



BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH: VINCENZO PAGANI'S MADONNA DELLA CINTOLA



Fig. 1

In an open landscape, the *Madonna* and the *Child Jesus* offer the girdle to the Apostle Thomas, immersed in a mystical conversation with the Saints *Roch* (invoked against epidemics, with the signs of the Bubonic plague on his thigh), *Bartholomew* (with the knife with which he was flayed alive), and *Catherine of Alexandria* (with the spiked wheel, the instrument of her martyrdom).

When the painting arrived in the Vatican Museums from a storage deposit in the Basilica of Saint John Lateran (2003), no information was available about it. Its conservation conditions were so compromised that it was difficult to interpret. It was therefore necessary to undertake a long phase of study that, starting from a detailed examination of the work, continued with extensive art historical research and scientific analyses. It emerged that the *Madonna della Cintola* arrived at Saint John Lateran probably around 1844.

The stylistic and iconographic analysis of the work, along with the gradual recovery of the pictorial quality through its restoration, have enabled it to be recognised as the work of painter Vincenzo Pagani, from the Marche, who executed it between 1525 and 1520 for a Church in the southern part of the region. Born in Monterubbiano, near Fermo, in the early decades of the sixteenth century, he headed a very renowned workshop that had taken the place of those of the better-known brothers Vittore and Carlo Crivelli.

The working method of Pagani and his collaborators, who had many requests to deal with, involved the repetition of

standard models to be adapted to different compositions, varying the position of the figures or offering the images in reverse, modifying the clothing and attributes of the Saints according to necessity. This appears evident from a comparison of the *Saint Catherine* in the *Madonna della Cintola* with the *Saint Lucy* of the shrine to Saint Francis in Sarnano (Macerata), signed by Vincenzo and dated 1525, now in the local Municipal Gallery (**fig. 1**). It offers the same female type, typical of their repertoire, which recalls models of the Umbrian proto-Renaissance.

Catherine and Lucy have in common the position of the two figures, the details of the clothing and hairstyles, the particular morphology of the feet, and the red slippers (**fig. 2**). Similarly the landscape opens up in a wide and luminous vista, with expanses of barren land punctuated by the green of the vegetation and by small white villages overlooking the marina, the blue mountains in the background recalling Mount Conero. The little white church with its gradated linear façade, which does not exist in reality, is often present almost as if it were a signature in the works of Vincenzo Pagani (**fig. 3**).



Fig. 2, 3

Vincenzo knew the Crivelli brothers and Pietro Alemanno well, and reinvented himself in the style of Perugino, as well as of Signorelli and Marco Palmezzano; later (from 1529 onwards) he referred to the models of Raphael and Lotto. In the *Madonna della Cintola* we are able to appreciate the happier language of Pagani, a little archaic, simple and immediate, with an enchanted, fairy-tale tone.

The iconographic appearance of the panel offers us surprises. The traditional image of the *Madonna della Cintola* is that of the Virgin of the Assumption who ascends to heaven after death and gives Saint Thomas her girdle (often green, like the relic venerated in Prato, but at times red or blue). On the contrary, in this panel Mary is depicted following the Augustinian iconography, as a Mother with her Son, but always in the act of offering her girdle to the incredulous apostle. On this occasion the girdle is black - with penitential significance - in memory of the one given by the Virgin to Saint Monica, mother of Saint Augustine. But the girdle symbolises above all the bond between heaven and earth, and the protection accorded by the Virgin to those who invoke her, as expressed in the prayer inscribed in the frame of the throne:

SANTA MARIA ORA PRO NOBIS