

CALLISTO FINE ARTS

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Master of the Magi of Fabriano (Fabriano, 1360s–1370s)
Madonna and Child

Polychromed wood 51 9/16 inches, 131 cm.
c. 1360–1380

Provenance: Private collection, Florence.

Bibliography: E. Neri Lusanna, *Per l'Adorazione dei Magi di Palazzo Venezia a Roma*, in *Nobilis arte manus. Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Antje Middeldorf Kosegarten*, ed. by B. Klein and H. Wolter-von dem Knesebeck, Dresden-Kassel, 2002, pp. 218–227. G.Kreytenberg, in *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, ed. by A. Butterfield (exh. cat., Salander- O'Reilly Galleries, New York, 3 November 2004–8 January 2005), New York, 2004, pp.6- 12. *Sacri legni : sculture da Fabriano e dalla Marca Picena*, ed. by Paola di Girolami ... [et al.], Florence, 2006, pp. 79-81, ill. Exhibited: *Sacri legni : sculture da Fabriano e dalla Marca Picena*, Montalto Marche, Museo Sistino Vescovile, 22 April – 17 September, 2006.

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Relevant Bibliography: R. Sassi, "Un monaco olivetano scultore," *Rivista storica benedettina*, 24, 1955, pp. 1–4. E. Neri Lusanna, "Invenzione e replica nella scultura del Trecento: il 'Maestro dei Magi di Fabriano,'" *Studi di Storia dell'Arte*, 3, 1992, pp. 45–66. ____, "Per la scultura marchigiana del '300. Il Maestro dei Magi di Fabriano e il Maestro della Madonna di Campodonico," in *I Legni Devoti*, ed. by G. Donnini, Fabriano, 1994, pp. 26–38.

This sculpture group of the Madonna and Child, executed in painted wood, has survived in very good condition. Mary sits on a short bench that is covered with fabric and a white cushion. She wears a long, vermilion robe with a narrow neckline and long sleeves, in addition to a cloak, which covers her head, drapes over her shoulders, and is drawn across both legs toward her left side. Her pose is strictly upright and frontal. Mary not only faces forward, but the placement of her legs and the position of her arms are almost symmetrical. Mary's face, which has the "abstract smile of an idol" (Neri Lusanna, *op. cit.*, 2002, p. 221), also conforms to this frontal positioning.

While the tips of both feet uniformly touch the corners of the trapezoidal base, which widens toward the rear, the left heel must be slightly raised, since the left thigh is positioned somewhat higher than the right thigh. The infant Jesus sits on the raised thigh; he wears a long white robe with long sleeves. With her left hand, Mary gently supports her son, while she carefully holds the base of a vessel with the fingertips of her right hand. The vessel apparently amuses the child, who grasps it gleefully with both hands. Enrica Neri Lusanna (*op. cit.*, 2002), who is responsible for the fundamental study of this sculpture, correctly remarked that the posture of the infant Jesus, in contrast to that of the Mother, is pleasingly relaxed by the playful rotation of the body. As the Child turns to the Madonna and hands her the vessel, his right leg slips out of the robe. At the same time, out of curiosity, the Child turns his head back to look at the person from whom he has received the offering. The attribute of the vessel indicates that this Madonna and Child stood in the center of a multi-figure sculptural group of the Adoration of the Magi; typically, these groups also included the three holy kings, Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar, as well as Saint Joseph.

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The back of the sculpture of the Madonna and Child is relatively straight and unmodulated. This indicates that the sculpture, along with the figures of the Magi and Saint Joseph, was originally visible only from the front, and must have stood before a wall or niche. In the back, the lower section is hollowed out; this is the result of the seated position, whereby the mass at the bottom is far greater than that at the top.

The figures of another such sculpture group (figs. 1–4) are to be found in the Archbishop's Palace in Fabriano, the Marches. The Madonna and Child of that group is lost; however, Neri Lusanna (*op. cit.*, 1992) has found an old photograph of it in the photo library of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence (fig. 5). That Madonna and Child almost exactly matches our Madonna and Child, including their gesture, posture and drapery, as anyone who compares the two sculptures can see.

However, there are certain differences between the two Madonna and Child sculptures that only become evident upon closer inspection, and which Neri Lusanna (*op. cit.*, 2002, pp. 220–222) did not fail to notice. Most importantly, the Child from the Fabriano group is more rigidly axial, which detracts somewhat from the narrative and emotional interest of the group. Moreover, the outlines of the Madonna in the Fabriano group are somewhat less lively and interesting. The differences in the articulation of the robe worn by the Infant Jesus are also instructive. In the Madonna and Child belonging to the group in Fabriano, the body of the Child is hidden behind folds, whereas in our Madonna and Child the rounded belly of the Child is clearly visible. The two Madonna figures also differ in terms of the preparation of the gesso ground for the paint layer. The statues in the Fabriano Adoration group (and therefore, presumably, the corresponding lost Madonna and Child) have a thick gesso layer, which is covered by a thinner gesso layer for the articulation of ornamentation. In the case of our Madonna and Child, the gesso layer under the paint is very thin and the work of the sculptor is not concealed, as Neri Lusanna (*op. cit.*, 2002, p. 222) has noted. With respect to its paint and the nature of its preparatory gesso ground, according to Neri Lusanna (*op. cit.*, 2002, p. 222), our Madonna and Child matches the statues of Caspar and Balthazar (fig. 6) in the Museo di Palazzo Venezia in Rome. These statues, incidentally, are very similar to the corresponding statues of

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the Adoration group in Fabriano, but also show subtle differences analogous to those between the Fabriano Madonna and Child and our Madonna and Child. Consequently, it can be assumed that our Madonna and Child was originally part of an Adoration group that included the two statues of the kings in the Museo di Palazzo Venezia in Rome. The figures of Joseph and Melchior, the oldest, kneeling king, which certainly belonged to this sculpture group, are lost.

Neri Lusanna attributed the two sculpture groups of the Adoration of the Magi in Fabriano and in New York/Rome to an unknown “Maestro dei Magi di Fabriano” (*op. cit.*, 1992, 1994, 2002). The New York/Rome group, whose gesso ground for the paint layer is finer and whose artistic quality is somewhat higher than that of the Fabriano group, is likely to have been done by the master himself, whereas a workshop was probably involved in the creation of the other group. However, there is no basis whatsoever for the attempt (Sassi, *op. cit.*) to identify the master of the group in Fabriano as the Olivetan monk and sculptor Giovanni di Bartolomeo, who is documented in Fabriano between 1365 and 1385, since no works exist by this master that could serve as a comparison. Neri Lusanna sees the “Maestro dei Magi di Fabriano” as an artistic heir to Andrea and Nino Pisano, who also worked in the Umbrian city of Orvieto from 1347–1349. A comparison of our Madonna and Child with Nino Pisano’s statue of the Eucharistic Christ (Orvieto, Cathedral Museum) illustrates that the latter may have been a source of inspiration for the “Maestro dei Magi di Fabriano.” Neri Lusanna has convincingly dated the two groups of the Adoration of the Kings in the 1360s and 1370s. In terms of artistic quality, the Marchigian “Maestro dei Magi di Fabriano” was certainly the equal of his Pisan contemporaries in the wake of Nino Pisano.

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Fig. 1 Fig. 2 Fig. 3



Fig. 4 Fig. 5 Fig. 6