

WORKSHOP OF PIETER COECKE VAN AELST

(Aalst 1502 - Brussels 1550)

Madonna and Child

oil on panel
93 x 55 cm (36 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 21 $\frac{5}{8}$ in)

IN THIS BEAUTIFUL IMAGE OF THE VIRGIN AND CHILD, we are presented with an image of a mother trying to calm her playful son. The bright-eyed child tugs at the Virgin's long white shawl and, in his boisterousness, becomes tangled up in it. The wooden ledge on which the infant sits is an interesting motif, perhaps adopted from a design by Jan Mertens (c.1470-c.1527), who was the father-in-law and possible teacher of Pieter Coecke van Aelst. It serves to increase a sense of spatial realism, particularly with the elegant detail of the child's drapery spilling over the edge. The cherries or 'Fruits of Paradise' that lie on the polished wooden surface were given as a reward for virtuousness and symbolise heaven.

The figures are brilliantly depicted and particularly noticeable is the exquisitely fine detailing of the Virgin's hair. In the landscape beyond, a miniature scene of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt can be glimpsed; this technique of depicting minute moments from Christ's life is typical of Coecke's work. The Virgin is dressed in rich, luxurious fabrics and, peeking out from underneath the white shawl is a jewelled headdress. This is a costume appropriate to the mother of God and the red marble column reinforces the affluent and noble presentation of the figures.

The Virgin and Child in the present work are based on those in Coecke's work *The Virgin and Child with Saint John*, thought to have been the central panel of a winged triptych (fig. 1). The poses and clothing of the Madonna and Child are clearly comparable and motifs, such as the shawl spilling over the ledge, or the symbolic cherries, are repeated. In the present work, the figures are set in a classical interior, which opens out to a landscape beyond. This lends the figures a sense of immediacy and helps the viewer to relate to them. In contrast, in *The Virgin and Child with Saint John*, Coecke has chosen to include extra figures, those of St. John and an angel crowning Mary as Queen of Heaven, rather than giving mother and child an architectural framework. In comparison to the present work, the figures are also smaller, as Coecke has chosen to depict a more panoramic landscape. In this landscape, additional narrative vignettes have again been depicted, in this case the journey to Bethlehem and the Adoration of the Shepherds. The repetition of the central figures of *The Virgin and Child with Saint John* in the present work is evidence of the success and appeal of Coecke and his prolific workshop.



Pieter Coecke van Aelst, *The Virgin and Child with Saint John*, Private Collection (Figure 1)



The National Gallery's *The Virgin and Child Enthroned*, is also attributed to Coecke's workshop, and it has many of the characteristics of the present work. Once more, the Virgin wears a costume of luxurious reds and greens but in this work she sits on a magnificent, intricately carved throne. Yet although the Virgin is presented in a more regal fashion in the National Gallery's work, the mischievous looking child on her lap reminds us of her more maternal role, which is the focus of *Madonna and Child*. Christ's animated pose is of course reminiscent of the playful infant in the present work.

The apple that Christ clutches in *The Virgin and Child Enthroned* refers to his future role as the redeemer of mankind from Original Sin, and so symbolism is a subtle but important aspect of both works. It is also noteworthy how the steps in *The Virgin and Child Enthroned* engage the viewer with the figures, a similar technique to the inclusion of the wooden ledge in the present work.

Many of Coecke's depictions of the Virgin and Child were part of a narrative, an example being the Prado's *Adoration of the Magi* (fig. 2). Although this is a much more crowded and busy painting than *Madonna and Child*, the two works both share certain stylistic qualities, for example the delight in depicting costume, the use of an architectural setting and the dynamism and movement of the figures, in particular that of the Christ child. Once again the Virgin acts as a calming influence upon her animated son.

Many of the characteristics of *Madonna and Child* occur throughout Coecke's work, in a variety of subject matter. This is evidenced by a comparison between it and the Hermitage's *Agony in the Garden* (fig. 3). Huge folds of flowing drapery are a significant feature of both works and these are painted in rich bold tones of red, white and green. Spatial sophistication has already been noted as a feature of the present work but complexity of composition is also evident in the Hermitage's painting, as our eye is led from side-to-side through the foreground. The rocky outcrop on the right-hand side guides the eye to a limited view of the background on the left-hand side, in a technique used through the architecture in *Madonna and Child*. In addition the way in which Peter leans against a tree stump and James props himself up on his elbow demonstrates an originality in the poses of figures that is echoed by the fidgeting Christ child in the present work.

It is known that Coecke ran a large and prolific workshop which mainly produced work limited in its subject matter and which often featured the



Pieter Coecke van Aelst, *Adoration of the Magi*, The Prado, Madrid (Figure 2)



Pieter Coecke van Aelst, *Agony in the Garden*, 1527-1530, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; before 1797 (Figure 3)

figures of Madonna and child. As Linda Jansen writes, 'The majority of paintings attributed to Coecke consists of replicas...that were repeated over and over again and often produced on spec for the open market'.¹ This accounts for the repetition of figures in the present work and *The Virgin and Child with Saint John* as Coecke and his workshop specialised in reusing figures, motifs and details in a variety of flexible compositions. It is testament to the skill and flexibility of the workshop that the images, which are almost exactly the same size, can feature such a similar central figure pairing and yet have such substantial differences, which presumably accorded to the individual patron's needs. Although the present work is beautifully executed and demonstrates a high level of skill, the very size of the workshop means that the work attributed to it ranges in quality. When contemplating this Max Friedländer wondered whether 'Pieter Coecke by any chance lead a double life?'²

¹ Jansen, L., 'Serial Products in the Workshop of Pieter Coecke van Aelst: A Working Hypothesis' in *La Peinture Ancienne et ses Procédés: Copies, Répliques, Pastiches*, ed. Verougstraete-Marcq, H., Peeters Publishers, Leuven, 2006, p.174.

Coecke was born in Aalst, a village in the Southern Netherlands of which his father was deputy mayor. According to the biographer Karel van Mander (1548-1606) he was a pupil of Bernard van Orley (c.1488-1541) and although there is no documentary proof for this, there are certainly stylistic similarities. Van Orley's *Virgin and Child*, which hangs in the Prado, for instance, displays features such as tumbling folds of drapery, an architectural setting, biblical symbolism and a wriggling child, all of which recur in the present work (fig. 4).

From 1527 to 1546 Coecke lived and worked in Antwerp, with the exception of a year-long stay in Constantinople. At some point he also travelled to Italy and there is clearly a significant Italian influence on his work. His time in Antwerp demonstrates his versatility and skill in a number of disciplines. In addition to numerous painting commissions he created designs for sculptures and for a series of tapestries. A skilled linguist, he translated Vitruvius' (fl. later 1st century B.C.) *De architectura* into Flemish (Antwerp, 1539), and the multi-volume architectural treatise of Sebastiano Serlio (1475-?1553-5) into High German, Flemish and French, and this interest in architecture is evident in his work. Van Mander praised him effusively for introducing 'the right method of building' into the Netherlands, replacing 'the ugly modern German type'. He also created designs for woodcut series and for stained-glass windows. In 1546, Coecke



Bernard van Orley, *Virgin and Child*, c.1516, The Prado, Madrid (Figure 4)



Pieter Coecke van Aelst, *Charles V and Charles the Great before a Crucifix*, 1540s, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Collection of Count Cobenzl, Brussels, 1768 (Figure 5)

moved to Brussels and was named court painter to Emperor Charles V (1500-1558), shortly before he died in 1550, though he had signed himself 'imperial painter to Charles V' as early as 1534.

He also depicted the Holy Roman Emperor in the drawing, *Charles V and Charles the Great before a Crucifix*, which now resides in the Hermitage, a drawing which once more further illustrates the importance of architecture in Coecke's work (fig. 5). His numerous pupils included Gillis van Coninxloo (1544-1607) and possibly Pieter Brueghel the Elder (c.1525/30-1569), who became his son-in-law. He and his workshop were enormously successful and *Madonna and Child* is a beautiful and typical example of the workshop's production.

² Friedländer, M.J., *Early Netherlandish Painting*, vol. XII, Jan van Scorel and Pieter Coeck van Aelst, trans. Norden, H., A.W. Sijthoff, Leyden, 1975, p. 38.