



MUSEI VATICANI



MADONNA AND CHILD WITH THE SAINTS ONUPHRIUS, NICHOLAS OF BARI, BARTHOLOMEW AND JOHN THE EVANGELIST, by Giovanni Bonsi (doc. 1366-1371)

The polyptych of the *Madonna and Child with the Saints Onuphrius, Nicholas of Bari, Bartholomew and John the Evangelist*, is the only signed painting by Giovanni Bonsi (doc. 1366-1371), a Florentine artist of Neo-Giottesque education, around whose name a small number of works has been gathered, compatible in style and chronology, although of uncertain authorship.

The polyptych – tempera and gold on board, 166 x 234 cm – is structurally composed of five gothic-arched panels with pointed gables; the central panel is larger and taller than the others, each of them being interspersed with pillars surmounted by pinnacles. The frame appears to have been heavily reworked, and only in places are the surviving pieces unquestionably authentic.

The figure of the Virgin on the throne, with the richly clothed Child in her arms, stands out grandly against the finely carved architectural details of mullioned windows and rosettes. The figures of the Saints in the side panels, identified by inscriptions and by their respective attributes, stand posed upon a natural plane, where there is a hint of spatial development.

The signature inscribed in gothic characters onto the frame under the central panel reads: A.D.M.CCCLXXI. JOHES BONSI. DE FLORENTIA. ME PINXIT (1371 AD. *Giovanni Bonsi. of Florence. Painted. Me*).



The art historian Giovanni Poggi (1880-1961) was the first to reference the inscription to the one reported in the chronicles of the Dominican Monastery of San Miniato al Tedesco, in the province of Pisa. According to Poggi, the painting used to hang in a chapel of the conventual church, under the patronage of the Morali family. The provenance of the altarpiece from the church itself (formerly dedicated to the Saints Jacopo and Lucia *ad*

foris portam) is further confirmed by the busts of Dominican saints, depicted in the gables over the panels.

Very little is known about the life of the artist. A “Iohannes Bonsi pictor populi S. Laurentii” (“Giovanni Bonsi, painter in the Quarter of St. Laurence”) is enrolled in the registers of the Town Guilds (the “Arti”) in a document of the National Archives in Florence (Firenze, Archivio di Stato, *Matricole dell’Arte dei Medici e degli Speciali*, Vol.9, c.16). The reference is undated, but is certainly post July 1358. The name of Giovanni turns up once again in the books of the *Estimo e delle Prestanze*, also in the Florentine State Archive, this time in a pair with that of Neri di Mone di Cambio, who was also a painter and perhaps a companion of Giovanni’s in the keeping of a common workshop. The two appear residing together in Via Borgo della Noce, in the quarter of San Giovanni, Gonfalone del Leon d’Oro, in the years 1351-52, 1354 and again 1362-63.

The date of Bonsi’s death is not recorded, but it must have taken place before 1375, since Neri alone is cited as professionally active and without associates in a document of that year. Whatever the time limit of his activity, however, the appreciation surrounding Giovanni’s art was so great to have him appointed, in 1366, among those considered “meliores et sufficientiores quos consules artis Spetiatorum habent in eorum matriculis” (“the best and more proficient whom the Consuls of the Guild of the Speciali count in their registers”), so as to take decisions on the Fabbrica of Santa Maria del Fiore and the directions to follow. Again in 1367, the artist is recorded among the thirteen celebrities selected by the Operai of the Duomo, for choosing among the models proposed for the Fabbrica’s continuation.

Federico Zeri (1921-1998) has called attention upon the novelty factors of the polyptych, which reconciles the formalism of the tradition proceeding from the brothers Jacopo, Nardo and Andrea di Cione, called the Orcagnas, with the spatial lesson of Maso, thus anticipating the gothic revival at the end of the century.

Among the works traced and attributed by Zeri to Bonsi’s main catalogue, are: a triptych, divided among the Museums of Denver, San Diego, and a private collection; a small tabernacle, formerly in the Solomon collection of New York; a *St. Bartholomew*, formerly in the Rothermere collection of London; and a *Madonna and Saints* belonging to the New York Historical Society.