A delightful pen and bistre drawing of an Adoration of the Shepherds has recently been added to the Museum’s collection. The ghost of this drawing has been haunting the literature on Parmigianino for more than a century and a half in the form of an engraving by Conrad Martin Metz. This engraving was included by Metz in a collection entitled “Imitations of Ancient and Modern Drawings” published in London in 1798 and has been reproduced in modern times in the two most exhaustive studies of Parmigianino’s work. The authors of these books, Lili Fröhlich-Bum in 1921 and Giovanni Copertini in 1932, find in it indications of Parmigianino’s hand. Fröhlich-Bum writes, “A wholly individual composition of an Adoration of the Shepherds is preserved for us in a print by Conrad Martin Metz, which, as every detail shows, was an original from the hand of Francesco.”1

Copertini, more cautious in the face of a transliterated technique, confines himself to noting that although there are elements which point to Francesco himself it is possible that they are the “fruits of a felicitous assimilation.”2

The drawing itself, now come to light at last, affirms Francesco’s authorship. The extraordinary loss of character in the lines and of depth and harmony in the composition suffered at the hands of the engraver makes the comparison of drawing and print an absorbing study and serves to emphasize Parmigianino’s brilliant style. Every figure offers some illuminating comment, none more so than the child, whose graceful movement as he emerges from the bath into his mother’s arms is completely lost in the engraving. Particularly to be noticed in the drawing are the curving lines, constantly varied in strength, the parallel strokes in the shadows terminating in an accent where the contour of a muscle is indicated. From these fluid lines and strategically placed accents springs the sense of life and movement so characteristic of Francesco’s drawings.

Our Adoration of the Shepherds is not a sketch—indeed it lacks the vivid spontaneity of the artist’s sketches—but a carefully designed picture, its diverse elements cleverly woven into harmony and significance. The central theme is a compact group consisting of the Mother and Child, a serving woman, shepherds, and the ox and ass. Though placed far to the right and in the background, it commands attention not only by its grace but also because the eye is surely led to it by the pose of the strongly drawn shepherd in the foreground, the pointing Saint Joseph in the middle distance, and the angel hovering overhead. Depth and atmosphere are realized by the deft lighting of these several planes. The rhythm of the composition is peculiarly Francesco’s and foretells the veritable dances into which his later drawings are impelled. This one must have been made fairly early in his career, during, and probably close to the end of, his stay in Rome, where he went in 1524 and remained until 1527. The suggestion of Raphael’s influence, which at this period superseded that of Correggio, points to this time, while the figures, graceful but not attenuated, and the scene, animated but not aswirl with exaggerated movement, indicate a date well before his mannerisms had begun to dominate his style.

Amongst Francesco’s drawings of this period

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2 Il Parmigianino, vol. II, p. 60: “Si trovano spunti creativi che si direbbero propri di Francesco, ma non potrebbero essere essi frutto di una felice assimilazione?”
The Adoration of the Shepherds, by Parmigianino (1503-1540). Rogers Fund, 1946
Engraving by Conrad Martin Metz after the drawing by Parmigianino on the opposite page
A sheet of sketches by Parmigianino. In the British Museum, London. The studies of a mother and child were used by the artist in the other drawings here illustrated.

are a number closely connected with ours—notably an Adoration of the Shepherds in the Uffizi, another—probably an Adoration of the Shepherds although the subject is not altogether clear—in the British Museum and, most pertinent of all, a sheet of beautiful little sketches showing a mother lifting her child from his bath. These sketches, also in the British Museum, provide the motif for the several drawings here illustrated. The grouping differs, the action is changed, but in each the child is being lifted from a small wooden tub by his mother while a woman with a towel waits to receive him. This is a refreshing variation on the theme of the Virgin and Child and lends to this particular group of drawings an intimacy and charm that are wholly delightful.

The Adoration in the British Museum may
well have been the artist's first attempt to use
his sketches in a composition. Here we find an
arrangement in three planes similar to ours
but more tentative. The architecture of the
background has not been developed and the
foreground is somewhat confused by the unre-
solved significance of the two figures. All of
this, however, serves to isolate the exquisite
group of the Holy Family, which here retains
the vividness of a sketch while at the same time
it achieves dignity and strength by its simplicity
and sculptural quality. The Uffizi version is
certainly the latest rendering of the three. It is
more satisfactory pictorially, and its easy lines
flow into that rhythm, more marked here than
in ours, which, together with the exaggerated
elongation and elegance of his figures, was later
to characterize Francesco's style.
Writers on Parmigianino generally feel obliged to point out his weaknesses, balancing his virtues against his faults: his work is original, full of invention, but lacking in profundity; his style is brilliant, graceful, elegant, but empty of content; sentiment takes the place of emotion and movement serves for action. A psychiatrist could no doubt find in his biography the source of these weaknesses. He was born in Parma in 1503 and, orphaned in infancy, was brought up by two uncles who fostered his precocious artistic talents, in which they took great pride. By seventeen the boy had already painted a number of excellent works, including the Baptism of Christ, now in the Berlin Museum. At twenty-one, having absorbed what he could from Correggio, who had come to Parma in 1518, Francesco set out for Rome, attracted by the fame of Michelangelo and Raphael. Here he met with more admiration and encouragement, and on his return to Parma he received important commissions. He seems to have worked at fever pitch but always to have undertaken more than he was able to carry out. A bitter quarrel over an unfinished commission dogged his last days and, forced to leave Parma, he fled to Casalmaggiore, where he died at the age of thirty-seven.

In his short span of years he produced a prodigious amount, and if his limitations are disturbing it is because of the quality of his achievements. It is not what he does wrong that is deplored but what, with his gifts, he fails to do. Berenson could not in justice omit him from his Central Italian Painters of the Renaissance, though he all but dams him with faint praise: "My tale is told. . . . I shall add but a word about Parmigianino, the last of the real Renaissance artists of North Italy. He had too overmastering a bent for elegance to rest contented with Correggio's sensuous femininity. But this elegance he approached with such ardour, that
he attained to a genuine, if tiny, quality of his own, a refined grace, a fragile distinction, that please in fugitive moments."

All moments are fugitive—the important thing is the genuine quality that is his own and the enjoyment it brings. Parmigianino is still pleasing us after four hundred years. We can forget what he does not do and allow ourselves to rejoice in his gaiety, his verve, his grace, in the beauty of his style, the inexhaustible spring of his invention.

A NOTE ON THE HISTORY OF THE DRAWING

Parmigianino's drawings form the bulk and to many the most important part of his work. They are to be found in most of the great collections, particularly in the Gallery in Parma, the Uffizi, the Louvre, and the British Museum. Before they came to rest in public collections they were treasured in private hands, and our Adoration of the Shepherds, though seemingly 'lost' for so long a time, was no exception. Some of its story can be traced through the mark of Sir Thomas Lawrence in the lower left-hand corner.

The Lawrence collection, justly famous for its quality and scope, was formed with the aid of the London dealer Samuel Woodburn, himself a connoisseur of discernment. After the death of Sir Thomas it was turned over to Woodburn as Lawrence's chief creditor and was shown by him in 1835-1836 in a series of ten brilliant exhibitions of one hundred drawings each. In the catalogue of the fourth, which was devoted exclusively to the works of Correggio and Parmigianino, we find listed as no. 32 an "Adoration of the Shepherds—a beautiful composition. On the left a shepherd carries a lamb; above is seen the heavenly host, and on the right an angel descending over the holy family. Pen and bistre wash. Capital. Size, 6 inches by 8½ inches. From the Collection of the Marquis Vindé."

This information carries us back two steps: for Charles Gilbert, Vicomte Morel de Vindé, was the grandson and heir of Paignon Dijonval (1708-1792), one of the greatest collectors of prints and drawings of the eighteenth century. The Vicomte de Vindé, whose chief interests lay elsewhere, had his grandfather’s entire collection catalogued with the double purpose of making a permanent record of it and of selling it as a whole. In his catalogue, published in 1810, we find under number 391, after a description of the scene, “this very beautiful drawing is bistre wash on gray paper. It has been folded in quarters, and the folds have cut the paper.”

So we learn not only that it was in the Paignon Dijonval collection but that it had already suffered the precise damage it now has, which is clearly visible in the reproduction. In 1816 some six thousand drawings and sixty thousand prints were purchased by Woodburn from the Vicomte de Vindé.

The last clue which the drawing itself provides is the almost obliterated mark, on the lower right-hand edge, of another client of Woodburn's, W. Coningham, whose collection was sold to Colnaghi in 1846. Presumably our drawing, after passing from Paignon Dijonval to the Vicomte de Vindé, was purchased by Woodburn, sold by him to Lawrence, reacquired by Woodburn with the Lawrence collection, and later sold to Coningham. Just before it was bought by the Museum in 1946 it was in the hands of a Swiss collector.

The height of the drawing on page 73 is 8½ inches, width 5½ inches. Pen and bistre wash, on paper. Acc. no. 46.80.3.

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