

ANTICHITÀ
ALBERTO DI CASTRO



ANDREA PICCINELLI,
known as *IL BRESCIANINO*
(doc. in Siena and Florence from 1506 to 1525)

Charity

1515 circa

Oil on panel, tondo 58.5 (diam) cm; 23 (diam in)

Framed: 96.5 x 80 cm; 38 x 31.5 in

Bibliography:

DE MARCHI, A. G., *Revelations. Discoveries and Rediscoveries in Italian Primitive Art*, Florence, Centro Di, 2013, pp. 120-125; 151-153

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Text taken from : *Revelations. Discoveries and Rediscoveries in Italian Primitive Art*

[...] A very interesting tondo that is unknown to scholars has a frame that can be dated to the second half of the nineteenth century when the Primitives became extremely popular. The luxurious, purpose-designed frame with a prominent label tells us that the painting comes from a large gallery. The picture is from the end of the period that embraced the Primitives.

It can be dated around 1515 (fig. 62) and reflects a phase of the Renaissance that was not yet disturbed by anti-classical and then Mannerist influences. Formal elements make it possible to identify the author as Andrea Piccinelli, called *Brescianino* (Siena doc. c. 1506 - Florence 1525), who was active in Florence, as we can see from the manifest references to Andrea del Sarto in this painting. Brescianino is mainly documented in Siena where he developed the formulas of Beccafumi and Sodoma. His *Madonna Suckling the Child with Saints*, dated around 1510 (Buonconvento, Museo di Arte Sacra), is stilistically very similar to this panel.¹²⁷

An examination of this tondo contributes mainly to clarifying its rare typology, showing that it was originally a birth tray (*desco da parto*), and was later transformed into an easel painting. In fact, trays of this type were produced mainly between Siena and Firenze, from the late fourteenth century to the second half of the sixteenth.¹²⁸ The function of these objects has generally been explained in terms of what was almost a ritual feeding of new mothers. Archive studies, however, have shown that they were also part of wedding trousseaux and testamentary bequests of childless persons. Therefore, we must still find a definitive explanation of their real purpose. As noted in the general catalogue dedicated to this type of paintings, later exemplars can usually be related to particularly prominent families and important artists.¹²⁹ Our piece refers precisely to this phase.

The identification of the typology has made it possible to match this tondo to another, almost identical one that is also attributed to Brescianino; its current whereabouts are unknown, but scholars had already recognized it as a birth tray (fig. 61).¹³⁰ Although it is not impossible that the two paintings were originally a pair, it seems more likely that they were two sides of a single tray. Both typological and structural factors point to this conclusion.

The diameters are nearly identical and fall within the typical range for these items, generally between 50 and 70 centimetres. The support is broadleaved wood, probably poplar, like the great majority of Tuscan panels from that period.

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Fig. 61. Brescianino, *Charity*, formerly other side of the birth tray,
formerly London, Baron Bozall, then Rome, Sestieri



Fig. 62: Brescianino, *Charity*, Oil on panel, tondo
Ø 58.5 cm – 96.5 x 80 in its 19th century frame

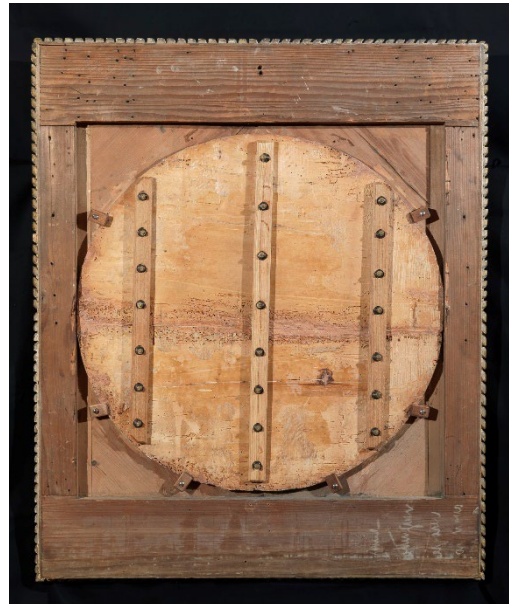


Fig. 62: Brescianino, *Charity*, back of panel

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And we can see a typical feature of many birth trays, a technical character which has not been observed. Our example consists of panels glued horizontally, tondos were frequently glued diagonally, whereas paintings and altarpieces from those geographical areas were most frequently constructed by joining the planks vertically.¹³¹ The unusual arrangement of the wooden boards could explain the function. With this type of structure, whoever was carrying the tray held the ends of a single board in her hands, without having to rely on the strength of glue holding vertically joined panels: this solution guaranteed much greater stability.

Both our tondo and the companion piece are decorated with the Piccolomini coat of arms, and on one there are also the arms of another family to denote a matrimonial or dynastic bond.¹³² The Piccolomini family had recently acquired another pope, Pius III, who reigned for only a few days. There is another Sienese tray related to the family; it is older, was painted by Benvenuto di Giovanni and was purchased by James Jackson Jarves (New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery).¹³³



Fig. 63. Brescianino, *Charity*, Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale



64. Sodoma, *Charity (?)*, Paris, Musée du Louvre

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The compositions on the Yale tray and ours mix figures and heraldic symbols. This is somewhat, but not extremely, unusual and it can be seen mainly in later Sienese output. Among the precedents for this less common trend there is a piece by the so-called Master of 1416 decorated with two rare and correlated iconographic themes (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art).¹³⁴

The thickness of the painting presented here was reduced, confirming that the two sides were separated. Similar planing was inflicted on many other birth trays, and generally on those with two painted sides.¹³⁵ They were split in order to transform one tray into two simple pictures. Around the end of the nineteenth century, lovers of Primitive Italian art began coveting salvers, *spalliere* and coffers, this was due to the development of dedicated studies on these objects and a consequent increase in their commercial value. The inappropriate covering of the entire perimeter of our tondo – the edges were filled and repainted – offers additional information. This was done to conceal a wide band generally reserved for the raised moulding that served as handles. The aim was to camouflage the true nature of the object that was still not in demand by trying to modify it into a “normal” painting and making it bigger. A wooden strip was inserted along the horizontal diameter and it was repainted.

There may have been various reasons underlying these complicated changes: from increasing the surface to fitting it with the lavish nineteenth century frame. Perhaps the support itself had broken along the line, as we can suspect from the severe insect damage in that area. In any event, we eliminated those additions that the cleaning revealed to be incongruent, as well as all the wooden reinforcing structures in order to restore the original shape. This difficult task is described in the appendix.¹³⁶

The companion piece has an image of *Charity*, although the definition is doubtful, since the figure is fully clothed while *Charity* is traditionally depicted entirely or partially nude.¹³⁷ The female figure in the centre of our tondo has an exposed bosom and therefore harmonizes with the iconographic custom. It also has very consistent ties with yet another *Charity* on panel in the Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena (#650; fig. 63), painted by Brescianino, as part of a series with at least three *Virtues*. Those paintings must have been part of a complex decorative composition which still needs to be reconstructed.¹³⁸ The formal similarities are so close in terms of date, style, colours and poses that we cannot exclude the possibility of a single commission that comprised the panels in Siena and the salver that has now been reconstructed in its original form.¹³⁹

Two figures related to the same subject, alluding to *Charity* and perhaps also to *Chastity*, appear on another *desco*. In fact, one famous salver by Sodoma (Louvre, #1681; fig. 64) has a pair of symbolic

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figures, generally considered *Love* and *Charity* accompanied by *putti*. The similarities are so strong that they point to the same iconography. This tray, painted a few years before our tondo, depicts both female figures in a single scene. It is interesting to note that Sodoma, who came from Vercelli in Piedmont, as we can detect from his style, had strongly influenced Brescianino, but in spite of his nickname, the latter's language was not at all affected by the Lombard-Brescia school.

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Notes:

- 127) Cf. S. Padovani and B. Santi, *Buonconvento. Museo di Arte Sacra...*, Genoa 1981, p. 45-48, which report several eighteenth-century notes on the panel that was formerly in the church of San Lorenzo at Bibbiano; M. Maccherini, in *Domenico Beccafumi e il suo tempo*, Siena exhibition catalogue, Milan 1990, #58.
- 128) The main book on the topic is by C. De Carli, *I deschi da parto e la pittura del primo Rinascimento toscano*, Turin 1997.
- 129) *Ibidem*, p. 33-34.
- 130) C. De Carli (*ibidem*, #67) notes that it was with Baron Boxall (London) and later with Sestieri (Rome). The picture published here was taken when the painting was in the Baron Boxall Collection.
- 131) A tray with M. Grassi (Maastricht 2011) is also made of horizontal boards; photographs show similar structures of others: by the Master of Ladislao Durazzo in the Detroit Institute of Arts (#65.385), the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge (Mass., #1925.8), by the Master of 1416 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (#26.287.1/2), by Matteo di Giovanni in the Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, as well as the Rape of Helen, in a private collection, London, and David and Goliath, also in a private collection, Florence (cf. C. De Carli, *I deschi da parto cit.*, #8, 2, 3, 12, 18, 19, 45); the grain is almost horizontal, yet somewhat oblique on the trays by Masaccio in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin (#58c), with the Garden of Love in the Princeton Art Museum (#63-63), with the Judgement of Paris in Cà d'Oro, by Girolamo di Benvenuto, by Francesco Botticini in a private collection, Florence, by Benvenuto di Giovanni in the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven (#1871.65), and with the Birth of the Baptist, in a private collection (Florence; *ibidem*, #14, 16, 26, 44, 55, 56, 73). Diagnostic information on one is available in S. Francolini and M. Vervat, *Il "gioco del civettino" dello Scheggia...*, 'Kermes', XIV, 2001, 42, p. 51-64. Some tondo paintings consist of boards assembled on a slant.
- 132) Or it may be some emphasis on the many branches of the Piccolomini Todeschini family; cf. P. Litta, *Famiglie celebri italiane*, XX, Milan 1831. There is a Piccolomini coat of arms under the scene of the victory at Montaperti (1260) in the Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, and it has parts of the arms here: stars and serpent. The coat of arms of Bishop Tommaso Testa Piccolomini (died 1483) had crossed arms. The most important of the Piccolomini popes, Pius II, had donated a reliquary with the arm of the Baptist to the city, it is now conserved in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo.
- 133) C. De Carli, *I deschi da parto cit.*, #55.
- 134) Metropolitan Museum of Art, #26.287.1/2; this also applies to an early birth tray attributed to the Florentine Master of Sant'Ivo (private collection), although the custom was most widespread in Siena; to a tray attributed to an anonymous Sienese artist, c. 1530 (Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale, #335), one in the Kisters Collection, Kreulizlingen, another attributed to the circle of Riccio (private collection) and lastly one with the Judgement of Paris (Siena, Chigi Saracini Collection), cf. C. De Carli, *I deschi da parto cit.*, #11, 63, 64, 69, 72.
- 135) The paintings by Parmigianino in the Galleria Doria Pamphilj (Rome, #290, 292) must have been separated early in the eighteenth century.
- 136) The work on the wood was planned by P. Monfardini and conducted by A. Borzomati, see below.

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- 137) C. De Carli, *I deschi da parto cit.*, #67. The figure, dressed in red, and the three putti were depicted by Andrea del Sarto and that may be the painting formerly in the Rospigliosi Collection. A composition with five figures (3½ x 3 feet) in the collection of the Duke of Luynes was attributed to this artist in 1793; two tondos “d’una Carità” by Beccafumi are mentioned in a 1654 inventory of the Patrizi Collection, one of these is in the Victoria & Albert Museum (#CAI.165) (cf. Getty Provenance Index).
- 138) P. Torriti, *La Galleria Nazionale di Siena. I dipinti dal XV al XVIII secolo*, Genoa 1978, p. 190-191; M. Maccherini (in *Domenico Beccafumi cit.*, #61) has linked that Charity with the 1513 fresco of the same subject by Andrea del Sarto in the Chiostro dello Scalzo, Florence.
- 139) According P. Torriti, *La Galleria Nazionale di Siena cit.*, p. 190-191, those panels come from the Palmieri-Nuti Collection and may have decorated a studiolo.