



MORETTO DA BRESCIA
ITALIAN (BRESCIAN/VENETIAN SCHOOLS),
C. 1498-1554
Virgin and Child with Saints Stephen and Jerome

1550
Oil on wood panel
Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation

Provenance: Piccoli Collection, Venice (?); Count Contini-Bonacossi Collection, Rome; Samuel H. Kress Collection, acquired 1927 (K. 24); Columbia Museum of Art since 1954.¹

The Artist

Moretto (the nickname means dark skinned or “the Moor.”) was born as Alessandro Bonvicino into a family of artists. His father, Pietro Bonvicino (d. ca. 1515), and paternal uncle, Alessandro (d. ca. 1484), are both recorded as having worked on projects in the public loggia of Brescia. Moretto, himself, became not only one of the most distinguished painters of sixteenth-century Brescia but also is a great example of a provincial artist who attained a stature of more than local prominence. An early source suggests Moretto received instruction under Titian in Venice but neither this experience nor any early trip to Venice can be substantiated. Although details of his training and early travels remain obscure, it is believed that he may have apprenticed under the Brescian painter Floriano Ferramola with whom he later

collaborated in painting organ shutters for the Cathedral of Brescia (1515-16). In 1521, already regarded locally as an artist of importance, Moretto committed to a joint effort with another local artist, Romanino, for the decoration of the Chapel of the Sacrament in the Augustinian church of San Giovanni Evangelista in Brescia. His part in the commission included canvases of the *Last Supper*, the *Gathering of Manna*, and *Elias and the Angel*, as well as representations of apostles and prophets. Although a Raphaelesque elegance is noticeable in the execution of the figures, the overall style betrays the influence of his colleague and possible mentor, Romanino. His clerical clients apparently appreciated his work since he received employment at this same monastic institution on several later occasions. During this same period, Moretto also painted a number of portraits including one (now in the National Gallery, London) thought to be of Gerolamo II Avogadro which uses a full-length format anticipating that employed by Titian in his famous portrayal of *Charles V and his Dog* (Prado Museum, Madrid).

By 1528, Moretto's reputation had spread beyond Brescia to such an extent that he received an invitation from the painter Lorenzo Lotto to take over a commission to decorate the choir of the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Bergamo. At the end of 1530, he was in Milan and five years later he joined the court of Isabella d'Este at Solarolo, returning in 1541 to complete yet more projects in that city.

In 1530, the artist produced a grand and carefully executed *Majesty of Saint Margaret* with the female saint being accompanied by Saints Jerome and Francis. Commissioned for the Brescian church of San Francesco, the work is characterized by graceful figures and forms, broad draperies, and soft but powerful colors. Of equal beauty, but clearer and brighter in hue, is the *Allegory of Faith*, another picture of this period featuring a beautiful woman holding the cross, the wafer, and the chalice. Now in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, the painting is admired for its broad, tender modeling and its extremely bright colors.

Moretto's paintings display a breadth of sources. While the local Lombard tradition continues to surface in his work and traces of the heritage of Vincenzo Foppa (see cat. 12) persist, he found much of his inspiration outside his region. His classically rendered *Massacre of the Innocents* affirms his reputation as "the Raphael of Brescia" but it was to Venice that he most frequently looked. There is in his work clear evidence of an assimilation of stylistic features from several Venetian masters including Palma Vecchio, and Giovanni Bellini, and, especially, the great Titian.

That Moretto was eager to utilize Titian's color and painterly technique is evident in many of his works at this time and in none more so than in the *Majesty of Saint Anthony*, executed for Santa Maria della Grazia in Brescia. Generally accepted as one of his finest works, this painting presents an usually rewarding visual experience through the artist's masterful treatment of color and his carefully executed contour lines, drapery definition and employment of chiaroscuro. While the influence of Titian is there, Moretto managed to preserve his own artistic personality.

In the 1540s, Moretto was almost overwhelmed with commissions and fulfilled his assignments with remarkable speed. He received orders from religious institutions and private patrons from Verona, Bergamo, Milan, and Venice. Among the most notable works from this decade is his celebrated *Christ in the House of Simon* which was executed for the Venetian church of Santa Maria della Pietà. The painting is remarkable for its luxurious and monumental style, beautiful use of color, splendid rendition of draperies, and for a composition that predicts those of Paolo Veronese at the end of the century.

Painting

This was among the earliest of Samuel H. Kress's acquisitions. Concerning the date of execution, there has been some debate, some having preferred to see it as being painted early in Moretto's career. Although it bears comparison with his *Madonna with Four Saints* in the Orzinuovi Hospital near Brescia, Suida has pointed out that the same compositional motif was revived by the artist when, twenty-five years later, he painted his *Madonna with the Four Doctors of the Church* (now in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt). Suida, followed by Contini-Bonacossi preferred the later dating.²

In this gently rendered panel, Moretto da Brescia depicts a seated Madonna cradling the Christ Child, cheek to cheek. He responds to her embrace by encircling her neck with His arms. This warmly human display of maternal-filial affection is set off against a suspended cloth-of-honor in accordance with Venetian custom. Observing this intimate moment are two saints, both of whom are identified by costume and attribute. The pairing of the two saints in this silent *sacra conversazione* is interesting and may refer to either the given name of the patron or to the place of intended installation. The younger saint on the left, dressed in clerical garb, holds what presumably is a book of scriptures in one hand and a palm frond, symbolic of martyrdom in the other. His identity as St. Stephen (for information on this saint, see cat. 6) is confirmed by the rock which rests upon his right

shoulder. The youthfulness of this saint is contrasted with the white bearded and scantily robed saint on our right who turns his back to us as he rests his left arm upon a book. Although missing his customary attributes of cardinal's hat, lion, and skull, Moretto's contemporaries would have recognized this figure from his appearance and dress as St. Jerome, the fourth-century saint who together with Augustine, Ambrose, and Gregory was regarded as one of the four Latin Doctors of the Church. His humble garb refers to the time he spent as a hermit and the book upon which he leans most certainly is his greatest contribution to the early Church, his translation of the Bible into Latin (the Vulgate). St. Jerome's identification is confirmed by the rock he holds in his right hand and which he used to beat his flesh in an effort to experience the pain of Christ's Passion.

Seemingly different, the two saints shared a common fervor for spreading the Christian gospel. Their presence bracketing the Virgin and Christ Child reinforces the message of the miraculous incarnation as well as the necessity of Christ's sacrifice. That sacrificial reference is reiterated by the cloth

with which the Child is wrapped (predicting the winding sheet in which Christ will be buried) and by the grape vine (an allusion to the Eucharistic wine) from which the cloth-of-honor is suspended.

With his use of cool, silvery colors, contemplative mood, and dignified composition. Moretto has created one of the most attractive works of the Brescian School. Shortly after Moretto's death, Georgio Vasari wrote that "he was fond of imitating cloths of gold and silver, velvet, damask, and other kinds, with which he carefully draped his figures." Vasari also noted that he painted "very natural heads and well draped figures," adding, with Central Italian prejudice, that "his heads are vigorous, in Raphael's style, though of very inferior excellence."³ The inspiration of Titian and of Palma Vecchio are certainly felt in this painting but the artist has managed to maintain his own individuality; this is especially evident in the naturalistic treatment of the Madonna's two attendants who seem not only to be saintly but fully alive.

by Argiri Aggelopoulou and Charles R. Mack

Exhibitions: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1941-52.

Kress Foundation File Opinion; Bernard Berenson, Giuseppe Fiocco, Roberto Longhi (with dating of 1525), Raimond van Marle, Federico F. Mason Perkins, Wilhelm E. Suida (1935), and Adolfo Venturi all agree on Moretto da Brescia's authorship of the panel.

Specific Literature: William E. Suida "Beiträge su Moretto," *Critica d'Arte*, V, 1 (1940), Fasc. 23, p. 118-19 (Pl. 88, fig. 1); *Preliminary Catalogue*, p. 136, No. 132; *Book of Illustrations*, p. 151; György Gombosi, *Moretto da Brescia*, Basel: Holbein Verlag, 1943, p. 110, No. 160; *Catalogue 1954*, p. 37; *Catalogue 1962*, pp. 75-76; Shapley 1968, p. 93; *Census*, pp. 145, 575.

Additional Bibliography: Camillo Boselli, *Moretto*, Brescia: 1954; Elvira Cassa Salvi, *Moretto*, Milan: 1966; Berenson 1968, pp. 274-79; Valerio Guazzoni, *Moretto: il tema sacro*, Brescia: Grafo, 1981. Sidney Freedberg, *Painting in Italy, 1500-1600*, Pelican History of Art, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, pp. 367-72; V. Guazzoni, *Moretto: Il tema sacro*, Brescia: 1981; P.V. Begni Redona, *Alessandro Bonvicino, il Moretto da Brescia*, Brescia, 1988.

Condition: The painting was cleaned in 1930 and minor restoration executed with dry colors and a damar medium.

In 1940 some stains were removed and in 1975 there was concern over possible insect infestation of the panel with the result that both the panel and frame were fumigated. Today, except for some minor restorations, the general condition is excellent. The varnish is only slightly discolored. The copper green was originally more brilliant but has darkened. Some dark brush strokes of an undrawing that does not correspond to the final composition are visible, mostly under the arm of St. Joseph.

Frame: The frame, of probable Bolognese manufacture, likely is of late sixteenth-century origin. It is a carved and gilt plate frame with leaf carvings along the outer edge. An astragal design is worked into the ribbon molding; the inner ogee is carved in a leaf pattern. The frieze is carved with gilt corner and center decoration. In addition, there is a bead course and cavetto at the sight edge. This frame is contemporary with the painting, it may be original to it.

Notes:

1. Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi, in *Catalogue 1962*, p. 76, notes that no proof of ownership by the Piccoli Collection has been found, nor any record of there having been such a collection. This provenance was first reported in *Catalogue 1954* and, according to Contini-Bonacossi had been supplied by Fern Rusk Shapley, who repeated the claim in *Shapley 1968*, p. 92 and said that she had

received the information from Kress conservator Stephen Pichetto.

2. *Catalogue 1954*, p. 37 and *Catalogue 1962*, p. 76. Suida also pointed to similarities between the St. Stephen in the Columbia painting and a single half-length representation of the saint in the Frizzoni Collection in Bergamo.
3. Vasari, III, p. 321.