

The Altman Madonna by Antonio Rossellino

SIR JOHN POPE-HENNESSY

Director, Victoria and Albert Museum

PERHAPS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL mid-fifteenth century Florentine marble relief in the United States is the Altman Madonna of Antonio Rossellino (Figure 1).¹ Not only has it the distinction of being perfectly preserved—in this it differs, for example, from the better-known Foulc Madonna of Desiderio da Settignano at Philadelphia, where the surface has been impaired²—

but it represents, in its fluent yet sophisticated composition, its superlative technical control, and the restrained emotionalism of its imagery, one of the peaks of quattrocento sculpture.

In paintings the scene that is depicted is generally self-evident, but marble reliefs are more elusive, partly because the differentiation of texture is less precise and partly because they are in monochrome. For this reason we must begin by looking afresh at the content of the Altman carving. In the center is the Virgin turned three-quarters to the left. She sits on a carved seat of which a volute on the corner of the back and the corresponding forward support are shown on the right of the relief. In two places the receding chair arm is covered by her cloak, the folds of which are so disposed that the molded edge beneath them is legible. Her cloak covers her head, and beneath it is a diaphanous veil, whose substance is distinguished both from the heavy material of the cloak and from the dress (Figure 2). The cloak is tied across her throat and the ends of the veil cover her chest. Beneath the breasts her high-waisted dress is bound by a wide girdle twisted in diagonal folds, and on it, as on the edging of the cloak, the sleeve, and the buttoned cuff, are traces of gilt decoration, which is carried through into the halo behind the head. Her hair is dressed with a braid above the forehead and one tress pulled back over the left ear, and her eyes, which are pigmented, look meditatively downward to the left, directed either to the Child, who sits on the further arm

1. Dimensions: 74 x 55 cm. According to W. von Bode, *Die Sammlung Oscar Hainauer* (Berlin, 1897) pp. 9, 61, no. 6, illustration on p. 8, the relief was bought by Hainauer from Conte Cosimo Alessandri, Palazzo Alessandri, Florence, in 1877. In 1906 it was sold by Frau Julie Hainauer, with other sculptures in the Hainauer collection, to Duveen Bros., from whom it was purchased in 1909 by Benjamin Altman. The attribution to Antonio Rossellino is due to Bode, and is accepted by all later authorities save A. Venturi, *Storia dell' Arte Italiana*, VI (Milan, 1908) p. 626, note 1, who lists it, along with the marble relief in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, among works wrongly ascribed to Rossellino.

2. The authenticity of the Foulc Madonna is wrongly questioned by A. Markham in a review of I. Cardellini's monograph on Desiderio da Settignano (*Art Bulletin* 46 [1964] p. 246): "I should like to eliminate the Foulc Madonna from the oeuvre of Desiderio. The face of the Madonna is as saccharine as that of the Madonna in Turin and the device of the open mouth has been carried to a ludicrous extreme." U. Schlegel, "Zu Donatello und Desiderio da Settignano. Beobachtungen zur physiognomischen Gestaltung im Quattrocento," *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 9 (1967) p. 40, note, tentatively subscribes to the same view. I see no reason to question the conventional view (1) that the Philadelphia relief is an autograph work by Desiderio, (2) that it is the direct source of a version of the composition in pigmented stucco in Berlin, and (3) that the Berlin relief probably corresponds with a gesso Madonna after Desiderio mentioned in the diary of the painter Neri di Bicci in 1464.





FIGURE 1
 Madonna and Child with Angels, by Antonio
 Rossellino. Marble. The Metropolitan Museum
 of Art, bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.675

FIGURE 2
 The Virgin in the Altman relief. Detail of Figure 1

FIGURE 3

The Christ Child in the Altman relief. Detail of Figure 1

of the seat, or to the spectator, on whom the Child's gaze is turned.

The posture of the Child is of extraordinary complexity (Figure 3). One leg, his right, is set frontally, while the other is turned almost in profile in opposition to the rest of the design. The lower half of the long torso that is habitual in the children of Antonio Rossellino has the same frontal accent as the right leg and the Virgin's containing hand, but the upper half is twisted to the left, with the right shoulder drawn back and the left advanced, while the right forearm is raised in a gesture midway between benediction and surprise. The head, with chin drawn in, corresponds with the Virgin's in that it is directed three-quarters to the left. The Child has a swaddling band pulled tight across his chest, and over it, suspended from both shoulders, is a transparent smock, through which the surface of the body can be seen.

The depth of the relief is naturally greatest in those parts notionally nearest to the eye, that is, at the base, where the left hand of the Virgin is superimposed on the right leg of the Child, with the thumb and forefinger fully undercut (Figure 4). The front of the seat likewise projects from the main plane of the relief, which is established by a flat rim running along the top and the two sides. Within the rim the background is slightly excavated. Up to the level of the chair back the surface behind the figures is void, but from that point to the top of the relief it is broken by horizontal lines of cloud, from which emerge four six-winged cherub heads (Figures 5, 6). The two beneath are turned inward to right and left and posed as though their nonexistent bodies were set on the same vertical axis as the Virgin and the Child. The two above are set on two diagonals protracted from the upper corners of the relief, one of them slightly and the other emphatically foreshortened so that they appear to be on a more distant plane than the heads below them. If the relief is studied in detail in this way, it is impossible not to be impressed by the clarity and confidence with which each visual point is made.

Before we go on to consider the class of carving to which the Altman Madonna belongs, it is necessary to



establish, in however approximate a fashion, the date when it was carved. Antonio Rossellino's chronology centers on one major work, the tomb of the cardinal of Portugal at San Miniato al Monte, which was begun in 1461, when the sculptor was thirty-three, and was completed in 1466.³ Thereafter his development can be traced with a fair measure of confidence through dated or datable works, the much damaged bust of Matteo Palmieri in the Bargello (dated 1468), the reliefs of the pulpit in Prato Cathedral (payment of 1473), and the figure of the Young Baptist from the Opera di

San Giovanni, now in the Bargello (payment of 1477). Round them we can assemble a number of undated carvings, which are likely to have been produced in the same term of years. Before the commencement of work at San Miniato al Monte, however, we have only one dated sculpture, the bust of the doctor Giovanni Chellini of 1456 in London.⁴ It is carved in a blotchy, brownish marble, and is technically one of the most careful and precocious works Rossellino produced. With it must be grouped a figure that is frequently assigned to a far later time, the statue of St. Sebastian at Empoli

3. For the tomb of the cardinal of Portugal see particularly F. Hartt, G. Corti, and C. Kennedy, *The Chapel of the Cardinal of Portugal, 1434-1459, at San Miniato in Florence* (Philadelphia, 1964).

4. For the Chellini bust see J. Pope-Hennessy and R. Lightbown, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum, I* (London, 1964) no. 103, pp. 124-126.

FIGURE 4

The left hand of the Virgin in the Altman relief. Detail of Figure 1





FIGURE 5
 Cherub heads on the left side of the Altman relief.
 Detail of Figure 1



FIGURE 6
 Cherub heads on the right side of the Altman relief.
 Detail of Figure 1

FIGURE 7

St. Sebastian, by Antonio Rossellino. Marble.
Museum of the Collegiata, Empoli (photo:
Alinari)

(Figure 7),⁵ not simply because it is carved from the same type of marble, which does not recur at San Miniato or in any later work before the Baptist in the Bargello, but because the handling is so closely similar to that of the Chellini bust. On the plane of style the meticulous treatment of the anatomy has the same relationship to Hellenistic models that the Chellini portrait has to Roman busts, while on that of technique it seems likely that the folds of the loincloth of the statue and the veins on the temple of the bust were carved in close proximity. While the documentary grounds for dating the statue to 1457 are certainly fallacious, the stylistic arguments in favor of a dating about 1460 are very strong. The fact that it was installed, at a much later date, in a painted altarpiece by Botticini, and that two little angels from the complex for which it was originally designed were perched precariously at the top on the corners of the frame, has no relevance to the date when it was carved.

The Altman Madonna must have been produced in close association with these works. There are three reasons for making this connection. The first is that the relief is carved from the same marble as the statue and the bust. This is not, of course, a compelling argument,

5. It is stated by J. Gaye, *Carteggio inedito d'artisti dei secoli XIV. XV. XVI*, I (Florence, 1839) p. 188, note, that a small payment listed in a *Denunzia de' beni* of Bernardo Rossellino of 1457 relates to the Empoli statue. For this reason the St. Sebastian was regarded as a work of 1457 by W. von Bode, *Denkmäler der Renaissance-Sculptur Toscanas* (Munich, 1892-1905) p. 100, and P. Schubring, *Die Italienische Plastik des Quattrocento* (Berlin, 1919). M. Reymond, *La Sculpture Florentine*, III (Florence, 1899) pp. 86-87, related the date 1457 to the two angels, not to the St. Sebastian. O. Giglioli, *Empoli artistica* (Florence, 1906) pp. 46-50, demonstrated that this reference is to the Empoli Annunciation of Bernardo Rossellino, and thereafter the St. Sebastian has been commonly assigned to a considerably later date. A dating c. 1470 was proposed by H. Gottschalk, *Antonio Rossellino* (Liegnitz, 1930) pp. 67-72, on the grounds (1) of a supposititious connection with the Pollaiuolo Martyrdom of St. Sebastian in the National Gallery, London, and (2) of a conjectural dating in the 1470s advanced by E. Kühnel, *Francesco Botticini* (Strassburg, 1906) p. 40, for the wings by Botticini, and by L. Planiscig, *Bernardo und Antonio Rossellino* (Vienna, 1942) p. 56, "kurz nach 1470." A dating c. 1460 was advanced by M. Weinberger and U. Middeldorf, "Unbeachtete Werke der Brüder Rossellino," in *Münchener Jahrbuch der Bildenden Kunst*, n.f. 5 (1928) p. 99, and is likely to be correct.





FIGURE 8
Virgin and Child, by Antonio Rossellino. Marble. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York

since the sculptor might have returned to a slab from the same vein or quarry at a much later time, but the impact of all three sculptures is bound up with the material from which they are carved, and one might guess that its use was a matter less of expediency than of aesthetic choice. The second reason is that the technique of the relief closely recalls that of the Chellini bust. In both, the living texture of the flesh is rendered with singular success, and the hair of the Child in the relief and that in the portrait are treated in a very similar way. The third reason is the element of ambiguity that is common to the stance of the St. Sebastian and to the pose of the Child in the relief; in both, the frontal position of the leg is contradicted by the movement of the torso above, and the opposition is resolved by the setting of the head. In the absence of documents, therefore, it would seem probable that the relief was carved after the Chellini bust and before the monument of the cardinal of Portugal, that is between 1457 and 1461.⁶

There is nothing in the style of the Altman Madonna that directly recalls the work of Donatello, yet thematically Donatello is the source of most of the motifs employed in the relief. It was Donatello who first experimented with the seated Madonna in half-length, notably in a beautiful pigmented terracotta relief in the Louvre, where the end of the seat is shown on the relief plane. In the Virgin and Child with Angels in the Victoria and Albert Museum, carved in Donatello's workshop probably in the 1450s, the seat is represented endwise in the same way, while in a school work, the so-called Pietra Piana Madonna in Florence, it is set diagonally in a manner which anticipates the practice of Antonio Rossellino. The alignment of the heads of the Virgin and Child is also found in the Louvre Madonna, and the cherub heads in the background are anticipated in another work by Donatello, the ruined terracotta Madonna formerly in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum and now in the Bode-Museum in Berlin. Moreover, it was Donatello who first studied the illusionistic potentialities of low relief in marble in the cloud-covered sky of the Ascension in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Assumption on the Brancacci



FIGURE 9
Virgin and Child, after Antonio Rossellino.
Marble. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

monument in Naples, and who later in the Quincy Adams Shaw Madonna in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts transferred the technique he had developed to a Madonna relief. Not for nothing was the Altman Madonna, when it first came to light in Florence in 1877, sold by its owner Conte Cosimo Alessandri to the Berlin collector Oscar Hainauer as a work by Donatello.

Antonio Rossellino's formal training is likely to have taken place in the family workshop under his brothers Bernardo (born 1409) and Giovanni (born 1417), but after 1453, when Donatello returned from Padua, and before 1457, when he left Florence for Siena, Rossellino and the great sculptor must have been in regular contact, and may indeed have frequented the same humanist circle of which Chellini (who was the doctor of Donatello), Neri Capponi (whose tomb chest was carved before 1457 in the Rossellino studio), and Matteo Palmieri (who was portrayed by Rossellino in a bust) formed part. Still closer contacts must have obtained between Antonio Rossellino and his younger contemporary Desiderio da Settignano, with whom he is brack-

6. An early dating for the relief is accepted by Bode, *Denkmäler*, p. 103, who considered it prior to the Madonna in Berlin, by Planiscig, *Rossellino*, pp. 52–53, who adopted the same view, and by Gottschalk, *Rossellino*, p. 42, who regarded the Berlin Madonna as the earlier work.

eted in a document of 1452. Even if we discount the claim that Desiderio was himself trained in the studio of Bernardo Rossellino, the parallelism with Antonio Rossellino is remarkable.⁷ Like Rossellino, Desiderio in the Foulc Madonna adapted Donatello's illusionism to a Madonna relief; and like Rossellino, in the Panciatichi Madonna in the Bargello he showed the Virgin on a seat set at an angle to the relief plane. Neither of these reliefs is dated or datable, but the Foulc Madonna may conjecturally have been carved in the late 1450s concurrently with the Madonna relief on the Marsupini monument in Santa Croce, and the Panciatichi Madonna may have been produced between 1461 and 1464. There is no evidence of the influence of one artist on the other, but taken together the reliefs establish very clearly the distinctive features of Desiderio's temperament: the figures are more animated, the designs more linear, and the volumes less pronounced. It is often wrongly claimed that Rossellino was, as an artist, Desiderio's inferior. Though his later works show a progressive decline from the summit of the 1460s, his sculptures before that time are fully commensurate in quality with those of the younger sculptor.

By some odd coincidence the relief by Rossellino that stands closest to the Altman Madonna is also in New York, in the Morgan Library (Figure 8). It is a little taller and far less well preserved, and is likely, in view of its manifest connection with Desiderio, to be rather earlier in date.⁸ As in the Foulc Madonna, the whole background is filled with cloud, and the faces of the angels, three in number, are set asymmetrically at the sides. The drapery is more cursive—in this too it resembles the Foulc Madonna—and the factor of reces-



FIGURE 10
Virgin and Child, after Antonio Rossellino.
Stucco. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

7. The relationship is wisely defined by Weinberger and Middel-dorf, "Unbeachtete Werke," p. 99, as "eine gewisse Ähnlichkeit mit Desiderio . . . nur im Sinne einer zeitlichen Parallele." The stylistic affinities between Desiderio and Antonio Rossellino are not such as to compel us to postulate a period of training in a common studio. It is, however, argued by A. Markham, "Desiderio da Settignano and the Workshop of Bernardo Rossellino," *Art Bulletin* 45 (1963) pp. 35-45, in my view mistakenly, that Desiderio was trained in the shop of Bernardo Rossellino, and was responsible for the face of the Virgin in the Madonna and Child of the Bruni monument in S. Croce and for the effigy in the tomb of the Beata Villana in S. Maria Novella.

8. Dimensions: 79.5 x 36 cm. Coll.: Cockerell, J. Pierpont Morgan. The relief is generally accepted as an early work of Antonio Rossellino's but is apparently dated by Gottschalk, *Rossellino*, p. 42, and Planiscig, *Rossellino*, p. 54, after the Altman Madonna.

sion is less pronounced. If, for example, we compare the exposed hands of the Virgin in the two reliefs, we shall find that the hand in the Morgan relief is the flatter of the two. The felicity of the design is seen as soon as the relief is juxtaposed with a crude marble copy in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Figure 9),⁹ probably dating from the fifteenth century and probably copied not from the original, but from a stucco squeeze, in which the figure of the Virgin is extended at the base and superimposed on a molded rectangular frame.

9. Pope-Hennessy and Lightbown, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture*, I, no. 108, pp. 130-131.



FIGURE 11
Virgin and Child, by Antonio Rossellino. Marble. Formerly in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin (photo: Staatliche Museum, Berlin)

Two other reliefs are patently connected with this work. One, probably contemporary with the Altman Madonna, is the Madonna of the Candelabra, known through a number of replicas in stucco and terracotta, which seem to depend from a lost marble original (Figure 10).¹⁰ The Virgin faces to the right, and her right

10. See A. Marquand, "Antonio Rossellino's Madonna of the Candelabra," *Art in America* 7 (1918-1919) pp. 198-206, and Pope-Hennessy and Lightbown, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture*, I, no. 110, pp. 132-133. The relief is ignored by Planiscig.

arm runs diagonally down the lower part of the relief; in both respects, as well as in the angle of the head, the figure is an inversion of that in the Altman relief. The edge of the seat appears in the lower left corner, and the Child, seated on a cushion on the chair arm opposite, faces inward and clasps a bird with both hands. At the back are two candelabra with a garland forming two diagonals between them. This last motif, as Marquand observed, recurs on the pilasters flanking the lower part of the tomb of the cardinal of Portugal.

The other related work is a marble relief formerly in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin (Figure 11).¹¹ Since it has been destroyed and the only photographs that are available are overlit, it is difficult to speak of it with any confidence. It could be judged in reproduction to be rather less sensitive than the Altman Madonna—this seems indeed to have been recognized by Bode—but there is no reason for supposing that it is anything but autograph. The posture of the Virgin is connected with that of the Madonna of the Candelabra, though her forearm is held horizontally, almost parallel with the base of the relief, and more of the outer and part of the inner arms of the seat are shown. But the head of the Child is turned outward to the right, so that the compositional pattern repeats in reverse that of the Altman relief. A feature which has no equivalent in this series of reliefs is the foreshortened left hand of the Child, where the protruding knuckle of the forefinger repeats a similar motif in the Foulc Madonna of Desiderio. The linear properties of the design are less pronounced than in the two New York reliefs, and the recession in the foreground is more abrupt. This and a new insistence on naturalistic detail (in the Child's tunic, for example, as well as in the cross worn round his neck, and in the Lippi-like veil piled up on the Virgin's head) may be among the factors which led Bode to conclude, almost certainly correctly, that it was of somewhat later date.¹² This view seems to be confirmed by the hair of the Child, which no longer adheres to the cranium, but is swept up in animated curls, one of which falls over the forehead. In the Virgin and Child on the tomb of the

11. Dimensions: 75 x 50.5 cm. F. Schottmüller, *Die italienischen und spanischen Bildwerke der Renaissance und des Barock*, I, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1933) pp. 46, 47, no. 1709. In contradistinction to Gottschalk, Planiscig (*Rossellino*, p. 54) regards the relief as the latest in date of Rossellino's early Madonnas.

12. Bode, *Denkmäler*, p. 103.

cardinal of Portugal the Virgin's robe is portrayed in the same fashion, and the hair of the Child is, on its larger scale, treated like that in the relief.

In the course of a recent analysis based by Clarence Kennedy on stylistic inference and by Frederick Hartt on unpublished documents, it was established that certain parts of the monument at San Miniato commonly given to Antonio Rossellino were in fact executed by his elder brother Bernardo; one of these, in which Bernardo seems to have worked from a model by Antonio, is the angel holding a crown posed on the left above the bier, and another, also from a model by Antonio, is the flying angel in the upper register on the right. It has, moreover, been demonstrated that members of the workshop of Bernardo Rossellino were also involved in the execution of the tomb. The practice of collaborative execution in the Rossellino shop has a long history. As early as 1444, in the Annunciation commissioned from Bernardo Rossellino for Empoli, we find two different hands at work, one, responsible for the Virgin, that of Bernardo, and the other, the artist of the Annunciatory Angel, perhaps that of Giovanni Rossellino. In the late 1440s the same phenomenon occurs again in the Bruni monument in Santa Croce, where the two angels beside the Virgin and Child in the lunette are once again by different hands, neither of which is Bernardo Rossellino's. Similarly in the Tomb of the Beata Villana in Santa Maria Novella, of 1451–1452, the curtain at the back is supported by two angels so different from one another that the one on the right has mistakenly been given to Desiderio da Settignano. In this case the juxtaposition seems to be that of Bernardo and Antonio Rossellino, as it is once more in the Annunciation which crowns the sarcophagus of the Beato Marco'ino at Forlì, where the Virgin is a typical work of Bernardo Rossellino, while the head of the Annunciatory Angel is not far removed from the head of the lower angel on the left-hand side of the Altman Madonna.

Antitheses like these do no more than scratch the surface of a far more intricate problem, that of the models by Bernardo and Antonio Rossellino which were realized by assistants in their shop. This issue is posed by the last of the marble reliefs looked on by Planiscig as early works by Antonio Rossellino, a marble Madonna in the Gulbenkian Foundation at Lisbon (Figure 12).¹³ A clue to the date of the carving is

provided by the garland and bull's head on the chair end in the lower left corner, which are associable with the classical ornament on the base of the monument of the cardinal of Portugal. If proof be needed that the relief was not carved by Antonio Rossellino, it is provided by the clumsy disposition of the cherub heads

13. Dimensions: 94 x 62 cm. It was bought by Gulbenkian from the Palazzo Guicciardini, Florence, through Dr. Jakob Hirsch. The relief is dated by Planiscig, *Rossellino*, p. 53, before 1461. I have not studied it in the original.

FIGURE 12

Virgin and Child, adapted from a design or model by Antonio Rossellino. Marble. The Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon (photo: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian Museu)



and by the sky, where the clouds are portrayed as little humps rising from a flat base, and are not treated impressionistically with irregular horizontal strokes, as they are in the Altman and Morgan reliefs. The features of the Virgin are inexpressive, and the front of her dress is treated schematically with no regard to the volume of the forms beneath. The Child likewise reads in a highly artificial way, with awkwardly articulated limbs, and hair which is rendered as a decorative pattern on the surface of the marble slab. At a time when

FIGURE 13

Virgin and Child, by Antonio Rossellino. Marble. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection, A. 31



it is fashionable to father on Bernardo Rossellino sculptures for which he cannot possibly have been responsible, it might seem inevitable that he should be credited with this relief. But though there is some morphological resemblance between the head of the Virgin and his genuine works, such an attribution would be unsound, and it is likely that the relief was adapted from a design or model of Antonio Rossellino's by a member of his brother's shop.

The later vicissitudes of Rossellino's style are illustrated by the only other relief by him in the United States, a Madonna in the Kress Collection in the National Gallery of Art (Figure 13).¹⁴ In its own fashion it is a highly accomplished work. The Virgin, almost in full face, is seen in three-quarter length behind a ledge, and the Child stands on a cushion at the right. This formula does not occur in any previous relief by Rossellino but is found regularly in Verrocchio, both in an autograph work, the terracotta Madonna from Santa Maria Nuova in the Bargello, where the Child also stands on the right side of the ledge, in the so-called Dibblee Madonna, a stucco squeeze from a lost marble, where the Child stands on the opposite side, and in a related marble Madonna from Verrocchio's workshop in the Bargello. Just as the protruding knuckle of the Child in the Berlin Madonna can be traced back to Desiderio da Settignano, so the clenched right fist, which is one of the least attractive features of the Child in Washington, seems to depend from the Dibblee Madonna and its derivatives. The right hand of the Virgin, as we might expect, continues the tendency toward deeper cutting that is apparent in the Berlin relief, and by comparison with the Altman Madonna her head is rounder, more placid, and more inert. The first step toward this change of type seems to be represented by the Nori tomb in Santa Croce, where against a marble curtain we see a mandorla containing a Madonna and

14. Dimensions: 84 x 56 cm. Coll.: Granby; Clarence Mackay, New York; Kress (1939). The attribution to Rossellino is due to W. R. Valentiner, *The Clarence H. Mackay Collection* (New York, 1926) no. 12, and is accepted by Planiscig, *Rossellino*, p. 59, and others, but is questioned in the 1941 *Preliminary Catalogue of Paintings and Sculpture in the National Gallery of Art*, p. 234, where it is stated that "although there are considerable elements of Rossellino's style and technique evident in this relief, the composition is more monumental and less curvilinear than that generally to be found in his work." The relief is variously dated c. 1475 (on account of its relationship to the Naples Adoration of the Shepherds) and c. 1477 (on account of its relationship to the Young Baptist in the Bargello).



FIGURE 14
Detail of one of the angels in the Barbadori altarpiece, by Fra Filippo Lippi. Panel. Musée du Louvre, Paris (photo: Archives Photographiques)

Child based on the Virgin in the monument at San Miniato. In books on Rossellino the Nori Madonna is usually presented as one of his last works, but it has recently been argued that it dates from before 1461 since “it is hard to believe that an artist of Rossellino’s temperament could, after realizing such an accomplished group as the Madonna and Child on the Cardinal’s tomb, have returned to this simpler frontal pose and to forms so much more congenial to an earlier stage of the development of Quattrocento sculpture.”¹⁵ Hard it may be to believe, but it is nonetheless all but a fact that the Nori Madonna was carved after the tomb, and probably dates from about 1470. Morphologically it marks a median point between the monument and such debased works of the seventies as the Naples Adoration of the Shepherds and the large tondo of the Nativity in the Bargello. The Washington relief is closer to the Nori Madonna than to the later works—it has the same rubbery drapery folds—and must have been produced in the same bracket of time.

The epithet commonly applied to Rossellino’s relief style is “pictorial,” but this term can mean many different things, and a true understanding of the carvings can be obtained only if it is defined. When the Altman Madonna is compared with paintings of the Virgin and Child produced in the 1450s and 1460s, the results are negative. Neither the Berenson and Washington Madonnas of Domenico Veneziano, nor the Louvre and Jacquemart-André Madonnas of Baldovinetti, nor the half-length Madonnas of Filippo Lippi in the Uffizi and the Palazzo Medici, nor the Esztergom Madonna of Pesellino, nor works of secondary artists like Zanobi Machiavelli and Neri di Bicci and the Castello Master, provide satisfactory analogies for the style of this or the cognate reliefs. On the contrary, they serve to confirm that the types and compositions of these early carvings are personal to Rossellino. Yet the idiom of the reliefs, and especially the handling of the drapery, reads unmistakably as though it were a sculptural adaptation from a painted source. And so it is, though the parallel occurs in painting of an earlier time. If we compare the

15. Hartt, Corti, and Kennedy, *The Chapel of the Cardinal of Portugal*, pp. 79–80, where it is correctly argued that the death of Francesco Nori in 1478 has no relevance to the dating of the monument or the relief. The contrary view, that the relief was executed shortly before the death of Nori and is therefore Antonio Rossellino’s last work, is adopted by Gottschalk, *Rossellino*, p. 85, and Planiscig, *Rossellino*, p. 60.



FIGURE 15
Virgin and Child, by Fra Filippo Lippi. Panel.
Palazzo Pitti, Florence (photo: Alinari)

robe and sleeve of the Virgin in the Altman Madonna with those of the standing angels to the right and left in Fra Filippo Lippi's Barbadori altarpiece of 1437 (Figure 14) or with the similar figures beneath the corners of the central platform in the Sant'Ambrogio Coronation of the Virgin of the early 1440s, it becomes evident that these great public paintings of fifteen or twenty years before were the source by which Antonio Rossellino was inspired. There is abundant proof of the retarded influence of Fra Filippo Lippi on his later works. Thus, the Naples Adoration of the Shepherds of about 1475 undoubtedly sprang from the stimulus of Lippi's altarpieces of the Adoration of the Magi at Annalena (soon after 1453) and Camaldoli (probably 1463), and the circular Nativity in the Bargello of about 1470 must have been conceived as a sculptural counter-



FIGURE 16
Virgin and Child, after Antonio Rossellino.
Polychromed stucco. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

part for Lippi's great tondo of the Virgin and Child in the Palazzo Pitti of about 1452. Lest it seem tendentious to postulate so close a relationship between two works of different subjects which share no iconographical motif, it may be noted that a group of reliefs of the Virgin and Child made by Rossellino in the late 1460s seems to have been touched off by the pyramidal Virgin in the foreground of the Pitti Tondo (Figure 15). The most notable of these reliefs is a composition of which a version in stucco without a background is in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Figure 16).¹⁶

In Florence in the 1450s and 1460s the personality of Lippi bulked considerably larger than it does in the

16. For the relief see Pope-Hennessy and Lightbown, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture*, I, no. 112, p. 134.



FIGURE 17

Virgin and Child, after the Morgan Madonna by Antonio Rossellino. Polychromed stucco. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of George Blumenthal, 41.190.40

minds of art historians today, and there are indications of the interest of sculptors other than Rossellino in his work. One of them is Luca della Robbia, one of whose bronze putti in the Musée Jacquemart-André from the Cantoria in the cathedral closely recalls the type of the Child in Lippi's Madonna of 1437 in the Palazzo Barberini, and whose Genoa and Bliss Madonnas reflect two different aspects of the composition of Lippi's half-length Madonna in the Palazzo Medici. Another is Desiderio da Settignano, whose St. Jerome in Washington and whose Dead Christ with the Virgin and St. John in San Lorenzo are both generically Lippesque.

Antonio Rossellino is, however, the only sculptor who made a continuing effort to provide a sculptural equivalent for Lippi's style. The sculptures that resulted are of unequal merit, and the latest of them, carved after the deaths of Desiderio and Bernardo Ros-

sellino, when control of a productive workshop seems to have precluded the close cogitation and technical refinement of the carvings of his earlier years, are little but transcriptions in three dimensions of motifs from Lippi's paintings. But the earlier reliefs, judged by the criteria of invention and expressiveness, are some of the most elegant and resourceful quattrocento sculptures. It was claimed by Leonardo that those reliefs which depend for their effect on the creation of a space illusion should be looked upon as paintings, and though the Altman Madonna was never, so far as we can tell, transformed into a painting, as was the Morgan Madonna—of which derivatives in pigmented stucco exist, one of them in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 17)—the aspirations revealed in the smooth transitions of its shallow planes and in the illusory mobility of its forms partake of the nature of both arts.