

# S P H I N X F I N E A R T



**South Netherlandish School, c.1500**

## **The Virgin and Child**

oil on panel (arched top)  
49.2 x 34.2 cm (19<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 13<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in)

This depiction of *The Virgin and Child* was a popular composition in Netherlandish painting during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, but this version stands slightly apart for several reasons, not least its exceptional quality. The Virgin gently cradles the infant Christ in both hands and stares serenely and maternally at Him. She is depicted as Queen of Heaven, dressed in a luxurious pink cloak over a fine tunic and delicate lace veil. She wears a jewelled headband, stands against a richly coloured hanging, and the wall behind her has been inscribed with detailed patterning. Beyond this wall is an extensive landscape dotted with copses of trees, and the whole composition is framed by a decorative foliate arch.

The painting is exquisitely painted, with the attention to detail that characterises the best work of the so-called Flemish Primitives. The modelling of light is superb, as it picks out the hollow of the Virgin's throat, highlights the sculptural folds of her cloak, and shimmers through both figures' hair. Details such as the slight flush of the Virgin's cheeks are typical of the overall subtlety of execution. The long slender fingers and rigid postures are also common features of southern Netherlandish painting of this period.

As previously mentioned, the composition of the present work was a popular one during this period. Max Friedländer believed it ultimately originated from Rogier van der Weyden's depiction of the [Virgin](#)

[and Child in his Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin.](#)<sup>1</sup> This painting soon became enormously popular and influential, in part because artists had ready access to it: the panel seems to have been installed either in the chapel of St. Catherine in the Cathedral of St. Gudule, Brussels, where the city's guild of painters held their services, or it may have been hung in their guildhouse.<sup>2</sup> The opportunity for artists to study van der Weyden's work at length, meant that it served as a prototype for many depictions of the Virgin and Child in the second half of the fifteenth century. Although, there was clearly a significant evolution between van der Weyden's painting and our work, resulting in major differences, the ultimate link is accepted by most scholars of the period.<sup>3</sup>

Although the exact composition of the present work appears to be unique, it does closely relate to several other works, [an example of which](#) is in the Palais Beaux-Arts in Lille. The Lille example is a noteworthy comparison for several reasons, not least of which is the Virgin's cloak is again pink. This is relatively unusual in Flemish Primitive painting, where the Virgin is usually depicted in blues and reds. Although the Lille work is significantly inferior in terms of quality, the two compositions are remarkably similar. The figures are set behind fictive ledges and under intertwining foliate archways, which were inspired by contemporary architectural motifs. The most significant difference between the two figural groups is that the Lille painting depicts *Maria Lactans*, with the Virgin breastfeeding her child. This was the traditional way of depicting Virgin and Child, and most versions of our painting follow this iconographic convention. In our work however, the breast is covered, which is unusual, but lends weight to the idea that it was not the usual workshop copy, but the work of an independent master, a theory consistent with its high quality. Similarly, the beautifully rendered landscape background of our work indicates a more ambitious painter than that of the Lille work.

Another variation on the composition, recently on the art market, is closer in quality to our painting. Like our painting, it unusually does not depict the conventional *Maria Lactans*, although the Virgin is dressed in the more traditional blue. In both works a central hanging acts as a framing device for the Virgin and Child, and divides the landscape in two. The second panel is a busier composition, with angels and a populated background. In contrast, our painting is completely focused on the Virgin and Child. The rich pink, and the figures' halos, draw the viewer's attention. The decorative scheme is restrained, the landscape relatively empty, so that nothing distracts from the mother and child.

The painter of our work is currently unknown. When the panel was sold in 2008 Ludwig Meyer believed that the artist must be Jan Provoost (1465-1529). Meyer believed that the work was painted c. 1500, and that Provoost was the only plausible candidate for a work of such quality. Meyer acknowledged that there were stylistic differences between our painting and some of Provoost's other depictions of the Madonna and Child, such as the one in the Mauritshuis.<sup>4</sup> However, he attributed these differences to the fact that they were painted at different stages of Provoost's career. Other scholars have grouped all the paintings which have this basic composition to the Master of the Gold Brocade, a name assigned to an unidentified southern Netherlandish artist. However, our painting is of a much higher quality than most of those given to the Master of the Gold Brocade, so this does not feel like a plausible attribution. Our painting was certainly painted c. 1500 in the southern Netherlands, quite possibly in Brugge as the foliate arch was a common device for that city's artists. Although a definitive attribution currently eludes scholars, it is nonetheless an outstanding example of Flemish Primitive painting.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedländer, M. J., *Early Netherlandish Painting*, vol. II, (New York, Frederick A. Prager, 1967), p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> De Vos, D., *Rogier van der Weyden: The Complete Works* (Antwerp, 1999) pp. 203, 206.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the influence of van der Weyden's depictions of the Virgin and Child, see De Vos, D. 'De Madonna-en-Kindtypologie Bij Rogier Van Der Weyden En Enkele Minder Gekende Flemalleske Voorlopers' in *Jahrbuch Der Berliner Museen* 13 (1971), pp. 60-161.