

T O M A S S O



Lorenzo Ghiberti (c. 1378 - 1455)

Madonna and Child

Polychromed stucco (retaining most of its original polychromy)

89 cm (35 in.) high 61 cm (24 in.) wide

The present sculpture is one of the finest known examples of a greatly revered Madonna and Child composition from the first half of the fifteenth century and represents a remarkable survival from the moment when the 'springtime' of the Renaissance was coming into full bloom. Ghiberti grew up in Florence, in the goldsmith's shop ran by Bartolo di Michele, called Bartoluccio, the husband of his mother. He was thus trained as a goldsmith and, apparently, a painter. He remained in Florence all his life and was considered something of a prodigy when, in 1400, at around twenty years old, he was awarded the commission to make the bronze doors of the Florentine Baptistry, after winning a famed competition to design them in which the losers included Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446). This award, by the leading guild in Florence, made his foundry the most important in the city and further commissions followed from other guilds, such as large bronze statues of Saint Matthew and Saint Stephen for Or San Michele. It was during his work on the Saint Matthew bronze that Ghiberti came to know Cosimo de' Medici, who recommended Ghiberti to his brother Lorenzo, to design and execute a shrine for the convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli. Commissions by the great guilds of Florence were to continue all his life and provided a significant amount of work and income. Indeed, the only large work that Ghiberti undertook outside Florence were his reliefs for the font of the Siena Baptistry. He was to train most of the leading Florentine sculptors of the first half of the fifteenth century, not least the great Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi, known as Donatello (c.1386–1466) (Krautheimer 1970, pp. 3 – 5).

This type of Madonna and Child relief would have been presented in a *colmo da camera*, a type of architectural frame frequently used for images that were intended for private, domestic devotion, often placed within a wooden tabernacle or shielded in a painted niche. By the fifteenth century, the Madonna and Child were fully established as a primary subject for relief sculpture and such artefacts were in high demand in Florence and the surrounding region. It is noted that the fifteenth-century theologian Fra Giovanni Dominici recommended that parents should keep images “in which your child might delight. The Virgin Mary is good to have with the child on her arm”. Indeed, this image represents the beautiful and caring Virgin as the ideal mother. The realistic, polychrome rendering, combined with their close, physical proximity, emphasizes their humanity, vulnerability and the deep nature of their love. Seeming to reflect this, such images, as Renaissance inventories show, were often kept in the most private and intimate of the spaces of the house, such as the camera, or bedchamber. It was perhaps no surprise that Ghiberti was the first Florentine artist to perfect the use of clay to create this type of devotional image, because it was so central to the production of bronzes, of which he was the leading master.

Wilhelm Bode was the first to link the origin of this particular Madonna and Child composition with Lorenzo Ghiberti, challenging the hitherto accepted attribution to Jacopo della Quercia (Bode 1914, pp. 71–89; 1921, pp. 51–54). Other scholars who have shared this view are Pope-Hennessy (1980, p. 60), Oskar Wulff (1922, pp. 91–103), Giancarlo Gentilini (1989, pp. 37–47) and Richard Krautheimer (1956, pp. 4–8) – the author of the standard monograph on the artist. Gentilini has also suggested Michelozzo as the author and dated the composition to around the time he was working on the doors of the Baptistery (Gentilini 2009, pp. 49–55). Luciano Bellosi identified the composition as a work by Filippo Brunelleschi (Bellosi 1998, pp. 48–69; 2002, pp. 25–30; 2012, pp. 197–212). Aldo Galli quotes Bellosi’s conclusion that a recently discovered polychromed terracotta version in Fiesole “would thus have been modelled by Brunelleschi in the first years of the 15th century” (Bellosi 2009, p. 62; Galli 2013). This proposition is shared by L. Speranza (2008, pp. 12–14; 2009, pp. 58–61). However, what is certain is that the present work is one of the most vibrantly modelled and beautifully polychromed examples of the composition and is indeed one of the finest known. This encourages the conclusion that it would have been one of the very first versions made, after perhaps the terracotta that was recently discovered in Fiesole.

The curious way the infant Christ presents the sole of his foot to the worshipper seemingly derives from the popular byzantine iconography of the Madonna Glikophilousa, alluding to part of this object’s function as a tactile, three-dimensional ‘icon’ – because the worshipper would touch the foot of the Christ child in veneration of his sacred infancy. Therefore, the tactile element of the sculpted object and the audience’s physical interaction with it were an important part of the aesthetic appreciation and religious experience of relief sculpture in the first half of the fifteenth century. Ghiberti himself declared, upon the discovery of a Hermaphrodite, that “In this statue was the greatest refinement, which the eye would not have discovered, had not the hand sought it out” (Johnson 2002, pp. 64–66). This statement goes some way to demonstrate that, during the Renaissance, there was an awareness of sculpture’s innate tactility and of the importance of touch in the discovery, appreciation and experience of it.

The former director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Sir John Pope-Hennessy, described the design of this most renowned Madonna and Child composition as “of great distinction” (Pope-Hennessy 1964, pp. 60–61). Indeed, our example and another in the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Busseto, Parma, has a similar base to a version at the V&A, both featuring a pair of winged putti who hold a garlanded wreath. Pope-Hennessy states that the motif originates from Donatello’s design for the Parte Guelfa niche at the church of Or San Michele, Florence, which dates from 1423, and therefore concludes that the Madonna and Child composition could date from between 1423 and 1427. Although the present work is difficult to date precisely, one is perhaps assisted in this endeavour by comparing the composition and handling with a mother and child figure on the Moses panel of the Doors of Paradise, conceived by Lorenzo Ghiberti between 1436 and 1439. Both the pose of the child and the folds in his drapery are strikingly similar. It is possible that Ghiberti could have been inspired by this arrangement and produced the original model for this work in the 1430s.

The present relief formed part of the estate of the late David B. Abbate, a passionate collector of Italian Renaissance art. The son of Peter Abbate, himself an avid collector and a professional photographer, David was a graduate of the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. He worked for thirty years at CBS Evening News, first as a graphic artist and then as its art director. Mr Abbate personally transformed his New Jersey townhouse into a Renaissance-style palazzo, handcrafting all the architectural details to fit his rich collection of Italian paintings and sculpture.

Provenance:

David B. Abbate (1949-2013), New York and New Jersey, USA

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