



MUSEI VATICANI



THE VIRGIN BESTOWS HER BELT TO SAINT THOMAS, THE MASS OF SAINT GREGORY, SAINT JEROME PENITENT by Antonio del Massaro, known as “il Pastura”

The altarpiece here exhibited, presented for the first time to the public after its restoration of 2016 -17, is ascribable to the hand of Antonio del Massaro from Viterbo, known as “il Pastura”. As he was a signatory in 1478 of the statute of the Company of Saint Luke, scholars have long speculated as to his possible apprenticeship in the studios of Perugino and Pintoricchio. After an uncertain participation in the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel (1481- 82), that certainly he had the opportunity of observing closely, and a spell at Orvieto about which not much is known (1489), in 1492 the artist was once again in Rome, assisting Pintoricchio in the fresco decoration of the Borgia Apartments. There he remained until 1495, giving his best contribution to the Sala dei Misteri (*Assumption of the Virgin*) and the Sala delle Arti Liberali (*Rhetoric, Music, Astronomy*).

The similarity of the central panel of this triptych with the compositional scheme of the *Assumption* has been noted by many commentators. Having rejected or at least down scaled his participation in the monumental undertaking of the Basso Della Rovere chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo (before 1484), Pastura left what is probably his masterpiece in the frescoes in the choir of the Duomo of Tarquinia (1508-09), damaged in a fire in 1642, where the usual references to the culture of Rome, as well as to that of Latium and Umbria, are mixed with reminiscences from Ghirlandajo’s and Signorelli’s painting.

The Triptych, dated to 1497 on the architrave frame resting on the arch of the chapel on the left, pertains to a moment of transition in Pastura’s style.

The first panel describes the well-known episode of Saint Gregory celebrating Mass in a chapel at his monastery at Celio, where the Saint, bent over the host, has the miraculous vision of Christ *in pieta*, like a living symbol of the Eucharistic sacrifice. The right hand panel depicts the usual image of Saint Jerome penitent in the desert; the Saint, recognisable by the attributes of the lion and the cardinal’s hat, beats his breast while praying on his knees, in front of an image of the Crucifix. The central panel illustrates the traditional apparition of the Virgin to Saint Thomas, in the act of bestowing upon him her belt (really, the relic of her actual belt, or *Sacro Cingolo*, which is today kept in the



Above: detail of the date inscribed on the cornice of the lintel within the chapel (*Mass of St. Gregory*).



Below: detail of the background in two panels, showing unified features in the landscape (the *Apparition of the Virgin to St. Thomas*; the *Repentant St. Jerome*).

Duomo at Prato); this is a material testimony to her assumption into Heaven (alluded to by the empty sarcophagus depicted in the background) and a sign of the apostolic ties, as well as of intercession and spiritual communion. Thomas, in tune with the narrative of the Gospels, needs the support of a physical proof to sustain himself in the faith.

By virtue of the particularities of its iconographic combinations, it is probable that the triptych was originally commissioned by an important - likely Roman - monastic community, characterised by pronounced doctrinal interests and by a special devotion to the Virgin and to the Fathers of the Church.