

Extra Information on Perspective in the *Madonna and Child*

This panel was probably once part of a polyptych, or multi-paneled, altarpiece. In modern times, altarpieces have often been dismantled, and modern historians have had to hypothetically reconstruct them. This panel has been identified with a polyptych seen in the nineteenth century by F. Sacchi. Sacchi described a work with "the Virgin and Child enthroned in the middle, St. Helen and Tobias and the Angel on the sides . . . sold to an English antiquarian in 1869." Art historians have linked this description with the Museum's panel and two other paintings (now in Oxford, U.K.) that depict *St. Helen and Tobias and the Angel*. There are several reasons that have led historians to link these panels.

First, the similar size of the panels and the consistent handling of the paint in the pictures support the reconstruction. Connoisseurs, experts who have examined large numbers of paintings close-up, are able to make such judgments by studying the subtle characteristics of different artists' styles. Second, thematic connections among the panels support the hypothesis. In the Tobias panel, for example, the child Tobias holds a fish. According to the *Book of Tobit*, the angel Raphael instructed Tobias to make a salve out of a fish's organs to cure his father's blindness. If the Oxford Tobias painting were placed to the left of the museum's *Madonna and Child*, the Jesus would be looking directly at the fish, thereby connecting Him with one of His conventional symbols. Christ, too, cured both physical and spiritual blindness.

We do not know why the altarpiece was made, or who commissioned it. It was probably in the Church of St. Helen in Italian city of Cremona, so the presence of St. Helen in the right-hand panel would reflect the patronage of the church. St. Helen (the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine) was believed to have found the True Cross upon which Christ was crucified. The church may have processed a relic related to Helen or the True Cross. Raphael is sometimes considered a guardian angel of children, so the altarpiece may have been made in gratitude for the birth or healing of a child.

In addition to the fish, other symbolic animals are present in the panels. A dog accompanies Tobias (in accordance with the Biblical story), and Christ holds a goldfinch. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, this bird was seen as a symbol of the Passion because it was thought to feed on thorns (a reference to Christ's Crown of Thorns).

When compared with the Virgin Mary in the Museum's *Madonna and the Man of Sorrows*, Melone's *Madonna and Child* seems much more naturalistic. The artist more convincingly models the forms and creates a convincing illusion of light and shadow. Single-point perspective, a drawing technique developed during Renaissance, is used to create the illusion of three-dimensional space. The architectural lines of the coffered ceiling and tiled floor appear to converge at a single vanishing point. This point is near the Madonna's heart, so the formal qualities of the painting reinforce its spiritual message.

The image is painted with oil paint, a medium borrowed from northern artists that became popular in Italy in the sixteenth century. By using oils rather than tempera,

artists were able to achieve a much broader range of tonal variation and intensify the naturalism of their paintings.

Joan Stack document:

Altobello Melone's *Madonna and Child* is an outstanding example of High Renaissance naturalism and ecclesiastic decoration. Art historians believe the painting was once the central panel of a multi-paneled altarpiece or polyptych. The now lost Melone polyptych has been called the "Picenardi Altarpiece," named for the Italian art dealership that owned it in the nineteenth century.

Two large paintings representing *Tobias and the Angel* and *St. Helen* (mother of the Emperor Constantine) once flanked the Museum's Madonna. These paintings now hang in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England. In 1999, the Museum acquired two small paintings from the three-panel predella of the original Picenardi altarpiece: *The Questioning of Judas* and *the Proving of the True Cross*. A predella is a narrow, horizontal platform on which an altarpiece rests. Predellas were often painted with narrative scenes that illustrated episodes from the lives of the holy figures represented in the larger panels above the platforms. Our predella panels illustrate scenes from the life of St. Helen.

When compared with earlier representations of the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus, Melone's *Madonna and Child* reflects the new ways artists of the High Renaissance approached this traditional subject. Unlike artists of the medieval period, Melone convincingly modeled the anatomy of his figures in three-dimensions. We can imagine the mass of the Virgin's body under the naturalistic folds of her drapery, and we are convinced by the depiction of the nude body of the Christ child. Earlier artists often had difficulty portraying the immature proportions of infants, frequently representing babies as doll-like, miniature adults. One reason for the lack of naturalism in the Middle Ages was the accepted studio practice of copying figures from model books and from other artworks rather than from nature. During the Renaissance many painters began to make studies directly from life.

Melone's *Madonna and Child* is also the earliest painting in our collection in which the artist demonstrates a clear understanding of mathematical perspective. Mathematical or linear perspective allows viewers to feel as though the pictorial space of a painting is an extension of real space. This system was unknown in antiquity and was first discovered in the Renaissance. Artists began to use the system on a grand scale after 1436, when the architect and author Leon Battista Alberti wrote a treatise in which he explained how painters could create the illusion of special depth by using one-point and two-point perspective grids to organize their pictures. To achieve this illusion, one begins by establishing a horizon line and a vanishing point or points in one's picture. All the straight lines that recede into space are represented as orthogonal lines that meet at the vanishing point(s). Throughout the fifteenth century, Italian Renaissance artists gradually became familiar with Alberti's system. By 1500 virtually all Italian painters understood one-and two-point perspective. In Melone's *Madonna and Child*, we can clearly see the use of this perspectival system, as the architectural lines of

the tile floor and the arched vaulted ceiling converge at a single point located on the Madonna's chest.

Melone's decision to situate the vanishing point on the chest of the Virgin (the locus of both her heart and her Christ-nourishing breast) was probably not accidental. Renaissance artists frequently used naturalistic devices to convey spiritual messages and focus their viewers' attention on specific elements in their pictures. In the *Madonna and Child*, the artist abandoned old-fashioned devices for indicating the holiness of sacred figures (such as unnaturalistic gold backgrounds and elaborate plate-like halos) in favor of a perspectival system that focuses the viewers' eyes on the Virgin. Moreover, Melone's thin, unobtrusive gold-line halos are barely noticeable, and the arched form over the Virgin's head calls attention to her face by naturalistically echoing the rounded forms of old-fashioned halos.

Despite its new Renaissance naturalism, Melone's *Madonna and Child* served a very traditional religious function in its original ecclesiastic context. Images of Mary and the infant Jesus reminded worshippers of Christ's bodily incarnation which was re-enacted during the Eucharistic Mass. In Melone's painting, the Virgin presents Jesus to the viewer as she sits in an apse-like space, her lap covered by a white, corporal-like cloth (corporal = altar cloth). The Madonna's formal pose in this shallow architectural space may have encouraged viewers to associate her body with an altar in an apse. Like an altar, the lap of the Madonna supports the body of Christ. She stares out at the viewer, with a grave expression, seemingly aware that her child will be sacrificed for humanity. The infant Christ is also aware of his future fate, as he reaches forward, towards the space of the viewer, clutching and gazing intently at a goldfinch. In the medieval and Renaissance periods, the goldfinch was associated with Christ's sacrifice. The bird was thought to feed upon the sharp spines of the thistle, and, according to legend, the red spot on its feathers came from the blood of Christ from whose brow the bird extracted a thorn. The goldfinch was thus a reminder of the baby Jesus' future Passion and death. By grasping the bird, the Christ child accepts and looks forward to his sacrifice, which was re-enacted during the Mass that took place below the image.

References

- Stack, Joan. "The Iconographic Implications in the Reconstructed Picenaidi Altarpiece: A Typological Interpretation," *Muse* 33-35 (1999-2001) 33-61.
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