



THE ADORATION OF THE CHILD BY GHIRLANDAIO

Usually exhibited in Room IX of the Vatican Art Gallery, where other masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance such as Leonardo's *St. Jerome*, Giovanni Bellini's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* and Correggio's *Redeemer in Glory* are located, the *Adoration of the Child* by Domenico Ghirlandaio (Florence, 1449-1494) is a small (45 x 42 cm) tempera and gold panel painting. The painting arrived in the papal collections in the early 19th century, first passing through the Vatican Library and then in 1908 in the Pinacoteca of San Pio X. Exported from Tuscany by the engraver and museologist Carlo Lasinio (1759-1838), the panel was most probably painted in Pisa, where Ghirlandaio is documented not permanently between 1490 and 1493, for a now dismantled cupboard already in the cathedral sacristy and possibly intended to contain relics, according to a typology found since the mid-15th century in Beato Angelico's *Armadio degli Argenti*.

1

A particularly precious and refined work, characterised at the same time by the mature style of the supreme Florentine painter and by a reference - also in the choice of the gold background - to the artistic tradition of the late Middle Ages, the *Adoration of the Child* has a triple inscription, divided between the musical score supported by the five flying singing angels (GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO), the gold background around the Virgin (VENIENT GENTES ADORARE DOMINVM) and the one on the axis with the newborn Christ (EGO SVM LVX MVNDI).

Two other historiated panels, also by Ghirlandaio, depicting the *Resurrection of Christ* and the *Apparition of Christ to the Virgin after the Resurrection* were integral parts of the original pictorial decoration of the cupboard, the unusual iconography of which - absent from both the canonical and apocryphal Gospels - is due to *St. Bonaventure's One Hundred Meditations on the Life of Jesus Christ*, a treatise composed in the 13th century and which became a much-used source for painters and sculptors between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. It is precisely the dialogue in the form of inscriptions present in the *Apparition of Christ to the Virgin*, namely SALVE SANCTA PARENS said by Jesus and SALVE FILI MI IHS REX INCLITE REDEMPTOR MVNDI answered by his mother, that offers the emotional and devotional character of the text attributed to Pseudo-Bonaventure.

The three panels known so far of this piece of furniture demonstrate the very high quality of Ghirlandaio's mature painting, after his successes in the Florence of Lorenzo the Magnificent and in the Rome of Sixtus IV (frescoes in the Sistine Chapel), presenting some

of his distinctive features such as the minute rendering of details, in particular the faces and clothing of the protagonists, and the philological attention to antiquity, as evidenced by the pairs of pilasters that circumscribe the scenes, the classical sarcophagus in the *Resurrection of Christ* and the enclosure with polychrome marble mirrors in the *Apparition of Christ to the Virgin*.

If the main scene of the *Adoration of the Child* in the Vatican echoes the compositional scheme of the famous panel with the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, the admirable altarpiece of the Sassetti chapel in Santa Trinita in Florence modelled on the *Portinari Triptych* (1477-1478) by the Flemish artist Hugo van der Goes, the angels at the top are almost superimposable on those of the *Adoration of the Magi* of 1488 for the Spedale degli Innocenti, for a small-format work that constitutes a dense compendium of Ghirlandaio's style.

FABRIZIO BIFERALI

CURATOR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF XV-XVI CENTURY ART



ADORATION OF THE CHILD
CA. 1492
INV. MV40344