

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

Virgin and Child Enthroned by Vittore Crivelli



Title: Virgin and Child Enthroned
Left, St Bonaventura; right, St Louis of Toulouse;
below, four pairs of figures of saints; St Agatha and St Augustine;
an unidentified female Franciscan saint and St Clare of Assisi;
four unidentified male Franciscan Saints

Maker: Vittore Crivelli (c. 1445 - 1501/2)

Medium: Tempera with gold and oil glazes on panel

Date: c. 1489

Dimensions: Virgin and Child h. 153 x w. 66.3 cm

Museum No: 1060

Gallery: 6

The Artist

Vittore Crivelli was born in Venice and like many Renaissance painters came from a family of artists. Both his father, Jacopo and older brother, Carlo, were painters and we know that Vittore worked in his brother's workshop in the 1460s after he followed him to Zara in Dalmatia, then a province of Venice, now Zadar, Croatia. He established his own workshop there but then followed his brother to Fermo on the east coast of Italy in the 1480s, where he worked until his death. Despite this, he always signed himself as a Venetian.

Although not mentioned by Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists*, the brothers both received a large number of commissions and had considerable reputations in their day judging from prices that they were able to command for their work. In 1501, Vittore received a commission for an altarpiece for which he would be paid 200 ducats. Like his brother, Vittore's main patrons were the religious orders and his decorative, conservative style suited the aims of such patrons, as well as those of the minor nobility, despite the fact that to Vasari's eyes, Crivelli's work was old-fashioned and insignificant to the progress of art.

Vittore's style is certainly conservative and relies heavily on his brother's style in his depiction of figures, use of gold leaf and the symbolic use of fruit and flowers. His work is difficult to date partly because this style remained consistent throughout his career.

During Napoleon's campaigns in Italy and the suppression of the convents in the early 19th century Crivelli's works were neglected. However, by the end of the century his work became popular once again and many altarpieces were dismantled for sale as individual panels.

The Painting

This altarpiece is not complete and would have originally been a polyptych with several other parts, some of which are now in other museums and some of which have been lost. The altarpiece is painted on wood in tempera with gold leaf. For more information on this technique see www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/pharos. It was thought to be commissioned for the altar of the Church of San Francesco in Monte Santo, a franciscan order, which is significant when looking at the iconography of the panels. In its original location in the church, the gold leaf would have shimmered in the candlelight, reflecting light out to the congregation and must have inspired awe in the viewer, coming in from an outside world where colour was something mainly found in nature.

The subject matter, showing the Virgin crowned as the Queen of Heaven, is one that dates back to the 6th century in western art and the full-face frontal view that we see here looks to Byzantine art.

The central panel shows the Virgin and Child surrounded by angels. Many of the details that the artist has included are symbolic. At the centre of the panel, the baby Jesus holds a carnation, the symbol of pure love, betrothal and marriage, the church as the bride of Christ. The symbolism is reinforced with more red carnations in a vase at the foot of the Virgin.

Beside the Virgin sits a goldfinch. Legend had it that the goldfinch acquired its red spot when it flew down and plucked a thorn from Christ's brow as he was on the road to Calvary and was splashed with the Saviour's blood. Hence the bird came to be associated with Christ's death. The baby himself also seems to be lying in a position across his mother's lap not unlike the pose that we see in a Pieta, an image of Mary holding her dead son after the Crucifixion.

The hedge of white roses behind Mary symbolises her purity, whilst above her head are pomegranates, a symbol of the Resurrection and the church. The other fruits are also symbolic – the apple is the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and alludes to Christ as the future redeemer of

mankind from original sin. The grapes symbolise the Last Supper and the Eucharist while the cucumber is used at the Jewish Festival of Passover and so refers to Mary and Jesus' Jewishness. The angels to either side of Mary hold palm branches which remind the viewer of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. All this symbolism would have been immediately recognisable to the 15th century viewer and so in the central panel the artist has given the viewer the full story of Christ's life and purpose.

The saints on either side of the Virgin, as well as below, are recognisable through the objects that they hold or wear. On the left is St Bonaventura, a 13th century saint who holds the tree of Jesse, referring to the prophecy of Isaiah that a Messiah would spring from the family of Jesse, the father of King David. He also holds a book, a reference to his writings and his cardinal's hat which he was apparently too humble to wear. He does wear his bishop's mitre as he was cardinal bishop of Albano.

To the right of the Virgin is St Louis, who is shown as Bishop of Toulouse wearing his mitre and holding a staff. St Louis was another 13th century Franciscan saint who was born the second son of the King of Naples. He renounced his claim to the throne in order to pursue a monastic life and follow the Franciscan vow of poverty. The jewel-like mark on his hand may be a reference to the stigmata of St Francis himself.

On the predella panels below, we find St Agatha, in red with a green book, St Augustine, St Margaret of Cortona and St Clare of Assisi together with four Franciscan Saints. St Agatha's end was particularly grisly - she was martyred by having her breasts cut off and these are shown hanging down in front of her. St Clare was the founder of the Poor Clares or Second Order of St Francis. Like the other Franciscan saints shown in the panels, she wears a rope girdle around her waist with three knots representing poverty, chastity and obedience.