Signorelli’s *Madonna and Child*: A Gift to His Daughter

TOM HENRY

*Oxford Brookes University*

Luca Signorelli’s *Madonna and Child* in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 1) is an exquisite picture, eloquently and intelligently appreciated by Roger Fry in 1910:

[Signorelli’s] *Madonna* is a great and profoundly original creation. At first sight one is inclined to complain that the elaborately decorated gold background, an imitation apparently of a gilded leather hanging, is too assertive, that the rich golden flesh tones are not sufficiently relieved; but as the eye gets accustomed to the unusual treatment one not only gains intense satisfaction from the marvellous drawing of the gold decoration, with its *intrecia* of aggressive *putti* and scroll-work, but one realises that the figures of the *Madonna* and Child maintain their due predominance by the unparalleled amplitude and simplicity of their forms. The simplification here is such as only a few of the greatest draughtsmen have ever attained to. It is as surprising as Piero della Francesca’s, and yet the line seems to imply the control of a more tumultuous, nervous force. The color, too, with its suggestion of archaic and Byzantine originals, is one of the most daring and successful experiments in Italian art.1

The painting measures 51.4 by 47.6 centimeters and was first recorded in the Tommasi collection in Cortona in 1857.2 It had been sold to Robert Benson by 1893 and passed (via Duveen) to Jules Bache in 1928. The Metropolitan Museum acquired the picture in 1949, as part of the Bache Collection, and it is frequently referred to as the *Bache Madonna*. The painting has been accepted as an autograph work by Luca Signorelli (ca. 1450–1523) in most modern scholarship and is generally dated about 1505–10.3

One can read biographies of fifteenth-century artists without ever learning whether they married or had children. In the case of the *Bache Madonna*, however, Signorelli’s private life sheds light on his picture. An overlooked, but not unknown, document in the State Archives in Florence effectively establishes that the *Bache Madonna* was given by Luca Signorelli to his daughter Gabriella in April 1507.4 This provides a charming provenance, a confirmation of the date, and some explanation of the appearance of the picture. It is also one of the rare occasions in the history of Italian Renaissance art in which a domestic picture can be related to a contemporary document.

Luca Signorelli was born in Cortona about 1450 and died there in October 1523.5 He married Galizia Carnesecchi soon after 1470 (when Galizia was described as still unmarried),6 and she predeceased him in September 1506.7 Four of the couple’s children lived into adulthood: Antonio, Tommaso, Felicia, and Gabriella.

The eldest, Antonio, appeared before the Priors in Cortona in 1490 to explain his father’s absence elsewhere (almost certainly in Volterra).8 He became an assistant to his father, and in 1494 he apparently collected a payment for Signorelli in Città di Castello.9 In February 1497 Antonio witnessed a document in his father’s workshop in Cortona,10 but his only documented activity as a painter was a pair of candelabra, which had been commissioned from Luca in 1495.11 Kanter has cautiously advanced that Antonio’s hand might be found in the *Assumption of the Virgin* in the Metropolitan Museum (acc. no. 29.164), and in the earliest frescoes at Monteoliveto Maggiore, painted about 1498–99.12 But before Antonio could develop into an independent artist he died, almost certainly of the plague.13 He was still alive on July 2, 1502, but was dead by July 23, when Signorelli, acting as his heir, returned some land which had been part of the dowry that Antonio’s wife had brought to the Signorelli estates.14 Signorelli’s second son, Tommaso, was not a painter, but was named as the artist’s heir from 1502 onward (following the death of his elder brother). He duly inherited his father’s property in 1523 and died in 1529.15

Signorelli also had two daughters, both of whom married and had children. The elder, Felicia, married Luca Boscia in October 1500 with a dowry of 220 florins.16 She had a daughter, Bernardina, but died before Signorelli drew up his first surviving will, in August 1502.17 If, as seems likely, she died in the same bout of plague that claimed Antonio Signorelli, we can probably infer that Luca’s will, which he made on

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The notes for this article begin on page 167.
August 1, 1502, was a response to this family tragedy (both at the level of the morbid thoughts that were probably provoked by the death of his children and to vary the terms of his will in order to install Tommaso Signorelli as his universal heir). 18

Signorelli's second daughter, Gabriella, married Mariotto di Antonio Mazza (also from Cortona) sometime before August 1502, and the couple had three daughters. There are a few scattered references to Gabriella. The first is oblique. In December 1492, Signorelli bought new dresses for his daughters from a Cortonesi tailor, Pavolino di Mariotto, and one of these was probably for Gabriella. 19 She was mentioned in his will of 1502, and when Signorelli renewed his will in October 1504, Gabriella was bequeathed a mourning dress worth 7 florins (the same value, inci-
dentally, as a tondo that he painted in 1505). In Signorelli's final will of October 1523, this bequest to Gabriella was extended to mourning dresses for her two unmarried daughters, Felicia and Diana. And Gabriella was also remembered in her mother's will, in which she was left 4 florins.

The gifts to Gabriella that concern us are not, however, these items of cash and clothing, but some paintings that the artist gave to his daughter on April 10, 1507. In a notarial act (Figure 2) which was drawn up in the church of Santa Margherita in Cortona by Ser Noferi Laparelli, Signorelli gave his one surviving daughter various possessions. The reason for this gift was not stated, but the death of Luca's wife (and Gabriella's mother) in the previous year may provide the context of the gift. Alternatively it may have been intended to celebrate the birth of a child. The gift included a length of green cloth from Orvieto, a dark purple cloak (camurra), a coverlet that had belonged to Gabriella's mother, and 2 gold florins, which were owed to Bernardino di Mariotto (Cortonesi).

The gift also included two paintings. The first is unidentified. It was "an image of the Virgin Mary, full-length with two figures to the side." No indication of scale is given, except that it was called a quadro and was presumably larger than the second picture (which was described as a quadrettum). The only surviving picture which fits this description is a fragment of an altarpiece at Lucignano, but this picture does not have a provenance that can reasonably be traced to Signorelli's family and it is unlikely to have been a domestic picture. It was probably not the same picture that was given to Gabriella.

The second painting was a "small picture with a
half-length image of the Virgin Mary with her son in her lap with an elaborate gold background” (unum quadrettum cum media imagine Virginis Marie cum pueru in ulnis cum campo auri elaborato). There is little doubt that this picture was the Bache Madonna. Although the document does not state that Signorelli was the author of this picture, the implication seems reasonable, and this painting is Signorelli’s only known gold-backed Madonna. The Bache Madonna is also surprisingly small, given the forceful impact of the figures. The extraordinary gilded background points to a specific moment in the artist’s career: the first decade of the sixteenth century. Although it has been dated as early as the 1480s (Van Marle) or the 1490s (Dussler), most commentators (Salmi, Scarpellini, Zeri, and Kanter) have associated the Bache Madonna with the decorative tendency seen in the Cortona Lamentation, the Matélica altarpiece, and the Arcevia polyptych and have plausibly dated the picture about 1505-7. The Matélica altarpiece is securely dated 1504-5, and there is a clear connection between the Bache Madonna and the severe profile and the glazed putti painted on a gold background in the draperies of one fragment from this altarpiece, the Four Standing Figures in an English private collection (Figure 3; foreground left). There are also connections with the Virgin and Child of the Arcevia polyptych of 1507 (Figure 4). The decorative motifs of the Virgin’s draperies in this picture can again be compared with the Bache Madonna, and the Virgin and child are closely comparable, although I would argue that this group at Arcevia develops out of the solution for the Bache Madonna (and not vice versa).

The unique gold background and the stylistic dating both support the conclusion that the Bache Madonna was Signorelli’s gift to his daughter, and the provenance of the picture may support this view (and certainly does not undermine it). We do not know how the picture entered the Tommassi collection, where it was first recorded in 1857, but there is no evidence that the family ever acquired fifteenth- or sixteenth-century pictures outside Cortona. By the mid-nineteenth century the family owned several pictures by Signorelli, and all of them appear to have been painted for Cortonesi families or churches.

While these examples suggest that the Tommasi actively acquired pictures that were available in Cortona, the Bache Madonna might have entered the collection in another way. Felicia Signorelli married Luca Boscia in 1500. The Boscia line merged with the Tommasi in the early seventeenth century (with subsequent generations of the family tracing themselves to both lines). The Bache Madonna might have entered the Tommasi collection if, for instance, Felicia’s
daughter, Bernardina, had inherited the picture when Gabriella’s daughters died without issue. This is, however, pure speculation.

On balance, the unique gilded background, the scale, the date, and the provenance of the Bache Madonna all point to its identity with the picture that Signorelli gave to his daughter in 1507. It would, in that case, have been familiar to Signorelli’s nephew and artistic heir, Francesco Signorelli (ca. 1490/95–1553). This may help to explain the genesis of another picture which is sometimes attributed to Luca Signorelli but has more recently been assigned to Francesco: the Virgin and Child in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (Figure 5). This picture is very badly abraded and was extensively overpainted in the past. Although the Liverpool picture is slightly larger than the Bache Madonna (it measures 59.1 by 50.1 cm), the two pictures appear to have been executed on the basis of the same cartoon, and Kanter has suggested that the Liverpool version was probably painted by Francesco Signorelli, possibly before Luca’s death and under his supervision (ca. 1515?). The fact that the colors of the Virgin’s draperies are identical in both versions also suggests familiarity with the Bache Madonna.

Signorelli’s painting in the Metropolitan Museum is exceptionally well preserved, although it is slightly abraded and has a few localized repaints. It is a beguiling image and there are few comparable works by other artists. The most unusual elements in the picture are the decorative motifs and the putti (both winged and wingless) of the gold background. These putti are painted in thin red, blue, and green glazes on gold leaf and reflect Signorelli’s decorative interest in the first decade of the sixteenth century. Fry suggested that the background is meant to recall a “gilded leather hanging,” a type of decoration known to have existed during the Renaissance (e.g., in the Palazzo Medici, Florence). Alternatively this background can be compared to intricate bookbindings or to the quadratura of fifteenth-century illuminated manuscripts, but the scale is unusual and this explanation of

Figure 4. Luca Signorelli. Virgin and Child (detail of the central panel of the Arcevia polyptych), 1507. Oil and gold on wood. Collegiata di San Medardo, Arcevia, Italy (photo: Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, Rome)

Figure 5. Francesco Signorelli (Italian, ca. 1490/95–1553). Virgin and Child. Oil on wood, 59.1 x 50.1 cm. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, England, 2810 (photo: Walker Art Gallery)
the picture’s appearance is not very satisfactory.\(^{37}\)
Another possibility, which was suggested to me by Keith Christiansen, is that this background recalls a window made out of stained-glass roundels. The way in which these roundels are apparently joined to one another by small loops recalls window construction, and if Signorelli’s house had windows of this type there is no reason why he could not have decorated the panes of glass with glazes.\(^{38}\)

Another unusual feature of the picture is the two coins, or medals, with their wreathed portraits of Roman emperors. The medal in the top left corner shows Domitian (r. 81–96) and is inscribed: s·p·q·r domicianus II IM / S / C (The Senate and the People of Rome. Domitian Emperor in the Second Year of His Reign, by Decree of the Senate). The medal in the top right corner shows Caracalla (r. 211–17) and is inscribed: s·p·q·r· cha·chali·im·an·iii m·iii / I / C (The Senate and the People of Rome. Caracalla Emperor in the Third Year and the Fourth Month of His Reign, by Decree of the Emperor). These medals are, however, Renaissance fantasy rather than copies after the antique, and their inscriptions are similarly made up.\(^{39}\) The proportions of the heads to the fields is also unrelated to ancient Roman coins, and they are no more than generically \textit{all'antica}.\(^{40}\)

In addition to his sensitivity to the nature of the background, to the role of color and of line, and to the primacy of the \textit{Bache Madonna} over the Liverpool version, Roger Fry was also keenly aware of the simplicity of the Virgin Mary in this picture. She is more plainly dressed than most of Signorelli’s other Madonnas—and she has not been given a halo. She is the Mother of God and may have been painted, with loving care, at a moment when Signorelli had lost his wife and the mother of his children.\(^{41}\) If so, this gift to his surviving daughter was particularly poignant, and the \textit{Bache Madonna}’s charm may have found a partial explanation.

\section*{Acknowledgments}

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Guido Tommasi-Aliotti (1926–1996), who was the passionate guardian of his family archive and founder of the Associazione fra i Proprietari di Archivi di Carattere Domestico in Cortona. He facilitated my researches into the provenance of the \textit{Bache Madonna}, which was owned by the Tommasi family in the nineteenth century; I am also indebted for her assistance to his widow, Grazia Tommasi-Aliotti. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Metropolitan Museum in February 1999, and I am very grateful to Keith Christiansen for inviting me to speak and for welcoming me to New York. My transcription of the document of April 1507 was kindly corrected by Caroline Elam.

\section*{Abbreviations}

\begin{itemize}
  \item ASCC Archivio Storico Comunale, Cortona
  \item ASF, NA Archivio di Stato, Florence, Notariale
  \item Antecosimiano Mancini 1903
  \item \textit{Vita di Luca Signorelli}. Florence: Carnesecchi, 1903.
\end{itemize}

\section*{Appendix}


Aprilis

\begin{quote}
[\text{note in margin}] Donatio facta domine Gabrielle filie magistri Luce
\end{quote}


Egregius et excellens vir et Pictor magister Lucas Egidii de Signorellis civis Cortonensis ex certa eius scientia etc. omni meliori modo etc. per se et suas heredes et successores causa et titulo donationis facte inter vivos dedit tradidit et donavit domine Gabriele filie dicti magistri Luce et uxor di ad presens Mariotti Antoni Mazze et mihi notario infrascripto pro dicta domina Gabriella stipulantes et recipienti ac pro suis hereditibus et successoribus unam imaginem Virginis Marie inte-
The aforesaid mistress and to me as notary through these statements and for his heirs and successors...

NOTES


2. It was seen in Cortona by Otto Münzler, September 8, 1857: “Cavalli” Luigi (or Luca?) Tommasi has several pictures by Signorelli... A Virgin and Child by the same artist, is more delicate, and preferable; yet extremely dirty, 1 f. 6/ on w. 1 f. 8/in h. (Carol Togneri Dowd, ed., “The Travel Diaries of Otto Münzler 1855–1858,” Walpole Society 51 [1985], p. 165). The picture was also described by Charles Eastlake, “Notebook” (in the archive of the National Gallery, London, 1857, vol. 1, fol. 5 r–v. It cannot be confidently identified in the “Inventario e stima di tutti i quadri che esistono nel palazzo dei nobili Signori Luigi e Girolamo Tommasi fatta del Prof. Niccola Monti” [20.3.1858], MS in the Tommasi-Aiotti archive, Cortona. But it was recorded as in the Girolamo Tommasi collection by Robert Vischer, Luca Signorelli und die italienische Renaissance, eine kunsthistorische Monografie (Leipzig: Veit, 1879), p. 260.


4. The document was referred to, but not published, by Mancini 1903, p. 148. The connection with the Bache Madonna has not previously been proposed (except in my Ph.D. diss., “The Career of Luca Signorelli in the 1490s,” London University, 1996, p. 222).

5. Signorelli’s date of birth is unknown. For his death, see Nicola Fruscoloni, “Quattro documenti inediti per la vita di Luca Signorelli,” Annuario dell’Accademia Etrusca di Cortona 21 (1984), pp. 175–89, esp. p. 188.


avere adì dicto lire una et soldi quindices tanti sono per dipintura de uno paio de candelieri, quali depinse per la Compagnia a biachra inbrunita; monta lire 1, soldi 15, denari.”


13. Luca Signorelli was extracted to serve as a Prior on June 23, 1502, but was excused “habebat familiam morbo epidemic oppressam”; ASCC, Lib. Q. 5, fol. 97r (29.6.1502); Mancini, Notizie sulla Chiesa del Calcinaio, p. 89. Antonio was still alive at this date, and this probably refers to Luca’s daughter Felicia.


16. ASF, NA 15272 (formerly N 178), Paolo Ferrantini, 1499–1502, fols. 133v–135r (14.10.1500); referred to by Mancini 1903, p. 130.

17. Felicia was apparently still alive in June 1501, see ASF, NA 15272 (formerly N 178), Paolo Ferrantini, 1499–1502, fol. 134v (19.6.1501); referred to by Mancini 1903, p. 130.

18. ASF, NA 5596 (formerly C 623), Pietro Coppi, 1497–1504, fols. 57v–59r (1.8.1502); referred to by Mancini 1903, p. 139. Signorelli’s wills are the principal source of information about the artist and his family.


21. ASF, NA 1173 (formerly B 161), Niccolò Baldelli, 1507–24 (1529.2); fols. 107r–147 (13.10.1523); referred to by Vischer, Luca Signorelli, pp. 305–66.

22. ASF, NA 11413 (formerly L. 49), Girolamo Laparelli, 1505–7, fols. 279r–283g (7.9.1506); referred to by Mancini 1903, p. 19.

23. This act is published in full in the Appendix.

24. “unam imaginem Virginis Marie integre cum duabus figuris a latere in uno quadro”; see Appendix.


29. E.g., the Adoration of the Shepherds (now Accademia Etrusca, Cortona), the Virgin and Child with Saints Joseph and Onuphrius (formerly in the Canepa collection, Rome), the Incredulity of Saint Thomas and a Donor (formerly in a private collection in Italy but destroyed by fire in 1995), and the Virgin and Child with Saints Peter, Paul, Benedict, and Vincent (now Castel Sant’Angelo, Rome). The Nativity now in the Galleria Sabauda, Turin, is also said to have come from the Tommasi collection, and pictures by Signorelli with a Tommasi provenance are also to be found in the Uffizi, the Fiocco collection in Padua, and in the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

30. For documentation of the Signorelli-Bosca marriage, see note 16 above. Luca Bosca’s relationship with Signorelli is suggested by several additional references. In May 1497 Bosca acted as fiduciarius when Signorelli served as a Prior (ASCC, Lib. Q. 4, fol. 319v). In February 1502 he acted as the artist’s procurator (ASCC, NA 5764 [formerly C 685], Bernardino Cortonesi, 1502, fol. 22v), and Signorelli was his fiduciarius in May 1504 and again in November 1519 (ASCC, Lib. Q. 5, fol. 183r, and Q. 8, fol. 255v). Bosca was Signorelli’s fiduciarius again in May 1520 (ASCC, Lib. Q. 8, fol. 300v).

31. I could not have made this connection without the assistance of the late Guido Tommasi-Allioti. According to his “Schema genealogica della famiglia Bosca Tommasi” (Tommasi-Allioti archive, Cortona), the connection between the families can be dated to the marriage in the early fifteenth century of Francesco di Battista Bosca and Giovanna di Giovanni Tommasi.


33. Fry saw the pictures together in 1910 and was the first to dismiss the Liverpool picture as “merely a school piece”; see Fry, “The Umbrian Exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club,” p. 268.


40. The style of the picture is arguably consistent with a narrower range of dates than that proposed above; the period could be shortened to between September 1506 and April 1507 (the dates, respectively, of the death of Signorelli’s wife and of this gift to his daughter). If we knew more about the circumstances, a parallel might be found in Piero della Francesca’s undertaking to paint the Madonna del Parto following the death of his mother, Romana di Pierino da Monterchi, in November 1459.