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Domenico Puligo  
*The Madonna and Child*

**DOMENICO DI BARTOLOMEO UBALDINI, called DOMENICO PULIGO**  
(Florence, 1492 – 1527)

*Madonna and Child*

Oil on panel, 64.6 x 49.5 cm (25½ x 19½ in)

**PROVENANCE**

Principi Corsini Collection,  
Palazzo Corsini al Parione,  
Florence

**LITERATURE**

U. DE MEDICI, *Catalogo della  
collezione dei Principi Corsini  
in Firenze*, Florence 1880, p. 57  
entry n. 181

<sup>1</sup>The label bearing the number 181, now on the back of the frame, is an inventory number listed in the guide to the prestigious collection drafted by Ulderigo de' Medici in 1880: U. DE MEDICI, *Catalogo della collezione dei Principi Corsini in Firenze*, Florence 1880, p. 57 n. 181; the work is still mentioned in the 1886 edition. The various 16<sup>th</sup> century Florentine paintings mentioned in the Corsini picture gallery include other paintings given to Puligo that are similar in format or subject matter; see DE MEDICI, *op. cit.*, p. 31 n. 10 *Madonna and Child with Angels* (note across the Brogi photograph 15998), p. 41 n. 140 *Holy Family*, p. 53 n. 170 *Holy Family*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> G. VASARI, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, Florence 1550 and 1568; ed. R. BETTARINI and P. BAROCCHI, Florence 1966-1987, 6 vols. only of the *Vite*, IV, pp. 249, 251.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

The painting comes from the picture gallery of the Principi Corsini in their palazzo in Via del Parione in Florence, where it was attributed to Domenico Puligo from at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. A catalogue compiled by Ulderigo de' Medici in 1880 describes the painting, which hung in the fourth room after the alcove, thus: «181. Puligo Domenico – The Madonna with the Child Jesus: fig. fin. Al. Gin. Two-thirds life size Pan. ht. mt. 65, wid. Mt. 0,50», in other words, the exact dimensions of the picture under discussion in this paper<sup>2</sup>.

The traditional attribution to Puligo is extremely convincing. Puligo was a painter praised by Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists* for his draughtsmanship and for his «pleasing and gracious» handling of colour, «considering that his method of painting with softness, without overloading his works with colour or making them hard, but causing the distances to recede little by little as though veiled with a kind of mist, gave his pictures both relief and grace»<sup>3</sup>.

The Virgin is seated full-face in the foreground, her eyes gazing down at the Christ Child in her lap as she girds him in a transparent veil, foreshadowing his winding cloth. Jesus, naked save for a second diaphanous cloth covering his thighs, sits with his legs akimbo, turning his curly head towards the observer. The figures emerge gradually from the background thanks to the artist's measured modulation of *chiaroscuro*, their expressions veined with a languid sentimentality that recalls the «beautiful expressions of his heads» also mentioned by Vasari<sup>4</sup>.





The painting's excellent condition allows us to analyse the perfection of its execution in every phase, from the preparation of the wooden support, through the *imprimatura* with its pinkish base, and right up to the brushwork applied in thin layers of *velatura* in such a way as to convey a soft, suffused form, achieved in places even with the use of fingertips. One can detect *pentimenti* (in particular in the hands and arms of the Christ Child, in Mary's fingers and in the veil covering her head) that underscore the artist's tendency to define the details of his compositions as he painted, up to and including in the final phase in the process, while his long, transparent and perfectly blended brush strokes aim to produce a nuanced finish with gradual transition from light to shade, thus imparting a sweet and intimate, yet at the same time melancholy, tone to the composition which Vasari tells us was one of the most characteristic features of Puligo's style.

The fact that the painting is unfinished offers us an excellent opportunity to penetrate the artist's *modus operandi*. The halos are incomplete; the final *velature*

**Fig. 1:** Domenico Puligo, *Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist and St. Lawrence*; Florence, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, inv. 1912 n° 146

**Fig. 2:** Domenico Puligo, *Madonna and Child with St. John the Baptist*; Florence, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, inv. 1912 n° 145

on the green of the drapery and mantle are missing; the paint on the hands of both the Virgin and the Christ Child is still thin; the figures adopt a tight, half-closed pose that suggests they were intended to clutch an attribute (a flower, a goldfinch, a cross...) with which the artist may have planned to complete his composition. The pinkish *imprimatura* in the lower half of the panel can be



**Figs. 3-5:** Domenico Puligo, *Madonna and Child*, detail; *The Virgin and Child in Majesty with St. Quentin and St. Placidus*, detail and whole painting; Sarasota, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art

made out beneath the tunic covering the Virgin's legs in the foreground and in a narrow portion at the side beneath her right arm, where there is absolutely no trace of colour – it would probably have been the blue traditionally associated with Mary's mantle – but where a few vertical brushstrokes of the greyish background and the Virgin's red sleeve have spilled over. In fact, the whole of the



lower part of the composition has a broadly unfinished feel to it, the *chiaroscuro*, the highlighting, the volumes and the separation between the garments and the drapery on the right all waiting to be properly defined.

The painting's subject, composition, format and size all point to it being intended to hang in the bedchamber, a genre in which Puligo and his workshop specialised, devoting their energies primarily to painting «pictures of Our Lady, portraits, and other heads»<sup>5</sup>. We can also see significant stylistic, compositional and formal similarities with the paintings in the Galleria Palatina in Palazzo Pitti in Florence that have traditionally been attributed to Puligo since the days of the inventories drafted for the Houses of Medici and Lorraine<sup>6</sup>.

In particular, we can detect stringent similarities with the *Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist and St. Lawrence*, which can be dated to the second half of the 1510s (fig. 1), in the figure of the Virgin, in the Christ Child's features, in the plastic yet nuanced forms, in the vibrant palette (ranging in Puligo's work from violet to red and from green to blue), in the deep, crumpled folds and

**Fig. 6:** Domenico Puligo, *The Holy Family with the Young St. John the Baptist*; Rome, Galleria Borghese, inv. 432

**Fig. 7:** Domenico Puligo, *Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist*; Munich, Alte Pinakothek

<sup>5</sup>VASARI, *op. cit.*, ed. 1966-1987, IV, p. 251.



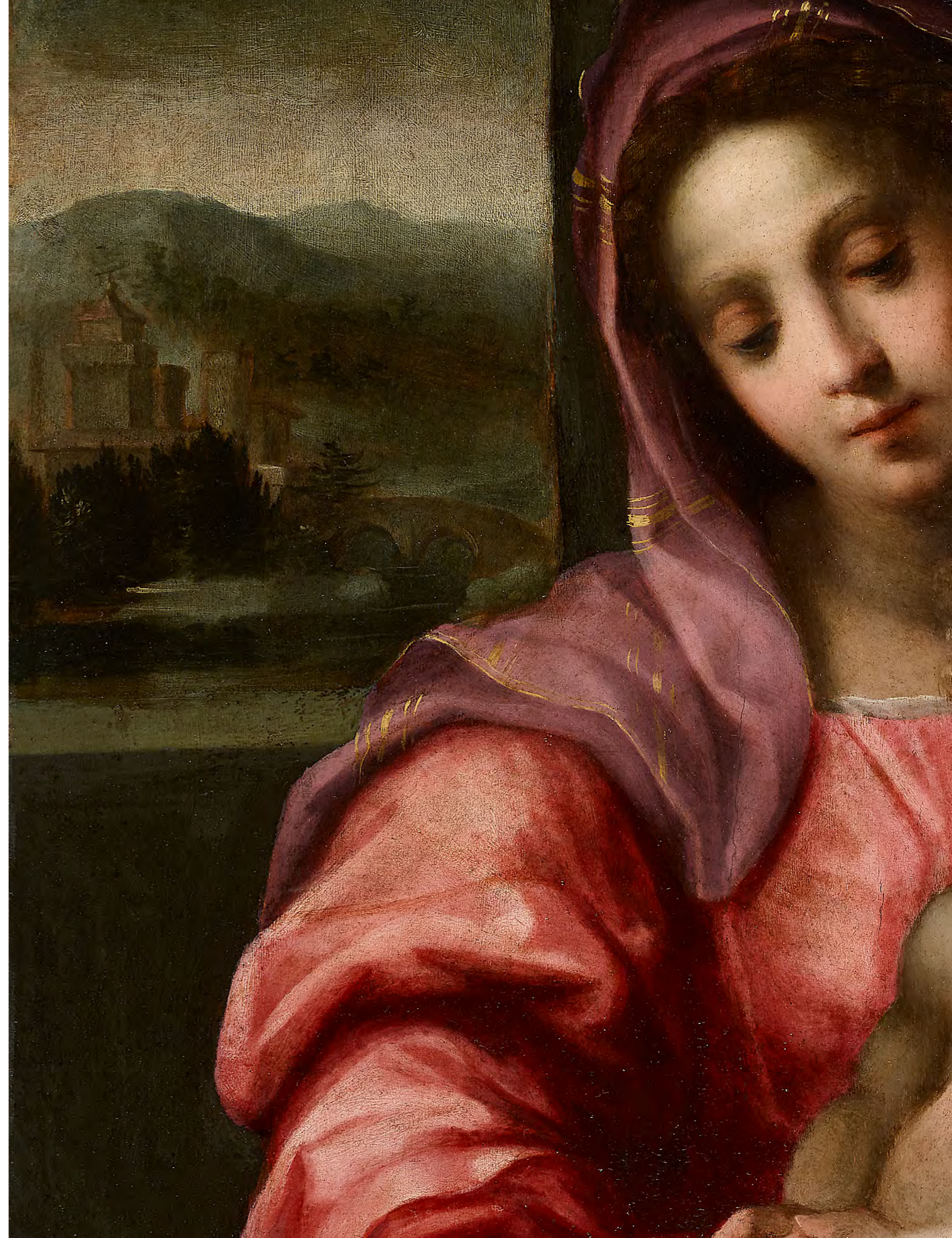
**Fig. 8** Domenico Puligo, *The Vision of St. Bernard*; Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, detail

<sup>6</sup>For Puligo's paintings in the Galleria Palatina in Palazzo Pitti, see: E. CAPRETTI, in *I dipinti della Galleria Palatina e degli Appartamenti Reali. Le Scuole dell'Italia Centrale 1450-1530*, ed. S. PADOVANI, Florence 2014, pp. 269-291 ('I cataloghi di Palazzo Pitti'; 3.1), pp. 269-291. In general, for Puligo's works mentioned in this paper, see: E. CAPRETTI, *Domenico Puligo, un protagonista 'ritrovato' dell'arte fiorentina del Cinquecento*, in *Domenico Puligo (1492-1527). Un protagonista dimenticato della pittura fiorentina*, exhibition catalogue (Florence, Palazzo Pitti, 27 September 2002 - 5 January 2003) ed. E. CAPRETTI and S. PADOVANI in conjunction with S. CASCIU and with an essay by A. FORLANI TEMPESTI, Livorno 2002, pp. 24-53, esp. pp. 44-51 (*Elenco delle opere*) with the entries for the works displayed in the exhibition.

<sup>7</sup>inv. 1912 n. 145; recorded in 1666 in the inventory of Cardinal Carlo de' Medici and already attributed to Puligo then.

in the general mood of tender languor bolstered by the "mist" enveloping the forms in half-shadow. Also, the figure of the Baby Jesus with his curly locks, his head inclining to one side, his expression filled with foreboding, his legs akimbo and his chubby hands with small, almost clawlike fingers, is tantamount to a signature on the painter's part, a constant feature both of his "bedchamber Madonnas" throughout his artistic career and of the *Madonna and Child with St. John the Baptist* also in the Galleria Palatina<sup>7</sup>, one of his loftiest creations which can be dated to the 1520s (fig. 2). Again, the face of the Virgin (fig. 3), her tired eyes gazing downwards, her look of absorption, her small pink mouth and her rounded chin all reflect a physiognomy that is a constant feature of Puligo's depictions of Mary, from the youthful altarpiece now in the Ringling Museum in Sarasota (Figs. 4-5), which may have been painted for the Badia a Settimo, to the *Holy Family with the Young St. John the Baptist* in the Galleria Borghese (fig. 6) and the *Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist*, a later work now in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich (fig. 7). Further comparisons may easily be made with Puligo's series of «heads», as Vasari calls them, for example the *Magdalen* in the Accademia Albertina in Turin or the *Female Figure* in the collection of the Arciconfraternita della Misericordia in Florence.

The small landscape in the upper right-hand corner of the painting echoes



<sup>8</sup> Walters Art Gallery, inv. 37.652

similar views in Puligo's work (see, for example, the painting now in Munich) and the background in the superb altarpiece depicting the *Vision of St. Bernard* now in Baltimore<sup>8</sup>, one of his most intense and most successful paintings (fig. 8). The pattern is repeated in various works spanning the whole of his artistic career



**Fig. 9:** Domenico Puligo, *Madonna and Child*, infrared reflectography

<sup>9</sup> See other works by Puligo with a similar composition in CAPRETTI, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-51 nn. 5, 16, 58.

from the youthful *Madonna* in the Galleria Nazionale di Palazzo Barberini in Rome, in an unflagging output in which fully autograph works stand out alongside workshop versions intended to meet the requirements of a very varied customer base interested in clearly popular subjects<sup>9</sup>.

In general, both in this picture and in the loftiest paintings traditionally attributed to Puligo, the suspended, intimate and suffused atmosphere in which a *sfumato* inspired by Leonardo conceals outlines and softens volumes, reveals an attempt to achieve compositional harmony as a reflection of an inner harmony in an intimism veined with melancholy: feelings and anxieties are mitigated, and descriptive and ornamental details are absent in order to achieve the ideal, silent and heavily

<sup>10</sup> E. CAPRETTI, *Ritratti e alcune "teste" del Puligo*, in "Antichità viva", XXXII, 1993, n. 3/4, pp. 5-14.



**Fig. 10:** Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, *Madonna and Child*; Florence, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, inv. 1912 no. 363

interiorised mood that is also a constant feature of Puligo's superb portraits<sup>10</sup>.

As we have seen, Puligo «always kept to the same method of working and to the same manner, which caused him to be held in esteem as long as he lived», as Vasari notes in his *Lives of the Artists*<sup>11</sup>, thus developing a consistent and constant style without sudden change or major revision, a style in which a crucial role was played by the influence of Andrea del

<sup>11</sup> Vasari, *op. cit.*, ed. 1966-1987, IV, p. 249.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Sarto, a friend who was generous with his advice and his suggestions, a kind of “mentor” for a very talented artist such as Puligo, for whom nothing «was more dear ... than to see that master in his workshop, in order to learn from him, showing him his works and asking his opinion of them, so as to avoid ... errors and defects»<sup>12</sup>.

The *Madonna and Child* under discussion here appears to hark back to certain works of Del Sarto such as, for example, the putti in the *Corsini Madonna* in Petworth House or the Madonnas in the paintings in the Galleria Borghese and the National Gallery of Canada. But at the same time, the simplification of the scene and the affection binding the two figures are reminiscent of the teachings of Puligo’s master and friend Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio (fig. 10) from whom he appears to have inherited his stern, stringent interpretation of the models developed by Raphael during the latter’s time in Florence via the austere, unruffled art of Fra’ Bartolomeo and the School of San Marco.

The painting process revealed through diagnostic inspection confirms the discoveries made during restoration of Puligo’s pictures for a monographic exhibition at the Galleria Palatina in Palazzo Pitti in 2002. As Giovanni Cabras writes, the painter «uses a full range of subtle colour transitions either “*a mezzocorpo*” or in “*velature*” and, making the most of the luminosity of his plaster primer, he manages to achieve effects in a scale of occasionally imperceptible modulations of colour»<sup>13</sup>.

Infrared reflectography has also allowed us to observe dark brushstrokes in the painting that create areas of shadow, building volumes while simultaneously hiding outlines by likening them to the dark background, a technique seen in other Puligo paintings subjected to inspection. This confirms, also in the case of the picture under discussion in this paper, the *modus operandi* characteristic of Puligo which we have discussed above and which Vasari describes thus: «the outlines of the figures that he made were lost in such a way that his errors were concealed and hidden from view in the dark grounds into which the figures merged»<sup>14</sup>. His drawing, so light and subtle that it can barely be discerned or can be seen only in certain areas (for instance, in the Christ Child’s hands) in reflectography, is another typical feature of Puligo’s style that has already been

<sup>13</sup> G. CABRAS 2000, restoration report cited in E. CAPRETTI, 62. *Bottega di Domenico Puligo, Sacra Famiglia*, in *I dipinti della Galleria Palatina* 2014, p. 284.

<sup>14</sup> VASARI, *op. cit.*, ed. 1966-1987, IV, p. 249.

<sup>15</sup> GALASSI, *op. cit.*, p. 110 and fig. 4 on p. 113.



noted elsewhere<sup>15</sup>. This manner of drawing may have been prompted by the use of tracing paper from a cartoon, a method commonly adopted by Puligo (as indeed it was by Andrea del Sarto and by other 16<sup>th</sup> century Florentine artists) which allowed the painter to use compositional prototypes in different paintings in versions tailored to meet the requirements of individual patrons with only slight variations.

The composition of our painting is known from various versions based on the same design but of far inferior quality. Bernard Berenson had already attributed one such painting, now in the Pinacoteca Comunale in Città di Castello (fig. 11), to Puligo but its appalling state of conservation has prevented Elena Capretti from including it in her catalogue of the artist’s work<sup>16</sup>. Victoria Markova has also published an interesting version in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow (fig. 12), although it appears to have been heavily repainted. Interestingly, the Christ Child in the Pushkin version holds a small cross in his hand, which is compatible with the position of his fingers<sup>17</sup>. Other replicas of far inferior quality are to be found in the Cobbe Collection in Hatchlands Park (Guilford, East Clandon) (fig. 13) and in the church of Santa Anna Matrona in Milan.

**Figs. 11-13:** Workshop of Domenico Puligo (?), *Madonna and Child*; Città di Castello, Pinacoteca comunale; Domenico Puligo (?), *Madonna and Child*; Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts; Circle of Domenico Puligo, *Madonna and Child with St. Catherine of Alexandria*, Guilford (Surrey, UK), Hatchlands Park, Cobbe Collection

<sup>16</sup> B. BERENSON, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance*, Oxford 1932, p. 475; IDEM, *Pittura italiane del Rinascimento*, Milan 1936, p. 408; IDEM, *Italian pictures of the Renaissance*, London 1963, I, p. 183. In the Fondazione Zeri photographic library the painting is listed as by Puligo (entry n° 33147 - photograph by Alinari; motive for attribution: literature). In the photographic library of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, on the other hand, the painting is to be found in the folder for Giovannantonio Sogliani (photograph 313709 - Studio fotografico Tacchini-Città di Castello 169-DIP). While its affinity with Puligo’s style is noted, the painting is attributed to an “anonymous 16<sup>th</sup> century artist” on account of its inferior quality, in P. PAZZAGLI, in *Pinacoteca Comunale di Città di Castello. 1. Dipinti*. Palazzo Vitelli alla Cannoniera, ed. P. F. MANCINI, Perugia-Milan 1987, p. 190 n. 32.

<sup>17</sup> Panel 64.6 x 49.2. V. MARKOVA, in *Kartiny ital'janskich masterov: XIV - XVIII vekov iz muzeev SSSR Gosudarstvennyj Muzej Izobrazitel'nyh Iskusstvo Imeni A. S. Puskina*, Moscow 1986, pp. 42-43 n. 9 (inv. 5).

<sup>18</sup> Taken from: E. CAPRETTI, in *Ghirlandaio. Una famiglia di pittori del Rinascimento tra Firenze e Scandicci*, exhibition catalogue (Scandicci, Castello dell'Acciaio, 21 November - 1 May 2010), ed. A. BERNACCHIONI, Florence 2010, p. 93; in *I dipinti della Galleria Palatina*, op. cit. (note 7), p. 269. Preceding literature, in addition to the literature already mentioned, in the preceding notes: G. A. GARDNER, *The Paintings of Domenico Puligo*, Columbus, Ohio State Univ., Ph. D. Diss., 1986; E. CAPRETTI, *Un'aggiunta al Puligo maturo*, in "Paragone", XLII, 1991, n. 493/495 (new series n. 26/27), pp. 59-65; P. LA PORTA, *Ritratto di Domenico Puligo*, in "Prospettiva", 68, 1992, pp. 30-44; R. SPINELLI, *Giovanni della Robbia, Domenico Puligo e i 'compagni del Paiuolo' alla badia del Buonsollazzo*, in "Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz", XXXVIII, 1994, pp. 118-129; *Domenico Puligo*, op. cit. (note 7), with bibliography; T. MOZZATI, *Giovanfrancesco Rustici. Le Compagnie del Paiuolo e della Cazzuola: arte, letteratura, festa nell'età della maniera*, Florence 2008 ("Fondazione Carlo Marchi. Studi"; 22), pp. 347-348. A crucial source is Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*: Vasari, op. cit. (note 3), ed. R. BETTARINI and P. BAROCCHI, also on line: [http://vasari.sns.it/cgi-bin/vasari/Vasari-all?code\\_f=print\\_page&work=Giuntina&volume\\_n=4&page\\_n=247](http://vasari.sns.it/cgi-bin/vasari/Vasari-all?code_f=print_page&work=Giuntina&volume_n=4&page_n=247).

A contemporary of Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino, Domenico di Bartolomeo degli Ubaldini known as Puligo<sup>18</sup> presumably entered Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio's workshop in the first decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and, according to Vasari (1568), he remained there "for many years".

It is certainly true that he was already a grown man when he enrolled in the Compagnia di San Luca, the painter's "guild", in 1528.

From the outset Puligo had the makings of an artist specialising in paintings intended for the domestic environment, such as portraits, "heads"— of Lucretia or Cleopatra, or of saints such as the Magdalen or St. John the Baptist – and devotional pictures chiefly depicting the Madonna and Child, of which the Galleria Palatina in Palazzo Pitti has several examples from the Medici and Lorraine collections. His compositions are characterised by "a kind of mist" (Vasari, 1568), a *sfumato* harking back to the work of Leonardo da Vinci, in which forms are veiled and figures take on a suffused and melancholy mood, encapsulating the sentimental style that is a leitmotif of Puligo's work. His output was deliberately easy to grasp, often with repeated compositional modules which allowed him in many instances to delegate the actual execution of his most popular inventions to his workshop.

In Puligo's overall output it is his portraits that stand out with their absolutely unique character. His only signed and dated work is a *Portrait of a Man Writing*, now in Firlé Place near Lewes, dated 1523. Following a virtually unchanging pattern, the figures portrayed by Puligo, devoid of any attempt at detailed description, invariably tend to turn their absorbed and introverted gaze on the observer, inhabiting an ideal, suspended, abstract space.

Despite specialising in pictures for the "bedchamber", Puligo also turned his hand to larger formats such as altarpieces, producing works of considerable quality. *The Deposition from the Cross* in Anghiari, now in the Propositura di Santa Maria delle Grazie but originally painted for the seat of the Confraternity of the Cross, was probably painted in 1515.

Puligo enjoyed close ties with the Cistercian order. For the abbey of San Salvatore a Settimo he painted the *Virgin and Child in Majesty with St. Quentin and St. Placidus* now in Sarasota (John and Mable Ringling Museum), probably for the

Chapel of St. Quentin in the abbey church, and he also frescoed the cloister with now lost stories from the life of "Count Ugo who founded seven abbeys". Between 1513 and 1521 he is recorded as having worked repeatedly for the abbey of San Bartolomeo al Buonsollazzo in the Mugello in the company of other artists such as Giovanni della Robbia. His works inspired by Cistercian themes include the *Vision of St. Bernard* now in Baltimore (Walters Art Museum), which Vasari called "the best work that Domenico ever executed" when it was owned by the brothers Giovan Gualberto and Niccolò del Giocondo, and a very fine *Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist and St. Bernard* whose whereabouts are currently unknown but which is documented in a photograph in the Fondazione Longhi. And lastly, in 1526-7, he painted one of his greatest masterpieces, the altarpiece for the Da Romena Chapel in the church of the Cestello in Florence (now Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi) formerly owned by the Cistercians of the Badia a Settimo. The altarpiece is still *in situ* and its original frame has been attributed to Baccio d'Agnolo.

Puligo belonged to the Compagnia del Paiuolo, a merry band established along with the Compagnia della Cazzuola after the Medici returned to Florence in 1512. The driving force behind the company's meetings was Giovan Francesco Rustici who hosted its members in his workshop "alla Sapienza". The artists in the company included Andrea del Sarto who, Vasari (1568) tells us, would often show up at Puligo's workshop to dispense advice or to offer him drawings. Del Sarto's influence on Puligo's work is so clear as to have prompted scholars in the past to classify Puligo as an imitator of Del Sarto. In actual fact he interprets Del Sarto's models in a highly personal style, in images filled with sweet yearning, rising out of the *sfumato* that envelops his forms like a mist, conferring on them a highly individual intimacy and a feeling of psychological suspension. Andrea del Sarto's *Madonna of the Harpies* (Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi) is the inspiration for Puligo's *Madonna and Child with St. Hippolytus and St. Cassian* in the Propositura di Laterina, one of the most important recent additions to the corpus of his work.

Having caught the plague, Puligo dictated his last will and testament on 12 September 1527 and by November of that year he was dead.





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