

ABSTRACT

FRANCIS Ist (1494-1547), King of France, buys in 1530 a painting on wood by Raphaël, representing a Madonna with Jesus and St. John as children. The picture is the present for his second wife, ELEONORE of Castile, on the occasion of her crowning as Queen of France (May 3, 1531) in the St. Denis Basilica. This legal act seals the peace treaty of Cambrai, 1529, concluded between the Habsburg Emperor CHARLES V, brother of Eleonore, and the King of France.

The painting, after a 250 years stay at Fontainebleau and Versailles, is transferred in 1793 during the French Revolution to the Louvre, being called now la "BELLE JARDINIÈRE", and is considered to be one of the most accomplished works by Raphaël.

In 1866, the Swiss businessman and banker Jacob Weiss-Sulzer, born in Winterthur but active in Vienna, Austria, buys a very similar painting at a Vienna auction; it was owned by a noble family of Genoa, Cambiaso. This "MADONNA LEO X" (MLX) is, under many aspects, barely distinguishable from the "BELLE JARDINIÈRE" (BJ), but it is painted on canvas.

In the 19th and early 20th century most experts were unanimous that only paintings on wood could be original works by Raphaël and regarded the canvas auctioned in Vienna as a later copy of the BJ. This assumption – being, by the way, wrong – is additionally challenged by the signature "Raffaello V" and the dedication to Pope Leo X, well visible – and beneath the original varnish of the canvas painting. Further analysis of the canvas and the colours used enforce the conviction that no anachronistic items can be found.

The dedication reads: LEONI P.O.M.I.R.V., e.g. "Leoni Pontifici Optimo Maximo Incoronato Raphael Urbinas", i. e.: "To Leo, the greatest and best pontifex (Pope) on his crowning by Raphaël from Urbino". That ceremony having taken place on March 19, 1513 in the Vatican, the dating of the MLX canvas is thus secured. It marks a turning point in Raphaël's technical and stylistic approach: from now on he, for a few years, prefers canvas painting, developed in Venice because of a better resistance to moisture, allowing him as well a more spontaneous and atmospheric rendering of the subject.

Until today the complex relationship between BJ and MLX is unclear and their origin as well as authenticity is debated. Dr. Hanspeter M. SIGG, a lawyer from Zurich, has deployed a painstakingly detailed historical and technical analysis, comparing the two paintings with other known copies conserved in some of the most prestigious museums of the world.

The conclusions are astonishing! The group with the Holy Virgin and the two children in the BJ, the MLX as well as in the copies goes back to a carton preserved in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C. Whilst the copies reproduce exactly the outlines of it, the BJ differs slightly and the MLX considerably and in many and decisive details. The group must have been emendated, whilst being painted, quite a few years later, and with the additional mastership gained by Raphaël in the meantime. The origin of the BJ goes back to an altar piece of 1506, which according to VASARI was left unfinished in Florence. It was reworked and embellished by other painters, first in 1508 in Florence, before it was transferred to Siena, and a second time around 1530 by Raphaël's pupils, who finished the work according to the royal wishes of FRANCIS Ist. Francis, who spoke fluently Italian and was a close friend of the Medici Pope LEO X, must have been familiar with the MLX canvas donated by Raphaël in 1513 and wished to acquire it as a solemn gift to his second wife Eleonore of Castile. However the then owner of the MLX, the Prince of Massa (Tuscany), a vassal of the Emperor CHARLES V, was reluctant to sell it, for political reasons.

The envoys of FRANCIS were thus forced to turn their attention to the altar piece of 1506/1508, which was then only completed – with landscaping details in the background that reflected the King's wishes. FRANCIS could not detect the subterfuge. Accordingly the BJ was (and is) until now recognized as an original and integral work of Raphaël! Such royal wish and will has been handed down to all Raphaël experts until now and has masked the unmistakable evidence against it.

The story about the development of BJ and MLX is laid out in a book written by Dr. Hanspeter SIGG and has been premiered on May 11, 2014 in Winterthur by the author. Some other glimpses may be mentioned here. On the left-hand side of the MLX canvas the panorama in the background is a stereometrically exact view of Rome as perceived from the Vatican hill, pointing to the owner of the painting, the Pope. Looking at the same place in the BJ table, the silhouette of the buildings is completely different. Instead of in Rome, we are displaced to France and discover there the wedding church and most notably the St. Denis Basilica (still with its old north tower, now destroyed), where the crowning of ELEONORE took place.

The last part of the book analyzes the hotly debated dating of the paintings, created by Raphaël and his studio during his later "roman" period, offering quite a few discoveries.

A final essay on the qualms of art historians when confronted with discovery of hitherto unknown original works of Old Masters, a short curriculum of the last buyer of MLX, as well as independent expertises performed on it close this richly illustrated book.

HW/14.4.2014