THE CASE OF THE SEVEN MADONNAS

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Mino da Fiesole gives his sculptures a touch of enchantment. His is a puzzling genius, for while enjoying the favor of the general public, to specialists of renaissance art he has always remained something of an enigma. Possessing a curiously mannered style, Mino borrowed freely from the work of his contemporaries, and they, to add to the perplexity of later scholars, borrowed no less from him. Reason enough that modern critics have been sorely put to it to place a definitive label on the man and on his work. Nevertheless we are gradually viewing him in ever clearer focus. And now a Madonna relief in the Museum’s collection is the instrument for further sharpening our whole vision of Mino.

The piece in question is the Madonna and Child shown on the opposite page. It is rare as well as lovely, for, since a number of reliefs formerly attributed to Mino have been re-studied, it seems to be the only Madonna in America that is unquestionably his. Just one other Mino Madonna, the Mozzì tondo in the Berlin Museum, is found outside Italy.

Rare as it is, our Madonna has an importance far greater than its artistic value. Our study of it reveals that its basic design is intimately related to no less than six other Madonnas by the same master, all of them variants of a single theme. Judged separately in the past, some of these have at times been erroneously labeled “workshop” or “follower of Mino”; but considered as a group the evidence of their common authorship is overwhelming. And, what is even more exciting, an orderly evolution is found to exist among all seven pieces, each bound to the other by the inexorable thread of composition. The case of the seven Madonnas seems to unfold with the inevitability of a detective story.

The seven Madonnas are: two reliefs in Florence (one in the Bargello, the other on the tomb of Count Hugo of Tuscany); two reliefs on the Roman tombs of Pietro Riario and Cristoforo della Rovere, as well as the one in the hospital of Santo Spirito, also in Rome; the tondo in the collection of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin; and the relief in the Metropolitan.

Which of these seven, you may ask, is the original model? Strangely enough, not one of them! The original is the creation of Mino’s illustrious contemporary in fifteenth-century Florence, Antonio Rossellino. It is the marble Madonna del Latte (p. 21), which, if not a war casualty, remains in the church of Santa Croce. Visitors to Florence may recall this superb work, set in a great column in the nave of the church, not far from the tomb of Michelangelo. Rossellino’s queenly Virgin, framed in a mandorla of cherubs, is seated on a throne of clouds and holds in her lap the Christ Child, his hand raised as if to bless the passer-by. It was this masterpiece which, on our evidence, inspired Mino not once, but seven times.

In tracing the development of Mino’s Madonna series, a number of historical facts bear out the evidence of composition; not a single historical fact contradicts it. Although this sort of corroborative evidence is fragmentary, it offers, we think, strong support to our study in detection.

The story of the seven Madonnas begins in Florence, since the very presence of the Rossellino original in the church of Santa Croce suggests that Mino carved the first of his series in that city. Mino of course was familiar with all of Rossellino’s Florentine works, the two sculptors being on close enough terms to collaborate, in 1473, on a pulpit for near-by Prato. So it is no surprise to find that the
Detail of the Madonna and Child by Mino da Fiesole (1429-1484) shown on page 23. In the Metropolitan Museum. Photograph by Charles Sheeler
Madonna which, according to the evidence of composition, is the first of the series, has a long history connecting it with Florence. It is the distinguished sculpture (p. 21) from the Benedictine monastery, since suppressed, which adjoined the stately church of the Badia. This relief is now in the Bargello.

While no one has as yet commented on the resemblance between this work by Mino and Rossellino's Madonna del Latte, as the illustrations show, it is very striking. At the same time a number of innovations occur in Mino's relief, making it delightful in its own right. These changes and those appearing in the other six variants are the significant clues in our story.

For example, where Rossellino's relief is almond-shaped, Mino's first version is circular; therefore the sculptor used only the upper half of the composition. He eliminated the cherubs in Rossellino's border, except for one at the base, which he developed into a console. And, although he used the same garment as Rossellino for his Christ Child, he clothed his Virgin with apparel of his own invention.

The second Madonna—the Morgan relief in the Metropolitan (pp. 18 and 23)—has a fine simplicity; there is no elaborate decoration to distract from the central theme of Mother and Child, which is at once austere and adorable. The rectangular white Carrara plaque, on which the heads are carved in high relief, and the bodies in lesser relief, possess, because of these contrasting planes, a sense of poetic unreality. In the hands of a less sensitive artist, or one technically less gifted, the effect might well be merely odd. With Mino, however, mannerism counts as an asset.

For whom was the Morgan relief made? On this point our inquiries have been fruitless. Where was it made? Since it more closely resembles Mino's first Madonna, which is Florentine, than does his third, which we shall presently discover to be Roman, we can guess at its birthplace. We place it with the first as a Florentine production. In comparing it with the first version, several changes appear that show the artist's further deviation from Rossellino. There is the outward turn of the Infant's head; the sacred orb in his left hand (a motive again to appear in the three succeeding versions); the Christ Child's drapery, covering his chubby body but no longer falling from his right shoulder (a detail repeated in all the later Madonnas); and no console at the base.

Although there is no direct way of dating the two Madonnas which we call the earliest, there is an indirect approach. The next three versions being Roman, the time of Mino's journey to the Eternal City should represent a terminal date for the Florentine Madonnas. While there has been considerable speculation as to when Mino left Florence, the facts seem clear enough.

Several documents show that Mino was working in and around Florence (largely under the patronage of the local Benedictine monks) during the period 1467-1474.

None indicate that he was in Rome during these years. His first Roman commission during the subsequent period was in Old St. Peter's on the tomb of Pope Paul II, which in its unparalleled pompousness became a sensation of the age. When in the late fifteenth century the church was torn down to make way for the present St. Peter's, fragments of the tomb were saved, and to this day are preserved in the Vatican crypt.

Although Paul II died in 1471, his monument seems to have been erected somewhat later. It was ordered by the pope's nephew, Cardinal Marco Barbo, who, as papal legate to Hungary, was absent from Rome during the greater part of the three years following the pope's death. The supposition that work on the tomb was not begun until after Barbo's return, late in 1474, is borne out by an old Vatican codex containing a copy of an inscription, not among the fragments of the tomb in the Vatican crypt, which, if genuine, shows the monument was completed in 1477.1

1 Cod. Vat. Reg. 770 cur. 1570, quoted by V. Forcella, Iscrizioni delle chiese . . . di Roma (Rome, 1875), vol. vi, p. 44. The inscription reads: MARCUS BARBUS CARD. S. MARCI PATRIARCHA AQUILIEIENS CONSANGUINEO B. M. P. ANN. SAL. MCCCV. LXXVII: "Marco Barbo,
LEFT: the Madonna del Latte, marble relief by Antonio Rossellino in the church of Santa Croce, Florence. RIGHT: Variant I, the Madonna and Child, marble relief by Mino da Fiesole in the Bargello, Florence
As the Italian scholar de Nicola suggests, the tomb may be dated 1475-1477. And by way of confirmation, Vasari in his life of Mino da Fiesole reports that the tomb was built within a period of two years.

So our first two Madonnas were in all probability made before the end of 1474. Indications are that they were carved within this year or the year preceding, for in style they relate closely to sculptures on the tomb of Pope Paul II, made just after 1474. Such evidence, by the way, permits us for the first time to allot the Bargello relief—version one—a reasonable place in the list of Mino’s works. (Even the officials of the Florence museum have been misled as to the date of their masterpiece, considering it as probably executed after 1481.)

Two reliefs which Mino made for the great tomb of Paul II serve as a transition to his third Madonna, and show again his facility for appropriating whatever met his fancy in the work of his contemporaries. In 1470, while Mino was still in Florence, a great master of the age, Piero Pollaiuolo, painted a figure of Faith for the Mercanzia. Comparison of this painting in the Uffizi with Mino’s Faith for the tomb of Pope Paul in Rome (see p. 24) proves that our sculptor was not one to turn his eyes inward when working. Both pose and architectural setting are too near those of Pollaiuolo to be a coincidence. Just another case, we think, of Mino’s successful petty larceny, seemingly undetected until now. Mino’s Charity also closely resembles Pollaiuolo’s Faith, but instead of the crucifix and chalice she holds a child as the symbol of her particular virtue (p. 25).

Now Charity with a child and a Madonna and Child are very much alike. And when asked to create a Virgin and Child—our third version (p. 25)—for the tomb of Cardinal Pietro Riario in the Santi Apostoli in Rome, Mino imparted to it several of the Pollaiuolan effects he had just used for his Charity. The throne upon which the Riario Madonna sits and her curiously loose-jointed posture are those of Charity. Whereas in the fountainhead of the series, Rossellino’s Madonna del Latte, the Virgin’s feet are shod (in Mino’s first two versions no feet appear), those of the Riario Madonna are bare: they are the bare feet of Charity. Even the facial expression seems to have more of Pollaiuolo in it than of Rossellino.

What is more important, the Riario Madonna clearly continues the compositional development begun in the earlier variants. Mary’s robe (like that of the Rossellino) covers a simple gown, for the elaborately decorated dress of the first two versions is from now on discarded in favor of a garment less pretentious. One change of apparel, with minor variations, recurs in all the later versions of the theme. It is the addition of a narrow shawl or veil, falling from either side of the Virgin’s headdress and draped over her breast in a graceful crescent. The console beneath her feet is like that found in the first Madonna (the second, being rectangular, needed no console). Her right arm extends towards the deceased cardinal, represented kneeling at her side. Cardinal Pietro Riario, by the way, hardly merited such recognition. In bestowing the red hat upon him in 1472 his uncle, Pope Sixtus IV, had only made his iniquities more conspicuous. Riario died in 1474, and his tomb, erected by his doting uncle, was probably finished within a year or two after that of Pope Paul.

The Riario Madonna and, to an increasing extent, the fourth and fifth Madonnas show the influence of those phlegmatic sculptors with whom Mino was collaborating in Rome. Chief among them were Andrea Bregno, who built many fine Roman tombs yet not a single great one, and Giovanni Dalmata, whose work was too, too solid. There is no doubt that Mino’s Roman Madonnas are less austere and less crisply carved than his Florentine ones. A Roman relaxation supplants the tension of Florence.

Cardinal of St. Mark’s and Patriarch of Aquileia, erected [this monument] in memory of his distinguished relative, in the year of salvation 1477.  
This Roman phase of Mino's style shows to its fullest in the fourth Madonna (p. 26), the exquisite one on the tomb of another nephew of Sixtus IV, Cardinal Cristoforo della Rovere, in the Roman church of Santa Maria del Popolo. The Virgin, hitherto represented gazing straight ahead, now and in the later versions turns to her son, who, as if for contrast, again faces the spectator. Her garments are those of the third, but unlike the third the della Rovere Virgin wears no cape. The clouds which appear at the base of the composition are a curious reflection of Rossellino’s design, and appear in this fourth version only. Since of all seven Madonnas, the fourth follows most closely the almond shape of the Rossellino (in which there are clouds at the base), their presence here is explained. The fourth Madonna may be dated between February of 1479, when the cardinal died, and the moment of Mino’s departure from Rome, presumably early in 1480.

The fifth Madonna is the relief (p. 26), now in the Roman hospital of Santo Spirito, said to have come originally from the Basilica of the Lateran. It is rectangular in form, and its composition is markedly like the fourth. Yet a curious feature differentiates it from the former. Trifles—a glance, an attitude, or a simple gesture—may tell an entire story: in the first four versions, the Virgin grasps the right foot of her Son; in all the later ones she holds his left. One more indication of Mino’s consistent development of the Rossellino theme; one more link in support of our sequence.

The sixth Madonna (p. 27) was made on the sculptor’s return to Florence; it is in the Badia on the tomb of Count Hugo of Tuscany, which Mino had left incomplete when he set out for Rome some five or six years before. It is circular in shape, and its chief difference from the Santo Spirito Madonna is that, instead of an orb, the Christ Child holds what appears to be a pomegranate or fig. Since one document shows Mino in Florence in 1480, and another, that the tomb was finished by the beginning of 1481, the date of this sixth Madonna may be closely determined.

The seventh and last Madonna (p. 27), now in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, was formerly in the Palazzo Mozzi in Florence. In this tondo the general pattern of the earlier reliefs is followed, although with a certain lassitude. For the first time, the Infant’s hand is empty and unoccupied. And now, as if to complete the cycle of variants, the Mother and Child face

4 From an inscription on his tomb: CRISTOPHORO RIVEREO ... OB. AN. VIL. PONT. XYS. L. FBR. Translated, it reads: “Cristoforo della Rovere died on February first, during the eighth year of the pontificate of Sixtus IV.” Since the eighth year of Sixtus’s reign commenced in August of 1478, Cristoforo died on February 1, 1479.

5 A document of 1480 (Serie dell’Archivio del Monte Comune, n. 103, c. 31) quoted by U. Dorini in the Rivista d’arte, 1966, p. 52, mentions a certain house in Florence in which Mino was dwelling.

6 A document of January 4, 1481, relating to the tomb, is preserved in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Corporazioni religiose sopprese, Badia, no. lxxviii. It is set down by G. Poggi in Miscellanea d’arte, 1903, p. 102.
LEFT: Faith, painting by Piero Pollaiuolo in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence. RIGHT: Faith, marble relief by Mino da Fiesole in the Vatican crypt, Rome
LEFT: Charity, marble relief by Mino da Fiesole in the Vatican crypt, Rome. RIGHT: Variant III, the Madonna and Child, marble relief by Mino da Fiesole in the church of the Santi Apostoli, Rome
Variants IV and V, marble reliefs by Mino da Fiesole. LEFT, in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome; RIGHT, in the hospital of Santo Spirito, Rome

one another with easy intimacy. Of all seven, this seems to be most fully Mino’s creation, the farthest removed from the Rossellino. The most mannered of the seven Madonnas, it is also the least spiritual. It was one of Mino’s last works, for, as shown by the development in composition, it was surely made after the completion of the Count Hugo relief (early in 1481); and Mino died in the summer of 1484.

As a footnote to this study of the seven Madonnas, it is interesting to review some other reliefs of the same general composition by contemporaries of Mino. One such relief is in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome, on the tomb of Bishop Pietro Guglielmo Rocca. As the prelate died in 1482, after Mino had left Rome for the last time, it cannot possibly be by our sculptor. The tomb itself—and the relief on it—seems rather to come from the workshop of Mino’s colleague in Rome, Andrea Bregno. Here, then, is a succession of borrowings—from Rossellino, to Mino, to Bregno. A tondo in the Metropolitan Museum seems also to have originated in the Bregno workshop, its Roman origin being suggested by the fact that a probable copy of it is to be found in the precincts of the church of Santa Brigida in Rome.

There are also a number of Madonna reliefs by Mino which resemble other Rossellino compositions. To note two instances: reflections of Rossellino’s exquisite relief in the Alman collection of the Metropolitan Museum occur in Mino’s sculpture for the tomb of Cardinal Nicolò Forteguerri in Santa Cecilia in Rome (on which the shadow of Pollaiuolo’s Faith also falls); while Rossellino’s Madonna in the Berlin Museum may well be the inspiration for Mino’s piece in the Palazzo Martelli in Florence.

Lastly, the evidence of the seven Madonnas also places Rossellino’s Madonna del Latte itself in a totally new light. This celebrated relief, elaborated from an earlier composition planned in 1461 for the tomb of the Cardinal...
of Portugal in San Miniato in Florence, forms the principal decoration on a monument in Santa Croce carved for a certain Francesco Nori. As shown by an inscription, the Nori monument was erected on the order of Francesco "in honor of his father, Antonio, himself, and his descendants." Nori perished in 1478 while defending Lorenzo de' Medici during the Pazzi conspiracy, and Rossellino died soon thereafter, in 1478 or 1479. For a variety of doubtful reasons the Madonna del Latte has been generally dated either in 1478, or just before, and consequently came to be considered Rossellino’s final work. Yet it necessarily existed before the first of the seven Madonnas could have been made. Since, as we have shown, Mino’s first two versions of the theme were no later than 1474, and quite probably a year or two earlier, “about 1470” seems now a better date for the famous Madonna del Latte. Clearly it is not Rossellino’s “last testament,” as Adolfo Venturi once fulsomely named it.

The pursuit of Mino’s seven Madonnas from Florence to Rome, and back again to Florence, leads us at last to their author. Now that his systematic development of the Rossellino theme has been exposed, the question that remains to be settled is what caused Mino da Fiesole to adopt that method of working. Charming though his results may be, can there be any justification for persistent raids upon the works of another? Is the sculptor of the seven Madonnas an angel or a rogue?

No one has analyzed Mino more keenly than Giorgio Vasari. “Having the intelligence capable of achieving whatever he wished,” Vasari wrote, “[Mino] was so captivated by the style of his master, Desiderio da Settignano, because of the grace with which he endowed the heads of women, children, and all his figures—this in his judgment seeming superior to nature—that he practiced and studied it alone, abandoning natural objects and thinking them useless. Therefore, Mino had more grace than solid grounding in his art.”

Ever since the time of Vasari, Mino’s originality has been somewhat suspect, and the seven Madonnas seem to show the artist at last in his true colors. Yet Giorgio Vasari and the Madonnas are not necessarily hostile witnesses. Summing up Mino’s philosophy of art,
Vasari actually supplies the motive for our seven reliefs. He shows how Mino, one of the highly acclaimed artists of the day, was possessed by an unreserved admiration for what seemed good in the work of his contemporary Desiderio. On the basis of the present study we know that this feeling extended equally to the work of other artists—to Rossellino and Pollaiuolo. So complete was this admiration that Mino never hesitated in acting on it. Vasari could also have added that even the greatest artists have borrowed from one another as a matter of course throughout the ages and that borrowing is in fact the basis of all tradition. Mino’s defense—and the seven reliefs are his witnesses—is that although he may have borrowed far more than any other artist of his time, he did so always with discretion. The seven Madonnas, each of which stands as a complete work of art, show how a borrowed composition immediately became Mino’s own. If what he took from Rossellino may have seemed to him “superior to nature,” to use Vasari’s words, in his interpretation of it Mino departed ever further from nature. In this lay his saving grace; in this too was to be found the limiting measure of success of one who was always preoccupied with form rather than with substance.

In Mino we meet a mannerist who lived before his time. Among his contemporaries in Tuscany, he was equaled only by the too little appreciated Agostino di Duccio, who turned the prosy Tempio Malatestiano (now badly damaged, according to reports) into a gem of pure lyricism. Like Agostino, with a highly mannered approach, which he ever refined and polished for its own sake, Mino created works far removed from the naturalistic and often academic productions of his period. And in our own age of latter-day mannerism, this is his paramount claim to appreciation. Although past critics have admired him for the delicacy and refinement of his work, many among the rising generation having had their fill of naturalism, however honest or skillfully rendered, and discovering new truths in the formalism of contemporary artists, will find in Mino a man after their own taste.

The illustrations of the Madonna del Latte and Variant 1 are from Alinari photographs. Those of Variants III, IV, VI, VII, and Mino’s Faith and Charity are reproduced from Bode, Denkmäler, pls. 408, 406, 396, 392, and 407. Variant V is from Rassegna d’arte, 1908, p. 65, and Pollaiuolo’s Faith is from Antonio Pollaiuolo, by Maud Cruttwell, pl. XXXI. Charles Sheeler made the photograph of the Museum’s relief. This sculpture (acc.no.42.38.2; 21½ by 15¼ in.) was exhibited in the Museum as a loan from Miss Morgan, from June of 1907 until the end of 1908.