

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Pierfrancesco FOSCHI (Florence 1502 - Florence 1567)

The Virgin and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist

Red chalk and red wash.

A small sketch of the Virgin and Child(?) in red chalk on the verso.

134 x 108 mm. (5 1/4 x 4 1/4 in.)

Drawings by Pierfrancesco Foschi are very rare, and only some fourteen autograph sheets are known. Among the few autograph compositional drawings by the artist in public collections are a *Virgin and Child with Saints* in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and a *Design for a Tabernacle with God the Father and Saints* at Christ Church in Oxford, as well as a *Creation of Adam* in the British Museum. A black chalk study of two draped female figures is in the Louvre, while another drawing of *The Virgin and Child with Angels* is in the collection of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago, Chile. A handful of other drawings by or attributed to Foschi are in the Uffizi in Florence, the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York and the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle.

The composition of the present sheet, as first noted by Anna Forlani Tempesti when it was exhibited in Florence in 1980, can be related to Foschi's painting of *The Holy Family with the Young Saint John the Baptist*, today in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence. Indeed, this drawing may have been inspired by the painting, which has been dated to the early years of Foschi's career, between 1526 and 1530. As Alessandro Cecchi has observed of the Accademia panel, '*The composition, densely populated by figures ranged diagonally, reveals on the one hand its debt to the altarpieces of Andrea del Sarto, in the pose of St Joseph and in the typology of the Christ Child and the young St John. But it shows the unmistakeable style of Pier Francesco, who skillfully combines the sharp contours of faces and limbs with the ample masses of the bodies and draperies.*'

The present sheet was first published by a previous owner, Myril Pouncey (1907-2001), in her pioneering article on Foschi's drawings in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1957. As Pouncey noted, 'Pierfrancesco di Jacopo di Domenico [F]oschi's main claim to fame is that he is often mistaken for Pontormo. Yet this minor Florentine artist of the mid-sixteenth century has a personality of his own, even if it is somewhat limited in range and development.' Describing Foschi as 'a sensitive and gifted draughtsman', Pouncey assembled a small group of five drawings that she attributed to the artist. Writing of the present sheet, she added that, 'I would say that the little *Madonna and Child with the Infant St John* is the most attractive drawing of the group were it not that it belongs to me. The abandon with which the Child reclines on the Virgin's lap contrasts delightfully with her somewhat tense mood as she prepares to suckle Him. Here, more than in the other drawings, we are reminded of Pontormo, by whom [F]oschi seems to be influenced in his vivacious handling of the red chalk and in the firm modelling of such passages as the Madonna's left arm with its reflected lights. But only [F]oschi could have realized her peculiar egg-shaped head which we encounter again and again in paintings and drawings alike. In the general development of Florentine style in the field of drawings this little study takes its place in the succession that leads from Pontormo down through Maso di San Friano and on to Giovanni Balducci at the end of the century.'

This fine drawing was included in two recent monographic museum exhibitions devoted to Pierfrancesco Foschi, held in Georgia in 2022 and in Florence in 2023-2024. As discussed by Simone Giordani in the exhibition catalogues, 'This small drawing is part of a core group of sheets that helped establish Foschi's graphic corpus. It is one of three examples known to represent a Marian subject and clearly intended for a painting for private devotion...we do not know of a [Andrea del] Sarto prototype that Foschi might have drawn from. It is instead probable that the painter revised his design for the Accademia's *Holy Family*...This drawing reworks the general scheme of that composition (without Saint Joseph), the monumental pose of the Virgin and the gesture of her left arm, and the figure of the young Saint John.'

The same scholar further describes the present sheet in some detail: 'The composition of the sacred group is centered on the body of Jesus, who, almost slipping between his mother's legs, constitutes the dynamic core of the image. The Virgin leans toward him and lifts his head with her right hand while with her left hand she gently brings him to her breast to suckle him. Standing behind and leaning on Mary's shoulder, Saint John reaches out with his hand toward Jesus, effectively suggesting the depth of the space in which the scene takes place, a device seen in countless examples by Sarto. It seems that Foschi had by now a rather clear idea of the composition he wanted, and the only area in which changes produce a somewhat confusing result is in the position of Saint John's lower body. For the rest, the elaboration of the image presents a good degree of fineness and is balanced and harmonious. Foschi focuses in particular on the study of light variations, which include a rich range of gradations, from restrained areas of dense shadow to halftones often rendered in a soft way and very light points that allow volumes to emerge. His typical broken outline sometimes takes on a tremulous quality, which, together with the play of light, produces an impression of greater vividness in the use of the graphic medium. This image is certainly freer than the youthful and analytical approach of the Uffizi drawing [of the same subject]...which leads us to date this sheet during a more advanced phase of the painter's career...perhaps in the first half of the 1530s.'

As noted by Giordani, the present sheet is likely to be somewhat later in date than a larger red chalk drawing by Foschi of the same subject, albeit different in composition; a *Madonna and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist* of c.1528-1530 in the Uffizi.

Exhibitions

Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, *Firenze e la Toscana dei Medici nell'Europa del Cinquecento: Il primato del disegno*, 1980, p.117, no.219; Athens, GA, Georgia Museum of Art, *Wealth and Beauty: Pier Francesco Foschi and Painting in Renaissance Florence*, 2022, no.5; Florence, Galleria dell'Accademia, *Pier Francesco Foschi (1502-1567): Pittore fiorentino*, 2023-2024, no.5.

Literature:

Myril Pouncey, 'Five Drawings by Pierfrancesco di Jacopo di Domenico Toschi', *The Burlington Magazine*, May 1957, pp.158-159, fig.25; Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, *Il primato del disegno*, 1980, p.117, no.219 (entry by Anna Forlani Tempesti), not illustrated; Nelda Damiano, ed., *Wealth and Beauty: Pier Francesco Foschi and Painting in Renaissance Florence*, exhibition catalogue, Athens, GA, 2022, pp.80-81, no.5; Cecilie Hollberg et al, *Pier Francesco Foschi (1502-1567): Pittore fiorentino*, exhibition catalogue, Florence, 2023-2024, pp.106-107, no.5 (where dated 1530-1535), p.209, fig.7; Nelda Damiano, 'Una figura enigmatica: Pier Francesco Foschi attraverso la sua produzione grafica', in Hollberg et al., *ibid.*, p.77.

Artist description:

The Florentine Mannerist painter Pierfrancesco di Jacopo Foschi (formerly, and incorrectly, known as Toschi) was a pupil of Andrea del Sarto, according to the brief mentions of him in Giorgio Vasari's *Vite*, and indeed a number of copies by him of works by Sarto are known. He appears to have been working as an independent artist by around 1529, when he is recorded as sharing a studio with his father in Florence. Foschi was a younger contemporary of the painter Jacopo da Pontormo, whom he assisted on the frescoes for the loggia of the Medici villa at Careggi in 1536. He also worked on some of the temporary decorations erected in Florence to celebrate the marriage of Cosimo de' Medici to Eleanora of Toledo in 1539, and that of Francesco de' Medici to Giovanna of Austria in 1565. Foschi received commissions from important clerics and members of the Florentine nobility, and produced altarpieces for several churches in Florence, Pisa and elsewhere in Tuscany. As one modern scholar has noted, his religious paintings are characterized by a 'simplicity and directness...a didactic clarity which only increased over the course of his long career as his style became more severe, sombre and monumental.' Perhaps the artist's best known works are three altarpieces – an Immaculate Conception with Saints Jerome, Augustine, Anselm and Bernard, a Resurrection of Christ and a Transfiguration – painted between 1540 and 1546 for the Florentine church of Santo Spirito. Foschi may also be noted for his portraiture, of which he was among the finest exponents in Florence in the 1530s and 1540s. His portraits, which often display a particular psychological insight, reflect the influences of Pontormo, Agnolo Bronzino and Francesco Salviati. One of the founders of the Accademia del Disegno in Florence in 1563, Foschi counted among his pupils Maso da San Friano.