

A New Palma Vecchio in the Chapter Hall Museum, Birgu – Some Observations on the Domestic *Sacra Conversazione* in Venice*

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A painting attributed to the sixteenth-century Venetian school was recently published in *Birgu – A Maltese Maritime City*.¹ The work in question, *The Virgin and Child with St. Peter and a Donor* (Pl. 1), is owned by the Chapter Hall Museum, Birgu.² It can now be considered as a new addition to the oeuvre of Jacopo Negretti, called Palma il Vecchio (c.1485-1528).³ The composition of the painting duplicates that of a picture by this artist in the Galleria Colonna, Rome (Pl. 2), even down to the portrait of the donor being ‘presented’ to the Virgin and Child by St. Peter.⁴ These variants represent a type that has become specifically associated with Palma: the *Sacra Conversazione*. Although this is a much abused term, often used to describe any picture portraying the Virgin and Child accompanied by attendant figures, it is most often applied to a particular generic type produced by artists working in and

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1. See M. Buhagiar, “The Artistic Heritage”, *Birgu – A Maltese Maritime City*, Malta University Service Ltd. 1993, 516: “The painting is by an unknown sixteenth century Venetian master of considerable artistic sophistication. There are echoes of Giorgione...and the young Titian...in the masterly handling of oil paint, in the sensuous response to the textures of fine clothes, and in the evocative peace of the distant landscape”.
2. See Buhagiar, 516. The painting was listed as a recent bequest to the museum.
3. For a full and comprehensive catalogue of Palma’s works, see P. Rylands, *Palma Vecchio*, Cambridge 1992.
4. The only difference between the design of the two works is that the composition of the painting in Birgu has been cropped at the left and right hand sides. With this discrepancy in mind, it is probable that the dimensions of the Birgu picture (82 x 72 cm) originally provided a near identical match to those of the Colonna version (82 x 108.5 cm). Rylands also reported the existence of a photograph of a further unfinished variant of similar dimensions to the Colonna picture in the Fototeca Morassi, Venice: “...a faithful copy of the picture, except that the left side with St. Peter is unpainted, measuring 70 x 110 cm.” For the painting in the Galleria Colonna see Rylands, 171: “The figure types and colour tones are typical of Palma. St. Peter for example can also be seen in Palma’s Zerman altarpiece of the end of the [1520s] [Mogliano Veneto, Church of Sant’Elena – Rylands, 41], while the Madonna’s veil is characteristically painted with the uniform pale grey shadows of all Palma’s paintings of white linen.”

around Venice in the late fifteenth /early sixteenth century.⁵

Although a thorough technical examination is necessary, the overall quality and finish of the picture in Birgu is sufficient to include it amongst Palma's 'autograph' work - so far as this qualification has any real significance to an artist who worked closely with a number of assistants in the continuous replication of variants of established formats. With this in mind, it must be admitted that the painting in Birgu is of a slightly inferior standard to its companion. Despite the flattening effect of its present shroud of discoloured varnish, the figures in the Birgu painting convey less presence and appear more two dimensional than their Roman counterparts. The Virgin, in particular, wears a disconcertingly vacant expression when compared to the dreamy look of introspective melancholy that graces the features of the same figure in the Colonna painting. This suggests that it was the latter picture that originally formed the model for the former. However, despite these reservations, the duplicative nature of the painting in Birgu need not be too much cause for concern. It is a work that is largely devoid of the type of stylistic anomalies that creep into even the most meticulous of copies by artists of later periods. Furthermore, the verisimilitude of Palma's stylistic idiosyncrasies is so strong, that the painting appears to be a contemporary copy produced by the artist himself, possibly in conjunction with a pupil. As such, it joins at least one other version of the composition of which we have a record.⁶

Although the original model was produced for a specific patron, it is quite common for one or more close variants to exist of a particular commission of this type.⁷ Their number hints at workshop practices in Renaissance Venice - presumably, the copying of completed commissions, or even the mimicking of work still in progress, was an ideal way of inculcating a student in his master's style and teaching him how to replicate it. The student's subjugation of his own personal manner to that of his teacher was essential to the success of a busy studio such as Palma's. It is a facet of painting from this the period that continually frustrates the connoisseurial approach of critics, both past and present. In the work of Palma, and to an even greater extent in that of his pupil, Bonifacio Veronese (1487-1553), the boundaries between master

5. For an account of the history of the term 'sacra conversazione' see R. Goffen, "Nostra Conversatio in Caelis Est: Observations on the Sacra Conversazione in the Trecento", *Art Bulletin*, 61 (1979), 198-222. 198-200.
6. See note 5.
7. See also Palma's *Madonna and Child in a Landscape* in the Hermitage, and the variant sold at Christies in 1990, Rylands, 169. Other variants mentioned by Rylands, 237, of an 'original' work, include those after the Hampton Court *Madonna with Sts. John the Baptist and Catherine of Alexandria*. This duplicative approach was one fostered, in particular, by Palma's pupil Bonifacio Veronese. See. P. Cottrell, "Bonifacio Veronese and the Young Tintoretto", *Inferno, The St. Andrews Journal of Art History*, IV (1997), 17-36, 24-5.

and assistant are often impossible to define.⁸ In the case of the ‘bread and butter’ nature of the immensely popular *sacra conversazione* format, the problems are particularly acute. This is especially so in Palma’s case as the artist’s oeuvre devolves around paintings of this type.

As far as the development of this genre within Venetian painting is concerned, it was in the early work of Titian, and subsequently in that of Palma, that the scene of the Virgin seated in a landscape was transformed into what are sometimes informally referred to as “Holy picnics”. Inspired by such pivotal works as Titian’s *Holy Family with John the Baptist* in Edinburgh, c.1511 (Pl. 3), the Virgin’s hieratic position within analogous compositions becomes gently eroded as she descends to the physical level of her companions.⁹ The superficial similarities with the iconographically separate scene of the Virgin in majesty finally fade away as the Madonna eventually appears seated on the ground amongst a selection of saints, sometimes accompanied by a patron in adoration.¹⁰ This common scene, as epitomised by Palma’s *Madonna and Saints* at Penrhyn Castle (Pl. 4), datable to c.1522, takes place in characteristically bucolic surroundings.¹¹ The emphasis on landscape is a symptom of the Venetian interest in sub-Arcadian settings that first manifests itself in the work of Giorgione. It is not only a response to the pastoral themes explored by contemporary poets such as Bembo and Sanazzaro, but also the result of an engendered predilection for images of the *terra firma* on the part of the Venetians. It is arguable that this interest was provoked as much by the dearth of flora and fauna in the lagoon as by Venice’s political ambition for territorial expansion on mainland Italy in the previous century.

Although Palma’s stylistic development is notoriously difficult to follow, there are good grounds for ascribing the bulk of his full length *sacre conversazioni*, including the example at Penrhyn, to the last decade of the artist’s activity.¹² While this work illustrates the virtual culmination of the process outlined above, the picture in Birgu represents a transitional point in the development of Palma’s *sacre*

8. See previous note. Today, the likelihood of Bonifacio’s apprenticeship to Palma gains almost universal acceptance. For the arguments in favour of this supposition see Rylands, 115 & Cottrell, 20.
9. For Titian’s painting see H. Brigstocke, *Italian Paintings in the National Gallery of Scotland*, 2nd edn, Edinburgh 1993, 170-1 & Rylands, 70. For the evolution of Palma’s *sacre conversazioni*, see Rylands, 67-88 & W. Suida, “Studien zu Palma”, *Belvedere*, 12, 5/6 (1934-5), 85-101. 85-90.
10. For the iconographic differences between these two types see Goffen, 218.
11. For the painting at Penrhyn see Rylands, 203-4.
12. The author follows Rylands’ view of Palma’s artistic development to a certain degree. Despite some acute difficulties, it is too simple to think of Palma’s stylistic development as “almost non-existent” – M. Lucco, in a review of Rylands’ *Palma Vecchio*, in *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXVI, (Jan 1994), 32-33.

conversazioni dateable to c.1515.¹³ While the Madonna is of a sort typical of the work he produced between c.1512-20, what anchors this painting to an earlier date than the example in Penrhyn is its archaisms.¹⁴ For example, the Virgin retains the authority of her elevated position at the extreme right, while the figures themselves still appear in the 'half length' format. Both the cropped composition and the regal cloth of honour which frames the figure of the Virgin are remnants of the traditional iconic images of the Virgin and Child which had been popular in Italy since the end of the Dark Ages. Another *retardataire* element is the way in which the foreground figures relegate the landscape to the status of a backdrop. Yet even here, we see the interest in the pastoral setting that characterises the work of the Venetians and which sets them aside from their central Italian counterparts. Palma demonstrates a typically Venetian concern for the effects of light and atmosphere in his portrayal of the glow of early morning breaking over the mountains and walled town to the right of St. Peter. Today, the darkened varnish gives the scene a more crepuscular air than was originally intended, and one assumes that the original state of the work replicated the crisper colours and more distinct forms of its companion in Rome.

Turning to specific details of the composition, the formula of having the patron receive the blessing from the Christ Child perched on the knee of the Virgin who frames the composition at the right, is directly inspired by an extremely influential type first produced by the workshop of Giovanni Bellini at the end of the 15th century (as exemplified by a picture in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Pl. 5). This prototype inspired several variants from a number of artists working throughout the Veneto, one of the closest of which is Lorenzo Lotto's *Virgin and Child with Sts. John the Baptist and Peter Martyr* (1503) in the Galleria Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.¹⁵ It is in Lotto's work that the landscape element begins to properly assert itself for the first time in a painting of this established type. Inspired by the later examples of Titian, Palma's figures demonstrate a greater degree of animation. In particular, the energetic characterisation of the Christ Child is more

13. This is a little earlier in Palma's development than the date put forward for the Colonna painting by Rylands, 171, who suggested 1516-18: "[the picture] belongs to what amounted to the most experimental period in Palma's career when he was struggling with compositional problems. The infant Christ for example is not convincingly related to the plump Madonna, who gazes without focus, and tentatively steadies the baby with the tips of her fingers." In addition to these observations, one notices a close parallel with the face of St. Peter in that of St. John the Evangelist in a Palma's *Presentation of the Virgin in Serina* (Bergamo), which Rylands, 162, dates to 1514-15. However, the arrangement of both the Madonna and Christ Child is similar to that of *The Adoration of the Magi* in the collection of the Brera, Milan, dateable as a result of documentary evidence to 1525-6. Rylands, 224-5.

14. See also previous note.

15. For the similarities between Bellini's picture in New York, and Lotto's picture in Naples see P. Humfrey, *Lorenzo Lotto*, New Haven and London 1997, 8-9. Humfrey also noted that the figure of the Baptist was a later addition which replaced a depiction of a kneeling patron.

akin to that of the infant Hercules and typical of Palma's bluster as compared to the poignant immobility of Bellini's approach. Christ springs forward towards the donor in what appears as a near parody of Titian's later figure of Bacchus from the London *Bacchus and Ariadne*.¹⁶ The gesture of benediction is so vigorous that, coupled with Christ's expression of alarm, it appears almost as a rebuke. The gentle restraint placed upon her son by the Virgin and this figure's overall air of reserve, is a typical narrative element; wherever the Christ Child appears to embrace his role as Redeemer, either grasping at symbols of the passion or, as here, in the act of blessing, the Virgin often demonstrates a degree of maternal concern for the earthly fate of her son (this is more obviously conveyed in the Colonna version). However, the narrative elements of such a scene can often mislead at the expense of a recognition of their symbolic importance. Here, the symbolism of Christ's assumption of his spiritual role is underlined by the conjunction of the child's gesture of benediction with the keys of Heaven grasped by St. Peter – a clear indication of the donor's wish to guarantee for himself a place in Paradise. This method of depicting a donor being presented to the Virgin and Child is one that stretches back in Venice at least as far as the fourteenth century. One sees it in the context of funerary imagery in Paolo Veneziano's Votive painting of Doge Francesco Dandolo in the Frari (1339-40), and it was an established type that was carried on in other influential works such as the Votive painting of Doge Agostino Barbarigo by Giovanni Bellini in S. Pietro Martire, Murano (1488).¹⁷

As the result of a relatively new development in *sacre conversazioni* intended for a domestic setting, one notices the way in which the donor in Palma's painting seems to be very much aware of the Holy presence. His eyes rise to meet those of the Christ Child in a way that contradicts the lack of participation on behalf of the donor in previous examples. Some authors have sought to establish how, in public commissions from this period, the presence of the donor should be understood as existing within a different physical sphere to that of the divine company he is introduced to - in short, they can see him, but he cannot see them. Hence the donor's apparent lack of awareness in many paintings of this type.¹⁸ With reference to Titian's Pesaro Madonna (completed 1526), Charles Hope and Philipp Fehl have both suggested how the viewer should not interpret such images in a simple narrative sense and should resist the idea of the patron being physically presented to the Virgin and

16. London, National Gallery.

17. For the significance of Paolo Veneziano's work see Goffen, 215.

18. Such is the case in Bellini's work in New York (Pl. 5). For an example of the more traditional, formal approach see Palma's *Madonna with Sts. Mary Magdalene, John the Baptist, Catherine of Alexandria and a Donor (Francesco Priuli ?)* in Lugano, Thyssen-Bornemisza. See Rylands, 180-1, and also following note.

Child.¹⁹ However, it is hard to accept this interpretation with regard to *sacre conversazioni* for private use, such as Palma's painting in Birgu, in which the intimacy of the scene leads us to accept its apparent reality. St. Peter, presumably in his role as onomastic patron saint, ushers the donor into the Holy presence. The donor appears fully aware of the situation in which he finds himself, no longer staring straight ahead as in previous examples such as those by Bellini. The participatory role assumed by the donor in these domestic *sacre conversazioni* is one facet that separates them from the more formal approach taken in the public works discussed by Hope and Fehl within the context of the altarpiece. Formal precedents are relaxed in the former, domestic type. The anachronisms of the *sacra conversazione* formula, which Hope explains away as a result of context being important so far as it functions as an attribute of a symbolic type (see below), become more and more arbitrary.²⁰ However, one could still accept that the patron's awareness of the scene is dependent on the close proximity of his patron saint whose humanity operates as an intercessor, and therefore a bridge, between the corporeal and the divine. In Titian's works of this period, most obviously his *Virgin and Child in Glory with Sts. Francis, Blaise and a Donor* in Ancona (1520, Pl.6), the donor seems only to gain access to what is quite obviously a Holy vision through physical contact with his patron saint.²¹ In this example, the saint makes a point of directing the donor to a vision to which the latter appears initially blind, yet one that is all too apparent to the external viewer. The fact that this last example of a donor's cognisance of the whole scene appears in an altarpiece, rather than in a domestic *sacra conversazione* may explain the link

19. P. Fehl, "Saints, Donors and Columns in Titian's *Pesaro Madonna*", *Renaissance Papers* 1974, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press 1975, 75-85 & C. Hope, "Altarpieces and the Requirements of Patrons", *Christianity and the Renaissance*, Syracuse 1990, 535-571. Hope, 551: "One...point should be mentioned, namely, the presence of kneeling donors. It is often said that such figures are "presented" to the Virgin, that they see the saints in the picture, or... that they see the Trinity. This is inherently implausible, since there is no reason to suppose that any patron would have presumed to claim access to the beatific vision before the Last Judgement. The real meaning of such images has been well explained by Philipp Fehl in connection with Titian's *Pesaro Madonna*...Fehl argues that here Jacopo Pesaro is supposed to exist on a different plane of reality from the heavenly figures. He does not see them, but they see him, just as they see all of us. The picture is first and foremost an invitation to us to honour a particular group of saints, second, an expression of the donor's devotion to these saints, and third, an invitation to us to remember him in our prayers to them...even though the manner in which donors were represented might have tempted people in the Renaissance to speak of them loosely as being "presented" to the Virgin, the actual mechanism of the process seems to have been generally understood."
20. On the anachronistic inclusion of saints in such scenes, Hope, 546, drew attention to the way these *sacre conversazioni* developed out of scenes of the Nativity: "...it is because the Nativity, when shown in the principal section of an altarpiece, is not really a storia but a painting of the Virgin in a particular guise, that there is no incongruity in showing her accompanied by saints who could not have been present at the historical event, and no incongruity either in giving her, as is so often the case, much more prominence than her son."
21. See H. Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian, I The Religious Paintings*, London 1969, 109-110.

between the two types – one forged by the intimacy established between patron and patron saint.

The confusion between narrative and iconographic symbolism in domestic *sacre conversazioni* is exacerbated by the way in which they often appear to be inspired by specific religious narratives such as the Rest on the Flight into Egypt and the Adoration of the Shepherds. Hope suggests that the out of context appearance of saints and donors in works that seem ostensibly to be portrayals of the latter theme is as a result of the way in which the artist uses context merely as an attribute of the Madonna.²² Hence, the way in which scenes of the Adoration of the Shepherds are representative of the ideological significance of the Nativity and Mary's position as Mother of God, establishes them as perfectly amenable to their basis for *sacre conversazioni*. In contrast, portrayals of the Adoration of the Magi, which function specifically as scenes of the Epiphany, are not so adaptable.²³

Hope's analysis strikes at the very meaning of the term *sacra conversazione*, which the present author freely admits to the abuse of in reference to the painting in Birgu (the presence of at least one other saint would normally be a prerequisite for the appellation). As noted at the beginning of this essay, the phrase has a currency in that it describes paintings of a generic type which require a label. We can neither apply the simplistic interpretation of the term as 'Holy conversation', in which the saints actually seem to be in conversation, or at least meditation, on the divine truth, or Rona Goffen's more faithful appreciation of it as a way of describing a state of Holy communion.²⁴ In either case the phrase is anachronistic to the paintings it is most often used to describe and should be preserved only as another useful, yet technically inaccurate, art historical term. Yet, Goffen's interpretation of the inclusion of the donor in *sacre conversazioni* as a motif inspired by Franciscan doctrine is tempting.²⁵ This is especially so when one compares the following extract from the *Meditations on the Life of St. Francis* to paintings such as Palma's in Birgu, and when one also bears in mind the relationship between scenes of the Nativity and the composition of domestic *sacre conversazioni* in general. Here, as an aid to devotion, the author of the *Meditations* implores the devotee to imagine the scene of the Nativity as a vision in which he can include himself:

22. See note 20.

23. See Hope, 546.

24. Goffen, 200 : " The subject of a painted *sacra conversazione* is...a celestial reunion of models of piety who themselves constitute the *conversatio*, both as individual *exempla virtutis* and together as a "holy community" ”.

25. See Goffen, 202

*"Kneel and adore your Lord God, and then His mother and reverently greet the saintly old Joseph. Kiss the beautiful little feet of the Infant Jesus...and beg His mother to offer to let you hold Him a while. Pick him up and hold Him in your arms. Gaze on His face with devotion and reverently kiss Him and delight in Him. You may freely do this, because He came to sinners to deliver them..."*²⁶

This last exhortation appears to be taken to heart in the imagery of some *sacre conversazioni*. Here, Titian's Edinburgh *Holy Family* (Pl. 3 - in this case inspired by the Rest on the Flight into Egypt type) is of particular interest. It is arguable that, as a result of the portrayal of an unusually vigorous and youthful Joseph (in contrast to the standard "saintly old Joseph" described in the above extract), the patron appears in a substitutive role as Mary's husband, and seeks to embrace the Christ child in exactly the same way outlined by the author of the *Meditations*. However, if one accepts this hypothesis, one notes that the patron can only fulfil this exhortation in the physical context established by the painting by actually assuming the role of Joseph. To illustrate the mental act of devotion outlined in the extract (that is, to depict the patron holding the Christ Child rather than merely receiving his blessing) within the context of such a scene would produce an image that would translate itself as an enormous, and unacceptable, act of presumption on the part of the patron. The conundrum illustrates the inescapable iconographic straight-jacket imposed on the imagery of the religious narrative: its subservience to religious symbols which operate independently of the specific intentions of the work of art as a result of their subjugation to an established semiological language.

Ultimately, it must be owned that the important role domestic *sacre conversazioni* play in spanning the gap between a work of art designed specifically as an aid to devotion and a work which operates independently of such impositions, frustrates attempts to theologise them on the part of modern critics. The actual presence of the patron (or even that of his onomastic representative) and the scenes of intimate interaction between himself and God, is indicative of a process of externalisation, and thus, eventual negation, of the devotional function of this type of painting. Furthermore, it is illustrative of how the nature of the patronage and function of these works was changing during this period. The format of the private *sacra conversazione*, as epitomised by Palma's painting in Birgu, was ideal as a type that could span the evolutionary process between the work of art used for religious devotion and that which took its place as part of the art collector's *cabinet* (such is the environment in

26. I. Ragusa and R. B. Green, eds., *Meditations on the Life of Christ, an illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century* (Princeton Monographs in Art and Archaeology, XXXV), Princeton 1961, 38-39.

which these works seem to have been displayed).²⁷ This was due to its adaptability. Not only did the format fulfil the traditional requirements of religious imagery but it also embraced all the possibilities of the work of art enjoyed by the collector and connoisseur. It offered scope for portraiture in its inclusion of a depiction of a patron, thus appealing to the latter's vanity and fulfilling its role as a conversation piece. In addition, the attractive, self-delighting nature of the bucolic setting was one step towards a pseudo-secular genre inspired by the Venetian painter's almost innate awareness of environment and romantic interest in the *terra firma* provoked by those factors already outlined. Most of all, perhaps the established popularity of the basic formula and its repetitive nature took advantage of the rise of the collector and the growing interest in the individuality of the author – by the comparison of like with like, the connoisseurial appreciation of the idiosyncrasies of a particular artist's style could begin to operate successively. Thus, the repetitive nature of the *Sacra Conversazione* fulfilled a new desire on the part of the patron. Only by comparing the idiosyncratic artistic differences within the similarities of an established format, could each patron begin to properly involve themselves in collecting such pictures as works of art in the modern sense. Any collector is drawn to objects of a common type which have facility for variety while retaining their very uniformity – such is the nature of the object as collector's item. Hence the popularity of a replicative type which dominates the domestic output of Venetian painters during the Renaissance.

27. Rylands, 67, commented on the function of the type of domestic *sacra conversazione* produced by Palma: "The theme has no basis in theological writings nor does it have a place in the Catholic liturgy or calendar. There was no requirement for such paintings in a church, and one can safely say that they were intended for private use – whether as devotional images or as collector's items. They took their place among portraits, histories and mythologies...the function of the *Sacra Conversazione* was decorative, though still broadly speaking pious or inspirational" In support of this theory Rylands cited the example of the inventory of Andrea Odoni's collection by Marcantonio Michiel: here one could find a "Madonna and Child with a female saint and infant Baptist" by Titian hanging alongside Lotto's portrait of the patron and a "female nude" by Savoldo. See J. Morelli, ed., *Notizie d'Opera di disegno nella prima metà del secolo XVI...scritta da un anonimo di quel tempo*, Bassano 1800, 61.



Plate 1: Palma Vecchio, Madonna and Child with St. Peter and a Donor, c.1515, Birgu, Chapter Hall Museum



Plate 2: Palma Vecchio, Madonna and Child with St. Peter and a Donor, c. 1515, Rome, Galleria Colonna.



Plate 3: Titian, *Holy Family in a Landscape*, c.1511, Edinburgh, National Gallery.



Plate 4: Palma Vecchio, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, Gwynedd (Wales), Penrhyn Castle.



Plate 5: Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, c.1495, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library.



Plate 6: Titian, *Madonna and Child in Glory with Saints Francis, Blaise and a Donor*, 1520, Ancona, Museo Civico.