



THE *DECENVIRI* ALTARPIECE

The altarpiece for the Priori (the *Decemviri*) Chapel was commissioned in 1479 to the Perugian painter Pietro di Galeotto, whose death in 1483 led to the reassignment of the work to Perugino. The iconographic theme made explicit the identity value of the painting and underlined its close link with civic values.

The main panel had to represent the *Madonna and Child among the Patron Saints of Perugia*: Herculanius, the *defensor civitatis* during Totila's siege, who died in 549; Constantius, the city first bishop martyred at the the time of Marcus Aurelius; Laurence, the patron saint to whom the cathedral is dedicated, and Louis of Toulouse, the protector of Palazzo dei Priori, who became saint in 1317. The panel was completed in 1495 and signed on the throne base by the inscription “*HOC PETRUS DE CHASTRO PLEBIS PINXIT*”. In an airy portico made by harmonious geometric lines, which opens up towards a clear landscape, the figures of the Virgin and Child appear seated on a monumental throne that places them in a dominant position, giving them solemnity. Alongside, in a deep religious attitude, the patron saints show serene and calm poses, despite of the preciousness of their clothes and attributes.

To crown the altarpiece was commisisoned a cymatium with the *Madonna della Misericordia* and the portraits of the ten Priors then in office, led by Tiberuccio Signorelli. Since Perugino, engaged elsewhere, postponed the delivery of the work, the assignment was given to Sante of Apollonio del Celandro. However, Vannucci claimed the commission, accepting the collaboration of Sante di Apollonio to carry out the cymatium. In the new contract of 1495, the subject became the *Dead Christ*, as the Priors intended to celebrate the institution of the Monte di Pietà. The dramatic nature of the theme, based on a very widespread iconographic scheme, is masterfully enhanced by Perugino by the sharp contrast between the black background and the warm light that surrounds Jesus' pale skin. Thanks to essential chromatic and compositional choices, the artist thus manages to reach an intense spirituality.

The altarpiece in its entirety stayed in place until 1553, when, following the abolition of the Priors office, it was moved to a room on the first floor, turned into the “new” chapel. In 1797 the central panel was requisitioned by the Napoleonic troops and brought to Paris; it was given back to the Pontiff in 1816 and became part of the Vatican collections. The frame, carved and gilded by the Perugian painter Giovanni Battista di Cecco called il Bastone, and the panel with the *Pietà* remained in Perugia and later were added to the Academy's collections.