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Bernardino Luini  
*Three Angels on clouds*



**BERNARDINO LUINI (BERNARDINO SCAPI, called LUINI)**

(Dumenza ?; recorded from 31 March 1501 to 20 January 1532)

*Three Angels on Clouds*

oil on panel, 57.7 x 75.6 cm (22¾ x 29¾ in)

c. 1515–18

**PROVENANCE**

London, Christie's, 18 May  
1990, lot 45

**T**he three angels depicted on this panel rest their feet on small clouds and are characterised by the variety of their poses and by the serene expressions on their faces, suggesting a sentiment of

ethereal happiness. They wear small tunics of transparent gauze and each one has different coloured wings: green on the left, white in the centre and blue on the right. Their gazes converge towards a point, lower left, outside the surface of the painting. Thus the picture is likely to have once formed part of a polyptych with a Nativity or an Adoration of Jesus in its central panel, reflecting a compositional type of which examples abound in early 16th century Lombard art, for example Bernardo Zenale's *Adoration of the Christ Child* (Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, fig. 1) painted for the Confraternita dell'Immacolata Concezione associated with the Franciscans in Cantù (1502), the *Adoration of the Shepherds* by Pedro Fernandez (c. 1506–7) in the collection of the Marquis of Villahermosa in Pedrola (Zaragoza), and a number of versions by Bernardino Luini, ranging from the



**Fig. 1:** Bernardo Zenale, *Adoration of the Christ Child*, Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum

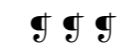
*Adoration of the Magi* frescoed on the south wall of chancel in the Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli in Saronno (1525, fig. 2) to the *Adoration of the Shepherds* (c. 1530–2, figs. 3,4) painted on one of the canvas doors protecting the





altarpiece of Sant'Abbondio, carved by Giovanni Angelo Del Maino for Como Cathedral in c. 1514. Similar angels with transparent tunics and coloured wings playing musical instruments while standing on small clouds may also be seen in the upper part of the altarpiece depicting the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Cardinal Scaramuccia Trivulzio* (Bishop of Como from 1508 to 1518, fig. 5) commissioned from Bernardino Luini for Como Cathedral some time between 6 July 1517 (the date on which the patron was raised to the purple, as we can tell from the vestments he wears in the painting) and 8 January 1518 (when Trivulzio stepped down as Bishop of Como in favour of his brother Antonio).

**Figs. 2,3,4:** Bernardino Luini, *Adoration of the Magi*, fresco, Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli, Saronno; *Adoration of the Shepherds*, Como, Cathedral (with detail)

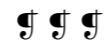


Defined by a vibrant, undulating profile, the figures stand out starkly against a monochrome background; a delicately nuanced *chiaroscuro*, inspired by the



**Fig. 5:** Bernardino Luini, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Cardinal Scaramuccia* Trivulzio, Como, Cathedral

*Lamentation over the Dead Christ* in the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, formerly in the Borromeo Collection in Milan (c. 1515, fig. 6)<sup>2</sup>, and the panels depicting *Christ Crowned with Thorns* and the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* in the Corpus Domini Chapel in San Giorgio al Palazzo in Milan (1516, fig. 7)<sup>3</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> M. ROMERI, in *Bernardino Luini e i suoi figli*, exhibition catalogue (Milan, Palazzo Reale, 10 April–13 July 2014), ed. G. AGOSTI and J. STOPPA, Milan 2014, pp. 85–92.

<sup>2</sup> A. OTTINO DELLA CHIESA, *Bernardino Luini*, Novara 1956, p. 77 cat. 59; P. AIELLO, in *Bernardino... op. cit.*, pp. 148–150.

Several of the stylistic elements in this panel, with its extremely effective palette, at once sober and sophisticated, can be found as early as in some of the scenes that once decorated Gerolamo Rabia's villa known as La Pelucca, in particular *Vulcan's Forge* and the *Sacrifice to Pan* (both of which were detached and transferred onto panels by Stefano Barezzi in 1821 and are now in the Pinacoteca di Brera)<sup>4</sup>; in the *Sacrifice to Pan* the two small Satyrs depicted before the altar already show that subtle balance between elegant draughtsmanship



<sup>3</sup> A. OTTINO DELLA CHIESA, *Bernardino... op. cit.*, 1956, pp. 108-109 cat. 146; M.T. BINAGHI OLIVARI, *Bernardino Luini*, Milan 2007, pp. 22-24; C. QUATTRINI, *Bernardino Luini nel secondo decennio del Cinquecento*, in "Rivista dell'Istituto Nazionale d'Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte", XXVII, 2004 (2010), pp. 166-175; M. FLAMINE, in *Bernardino... op. cit.*, 2014, pp. 112-121.

<sup>4</sup> M.T. BINAGHI OLIVARI, in *Pinacoteca di Brera. Scuole lombarda e piemontese, 1300, 1535*, ed. F. ZERI, Milan 1988, pp. 266-279, 294-297; G. AGOSTI and J. STOPPA, in *Bernardino... op. cit.*, 2014, pp. 102-135: c. 1513-14.

<sup>5</sup> *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti*, ed. P. BAROCCHI and R. BETTARINI, Florence 1966-87, V, p. 435.

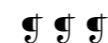
and nuanced *chiaroscuro* that has achieved perfection in the panel under discussion here. And even closer comparisons may be made with a group of works painted shortly after the La Pelucca cycle, all of them dated between c. 1515 and 1518. In this phase, to which the Houston *Lamentation* (c. 1515, fig. 6), the paintings in San Giorgio al Palazzo (1516, fig. 7) and the large



**Fig. 6:** Bernardino Luini, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, Houston, Museum of Fine Arts

panel on the altar of St. Jerome in Como Cathedral (1517-18) all belong, Luini shows a strong affinity with the styles of Bartolomeo Suardi, known as Bramantino, and of Bernardo Zenale, whose pale, opalescent handling of flesh and whose tendency to simplify the volumes of his figures Luini skilfully bolsters. Luini's work is marked in this phase by the style of two

Lombard masters older than him, but in interpreting their style he eliminates all sharpness with the "ornament of courtesy", as Giorgio Vasari so appositely defines his character and style (1569)<sup>5</sup>.



It is impossible to ascertain the original location of this painting as things stand today, but it must have been painted in a fairly narrow time frame some time



between c. 1515 and 1518. None of Luini's *Nativities* or *Adorations of the Christ Child* that can be dated to this period has the dimensions or formal requirements for it to be associated with the *Three Angels on Clouds*, whose innovative design was rapidly perceived as being an element in its own right, not bound in any way to the context for which it had been conceived. This contention is borne out by the existence of various old copies faithfully reproducing the composition. One of them, painted on panel in the 16th century (58.5 x 75.2 cm) (Fig. 8),

<sup>6</sup> A résumé of the studies on the collection is in A. MAZZOTTA, *Storia della quadreria nel palazzo, in Palazzo Litta a Milano*, ed. E. BIANCHI, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 2017, pp. 159-173.

<sup>7</sup> Sold by Christie's in London, 17 July 1986, lot 27; reproduced in L. BELTRAMI, *Luini. 1512-1532*, Milan 1911, p. 561. Autograph according to A. OTTINO DELLA CHIESA, *Bernardino... op. cit.* 1956, pp. 91-92 cat. 108; but "opaque copy: in the view of A. VENTURI, *Esposizione al Burlington Fine Arts Club di Londra*, in "L'Arte", 1, 1898, pp. 315-318.

**Fig. 7:** Bernardino Luini, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, Milan, San Giorgio al Palazzo



**Figs. 8,9:** After Bernardino Luini, *Three Angels on clouds*, formerly Milan, Litta Visconti Arese collection; *Three Angels on clouds*, sold Paris, 1983

<sup>8</sup> Hotel Drouot, Cornette de Saint-Cyr sale, 20 April 1983, lot 11 (attributed to Andrea d'Assisi detto l'Ingegno).

<sup>9</sup> J.Shell, *Bernardino Luini's lost altarpiece for the church of S.Vincenzo at Gravedona*, in *"Arte Lombarda"*, 90/91, 1898, pp. 189-191, esp. p. 190.

belonged to the Litta Visconti Arese collection in Milan in the 18th century<sup>6</sup> and, thanks to its illustrious provenance, it has long enjoyed undue fame<sup>7</sup>; while another copy, also on panel (57 x 72 cm) (Fig. 9) and dating to the time of Cardinal Federico Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan (1595–1631), was sold in Paris in 1983<sup>8</sup>.

In this connection, it is worth recalling that on 20 October 1516 Bernardino Luini pledged to Pietro Antonio Curti, an archpriest in San Vincenzo in Gravedona, that before Easter of the following year he would paint him an altarpiece comprising six panels, the central one of which would depict the *Nativity* (*"presepium unum bene pictum et laudabile et coloribus finis"*)<sup>9</sup>. The dimensions of the polyptych (seven *braccia* by five, roughly 416 x 297 cm) and its date tempts us to envisage the three angels set above or at the top of the *Nativity*, but sadly this suggestion must remain purely hypothetical because no other part of the altarpiece has yet been traced.

The painting is to be published in Cristina Quattrini's monograph on Bernardino Luini, soon to be released by Editore Allemandi of Turin.







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