

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

CAMILLO BOCCACCINO

(CREMONA 1504/1505 - 1546)

The Virgin and Child

Oil on wood panel, 9 ¼ x 8 ⅝ in (23.5 x 22 cm)



PROVENANCE

Ferrara, Sacchetti collection; Ferrara, Count Giovanni Battista Costabili (manuscript catalogue of 1835, f. 17v, no. 132); Ferrara, Giovanni Costabili (from 1841 to 1871); Ferrara, Alfonso Costabili (dal 1871 al 1884); Milan, Angelo Genolini, 1884; Milan, Sambon, Costabili sale, 27-29 April 1885, no. 80; from the early 20th century, Biarritz, private collection.

LITERATURE

-Camillo Laderchi, *Descrizione della quadreria Costabili. Continuazione e fine della parte seconda*, Ferrara, 1839, p. 8;
-Emanuele Mattaliano, *La collezione Costabili*, ed. by Grazia Agostini, Venice, 1998, p. 80, no. 174 (as Girolamo da Carpi).

The back of the panel bears the brand of the Costabili collection, “C·G·B·C”, and a printed label with “Raccolta del Conte Giambattista Costabili di Ferrara n. [inscribed] 132”.

As is clear from the branded letters and label on the back of the panel, this small-scale work formed part of the celebrated collection of Count Giambattista Costabili of Ferrara. The inventories of that collection, from 1835 (when it was listed as no. 132, as on the label here) to its sale at Sambon in Milan on 27-29 April 1885 (lot 80) ascribe it to Girolamo da Carpi.¹ In 1835 it was described as follows: “The Blessed Virgin with her son standing. Small and most beautiful panel, almost square, by Girolamo da Carpi. Formerly in in the Sacchetti residence”. In 1839 it was recorded by Camillo Laderchi with the same attribution and reference to its previous owner, as a “very small half-length figure of the Blessed Virgin and her son”.² As we shall see, this is not a work by Girolamo but a delightful autograph painting from the last period of Camillo Boccaccino, the “greatest genius of the [Cremonese] school”, to quote Luigi Lanzi, at the very end of the 1700s, driven by a fascination with Parmigianino.³ This is not the first time that sixteenth-century paintings from Cremona have been erroneously shifted into the oeuvre of Girolamo da Carpi: among those studied and published by Marco Tanzi, it is worth mentioning the dazzling, tiny *Adoration of the Shepherds* formerly in the Costabili collection and now in a Turin private collection, on which Antonio Campi’s signature emerged; or a remarkable Parnassus painted on panel, again by Campi (known to Tanzi only from a photograph in the archive of Enos Malagutti (1913-1944) housed in the Koelliker collection in Milan), which Malagutti himself – a painter, restorer and dealer from Mantua working in Milan – ascribed to Girolamo.⁴ During the 1540s and 1550s, Cremona was the setting for a singularly pro-Emilian trend, not merely through an interest in Parma and the art of Parmigianino, but driven by more complex stimuli and nuances, among which are marked interactions and parallels with works by Nicolò dell’Abate, Girolamo da Treviso, Girolamo da Carpi and Primaticcio.

The panel studied here is a fascinating little masterpiece from the late period of Camillo Boccaccino, close in time to the Oldoini altarpiece once in San Domenico and now in the Picture Gallery in Cremona (inv. 97), the *Virgin and Child between Saints Michael the Archangel and Vincent Ferrer* (fig. 1), signed and dated 1544, and the drawings associated with it (*Study for a female face*, c. 1544, unknown location, fig. 2). Also from that period are the frescoes of the Chapel of the Virgin in San Sigismondo, as well as the two roundels rediscovered in the 1960s, and the four small-scale Marian scenes in the vault, which he succeeded in carrying out before he died (the decoration was completed by Andrea Mainardi, known as il Chiaveghino).⁵ It is important, looking at the monumental and Parmigianino-inspired aspect of the Dominican altarpiece, to realise that the artist’s typically elegant pictorial and chromatic virtuosity is now largely compromised because of old interventions that greatly abraded and dulled the surface of the canvas (in 1859 Francesco Robolotti already considered it “spoiled by inept restorations”). Comparisons can also be attempted by examining the paint surface, albeit with some difficulty because of its general flattening; in any case these are decisive for attributing the little panel before us to Boccaccino.

If it is customary to state that in his smaller paintings Camillo prefers to apply paint in a far more liquid, looser manner, with swift, rich brushstrokes that are brief and luminous, we should also underline that the same features of technique and execution can be found in the better-preserved parts of the Oldoini altarpiece: in the gold-edged red drapery, the green sleeve of the Virgin, and the yellow cloak of Saint Michael. It is in these areas that one can recognise the painter’s characteristic handling, and one can thus draw significant parallels (while adjusting for the different scale) between the individual facial features of the two Madonnas and the arrangement of their hair, as well as noting the serpentine locks of hair of Saint Michael. There are also smaller details such as the way in which the little mouths are drawn

and how faces are constructed, with a precise relationship between mouth, nose and eyebrows; not to mention the subtle plays of light created by the knots and folds of the drapery. The passage of landscape on the right has the same intensely atmospheric impasto of colour that enriches Camillo's finest paintings of the 1530s – the little *Holy Family* in Glasgow (Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, inv. 125), the Speciano *Venus*, now on loan to the Brera Gallery in Milan, and the great Carmelite altarpiece of 1532, also at the Brera (Reg. Cron. 88).⁶ Another parallel exists between the Christ Child in our picture and the infants populating the blue heaven around the Virgin in the altarpiece from San Bartolomeo in Cremona (now in the Brera Gallery), not only for the precise resemblance but in the use of soft chiaroscuro.

The reconstruction of Camillo Boccaccino's final period can include a small privately-owned version of the Santa Marta altarpiece (the *Virgin and Child with Saints Martha, Mary Magdalen, Anthony Abbot, James the Greater and an Angel*; 38 x 25.4 cm, fig. 3), a sort of lost cult image – I am speaking here of the Busti altar in Cremona Cathedral – that accompanies Boccaccino's entire career, and another delightful little panel, this time secular and also in a private collection, with a depiction of *Venus with Eros and Anteros* (25 x 20 cm, fig. 4).⁷ Apart from their precise connection with his graphic oeuvre, and always on the highest level of quality, these completely typical works relate directly, and on all levels – technique and execution, style, and size – with the “bellissima tavola” once in the Costabili collection: suffice it to juxtapose the faces of Venus and the two little Madonnas, the solid, plump physicality of the children, and the meticulous, highly refined brushwork, which uses swift calligraphy to highlight each and every fold of drapery.

[1] See E. Mattaliano, *La collezione Costabili*, ed. by G. Agostini, Venice 1998, p. 80, no. 174.

[2] *Ibidem*; C. Laderchi, *Descrizione della quadreria Costabili. Continuazione e fine della parte seconda*, Ferrara 1839, p. 8. Marco Tanzi thinks that the early owner of the picture could be Cardinal Giulio Sacchetti, legate to Ferrara between 1626 and 1631, who assembled most of his quadreria, which forms one of the core groups of works in the Capitoline Picture Gallery in Rome, precisely during his years in that prestigious office. It is instead more likely, examining the Ferrarese sources, that the owner was either Doctor Luigi Sacchetti or Antonio Sacchetti, both recorded as among the most eminent collectors of the eighteenth-century in Ferrara.

[3] L. Lanzi, *Storia pittorica della Italia*, Bassano 1795-1796, ii, 1, p. 353.

[4] The *Adoration of the Shepherds* formerly in the Costabili collection has been published several times, together with its preparatory drawing in the Louvre (INV 6800): M. Tanzi, “Problèmes crémonais: peintures et dessins”, in *Disegno* (Actes du Colloque organisé par le Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes), Rennes 1991, p. 39, figs. 4-5; *idem*, “Dipinti poco noti del Cinquecento cremonese”, in *Studi e bibliografie 5, Annali della Biblioteca Statale e Libreria Civica di Cremona*, xlv, 1994, pp. 159-161, figs. 2-3; *idem*, *I Campi*, Milan 2004, pp. 15-16, pl. 9, fig. 3 (Mattaliano still believed this was by Girolamo da Carpi: see *La collezione cit.*, pp. 79, 251, no. 168). As for the *Parnassus*, it was published with the correct attribution some years ago: M. Tanzi, “Misto Cremona, 1”, *Kronos*, 9, 2005, pp. 127-128, fig. 11; a photograph of it is in the Federico Zeri photo archive at the University of Bologna (no. 36066) under “Anonymous Cremonese 16th century” and a note that in 1974 it was on the art market in Genoa.

[5] For the Oldoini altarpiece (and more generally for an updated assessment of Camillo Boccaccino) see M. Tanzi, “Gli amori milanesi di Camillo Boccaccino”, in *Attorno agli amori. Camillo Boccaccino sacro e profano* (Brera a occhi aperti, Sesto Dialogo), exh. cat., Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera, 29 March – 1 July

2018), ed. by E. Daffra and M. Tanzi, Milan 2018, pp. 31-81 (especially pp. 59-60, fig. 27); the frescoes in the vault of the Chapel of the Virgin in San Sigismondo are illustrated by M. Gregori, "Traccia per Camillo Boccaccino", *Paragone*, 37, 1953, p. 11, pls. 12-13.

[6] M. Tanzi, "Gli amori milanesi..." cit., figs. 12-14.

[7] *Ibidem*, figs. 32, 36.