

A Renaissance *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist* in Kirkcaldy

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Fig.1 / Circle of Domenico Puligo, *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, 1520s-1530s, oil on panel, 82.5 x 64.3 cm, Kirkcaldy (Fife), Museum and Art Gallery.

An attractive painting of the *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist* on a medium-sized, poplar-wood panel (82.5 x 64.3 cm) has long preserved its secrets away from the public gaze in the reserve collection of the Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery, Fife (fig. 1).¹ It was transferred there from Anstruther Town Hall between 1975 and 1984, and nothing earlier is known about its provenance.² However, an old strip of paper on the back bears the name of the great Florentine High Renaissance master, Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530), once viewed by the likes of Robert Browning and Heinrich Wölfflin as the epitome of a Renaissance artist. The picture is in reasonable condition, though there is evidence of woodworm on the back of the panel and there are scattered small paint losses on the front, some of which have been filled in. Its rainbow palette has been somewhat dimmed by discoloured varnish and would benefit from a full conservation, which is currently envisaged. Such an intervention might even further elevate the picture's quality.

The broad similarity with Andrea's style is indisputable, not least in its colouring, composition, and landscape (figs. 2 and 3), and explains the old attribution. However, neither the handling nor the characterization betray Andrea's immaculate finish, nor the deeply engaged cast of thought of his figures. Indeed the facial types are quite unlike Andrea's. We are dealing, rather, with a skilful work by one of his many pupils or imitators, with an emphasis on prettiness (the Virgin's Hollywood face) and elegance (the Christ Child's Mohican quiff). It opens up the complex and under-researched area of Andrea's studio and influence.³

Vasari refers to the many pupils who passed through his workshop for varying lengths of time, sometimes driven away by their lack of rapport with Andrea's allegedly domineering wife, Lucrezia del Fede, while he also mentions other artists as close friends or associates who worked alongside him. One of the latter was Domenico Puligo (1492-1527) who, according to Vasari, spent almost all his time painting Madonnas, and whose works are to this day still sometimes confused with Andrea's.⁴ Andrea, it seems, "was never so happy as when Domenico was in his workshop learning from him."⁵ Puligo's facial types, poses, and compositions bear especially close comparison with the Kirkcaldy picture (see fig. 4), even if the Fife panel seems somewhat harder in handling than Puligo's soft brushwork, and also rather more Mannerist, possibly placing it in the 1530s rather than 1520s. However, the contrapposto pose and splayed legs of the Kirkcaldy Christ Child, as well as the picture's overall composition, are closer to Puligo's *Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist* in the Galleria Palatina of Palazzo Pitti (fig. 4) than they are to Andrea's prototypes (see fig. 2). It is, therefore, tempting to view the Kirkcaldy panel as emanating from Puligo's circle, or even studio, rather than that of Andrea, in so far as they were distinct. Other works either by or attributed to Puligo are also close in feel to the Kirkcaldy *Virgin and Child with the Infant Saint John*. For example, the face of the Christ Child in a panel attributed to Puligo, now in Nantes (fig. 5), is very similar to that of the Kirkcaldy Saviour. Likewise Puligo's *Holy Family with the Infant Saint John* in the Pitti (fig. 6) has several links with the Kirkcaldy panel, from the now reversed pose



Fig. 2 / Andrea del Sarto, *Madonna and Child*, 1528-1530, oil on panel, 87 x 65 cm, Florence, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti.

Fig. 3 / Andrea del Sarto, *Pietà* (*Pietà di Luco*), 1523-1524, oil on panel, 238.5 x 198.5 cm, Florence, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti.



of the Christ Child through the upturned face, pose, and reed cross of Saint John, to the side-swept curls of Christ's central quiff.⁶ Yet other pictures show that Puligo's art was copied by pupils and imitators (fig. 7). Although Puligo is thought to have had many pupils, only one is mentioned by Vasari: Domenico Beceri of Florence, to whom we shall return.

Other possible candidates for author of the Kirkcaldy painting include later devotees of Andrea del Sarto, such as Michele Tosini, known as Michele di Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio (1503-1577), and his pupil, Francesco Brina (ca. 1540-1586), though perhaps there are not sufficient similarities in all details. A painter who may

more fully enter the arena is Pier Francesco Foschi (1502-1567), who had been a pupil of Andrea but who, from the 1530s onwards, began to overlay that style with mild Mannerist accents imported from Pontormo, Rosso, and Parmigianino.⁷ Certainly the face of the Kirkcaldy Madonna has (somewhat muted) echoes of Rosso's bright expressions. Characteristic of Foschi are the wide, circular eyes, of the Virgin in particular, as we encounter them in one of Foschi's finest portraits (fig. 8), and the pleated folds of her pink-red dress, as we see them in Foschi's variant version of one of Andrea's most famous altarpieces, the *Bracci Holy Family* in the Pitti (fig. 9), even if its attribution to Foschi is undocumented and based purely on style.



Fig. 4 / Domenico Puligo, *Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist*, after 1520, oil on panel, 96 x 70.5 cm, Florence, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti.

Fig. 5 / Attributed to Domenico Puligo, *Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, 1520s or later, oil on panel, 103.4 x 77.8 cm, Nantes, Musée d'Arts.

A pensive prettiness presides in both the Kirkcaldy panel and Foschi's *Virgin and Child with the Infant Saint John* (see fig. 9) that is different from Andrea's and Puligo's more melancholy meditations, through strained, intense expressions, on the Christ Child's future destiny of suffering. However, in the last resort, Morellian details, such as the different, almost Leonardesque curls of Foschi's Christ Child, derived from Andrea, may preclude him.

An even lesser master whose works bear comparison, without however quite shaping up in all details, or indeed in colour (except perhaps in the landscape) is the anonymous Master of Volterra who, as one can see from a picture attributed to him of the same



subject in a private collection (fig. 10), was similarly indebted to Puligo and Andrea at a lower technical level.⁸ However, the Kirkcaldy panel is arguably more expressive – and more beautiful, even if the hands of the two children are weak in their current state. Nevertheless, the group of pictures loosely gathered under this Volterra sobriquet, which was coined by Federico Zeri in allusion to the altarpiece of the *Madonna and Christ Child with Saints* in the Conservatorio dei Santi Pietro e Lino in Volterra,⁹ are clearly not all by the same hand, and indeed of very variable quality. So it is possible that one or more individual paintings in this group could measure up better in comparison with the Kirkcaldy picture than others.



Fig. 6 / Domenico Puligo, *Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, ca. 1525-1527, oil on panel, 130.9 x 95.4 cm, Florence, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti.

Fig. 7 / Copy after Domenico Puligo, *Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist*, after 1520, oil on panel, Private Collection.



Fig. 8 / Pier Francesco Foschi, *Giovanni Salviati*, ca. 1540s, oil on panel, 88 x 63 cm, Moscow, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts.

Fig. 9 / Attributed to Pier Francesco Foschi, *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, ca. 1525-1535, Genoa, Galleria Nazionale di Palazzo Spinola.

Fig. 10 / Attributed to Master of Volterra, *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, 1530s, oil on panel, Private Collection.



The small, rosebud-shaped mouth of the Virgin in the latter finds echoes in the mouths of the Virgin in two pictures connected with the Volterra Master in the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena: a *Madonna and Child* and a *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John* (nos. 562 and 563), both hailing from the sixteenth-century Florentine Governor of Siena's palace.¹⁰ A perhaps even more telling comparison can be made with a picture of a completely different subject, *The Rape of Ganymede*, ca. 1540 (Wales, Cyfartha Castle Museum and Art Gallery) (fig. 11), inspired by Michelangelo's famous lost drawing of 1532 for Tommaso de' Cavalieri, known through many drawn and painted copies.¹¹ Here the pretty face and rosebud-shaped mouth of Ganymede, so different from Michelangelo's, as well as the springy curve of his thighs and the colours of the landscape, are evocative of the Kirkcaldy Master, as are his strands of hair by comparison with those of the Virgin.



Fig. 11 / Attributed to Master of Volterra, *The Rape of Ganymede*, ca. 1535-1540, oil on panel, 180 x 88 cm, Cyfartha Castle, Museum and Art Gallery (Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Trust).

Fig. 12 / Andrea del Sarto or copyist, *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist* (The Fries Madonna), ca. 1521 or later, oil on panel, 104 x 76 cm, Ascott, Anthony de Rothschild Collection, National Trust.

Elena Capretti tentatively proposed that the Master of Volterra, given his apparent dependence on the style of Domenico Puligo, might in fact be the only Puligo pupil named by Vasari: namely Domenico Beceri of Florence.¹² According to Gaetano Milanese, this Domenico Beceri was probably a Domenico di Jacopo, called Beco, listed under 1525 in the alphabetical catalogue of the Compagnia di San Luca.¹³ And given that Vasari says that Beceri was distinguished by his good colouring, he might not be a totally inappropriate fit for the Kirkcaldy Master. But that master's dependence on the style of Andrea as well as Puligo is pinpointed by similarities with the poses, characterizations, and the side-combed Mohican hairstyle of the Christ Child, in a painting of the *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint*

John the Baptist, known as the Fries Madonna (Ascott, Rothschild Collection) (fig.12), viewed by Shearman as an original by Andrea, but as a (partial) copy of a lost prototype by Freedberg, and in the past even attributed to Puligo.¹⁴ Once again, therefore, the possibility of another hand, or even partial inventor, comes into play.

The projected cleaning of the Kirkcaldy panel, removing any retouchings, as well as dirty varnish, might bring the colours and forms of the picture into closer alignment with one of these assorted rivulets from the Puligo-del Sarto nexus. In the meantime, we can view the Kirkcaldy Master as a charming if minor Florentine exponent of Vasari's "maniera moderna", who was especially close to Domenico Puligo.



NOTES

1. I am indebted to David Mannings, Carlo Falciani, Heidi Hornik, Paul Joannides, David Ekserdjian, Michael Simpson, and Aaron Thom for discussing the picture with me; and to Nicola Wilson and Ross Irving for providing access, as well as information about the provenance.
2. It was part of Anstruther Town Council's collection until 1975, when all of the Town Councils were abolished under the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973. The painting was not accessioned by Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery until 1984, so will have been moved there at some point between 1975 and 1984.
3. Further to which see Julian Brooks, Denise Allen, and Xavier F. Salomon, eds., *Andrea del Sarto. The Renaissance Workshop in Action*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: the Getty Museum, 2015).
4. For Puligo see Serena Padovani and Elena Capretti, eds., *Domenico Puligo (1492-1527). Un protagonista dimenticato della pittura fiorentina*, exh. cat. (Florence: Palazzo Pitti, 2002).
5. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. A.B. Hinds and ed. William Gaunt, 4 vols. (London: J. M. Dent, Everyman's Library, 1963), II, pp. 264-266.
6. See Stefano Casciu in Marco Chiarini and Serena Padovani, eds., *La Galleria Palatina e gli appartamenti reali di Palazzo Pitti. Catalogo dei Dipinti*, 2 vols. (Florence: Centro Di, 2003), II, p. 308.
7. For Foschi see Sydney J. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy 1500-1600*, revised ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 464, 465, 469, and 701-702, n. 37 and 38.
8. I am indebted to Carlo Falciani for suggesting the closeness of the Kirkcaldy painter to the Master of Volterra, though as someone probably in his circle rather than he himself. For the Maester of Volterra see Patrizia La Porta, "Per il Maestro di Volterra," in *Pontorno e Rosso: Atti del convegno di Empoli e Volterra. Progetti Appiani di Piombino*, eds. Roberto P. Ciardi and Antonio Natali (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), pp. 172-174.
9. Photo, Gabinetto Soprintendenza di Firenze no. 11919.
10. See Piero Torriti, *La Pinacoteca di Siena* (Genoa: Sagep, 1978), p. 202. The *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John* is well illustrated in Padovani and Capretti, *Domenico Puligo*, p. 95.
11. The Welsh picture is more naturalistic than the Michelangelo and also contains several variations, especially in the architecture and the landscape. It was purchased by the Museum in 1911 from Mr. W. Edwards of Pontycapel Brewery. He, in turn, had acquired it from the painter Harry Dyke Pearce (information from Kelly Powell of the Cyfartha Castle Museum). Painted copies of the Michelangelo survive in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, while painted variants of it include Battista Franco's *Battle of Montemurlo*, ca. 1537 (Florence, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti). For the latter see Casciu, Chiarini, and Padovani, *La Galleria Palatina*, I, p. 125, and II, p. 183. The Cyfartha Castle picture is most convincingly Florentine and not implausibly by the Master of Volterra. However, other possibilities may include a Veronese painter such as Giovanni Francesco Caroto.
12. Elena Capretti in Padovani and Capretti, *Domenico Puligo*, p. 94.
13. Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanese, 9 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1879), IV, p. 468.
14. John Shearman, *Andrea del Sarto*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), I, pl. 85a, and II, no. 58, p. 247; Sydney J. Freedberg, *Andrea del Sarto Catalogue Raisonné* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 91-92 and fig. 95.