

A New Addition to the *Oeuvre* of Vincenzo Catena

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A little-known early sixteenth-century painting of the *Virgin and Child with Mary Magdalen and St George(?)* [Fig. 1] appeared at a Christie's sale in London on 7 July 2006.¹ It was catalogued as "Attributed to Vincenzo Catena" which is correct in general terms but reveals some doubt as to the true identity of its author. The design and pictorial style are comparable to paintings of similar themes in Catena's *oeuvre* but the issue that arises in this instance is whether the picture was executed by the master or by one of his assistants. While it is prudent to approach such matters with caution, close examination of the Christie's painting suggests that it is one of the master's securely autograph works.

Difficulties of attribution have long plagued the study of Vincenzo Catena, who was active in Venice between about 1500, or slightly earlier, and his death in 1531. Although he moved in the upper echelons of Venetian society and is mentioned briefly by such early sources as Marcantonio Michiel, Giorgio Vasari, and Carlo Ridolfi, Catena was neglected in later critical literature and slid to the margins of historical interest, where he remained until the early twentieth century.² In their general surveys, scholars such as Berenson, Van Marle, and Von Hadeln identified a significant number of Catena's works, and although their views of the precise extent of his *oeuvre* naturally varied, Catena was nevertheless lifted out of relative obscurity by their interest. In 1954 Giles Robertson produced a thorough and insightful monograph, but despite Robertson's efforts, Catena did not escape a generally negative classification among the followers of Giovanni Bellini, the so-called 'belliniani', painters who lacked imagination and originality.³ Recently, however, there has been an increasing acknowledgement and appreciation of Catena's pictorial skills which, in turn, have highlighted the need for a reconsideration and re-evaluation of his *oeuvre*.⁴ Indeed, an up to date catalogue of his autograph works would shed new light on Catena's role within the context of early sixteenth-century Venetian painting, but the task of compiling one is made extremely difficult by two major



Fig. 1. Vincenzo Catena, *Virgin and Child with Mary Magdalen and St George(?)*, c.1515-20. Oil on canvas, Location unknown (previously Christie's, London).

problems. Firstly, Catena's continued and self-conscious adherence to the tradition of Giovanni Bellini has resulted in many pictures of a Bellinesque style being attributed to Catena, when they in fact have little similarity to his autograph works. This is indicative both of a general misunderstanding of Catena's aesthetic and of an overly ambitious desire to find specific attributions for anonymous pictures from Bellini's circle. As such, the name Vincenzo Catena has often been applied more out of convenience than as a result of careful deduction. Secondly, Catena was almost certainly the head of a relatively productive workshop, and the current distinction between the pictures produced by the workshop and those executed by the master remains unsatisfactory. In this light it becomes clear that not only should past attributions to Catena be reassessed, but that pictures which have recently entered Catena scholarship require especially thorough consideration before they are assigned either to the master or to his workshop or followers.

The *Virgin and Child with Mary Magdalen and St George(?)* appears in a three-quarter length horizontal format, a compositional type developed and popularized in Venice by Giovanni Bellini. The general disposition of figures within an indeterminate interior setting is a

pictorial layout often employed by Catena, and in this painting the centralized placement of the window frame is utilized to great effect, creating a stabilizing symmetry that reinforces the quiet demeanour of the figures and complements the meditative calm induced by the simplified landscape. The Christie's picture also exemplifies Catena's tendency to reuse certain figural designs, adapting them for different purposes, and it is clear that this practice was not simply a matter of workshop convenience. Here, the design of the Virgin is the same as those in Catena's *Virgin and Child with St John the Baptist and St Joseph* now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the *Virgin and Child with St Mark and St Jerome*, whose location is unknown.⁵ However, in the second picture the small book in the Virgin's right hand is absent, eliminating any 'prophetic' content, and the rather rigid drapery and lack of compositional fluidity suggest that it may have been executed by the workshop.

The Child also finds analogies in other works by Catena in which He reappears several times with only slight variations.⁶ In the present case, the Child fingers the beads of a rosary, adding a conspicuous Marian dimension to the subject and emphasizing the picture's function as a vehicle for prayer. In addition to the Virgin and the Child, the warrior saint who, judging from the strip of white material encircling the top his staff, is probably St George, recurs in a painting now in the Museo Nazionale, Messina.⁷ The physiognomy of the Messina warrior is more expressive and individualized and, therefore, more portrait-like, but the pose and the details of the armour are very similar in both pictures. This kind of re-employment of successful models has created confusion about the chronology of Catena's oeuvre and has also tended to blur the distinction between autograph and workshop paintings.

Christie's' reluctance to attribute the painting securely to Catena may also have been due to its poor state of conservation. However, certain passages remain relatively intact and reveal its author to be accomplished beyond the level one would expect from an assistant. Despite the abraded surface, the dull varnish layer, and the spots of discoloured restoration, one is struck by the brilliance of colour: large blocks of vivid red, green, blue and, pink dominate the pictorial space and set the figures apart from the rather neutral background. Richly saturated colouring of this kind is characteristic of Catena's work and is one of his greatest strengths as a painter. The tonal variations, too, reveal a keen understanding of the effects of light and shadow, as does the modelling of the drapery. The detail of specific areas is of high quality, seen particularly in the finely executed highlights

of the Magdalen's hair and in the delicately rendered features of the two women. The most impressive and well-preserved section of the painting is the armour of the warrior saint. The meticulous depiction of his chainmail and the play of light across the smooth metallic surfaces are clearly the work of a skilled and experienced hand. Most remarkable is the small area on the left side of the armour in which the green and blue of the Virgin's garments are reflected. Such subtlety of execution indicates that it was not an assistant but the master himself who was responsible for this picture.

An intriguing feature of the painting, hitherto unmentioned in the very scant literature on it, is an inscription etched into the paint layer towards the bottom right edge of the Virgin's blue mantle which reads VCATE (the E does not appear in its entirety). While this is probably not an original signature, it does indicate that at some point in the painting's history it was considered to be by Catena and it probably records a true signature now lost.

In trying to determine a date for the Christie's picture, one is immediately confronted with the problem of Catena's chronology. There are approximately a dozen surviving signed paintings, but only the *Martyrdom of St Christina* altarpiece, still *in situ* in the Venetian church of Santa Maria Mater Domini, can be dated with relative security. The date 1520 is inscribed along the base of its marble frame, together with the name of its patron Angelo Filomati, and it is therefore reasonable to date the altarpiece to 1520 or perhaps to the following year as the frame may have been set in place a little before the painting. In 1581 Francesco Sansovino incorrectly recorded the signature, which is no longer visible, confusing it with the name of the patron, but this transcription error was corrected in Stringa's 1603 edition, where it is stated that the altarpiece was painted by "Vincenzo C."⁸ The difficulties posed by having only one secure date for his work are compounded by the fact that Catena's development as a painter was broad and slow: his pictures display a stylistic continuity in which new pictorial techniques and motifs were only gradually introduced. Consequently, it seems at present unwise to propose a precise chronology for individual paintings, and they should instead be considered within a more general time frame.

The bold and vibrant colour of the Christie's picture suggests that it was executed before the *St Christina* altarpiece whose warmer, softer tones are those increasingly found in Catena's later works. The drapery here is stiffer and less yielding, which also suggests an earlier date, but interestingly the Virgin appears to be wearing a headdress similar to that worn by

St Christina, although here it is seen from a different angle. The downward tilt of the Virgin's head is a motif Catena repeatedly employed throughout the second decade of the sixteenth century and the rather awkwardly drawn left hand of the Magdalen, resting on the ointment jar, is very close to the sitter's right hand in Catena's signed *Portrait of a Man* in Vienna, generally placed c.1515. Despite the damaged surface of the present picture, the atmospheric landscape with its golden light along the horizon is reminiscent of that in the London *St Jerome in His Study*, and approaches the mountainous vistas of the *St Christina* altarpiece. The Christie's picture must therefore have been painted between 1515 and 1520.

To summarize what has been argued above, the high level of quality apparent not only in the rich, vivid palette of the *Virgin and Child with Mary Magdalen and St George(?)* but also in its finer details, implies it should be given fully to Catena. This is further supported by the partial signature etched into the paint layer. This picture raises the issue of Catena's practice of repetition, but its success demonstrates that repetition should not automatically be seen in a negative light. Catena has been accused of a lack of originality, but it is more productive to recognize that the figural types employed in such devotional images satisfied a religious need and that in self-referencing, he was not only attempting to establish his own reputation but was meeting the requirements of a refined, if unadventurous, clientele. While it is true that Catena did not produce particularly innovative works, this statement must be tempered with the realization that he never intended to do so. At a time when Titian and Palma Vecchio were injecting their treatment of the Virgin and Child with Saints with dynamism and variety, Catena chose instead to remain true to the pictorial values established in Venice during the late Quattrocento, specifically those of Giovanni Bellini. The calm, reverential simplicity of the Christie's picture confirms his success in this endeavour.

- 1 I first became aware of this picture when reviewing the files dedicated to Catena in the Witt Library, London, where there is a note recording the picture's former location in the Del Drago collection, Rome. The only other mention of this painting is made by E. dal Pozzolo, 'Appunti su Catena', Venezia Cinquento, no. 31, 2006, 48. I was able to examine the painting while it was on view prior to the Old Masters Pictures sale at Christie's, London, on 7 July 2006, where it appeared as lot 142.
- 2 T. von Frimmel, (ed.), *Der Anonimo Morelliano: Marcanton Michiel's Notizia d'opere del disegno* (Vienna: C. Graeser, 1888) 72, 80, 86, 104; G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architetti: Di nuovo dal medesimo riviste et ampliate. Con i ritratti loro et con l'aggiunta delle vite de' viui, & de' morti dall'anno 1550 infino al 1567, Part II* (Florence: Appresso i Giunti, 1568) 518, 522; C. Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie dell'arte over le vite del gl'illustri pittori veneti, e dello stato, I* (Venice: G.B. Sgaua, 1648) 64-5.

- 3 G. Robertson, *Vincenzo Catena* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1954). For criticisms of Catena's oeuvre see, for instance, T. Pignatti, 'Vincenzo Catena', *Arte Veneta*, IX, 1955, 231-33.
- 4 For the most recent, comprehensive studies on Catena see A. Tempestini, 'La "Sacra Conversazione" nella pittura veneta dal 1500 al 1516', in M. Lucco, (ed.), *La pittura nel Veneto. Il Cinquecento*, III (Milan: Electa, 1999) 940-943; E. Giudoni, (ed.), 'Vincenzo Catena: Giornata di studi', in *Studi Giorgioneschi. Annuario di ricerche sull'arte del Rinascimento*, 1999, III (Rome: Fratelli Palombi, 2000); E. dal Pozzolo, 'Appunti su Catena', 5-104.
- 5 For a good colour reproduction of the Houston picture see Carolyn C. Wilson, *Italian Paintings: XIV-XVI Centuries in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston* (London: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in association with Rice University Press and Merrell Holberton, 1996) 335; a photograph of the Virgin and Child with St Mark and St Jerome is located in the Catena files of the Witt Library, London, and it is also reproduced in E. dal Pozzolo, 'Appunti su Catena', 51.
- 6 See, for instance, two versions of the Virgin and Child with St Zacharias, St Elizabeth and the Infant Baptist, one in the National Gallery, Prague, the other formerly in the Sackville collection at Drayton House, England; the Holy Family with a Warrior in the Museo Nazionale, Messina; the Holy Family in a Landscape in the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
- 7 For a reproduction of this picture see G. Robertson, *Vincenzo Catena*, plate 33.
- 8 F. Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima e singolare* (Venice 1581) 75: "Angelo Filomato Piovano e restaurator della chiesa fabricò l'altare di S. Cristina; e fu dipinto da Angelo C.P.". This was later revised by G. Stringa, (ed.), *Venetia città nobilissima e singolare* (Venice: Presso Altobello Salicato, 1603) 164: "Angelo Filomato Piovano e restaurator della chiesa fabricò l'altare di S. Cristina l'an 1520 la cui pala è nobilissima e la dipense Vincenzo C. Pittore molto stimato ai fuoi tempi". The "C.P." recorded by Sansovino reappears in Catena's Holy Family with a Female Saint in Budapest where he signs the picture "Vincenzo C.P.". It is therefore clear that Sansovino mistakenly substituted Catena's name for that of the patron which is inscribed on the marble frame. This transcription error is discussed in G. Robertson, *Vincenzo Catena*, 59-60.