

January 2011

## Rediscovering Bartolomeo Montagna: A Fresh Look at the Altarpiece for the Parish Church of Sandrigo, Vicenza

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### Recommended Citation

Elizabeth Carroll Consavari. "Rediscovering Bartolomeo Montagna: A Fresh Look at the Altarpiece for the Parish Church of Sandrigo, Vicenza" *The Burlington Magazine* (2011): 379-382.

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# Rediscovering an altarpiece by Bartolomeo Montagna for the parish church of Sandrigo, Vicenza

by ELIZABETH CARROLL CONSAVARI

BARTOLOMEO MONTAGNA's nearly forgotten contribution to late fifteenth-century painting in Venice and the Veneto deserves revisiting in the light of new archival evidence concerning the location of the altarpiece he painted for the parish church of Sandrigo, near Vicenza, a work now owned by Glasgow Museum and Art Gallery, Kelvingrove.<sup>1</sup>

Although Montagna is often viewed as a regional artist working mostly in Vicenza, it was in Venice that he gained early recognition as a painter, once he had received his first public commission there in 1482. Giovanni Bellini presumably sub-contracted Montagna to provide painted decorations for the *sala capitolare* at the Scuola Grande di S. Marco.<sup>2</sup> While a fire there in 1485 destroyed the canvases, it is believed the original cycle to which Montagna contributed depicted the Creation.<sup>3</sup> *The drunkenness of Noah* (Fig.22), possibly a presentation drawing, is associated with one of the canvases Montagna was hired to paint for the Scuola Grande.<sup>4</sup> Later in the 1480s Montagna produced many altarpieces for Vicenza and throughout the Veneto. According to documentary evidence for both lost and extant altarpieces, he completed no fewer than thirty-one *sacra conversazione* paintings around this time, earning him by 1488 the status of 'egregio viro M. Bartholomeo Montagna pictori excellenti'.<sup>5</sup>

The question of dating is crucial to an understanding of Montagna's particular contribution to altarpiece production in Venice and the Veneto at the turn of the sixteenth century. While most of his altarpieces are unmentioned in the archives and attributed to him on stylistic grounds, eight are convincingly



22. *The drunkenness of Noah*, by Bartolomeo Montagna. c.1482. Pen and brown ink, blue and purple wash over traces of black chalk on vellum, 22.8 by 35.7 cm. (Morgan Library, New York).

dated to this early period in the 1480s and 1490s. Generally, these works reveal formative inspiration from Bartolomeo Vivarini, Antonello da Messina and Giovanni Bellini. The altarpiece here under discussion, *The Virgin and Child with Sts James and Philip* (Fig.23), is usually ascribed to Montagna,<sup>6</sup> and new documentation concerning the work's purported location offers further clarification. The painting is a prime example of Montagna's reductive, almost stark pictorial approach as seen in his earliest altarpieces, such as *The Virgin and Child with Sts Anthony of Padua*

I owe a debt of gratitude to Pat Collins for her assistance at the Glasgow Museums, as well as to Giles Knox and Piero Lucchi. I thank Monsignor Don Antonio Marangoni at the Archivio Storico Diocesano and Archivio della Curia Vescovile in Vicenza for having brought to my attention the pastoral visitations of Cardinals Nicola Rodolfi, Giulio della Rovere and Marcantonio Bragadin as well as the church inventories at Sandrigo.

<sup>1</sup> The altarpiece is currently in the collection of the Glasgow Museums. The painting was accessioned to the Glasgow Art Galleries in 1906 when William G. Crum presented it from the family collection at Thornliebank House. It had been acquired by Alexander Crum on the advice of his cousin William Graham (1817–85), an important collector of the Pre-Raphaelites and of old-master painters. Interestingly, Graham also owned a painting by Montagna, *S. Giustina of Padua*, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The work here discussed, *The Virgin and Child with Sts James and Philip*, was not listed in Graham's collection according to the catalogue compiled by Oliver Garnett; see O. Garnett: 'The Letters and Collection of William Graham – Pre-Raphaelite Patron and Pre-Raphael Collector', *The Walpole Society* 62 (2000), pp.325 and 341–42.

<sup>2</sup> P. Paoletti: *Raccolta di documenti inediti per servire alla storia della pittura veneziana nei secoli xv e xvi*, Padua 1894, I, pp.11–12.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of these late fifteenth-century decorations, see P. Fortini Brown: *Venetian Narrative Painting in the Age of Carpaccio*, New Haven and London 1988, pp.269–70; W.R. Rearick: 'La Scuola Grande di San Marco', in N. Vanzan Marchini, ed.: *La Scuola Grande di San Marco I Saperi e L'Arte*, Venice 2001, pp.33–64; and F. Sansovino: *Venezia città nobilissima et singolare* (1581), ed. G. Martinioni, Venice 1663, p.102. See also T. Borenius: *The Painters of Vicenza*, London 1909, p.7; and L. Puppi: *Bartolomeo Montagna*, Venice 1962, p.42.

<sup>4</sup> Borenius, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.7; and Puppi, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.42, both connect this drawing to Montagna's Scuola Grande commission.

<sup>5</sup> G. Zorzi: *Contributo alla storia dell'arte vicentina nei secoli XV e XVI*, Venice 1916,

p.105, note 1. For further discussion of Montagna's altarpieces, see E. Carroll: 'Bartolomeo Montagna (1459–1523): Civic and Artistic Identity in Early Sixteenth-Century Vicenza', unpublished Ph.D. diss. (Indiana University, 2006); and *idem*: 'La pala ritrovata: Una rivisitazione della Pala d'altare di Bartolomeo Montagna, già nella Chiesa di San Marco a Lonigo', *Arte Documento: Storia e tutela dei Beni Culturali* 20 (2004), pp.112–17.

<sup>6</sup> All earlier writers attribute this work to Montagna. Borenius's observations, based on a photograph, wrote that it appeared 'hopelessly ruined', and that a follower could have easily completed the work. Borenius was the first to associate the Sandrigo altarpiece with the painting in the Glasgow Museums. He suggested that it could be the missing picture of the Virgin from the Oratorio de' Turchini in Vicenza, but the Oratorio picture is absent from the early guides by Boschini and Mosca, who otherwise thoroughly documented Montagna's Vicentine works; see Borenius, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.45. Puppi includes the Glasgow work in the Montagna corpus and assigns it as the work from the church of Sandrigo; see Puppi, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.103. Regarding condition, Glasgow's curatorial records indicate the painting was examined in 1948, when a 'cleaning test' of the signature proved the area to be 'homogenous with the rest of the painting', and had therefore most likely not been repainted. Following his pastoral visitation to Sandrigo in 1641, Cardinal Marcantonio Bragadin observed an unreserved altarpiece and that a new one had been ordered. This could suggest that the condition of Montagna's altarpiece was already compromised in the seventeenth century; see Appendix 2 below. The altarpiece was treated in 1973–74 and again in 2000. Based on strong resemblances to Montagna's draughtsmanship, and the improved appearance of the painting after Borenius's time, I believe it is impossible to attribute it to anyone other than Montagna. The two essential sources for the Sandrigo altarpiece are G. Maccà: *Storia del territorio vicentino*, Caldogno 1812–16, II, p.329; and J. Paton: *Catalogue Descriptive and Historical of the Pictures in the Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove*, 12th ed., Glasgow 1908, pp.138–39.



23. *The Virgin and Child with Sts James and Philip*, by Bartolomeo Montagna. c.1492. Panel, 183 by 151 cm. (Glasgow Museums).

and John the Evangelist now in the church of Castello di S. Giovanni Ilarione, near Verona, but commissioned for the Magrè Chapel at the Franciscan church of S. Lorenzo in Vicenza (Fig.24). The figures in the painting stand in a triangular formation before the *hortus conclusus*, a geometric arrangement against the wall that effectively truncates the perceived depth of field. In the Sandrigo altarpiece, Mary and the Christ Child project like apparitions from the austere, rocky setting, very different from Montagna's more typical verdant outdoor backgrounds.<sup>7</sup>

The Sandrigo altarpiece bears a cartellino at the base of the rough-cut throne on which is a faint inscription and a date that Tancred Borenius reported was 'blurred' and illegible in 1909.<sup>8</sup> This date, once improbably misread as 1449 (about the year of Montagna's birth),<sup>9</sup> is more convincingly read as 1499, as it has been by a number of scholars in the past.<sup>10</sup> However, this would place the Sandrigo altarpiece as contemporary with Montagna's accomplished Brera altarpiece of *The Virgin and Child with Sts Andrew, Monica, Ursula, Sigismund and three musical angels* painted for Bartolomeo Squarzi, which once adorned the high altar of the Vicentine church of S. Michele (Fig.25). These two works are clearly very different in style, colour and technical sophistication, and the Sandrigo altarpiece lacks the architectural and figural complexities found in the Brera painting. In particular, the draughtsmanship of the Virgin and Child is deficient in those otherworldly nuances captured in Montagna's more complex paintings. The facial features of the Sandrigo Virgin, for example, are of a completely different type. If one compares the S. Giovanni Ilarione altarpiece (Fig.24) with Montagna's other altarpiece at the Brera, *The Virgin and Child with Sts Francis and Bernardino of Siena*, commissioned for the Vicentine church of S. Biagio (Fig.26), not only is each attendant saint suffused with light, but also the countenance and composure of the Virgin is especially distinguished, establishing her as Mary, Mother of God. By contrast the Virgin in the Sandrigo painting lacks radiance and poise; instead she is a modest, shadowy figure, elevated only a little above her attendant saints.

Carlo Ridolfi, Marco Boschini and later Francesco Vendramini Mosca, a local chronicler of the late eighteenth century, all omit the Sandrigo altarpiece in their accounts of Montagna, but Gaetano Maccà cited the painting for the first time in his early nineteenth-century history of churches in the Vicentine territory.<sup>11</sup> According to Maccà, in 1812 the altarpiece was located in the sacristy. Antonio Magrini notes later that by 1863 the painting had disappeared from the parish church.<sup>12</sup> None of the documents at Sandrigo from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth note any possible dedicatory altars honouring Sts Philip and James in the sacristy.<sup>13</sup> But some light is thrown on this problem by the recent discovery of a church inventory of 1789 titled '*Nota spettante alla Chiesa Parrocchiale di Sandrigo*', which describes the first of the church's seven altars as '*Il Primo è sotto il titolo di S. Maria e de' SS. Apostoli Filippo e Giacomo*' (see Appendix



24. *The Virgin and Child with Sts Anthony of Padua and John the Evangelist*, by Bartolomeo Montagna. c.1480. Tempera on panel transferred to canvas, 200 by 170 cm. (Church of Castello di S. Giovanni Ilarione, Verona).

1 below). Artists' names and painting titles are rarely given in such inventories or notices, and Montagna is no exception. However, the dedication corresponds to the figures represented in his altarpiece. The document reveals that the church of Sandrigo was erected '*del 1492 sotto l'invocazione di S. Maria e de' SS. Apostoli Filippo e Giacomo*', which clearly predates Montagna's altarpiece. Comparatively speaking, the inventory written by the parish priest provides more on church history than do the notices of the earlier pastoral visitations. The inventory also confirms the presence of labelled relics of '*SS. Apostoli Filippo e Giacomo*', as well as of the Virgin Mary. The pastoral visitation of Cardinal Marcantonio Bragadin on 1st May 1641 describes the '*altare maius*', or high altar, as the same '*primo altare*' with its dedication to Philip and James (see Appendix 2).<sup>14</sup> Therefore, based on the new information provided by the 1789 *Nota* and the pastoral visitation of 1641, I would propose that Montagna's altarpiece, instead of being a sacristy altar, as Maccà suggests, was the first painted altarpiece installed in the church honouring the site's primary dedication and high altar to Mary and the apostles James and Philip. The presence of this dedicatory invocation eliminates

<sup>7</sup> The smaller S. Michele and S. Bartolomeo altarpieces, both in the Museo Civico, Vicenza, are also set in rocky landscapes.

<sup>8</sup> Borenius, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.45, no.4, notes the date was followed with a 'd' after the number, citing a conversation with J. Paton as his source.

<sup>9</sup> G. Moschini: *Guida per la città di Venezia*, Venice 1815, II, pp.606–07.

<sup>10</sup> Borenius, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.45; J.A. Crowe and G.B. Cavalcaselle: *A History of Painting in North Italy*, New York 1912, p.131; Puppi, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.103; and G. Buchanan: *Catalogue of Italian Paintings: with which is included a small group of Spanish pictures*, Glasgow 1970, p.74.

<sup>11</sup> Maccà, *op. cit.* (note 6), II, p.329, does not refer to the altar dedication: '*Nella*

*sacristia evvi un quadro dipinto sul legno, nel mezzo del quale mirasi la Beata Vergine e ai lati I Santi Apostoli Filippo e Giacomo. In fine leggesi, "opera de bartolomio Montagna 1499"*'.

<sup>12</sup> A. Magrini: *Elogio di Bartolomeo Montagna Pittore Vicentino*, Venice 1863, p.34, cited by Borenius, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.44–45.

<sup>13</sup> Only the pastoral visitations of Cardinal Marcantonio Bragadin mention Sts Philip and James; see Appendix 2.

<sup>14</sup> Here '*primo*', or first altar, can be translated as high altar or '*altare maggiore*' transcribed from '*altare maius*'. The pastoral visitation confirms the altar placement as the main or high altar because it is referred to as '*altare maius [ . . . ] de pala nova cum imaginibus Sanctorum Filippi et Jacobi*'; see Appendix 2.



25. *The Virgin and Child with Sts Andrew, Monica, Ursula, Sigismund and three musical angels*, by Bartolomeo Montagna. 1499. Canvas, 410 by 260 cm. (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan).



26. *The Virgin and Child with Sts Francis and Bernardino of Siena*, by Bartolomeo Montagna. Before 1490. Panel, 215 by 166 cm. (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan).

the possibility that the saints are different from the apostles proposed by previous authors.<sup>15</sup>

To resolve the problem of the dating of this altarpiece, a comparison between the Sandrigo painting and what we know of Montagna's contribution to the Scuola Grande di S. Marco cycle is instructive. The drawing of c.1482 of *The drunkenness of Noah* (Fig.22) only underscores the sophistication of draughtsmanship, containing subtle contrasts of light and shade, in the drawing, in contrast to which the Sandrigo panel appears to have been executed by a less experienced hand. As suggested by Borenus,<sup>16</sup> there remains the remote possibility that the work was by a less capable follower of Montagna and was executed no later than 1480. Stylistically, however, the Sandrigo altarpiece most closely approximates Montagna's evocative

pictorial language of the late 1480s and early 1490s, as is borne out by features present in the S. Giovanni Ilarione altarpiece of c.1480 (Fig.24). Thus, taken together, the new documentation revealing the titular dedication to 'S. Maria e d' SS. Apostoli Filippo e Giacomo', the presence of relics of the same saints and the evidence of Cardinal Marcantonio Bragadin's visitation, all confirm the altarpiece's iconography. This leads to a date of no later than 1492. I conclude that the Sandrigo altarpiece is by Montagna at a time when he was only partially trained, which is consistent with the date of the construction of the parish church and supported by new documentation of the church's titular dedication.

## Appendix

1. **Note regarding the parish church of Sandrigo (1789) with descriptions of the church and altar dedications, the number of masses celebrated annually, relics and jus patronatus by the parish priest Girolamo Cegan.** (Archivio Storico Diocesano, Vicenza; hereafter cited as ASDVi, 'Nota spettante alla Chiesa', 1789, unpaginated, fols.1r and 2v, Chiesa Parrocchiale di Sandrigo).

Questa chiesa parrocchiale di Sandrigo come consta dalla iscrizione posta sopra la facciata è sta eretta del 1492 sotto l'invocazione di S. Maria e de' SS. Apostoli Filippo e Giacomo. È stata consecrata da S. d. Raño Antonio Marino Priuli l'anno 1742 come consta dal Decreto di Consecrazione e si fa l'ufficio la seconda Domenica di Luglio. Ha Altari no. 1 sono proveduti di Ceva parte dalla Comunità e parte dalle Scuole e così d'altre supellettili.

Il Primo è sotto il titolo di S. Maria e de' SS. Apostoli Filippo e Giacomo, e a questo

vi è la Scuola del Sacramento la quale ha debito di far celebrare Messe no. 211 annualmente e vengono ogni ann[o] adempite non sono per altro locali [ . . . ]

Vi sono le seguenti reliquie: la Reliquia del SS. Apostoli Filippo e Giacomo con sua autentica [ . . . ] La Reliquia del velo di M. V. con sua autentica . . .

2. **Pastoral visitation by Cardinal Marcantonio Bragadin to the parish church of Sandrigo (1st May 1641), with a description of the high altar.** (ASDVi/VP, 'Visite Pastorali', Cardinale Marcantonio Bragadin, busta 8/0560, fol.73v).

. . . Visitavit altare maius non conservatum cui mandavit provideri de portatile inserendo in mensa altaris inseparabiliter aliquantulum elevato ut discendi possit a celebrante et hoc termino discendendo: itemque provideri de pala nova cum imaginibus Sanctorum Filippi et Jacobi . . .

<sup>15</sup> Paton, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp.138–39. Paton identifies them as Sts James the Greater and John the Evangelist. J. Eggleton: *Catalogue Descriptive and Historical of the Pictures in Glasgow Art Galleries and Museums*, Glasgow 1935, pp.215–17, identifies the saints as James the Greater on the right and John the Evangelist to the left of Mary. Puppi, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.55 and 103, erroneously identifies the figure of Philip as John the Evangelist, to the right of Mary. However, given that the church dedication is to the Virgin Mary and Sts Philip and James, in addition to the lack of specific iconography to suggest otherwise, the identification of the figure as St

Philip appears justified, as previously suggested by Maccà and Borenus; see Maccà, *op. cit.* (note 6), p.329; and Borenus, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.44–45. Furthermore, neither St Philip nor St John the Evangelist is portrayed exclusively with distinct symbols. Thus, the saint opposite James is most probably the apostle Philip, in reference to the other half of the church's dedication. Here, St James the Greater, depicted with a beard, pilgrim's staff and cloak, is clearly shown as Christ's apostle, the son of Zebedee.

<sup>16</sup> See note 8 above.