, so that if looked at with eyes that see and do not merely read off, it seems to cut through her shoulders.

III

I used to ascribe the Oxford and the Villamarina Madonnas to Bartolommeo della Gatta, Piero della Francesca's closest follower, but in the thirty years that have elapsed since then I have become dissatisfied with the attribution. Like many another, it came near enough for a provisional hypothesis, but nevertheless it kept one on the alert for a more convincing solution to the problem. That came to me the other day, when Count Umberto Gnoli, the Superintendat of Ancient Monuments and Works of Art in Umbria, induced me to look carefully at a stain, a smudge, on the bell-tower of the town hall at Città di Castello. I had vaguely known that these spots on the wall were all that remained of a Fresco executed in 1474 by Luca Signorelli, but outer glare and inner impatience had prevented me from looking at it carefully. This time I studied it scrupulously, and to my no small surprise I found that interesting and significant bits of the fresco could be descried. The first thing to strike me was the singular likeness of the Christchild to the One in the Boston picture. Looking further, I observed that the relation of the ear to the eye in the Madonna of this fresco is exactly what it is in the Villamarina panel, that the neck had the same proportions and outlines, and that the opening of the eyes, although wider, had the same swing of curve. Then the St. Paul in the fresco has the somewhat bird-like shape and carriage of the head found in the Villamarina Madonna, and a great similarity of features and expression as well as of quality of line.

It thereupon occurred to me that in the past thirty years I had more than a few times been struck by something distinctly Signorellesque in the frontal Angel of the Christ Church Madonna, and something equally so in the long head and in the features of the Child in the Villamarina picture. I used to shrug my shoulders and put the difficulty aside by saying that, after all, Bartolommeo della Gatta was closer still.

And one could hardly think otherwise if the earliest Signorelli that we knew was the Altarpiece of 1484 in the Perugia Cathedral. Between that masterpiece and the Madonnas that have been the subject of this essay the connection is only generic. The question takes on a different aspect if we go back ten long years in the career of the young painter and consider the Citta di Castello fresco of 1474. Although it is far too ruined to yield a photographic reproduction, a trained eye can discern enough to connect it with our three Madonnas. The point of contact is chiefly through the Villamarina panel; and this is as it should be, for that work is of the three the remotest from Piero.

The evidence, slight as it may seem to outsiders as an abstract proposition, will perhaps seem to students of the problem as telling as it does to me. The best working hypothesis that I can now frame is that the Boston, the Christ Church and the Villamarina Madonnas were painted in the order named, not by Piero della Francesca himself, nor yet by Bartolommeo della Catta, as I used to think, but by Luca Signorelli. At that time he was just emerging from under the shadow of his mighty master, and we can study the effort to free himself and can estimate how much he throws overboard to salvage his own inferior personality. The superiority of the Boston panel — the one closest to Piero — to the two others is to a sense like mine most patent, as is the superiority of all three to any of the Madonnas we have always known to be Signorelli's.

If the attribution here suggested is right, we can push back Signorelli's beginnings by twelve years at least — no little gain. The young artist may but have just left Piero's studio when at about the age of two and twenty he painted the Boston Madonna. Within the next two years he must have executed the Christ Church and Villamarina panels and the Città di Castello fresco of 1474. And then for ten years we have nothing of unquestionable authenticity from his hand. In the light, however, of the Madonnas here discussed, we surely shall not hesitate to accept the frescoed Annunciation discovered by Signor Mario Salmi and published as Signorelli's in the Rassegna d'Arte for August, 1916[2] (Fig. 6). That distinguished design not only does something to bridge an entire decade in Signorelli's career, but shows us, as it were, the author of the Boston and the two other youthful panels

[2] These frescoes were rapidly disappearing, but thanks to Signor Salmi's appeal to the generosity of the owners, they have now been detached from the wall of the little chapel and deposited in the Museum of Arezzo.

becoming the painter of the Perugia Altarpiece of 1484.

As even that impressive masterpiece does not mark its painter maturity, nor yet the grandiose Presentation from Volterra in the National Gallery, and as, in fact, Signorelli does not attain his full stature before 1490, it seems unwarranted to make of him, as we used to do, the most influential Umbro-Florentine artist of the last quarter of the Quattrocento. That position belongs to Pietro Perugino, and if there were accounts between then, Signorelli was the debtor and not the creditor. But if in Elysium he retains proud memories of what he did on this obscure planet, he may still claim that his uffizi tondo with the nudes in the background, his Berlin Pan and his frescoes at Orvieto were an inspiration to Michelangelo. Perhaps that is why he did not hesitate toward the end of his life to borrow money from him, refusing to pay it back and even denying the loan to his creditor's face.