# FRANCESCO PRATA DA CARAVAGGIO

(C. 1490 - APRÈS 1527)

## *The Virgin and Child*

Oil on canvas, 29 3/8 x 23 7/16 in (74.7 x 59.5 cm)



### PROVENANCE

France, private collection

### LITERATURE

- Chiara Naldi, *Cinquecento sacro e profano. Una selezione di dipinti italiani del XVI secolo*, Lugano, Galleria Canesso, 2013, pp. 18-22.

Tenderness and solemn composure coexist in this exemplary painting, which combines the sacred subject of a *Virgin and Child* with the intimate family mood that ties a mother to her own son. Set within an interior, the two figures fill the foreground, almost life-size, as they appear to look out of a

window, with the Child standing on the sill in an original pose, turning round to the Madonna. Behind them, another window opens onto an early evening landscape. Francesco Frangi has given the work its correct attribution to Francesco Prata da Caravaggio, a Lombard painter active during the first decades of the sixteenth century and a native of Caravaggio, near Milan. Notwithstanding the scarcity of biographical information, the artist's profile has become gradually clearer since the 1980s,[1] and scholars have cast light on the many points of contact between his oeuvre and the artistic worlds of Milan and Brescia. Prata's training was fundamentally influenced by Bernardo Zenale (c.1465-1526) and Bartolomeo Suardi, called Bramantino (c. 1465-1530). Soon, however, the painter was to enrich the cultural stimulus he had received in Milan with an awareness of Brescia, through a specific focus on the eccentric style of Girolamo di Romano, called il Romanino (c. 1484-c.1560). Frangi notes how it was precisely these two artistic and cultural roots that underlie the altarpiece with the *Virgin and Child with Saints* in the Galleria Sabauda in Turin, one of the painter's first works, dated by Marco Tanzi to about 1515.[2] Apart from the presence of numerous paintings in the surrounding territory, archival documents also confirm that Francesco Prata was constantly present in the city of Brescia, between 1513 and 1527, after which we lose trace of him.[3]

In his use of facial figure types, especially in the tilted and slightly asymmetrical face of the Virgin, Prata modulates those used by Romanino, but transforms the Brescian artist's typical veil of pathos into a more expansive and approachable atmosphere of luminosity through a symbiosis of the sacred and quotidian. Prata's way of communicating expressions and facial features was never excessively emphatic, and the colloquial quality of the ensemble is conveyed more through the affectionate exchange of gestures. The touch of melancholy in the lowered eyes of the Virgin, who already knows what lies in her son's future, is tempered by the loving gesture of the Christ Child, who turns his head, and knowing eyes, away from the picture space, but reaches out to caress his mother, who supports him gently with her protective embrace. The harmonies of blue, yellow and red in the drapery show the artist's interest in a rich but refined sense of colour, delicate in conception and liquid in handling. The brushstrokes become broader in the drapery and flesh passages, and return to a very fine point for the details of haloes and the decoration of the Virgin's dress, even becoming transparent for the description of the veil that covers her head, leading the beholder's gaze to the window at upper right. There, the foreground includes a barren tree-trunk alluding to the Passion of Christ, a relatively frequent symbol of death or interrupted life in sixteenth-century painting. Yet the artist does this in a discreet manner, so as not to disturb the tranquil mood of the whole. In this case, moreover, the presence of a church in the distant village, aligned with the trunk, could allude to the New Testament, which takes life and grows over what remains of the Old. In his description of landscape, too, Prata confirms his sensitivity to bright, refined colour: the bluish horizon melds into a leaden sky, in contrast with the sunny yellows of the fields. The work's appeal lies precisely in how it brings out an archaic, solemn mood, already mitigated by a Leonardesque softness and atmospheric blurriness.

The picture's style and classicizing, dignified composition have led Frangi to date it to a relatively late moment in the artist's career, somewhere around 1525, and he compares it with the *Martyrdom of Saint Agatha* (Brescia, Church of Sant'Agata), which is datable to about 1522. With this latter work our Virgin and Child shares not only the influence of Romanino but the straightforward devotional element that was so typical of the other great protagonist of Brescian art, Alessandro Bonvicino, called il Moretto (c. 1498-1554). Frangi draws further parallels, pointing out the close resemblance of style and composition found in the *Salome* – formerly in the Humphrey Ward collection as Romanino – and in the *Cleopatra* in a private collection, recently added to the artist's oeuvre.[4] Our picture shows no trace of the emphatic monumentality of his slightly subsequent works, which instead reflect the influence of the Brescian paintings of Callisto Piazza (1500-1561).

Notes:

1- See M. Tanzi, "Francesco Prata da Caravaggio: aggiunte e verifiche", *Bollettino d'Arte,* LIV-LV, 1987, pp. 141-156; F. Moro, "Un'Adorazione a Bedulita e l'area di Romanino", *Osservatorio delle Arti,* 1988, pp. 40-44; F. Frangi, "Tra Milano e Venezia. Vicende della pittura rinascimentale a Bergamo, Brescia e Cremona", in J. Lorenzelli and A. Veca, eds., *Museum*, exhibition catalogue, Bergamo, 1993, pp. 113-115; F. Moro, "Prata, Francesco", in E. De Pascale and M. Olivari, eds., *Dizionario degli artisti di Caravaggio e Treviglio*, Bergamo, 1994, pp. 198-203.

2- Tanzi, as in note 1, 1987, pp. 141-142.

3- P. Castellini, "Francesco Prata nella chiesa di Santa Maria di Bienno. Aggiunte al catalogo", in P. Castellini and M. Rossi, eds., *La chiesa di Santa Maria Annunciata* (proceedings of the study day, Bienno, 28 October 2000), 2005, pp. 52-53.

4- M. Capella, "Inediti bresciani per Francesco Prata da Caravaggio", *Artes*, 10, 2002, pp. 54-55.