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Carlo Maratta

(Camerano 1625 – 1713 Rome)

*The Madonna and Child with
Saint Joseph*

c. 1705 – 1711

oil on canvas

49 x 38 cm.;

19 1/4 x 15 in.

Provenance

Sale, Berlin, Leo Spik, 30 June 2022, lot 176 (as Circle of Giovanni Battista Gaulli il Baciccio), where acquired by the present owners.

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This wonderful painting is definitely among the most interesting of those that have been recently added to the *corpus* of Carlo Maratta: copies, replicas and variants are already known (figs. 1 & 2), thus indicating the existence of an original prototype, which for a long time has been considered lost or unknown. Even by just looking at the nature of the execution, which is nervous and fast and shows various *pentimenti*, one could recognise an 'extreme' composition by the 'Prince' of the 17th-century Roman School. The canvas almost represents a 'farewell to painting': in his last years, hand tremors made it impossible for Maratta to paint, although he kept producing artworks in collaboration with his workshop (see the examples in Turin and Camerano) or alone, as in this case, where he experimented with new inventions that his pupils and companions would also copy and replicate.

Two passages, respectively from the *Vite* by Giovan Pietro Bellori and Lione Pascoli, are useful to contextualise this specific moment of artistic production: the first states: 'in the year 1706 when he was 81 years old he was already shortsighted and his hand began to shake so much that he could not hold it still when painting', the second 'in 1712 when he was 80 years old he was in good health but his hands began to shake so he could only give disposition in his workshop to others what they had to do; his love for his work and for his daily painting habits was so big that he could not avoid working, here and then, with pencil, on paper, and on canvas'. We shall therefore collocate the present work between the *Holy Family* of 1705, Hermitage State Museum, St Petersburg, and the *Virgin and Child with an Angel*, Minneapolis Museum of Fine Art, of 1711 (as per the inscription on the reverse: *Eq.s Carlous Marati anno 1711*).

The present work is also of great rarity: it is indeed a prototype and therefore served a precise purpose within the dynamics of the 'Maratta factory'. The painter arranged his workshop, from the very beginning, as an assembly line in which he produced copies – sometimes with variants – of his most famous works; even altarpieces and frescos were regularly reproduced on canvas by the head atelier who, in turn, could also supply more than one autograph replica. We know from the sources that the painter was exorbitant in his pricing and kept patrons waiting years for the delivery of commissions: his objective was to spread his paintings and engravings as much as possible in order to cover the entire

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marketplace, promote his style and increase the prices of his few autograph works. The inventory of the inherited property of his daughter Faustina, destined for sale in 1720, also reveals that Maratta used to correct paintings that were normally realised in full by his pupils, but which were sold as autograph works by the master himself. Hence the prudence with which we must approach the paintings of Andrea Sacchi's pupil, which are often very problematic with regard to their complete or partial authenticity.

This *Madonna and Child with Saint Joseph* is located at the centre of the critical node briefly aforementioned – more broadly illustrated in my recent monographic study – and is truly emblematic of the attention with which new images and iconographies were minted, and skillfully meditated, in view of their replication and dissemination among an audience of connoisseurs who, despite being unable to pay for an autograph work, could nonetheless aspire to have a reflection of the inventiveness of Carlo Maratta, who at the time was considered a reincarnated Raphael, and as such the greatest painter of his years (to make a comparison, Bernini also had no rivals during his time, considering that even Baciccio was forced to accept his new idea of Classicism). The various *pentimenti*, the movement of the figures, the faces and the draperies are exemplary of a sophisticated formal elaboration of previous autograph paintings, which seem harmonious and effortless, but in reality are the result of a complex technical process. The work is also a clear homage to Raphael and his holy families: the Urbino artist was always a reference point and ideal rival of Maratta, who considered him a model to emulate and overcome in his attempt to modernise the Renaissance prototypes and reach a level of ineffable grace that would find its ultimate triumph in the European tradition of the 18th century. We shall also recognise that the inspiration for this image of private devotion was an old model derived from the *Virgin with Child* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (fig. 3), but the change in the arms gives more dynamism to the little boy. This comparison (fig. 4) confirms the autograph nature of the present painting: physiognomic elements such as the hair, realised through fast brushstrokes, and the plump skin, that looks so realistic, could only be realised by the same hand. A recurrent element is also that of the curtain, which opens up like a proscenium to reveal the holy representation; in this case, the interior is a domestic one: it is quiet and solemn.

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Another interesting element is the mutation in the model of the Virgin (fig. 5): she is not seen in profile anymore, but is almost frontal, the draperies making her volume more abstract, round and highly ornamental. Various are the works that can be compared and where the face of the Madonna becomes a principal *topos*: *Virgin and Child*, Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze (fig. 6), *Virgin and Child with Saint Joseph*, private collection (fig. 7, prototype for the work conserved at Toledo Museum). Her hair is collected in a centre parting, the forehead is wide, the oval of the face is idealised (with a small pointed chin), the nose is straight, the eyes have semi-circular eyelids, the mouth is little, and the lower lip is larger: these details are all recurrent in the aforementioned works.

The present work's late dating to c. 1706 – 1711 is evident by looking at the employment and use of colour, where the pictorial matter is more recognisable and creamy as in the drapery, and at the crackling light that gently sets on the surroundings and people. Both in the *Virgin with Child and Young Saint John* (fig. 8), formerly in the Lemme Collection, and in the aforementioned *Virgin with Child with an Angel* (fig. 9), Minneapolis Museum of Fine Art, we can find affinities in the execution, such as the white cloth under the Child as well as a similar mother-child emotional bond and tender, graceful relationship, which would open a vault on to what painting would become in the following decades, as in the works of Sebastiano Conca or Pompeo Batoni. It is not a coincidence that Stella Rudolph, who remains an unforgettable commentator on Carlo Maratta, accurately wrote: 'This distillation of a large production sector started in his youth by *'Carlo delle Madonnine'* represents the conclusion of the cycle where the sentiment was still frank and lively and therefore represents a legacy, which Benedetto Luti for instance would take over, as a leading protagonist of the first season of Roman Rococo painting'. These words perfectly apply also to this unpublished masterpiece of the *Madonna and Child with Saint Joseph*.

Alessandro Agresti, 1 March 2023, Rome

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Figure 1. Variant of the present composition



Figure 2. Variant of the present composition

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Figure 3. Carlo Maratta, *Virgin and Child*, c. 1660. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



Figure 4. The present work (detail)

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Figure 5. The present work (detail)



Figure 6. Carlo Maratta, *Virgin and Child*. Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze

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Figure 7. Carlo Maratta, *Virgin and Child with Saint Joseph*. Private collection



Figure 8. Carlo Maratta, *Virgin with Child and Young Saint John*. Formerly in the Lemme Collection

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Figure 9. Carlo Maratta, *Virgin with Child with an Angel*. Minneapolis Museum of Fine Art