

“VIRGIN AND CHILD WITH MILK SOUP”

GERARD DAVID

29 MAY – 07 SEPTEMBER 2014

IF THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION in the West had not given us thousands and thousands of images showing the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus in a loving relationship over the past few centuries, perhaps in this painting by Gerard David, one of the most important Flemish painters during the transition from the 15th to the 16th century, we would merely see a representation of a touching family scene in which a young woman, probably a mother, prepares a meal for her son in a cosy interior full of objects, which opens onto a delightful section of landscape. The absence of explicit religious elements in the scene reinforces the notion of the Virgin as mother, the earthly receptacle of the human dimension of Jesus, an idea that late medieval mysticism, especially that of the Poor Sisters of St Clare, constantly evoked. At the same time, this image of serene domesticity emphasises an ethical value to which the new humanist and mainly Erasmian spirituality made constant appeal. The small size of the painting indicates that it was a piece destined for private worship in a home environment where it could be viewed in close proximity and at length. The purchasers would certainly have shared the feeling of peacefulness and comfortable simplicity that the Northern humanists called “to live nobly”.

This painting represents a template that was repeatedly replicated within Gerard David's workshop and may even have been designed for this purpose from the beginning. It was probably displayed in his shop as an example and various versions of it were made, of which at least seven have survived. It is the analysis of these versions that supports the conclusion that it is the same drawing, mechanically transferred onto various panels which, already partially painted, could then be adapted according to the client's wishes with slight variations. In the version exhibited here, the boy is dressed, although the preparatory drawing shows him naked, as in other painted examples (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, or the Deutz collection, San Diego). Sometimes the objects represented were replaced by

***Virgin and Child with Milk Soup***

Gerard David

Oudewater, c. 1455 - Bruges, 1523

c. 1515

Oil on oak panel

Purchased from M. Ulrich, Brussels, 1901

Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, inv. 3559

others. In the MET version, instead of the spoon there is a bunch of cherries.

This matrix is also the basis for a more elaborate composition which includes the figure of St. Joseph – a Sacred Family – and is also known to have several versions.

It has already been suggested that David's composition of *Virgin and Child with Milk Soup* was based on Italian models. The window opening



Rest on the Flight into Egypt

Circle of Gerard David

Oudewater, c. 1455 - Bruges, 1523

c. 1515-25

Oil on oak panel

Évora, Convento do Paraíso, 1897-1900

Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, inv. 205 Pint

onto the landscape in the upper right corner was associated with some Milanese paintings by Leonardo da Vinci's followers and with two drawings by Leonardo himself, possibly studies for a lost painting that these followers had recaptured.

The Italian art seduced and influenced Flemish painting from the late 15th century and many of its masters, among them Gerard David, travelled to Italy. In 1506, David secured the order for a large altarpiece for San Girolamo della Cervara abbey, in Liguria, from the Genoese merchant and banker Vincenzo Sauli and, in addition to having travelled northern Italy, had the Lombard painter Ambrosius Benson as an apprentice and collaborator for at least four years (1515-19).

If this Virgin marks the beginning of a new model in Flemish painting, clearly influenced by

the Leonardesque circle (evolving in the following decades into other representations of saints and heroines), the multiplication of these small panels was also a novelty in Northern painting during the late 15th century. Responding to the decline in large orders from Bruges, particularly after the revolts against the emperor that marked the final decades of the century following the accidental death of Maria of Burgundy (1482), the city's workshops began to place increasing importance on direct sales (without order) intended for private consumption.

The painting from the MNAA exhibited here, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, has characteristics similar to the painting from Brussels; small in format, it shows a considerable secular bent in the treatment of the religious scene, not only by "secularising" the figure of the Virgin but also in exploring the seduction of landscape painting. It too was replicated with some variations, of which more than a dozen are known, and was later disseminated by artists trained in David's workshop such as Simon Bening, Adrian Ysenbrandt and Ambrosius Benson.

Born in Oudewater, a small Dutch city between Rotterdam and Utrecht, Gerard David was admitted into the corporation of Bruges as a master painter in 1484 and also became a master in Antwerp in 1515. Although he never moved away from Bruges, where he died in 1523, the link to a more flourishing city allowed him to continue to receive orders from foreign merchants. Such clients were essential for the maintenance of the large workshops with their apprentices and collaborators and guaranteed him commercial and artistic success. A pivotal painter at a time of profound transformations, David referenced the great Flemish masters of the 15th century by introducing compositional and typological innovations, influenced by the painting from northern Italy, with a refined technique. He was one of the most interesting Flemish masters in the early 16th century.

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