

A 'Virgin and Child' attributed to Andrea Sansovino

by ANDREW BUTTERFIELD

A NEWLY DISCOVERED sculpture of the *Virgin and Child* is here attributed to Andrea Sansovino (Figs. 19, 20 and 29). Although undocumented, it can be dated stylistically to the mid- or late 1490s, during the artist's period of employment at the court of the kings of Portugal.¹ Nearly all Sansovino's works made in that time have been lost, most, presumably, in the earthquake and fire that devastated Lisbon in 1755. Indeed, the present sculpture is possibly the only work by Sansovino to survive from his years on the Iberian peninsula.

Made from polychromed and gilded wood, the sculpture shows the Virgin, seated on a low pedestal-like throne, with the Christ Child standing on her right knee. His right hand is raised, as if in a gesture of acknowledgement, and in his left hand, which is supported by the Virgin, he holds a gilded orb. The sculpture is carved fully in the round, yet its design has a strong lateral orientation, so that the front face of the wooden block presents a three-quarter view of the Virgin and Child, who are turned slightly towards the viewer's left. The work is naturalistically painted, and the polychromy is substantially original, despite some areas of loss, especially at the back. The skin tones are warm, with roseate highlights, and the Virgin's cloak, decorated with a gilded floral pattern, is a pale blondish white, rather than the more traditional blue.

Celebrated for his sculpture in marble, Andrea Sansovino is also known to have carved sculptures in wood, although hitherto almost no works in this material have been attributed to the artist.² Every element of the *Virgin and Child* finds close correspondences with features of documented and securely attributed works by the artist. The similarities are especially strong with his works of the early 1490s and the early 1500s, that is to say, the years immediately before and after his trip to Portugal. For example, the Christ Child in the present work is comparable to the marble figure of the Christ Child (Fig. 21) atop the Corbinelli Altar in S. Spirito, Florence, which Sansovino completed just before his departure for Portugal at the end of 1492.³ The body type and proportions are similar in both works; this is especially clear in the formation of the muscles of the arms and chest. The hands of the two statues are alike in shape and treatment, and the feet are almost exactly the same in form.

The poses of the two figures are also comparable. In the present work the Child stands with his weight on his left leg and with his right leg advanced and bent slightly at the knee; in the Child

on the Corbinelli Altar, the stance is nearly a mirror image of this, with the right leg bearing the weight, and the left leg forward and bent at the knee. The position of the arms is also very similar, the right arm of the Child in the present work and the left arm of the Corbinelli Christ being placed at nearly the same angle and distance from the body and they are bent in the same way. The heads of the two figures are also similar: in both, the proportions of the cheeks in relation to the rest of the head are the same; and in both, the hair above the forehead is swept back.

The treatment of the drapery in the present work is also characteristic of Sansovino. For instance, a large fold of fabric runs across the lap of the Virgin, curves out slightly beyond her left thigh and loops over her raised left arm. Variations of this motif can be seen in many of his works, two key examples being the terracotta statuette of a *Virgin and Child* in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence (Fig. 25), and the marble relief of *Justice* (Fig. 23) from the Baptismal Font in Volterra, designed by Sansovino in 1502, which repeats this pattern almost exactly.⁴ The billowing drapery of Christ and the Virgin in the *Coronation of the Virgin* relief in the Corbinelli Altar is also closely related. Likewise, the way in which a large fold of drapery crosses the waist and loops over the arm of Sansovino's *Virgin and Child* in Genoa Cathedral from 1503 is comparable (Fig. 26).⁵ In all these works Sansovino treats the folds of the sleeve of the arm over which the drapery is looped in the same manner. In the Bargello, Genoa and Volterra figures, the sleeve has a large, deep fold just above the elbow, and in the Genoa and Bargello sculptures the fabric on the upper arm divides into a series of broad planes. The drapery of the sleeve of the left arm of the present Virgin shares all these characteristics.

Other features of the drapery also find parallels in Sansovino's documented sculpture. For instance, on the back of the sculpture the Virgin's mantle falls along the top of her throne in a series of interlocking folds that are both soft and angular. This is characteristic of Sansovino and can be found in many works, such as the folds just above the waist of the tunics of *St Matthew* (Fig. 24) and *St James* in the Corbinelli Altar, the folds above the waist in the dress of the Virgin in the Bargello *Virgin and Child*, and the folds of the drapery across the lower abdomen of *Justice* in the tomb of Cardinal Sforza, in S. Maria del Popolo, Rome (Fig. 27).⁶ It is also telling to compare the *Virgin and Child* with the seated figure of Judas at the centre of the relief of the *Last*

The attribution of the sculpture to Andrea Sansovino was first suggested in conversation by Giancarlo Gentilini and Alfredo Bellandi. For their observations and comments I am also grateful to Bruce Boucher, James Draper, David Franklin, Nicholas Penny and Eike Schmidt.

¹ On Andrea Sansovino and Portugal, see esp. R. Moreira: 'Andrea Sansovino au Portugal (1492-1501)', *Revue de l'Art* 133 (2001-03), pp. 33-38; and J. Höfler: 'New Light on Andrea Sansovino's Journey to Portugal', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 84 (1992), pp. 234-38.

² G.H. Huntley: *Andrea Sansovino, Sculptor and Architect of the Italian Renaissance*, Cambridge MA 1935, pp. 52-53, attributes a polychrome wood sculpture of *St Anthony* in S. Andrea, Lucca, to the artist. Furthermore, Vasari states that Andrea Sansovino made a wooden altarpiece for the King of Portugal; see G. Vasari: *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. G. Milanesi, Florence 1906, IV, p. 513: 'Fece anco un altare a quell re, di legno intagliato, dentrovi alcuni Profeti'.

³ The most complete account of this altar is M. Lisner: 'Andrea Sansovino und die Sakramentskapelle der Corbinelli mit Notizen zum alten Chor von Santo Spirito in Florenz', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 50 (1987), pp. 207-74.

⁴ For the terracotta *Virgin and Child* in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, see Huntley, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 43-44. On the Baptismal Font in Volterra, see *ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

⁵ For the Genoa *Virgin and Child*, see J. Pope-Hennessy: *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*, 4th ed., London 1996, p. 452; Vasari, *op. cit.* (note 2), IV, p. 514; and N. Baldini and R. Giulietti, eds.: *Andrea Sansovino: i documenti*, Florence and Monte San Savino 1999, p. 63, doc. 48.

⁶ For Sansovino's S. Maria del Popolo monuments, see Pope-Hennessy, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp. 452-53; Vasari, *op. cit.* (note 2), IV, p. 515; and Baldini and Giulietti, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp. 70-71, docs. 60-61.



19. (Left). Fig. 29 seen from the side.

20. (Middle). Fig. 29 seen from behind.

21. (Right). *Christ Child*, from the Corbinelli Altar, by Andrea Sansovino, 1492. Marble. (S. Spirito, Florence).



22. (Left). *Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, by Andrea Sansovino, 1510–12. Marble, 125 cm. high. (S. Agostino, Rome).

23. (Middle). *Justice*, detail from the Baptismal Font, by Andrea Sansovino, 1502. Marble. (Volterra Cathedral).

24. (Right). *St. Matthew*, from the Corbinelli Altar, by Andrea Sansovino, 1492. Marble. (S. Spirito, Florence).



25. (Far left). *Virgin and Child*, by Andrea Sansovino, c. 1502. Terracotta. (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence).

26. (Middle left). *Virgin and Child*, by Andrea Sansovino, 1503. Marble. (Genoa Cathedral).

27. (Middle right). *Justice*, detail from the tomb of Cardinal Ascanio Sforza, by Andrea Sansovino, c. 1505–09. Marble. (S. Maria del Popolo, Rome).

28. (Right). Detail of *The Last Supper*, from the Corbinelli Altar, by Andrea Sansovino, 1492. Marble. (S. Spirito, Florence).



29. *Virgin and Child*, here attributed to Andrea Sansovino. Mid- to late 1490s. Polychromed and gilded wood, 80 by 45.9 by 30.5 cm. (Private collection, United States).

Supper in the Corbinelli Altar (Fig. 28). In both works the left corner of the seat juts out in a triangular point between soft folds of drapery that dip down to either side. In this detail, the two sculptures are nearly identical in design and the treatment of the folds is almost exactly the same.

In the work under discussion the artist took great care to indicate the form of the Madonna's legs beneath the heavy drapery of her mantle. The fabric is caught up beneath her left knee and thigh; folds fall over her thigh and loosely follow the contour of her left calf, and her cloak spills over the side of the throne in a concatenation of triangular folds. A similar treatment of drapery appears in one of Sansovino's most famous works, the signed marble group of the *Virgin and Child with St Anne* in the church of S. Agostino, Rome, which was completed in 1512 (Fig. 22).⁷ Specifically, one should compare the right side of that sculpture where the fall of the drapery is structured in a similar manner to that in the present work. Also similar is the treatment of the cloak at the back of the left side of St Anne. Seen in profile, the cloak of the present sculpture falls in a group of three long folds that encompass the entire figure from the shoulders to the top of the throne; St Anne's mantle is draped in almost exactly the same way.

The architectural design of the throne in the present sculpture would also suggest that Sansovino is its author. The mouldings at its top and bottom edges are found in several places in the Corbinelli Altar, including in the bases of the pilasters on the front of the altar and in the Virgin's lectern in the relief of the *Annunciation*. Furthermore, the prophets in Sansovino's drawing of an altar (Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich; inv. no. 18670) are seated on thrones of similar design.⁸

Several factors suggest that Sansovino made this sculpture sometime between 1492 and 1502, during the period he was working in the Iberian peninsula. First, as already noted, the correspondences between the present sculpture and his known *œuvre* are especially strong with works he made immediately before and after his trip to Portugal. Second, until recently the sculpture was in a Spanish collection, and the artist is documented as working in Spain as well as at the Portuguese court. The pose of the Child standing on the Virgin's lap is found in a number of works dating from the 1490s, including Andrea della Robbia's *Virgin and Child* in S. Maria d'Antico, Maiolo,⁹ Benedetto da Maiano's *Virgin and Child*, formerly in the Bigallo, Florence,¹⁰ and Perugino's *Gonfalone di Giustizia* in the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia.¹¹

Knowledge of Sansovino's work on the Iberian peninsula is incomplete and uncertain, as there are no universally accepted

sculptures and few relevant documents from this period. A document signed in Florence on 9th December 1492 by the artist and agents of King João II of Portugal records Sansovino's agreement to enter the service of the monarch. According to Vasari, the artist worked in Portugal for nine years, a statement that appears to be substantially true as he is not recorded with certainty in Italy between December 1492 and April 1502.¹² It has been suggested that he was initially hired to make the tomb of the King's son and heir, Dom Alfonso, who died suddenly on 13th July 1491.¹³ It is certain that Sansovino later designed the tomb of King João II himself; a (now lost) drawing for this project was in the collection of Sebastiano Resta in the late seventeenth century.¹⁴ Vasari, who had studied two notebooks of designs drawn by the artist while in Portugal, says that Sansovino also made many works of sculpture and architecture there, including 'un bellissimo palazzo con quattro torri', a carved wooden altar with prophets, a terracotta model representing a battle of the King against the Moors, and a marble sculpture of St Mark.¹⁵ None of these works is known to survive and, given the absence of documentation, it is even uncertain which, if any, were actually made.

During his years in Portugal, Sansovino, as mentioned above, appears also to have worked in Spain, since a document of 15th July 1500 in the archives of Toledo Cathedral records a payment to 'maestro Andres Florentino' for a sculpture of St Martin for the Cathedral's retable.¹⁶ That this document refers to Sansovino has been generally accepted, in part because the payment includes expenses for the artist to return to Benavente, a village in the heart of the Portuguese royal hunting preserve near the Tagus River; as Moreira suggests, the King of Portugal may have granted Sansovino a house and studio there.¹⁷ Given that Sansovino worked in both countries during this period, it is impossible to say with certainty whether the present sculpture was made in Portugal or Spain.

This statue is important not only because it is a new work by a major Italian artist, but also an early example of the new High Renaissance style of sculpture that Sansovino helped to create. Unmistakably, the design of the figure and drapery are rooted in the style of Florentine masters of the late fifteenth century, especially Andrea del Verrocchio, Antonio del Pollaiuolo and Benedetto da Maiano. Yet here there is greater amplitude in the drapery and a greater clarity of the anatomical structure of the body beneath the drapery. Particularly impressive is the consummate skill with which the artist has combined complexity and gracefulness, foreshadowing stylistic developments in sixteenth-century sculpture.

⁷ On this sculpture, see esp. V. Bonito: 'The Saint Anne Altar in Sant'Agostino in Rome: A New Discovery', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 122 (1980), pp. 805–12; *idem*: 'The Saint Anne Altar in Sant'Agostino: Restoration and Interpretation', *ibid.* 124 (1982), pp. 268–76; and *idem*: 'The Saint Anne Altar in Sant'Agostino, Rome', Ph.D. diss. (New York University, 1983).

⁸ On Sansovino's drawing in Munich, see U. Middeldorf: 'Eine Zeichnung von Andrea Sansovino in München', *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 10 (1933), pp. 138–46; and *idem*: 'Two Sansovino Drawings', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 64 (1934), pp. 159–64.

⁹ A. Bellandi: 'Andrea della Robbia, Madonna in trono col Bambino benedicente, 1500/1500 ca.', in G. Gentilini, ed.: *exh. cat. I Della Robbia e l'arte nuova della scultura inventata*, Fiesole (Basilica di S. Alessandro) 1998, p. 219.

¹⁰ G. Gentilini: 'Benedetto da Maiano, Madonna col Bambino, ca. 1495–97', in F. Niccolai: *La Misericordia di Firenze. Archivio e raccolta d'arte*, Florence 1981, pp. 173–82.

¹¹ On the pose of the Virgin and Child in this painting and in seven other works by

Perugino, see R. Hiller von Gaertrigen: 'L'uso del cartone nell'opera di Perugino', in V. Garibaldi and F.F. Mancini, eds.: *exh. cat. Perugino, il divin pittore*, Perugia (Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria) 2004, pp. 155–65.

¹² Vasari, *op. cit.* (note 2), IV, p. 514. According to K. Frey, ed.: *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architetti: scritte da M. Giorgio Vasari pittore et architetto aretino*, Munich 1911, I/1, p. 347, Sansovino was documented in Florence in 1493 and 1495/96. However, the relevant documents have been reinterpreted as dated to the early sixteenth century by Baldini and Giulietti, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp. 60–61.

¹³ See Höfler, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 235; and Moreira, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 36.

¹⁴ The drawing was described by him in a letter as 'un disegno d'un sepulcro d'architettura in grande del re D. Gio. II di Portogallo, di mano del Sansovino Vecchio', cited in Höfler, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 236, note 27.

¹⁵ Vasari, *op. cit.* (note 2), IV, p. 513.

¹⁶ Moreira, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 37; document transcribed in A.M. de Bosque: *Artistes Italiens en Espagne*, Paris 1965, p. 362, note 4.

¹⁷ Moreira, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 37.