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Margarito d'Arezzo's *Virgin and Child Enthroned*: Victorian Beauty Under Attack?

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My chosen work of art for the Gallery section of Professor Hilary Fraser's Festschrift is the National Gallery's second oldest painting, Margarito d'Arezzo's *Virgin and Child Enthroned* of the 1260s and the debates it aroused when the inaugural director Sir Charles Eastlake bought it in 1857 as part of his revolutionary introduction of early Italian art into the national painting collection, much of which was seen as not at the time at all beautiful – 'unsightly' to use his own phrase. This warranted him explaining in the first annual report that such art was acquired not for its aesthetic merit but on the grounds of its historic importance. The article will examine the expanding public role of the National Gallery in terms of educating the widest possible public about the history of Western European painting in addition to offering what were deemed to be suitable teaching aids to encourage the native school of painters. It will also shine a light on various women who have played significant roles in promoting interest in and knowledge about early Italian art, including Margarito's panel, in the National Gallery's collection.



Margarito d'Arezzo's 750-year-old *Virgin and Child Enthroned* (Fig. 1) is the second oldest picture in the National Gallery. Painted about 1263–64, it shows the Virgin Mary, seated on a throne with the Christ Child on her lap, within an almond-shaped aureole. Around them are scenes from the lives of saints John the Evangelist, Nicholas, Catherine of Alexandria, and Margaret. The final scene, for instance, depicts St Margaret being swallowed by a dragon and then miraculously bursting out of its stomach, an episode that led to her becoming the patron saint of childbirth. It is probable that the picture was made for a church dedicated to one of these saints.



Fig. 1: Margarito d'Arezzo, *The Virgin and Child Enthroned, with Scenes of the Nativity and the Lives of the Saints*, probably c. 1263–64, egg tempera on wood, London, National Gallery (NG564).

The way that this thirteenth-century painter has chosen to portray Mary and her son relies on older theological and visual precedents where the emphasis was less on matters such as human affection than on their divinity and wisdom. Indeed, Mary is shown frontally, a traditional pose found in Byzantine icons (the art of the Eastern Christian empire) to express her unique and omnipotent role as 'Theotokos' ('Mother of God'). The carved lions either side of her seat are intended to evoke the throne of the wise Old Testament king, Solomon, described in the Bible's Book of Kings. Mary's pose and her throne also reflect a tradition of images in Western European art known as 'Maestà' ('majesty'), which underscored her rank and status as the Queen of Heaven. To signal her queenship, Margarito has depicted her wearing a splendid crown. With its embedded jewels and strips of lustrous stones hanging down either side of her face, it recalls the type of headdress worn by Byzantine empresses.

As for the Christ Child, Margarito's painting places the meaning of Christ's incarnation — when God became man — not so much on a story that ended with Christ's human suffering during his Passion on Good Friday but on his divinity and triumphant Resurrection on Easter Sunday. Such a perspective explains why Christ is represented as a miniature triumphant Roman emperor with toga and scroll. That Christ's authority derives from a heavenly source is indicated through his halo, the blessing gesture, and the scroll he holds, the latter a reminder that he is, for Christians, the incarnation of the 'Logos' ('the word of God'). It is reminiscent of Byzantine imagery of the adult Christ as 'Pantocrator' ('Almighty' or 'all-powerful'), which portrays him as humanity's stern and all-powerful judge. The notion of Christ as not only fully divine but also fully human and therefore vulnerable and open to suffering became of interest to writers and artists from the thirteenth century, a new way of thinking which was given great impetus by the influential writings of the Cistercian monk St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and by the religious revival brought about by St Francis of Assisi (1181/2–1226). Thereafter the iconography of the infant Christ increasingly showed him as a vulnerable infant needing love and protection from his mother, usually depicted as gentle and beautiful.

Margarito's painting was purchased in 1857 by the National Gallery's first director, Sir Charles Eastlake (1793–1865). It was an early purchase in a new role created for him in 1855 — even though the National Gallery had existed since 1824. The picture was one of a group of twenty-two early Florentine and Sieneese paintings which Eastlake bought from two Florentine dealers, Francesco Lombardi and Ugo Baldi. Another was Duccio's



Fig. 2: Duccio, *The Virgin and Child with Saint Dominic and Saint Aurea, and Patriarchs and Prophets*, c. 1312–15 (?), egg tempera on wood, London, National Gallery (NG566).

Virgin and Child with Saint Dominic and Saint Aurea, and Patriarchs and Prophets (Fig. 2) painted half a century after Margarito's, which shows a more tender image. Duccio's style is comparatively elegant and the Virgin more conventionally attractive, the whole characterized by flowing lines and soft colours. Here, in line with Franciscan teaching, Duccio, breaking away from visual traditions associated with Byzantine icon painting, depicts a

tender representation of the divine mother and child, who share an affectionate gaze as the infant Christ plays with the Virgin's veil. This comparatively relatable image was of the type which became popular as an aid in worship because it encouraged the viewer to empathize with the humanity of Christ and thereby inspired a believer's faith and devotion.

Eastlake described Margarito's panel as 'unsightly', a Victorian adjective for ugly, which does not seem much of a recommendation. Instead, he justified its purchase in the gallery's inaugural annual report on historical grounds, noting that the painting was useful as a way of demonstrating visually the 'rude beginnings' of Italian art and the progress it made over the next two and a half centuries before the era of Raphael, which was then deemed the benchmark of excellence.¹ As a painter, Eastlake's two major sources of artistic inspiration were, arguably, Titian in terms of colour and Raphael for beauty. This explains why most of Eastlake's female figures convey a Raphaelesque charm even when he was depicting Italian peasants or Greek fugitives (*Fig. 3*). From his working notebooks too, we know that he delighted in beauty and disdained what he regarded as gratuitous ugliness. For instance, he dismissed Matthias Grünewald's



Fig. 3: After Sir Charles Eastlake, *Greek Fugitives*, 1833, engraving on paper, London, National Gallery History Collection (H23).

famous *Isenheim Altarpiece* of the crucified Christ as 'deserv[ing] no other epithet than disgusting'.² Far more visually pleasing in his view was a representation like Raphael's *Mond Crucifixion*, a work now in the National Gallery's collection which he knew from Lord Ward's collection. Yet such personal preferences did not stop him from carrying out his directorial duties for the evolving National Gallery; indeed, he worked hard over several years to secure part of the Lombardi-Baldi Collection.

¹ Martin Davies, *The Earlier Italian Schools*, National Gallery Catalogues (London: National Gallery, 1986), p. 567.

² *The Travel Notebooks of Sir Charles Eastlake*, ed. by Susanna Avery-Quash, Volume of the Walpole Society, 73, 2 vols (London: Walpole Society, 2011), II, 134.

Eastlake's purchase of Margarito's panel received a very mixed response. On the one hand, many National Gallery trustees and members of the public, including Royal Academicians, were dismayed. They felt that the gallery should be a repository of acknowledged masterpieces, and as such should be a place where aspiring artists could go to find reliable models — not least in relation to beauty — to learn from and be inspired by. They did not think that such an ugly and crude painting as Margarito's could possibly offer anyone a useful exemplar. On the other hand, Eastlake's acquisition found supporters among those who were keen to see the National Gallery broaden the type of art it acquired and displayed. From the findings of various governmental select committees on the future of the gallery, which culminated in 1855 in a thousand-page report generated by the select committee of 1853–54 and which, in turn, led to the reconstitution of the gallery in July 1855, it was determined that henceforth the gallery should become a survey collection, where visitors could trace visually the history of Western European painting from its origins. Among the advocates for widening the canon was Anna Jameson (1794–1860), one of the first women to make her name writing about art. For instance, she championed the gallery's acquisition of early Italian art in her pioneering *Handbook to the Public Galleries of Art in and near London* of 1844.

Eastlake, never one to seek the limelight or fuel controversy, found himself caught in the middle of this stormy debate because he was both president of the Royal Academy from 1850 and director of the National Gallery from 1855 — institutions which during his time in office shared the same building on Trafalgar Square. While happy to buy select 'specimens' of the earliest Italian art, he was happier to secure less contentious, more idealized works which pleased artists and historians alike, such as Raphael's *Garvagh Madonna* (Fig. 4), purchased from the widow and heirs of Lord Garvagh in 1865.



Fig. 4: Raphael, *The Madonna and Child with the Infant Baptist* (*The Garvagh Madonna*), c. 1510–11, oil on wood, London, National Gallery (NG744).

Eastlake's legacy in terms of the very earliest Italian art has been built on over time, assisted by changing aesthetic attitudes. One peak in the National Gallery's purchasing of such art occurred during Dillian Gordon's time as the gallery's curator of Italian paintings before 1460. For instance, in 1999 she oversaw the purchase of an Umbrian diptych, one panel showing the Virgin and Child, dating to 1255–60, which makes it the earliest painting in the collection. A year later, in 2000, when shown a tiny, jewel-like *Virgin and Child with Two Angels* from Benacre Hall, Suffolk, she recognized it as coming from a dismantled diptych by the thirteenth-century Florentine artist, Cimabue (Fig. 5). The gallery was delighted to acquire this work given that, along with the younger Duccio and Giotto, Cimabue is heralded as a pioneer of the early Italian Renaissance.



Fig. 5: Cimabue, *The Virgin and Child with Two Angels*, c. 1280–85, egg tempera on wood, London, National Gallery (NG6583).

Margarito's work is, at the time of writing, off view as the frame and outer painted border is undergoing restoration by National Gallery conservator, Kristina Mandy. Under an unattractive and incongruous layer of nineteenth-century gilding traces of Margarito's gesso layer and fragments of original gold had started to reveal themselves. The cleaning process has increased their visibility and uncovered a previously hidden decorative yellow pattern on the border. Plans include a sensitive regilding of the frame and part of the painting in a manner resembling the appearance of the original gold elsewhere on the painting. Once back on public display, visitors will be able to enjoy more of the original beauty of Margarito's craftsmanship.

