AN ALTARPIECE OF THE DEATH OF THE VIRGIN

By ELIZABETH E. GARDNER
Research Fellow, Department of Paintings

In 1950 Robert Lehman presented to the Museum a large altarpiece, the Death of the Virgin by Bartolommeo Vivarini and his workshop. This interesting painting is now on exhibition in the Room of Recent Accessions.

The altarpiece was for many years in a side chapel of the Certosa in Padua, and scholars have long believed that it was, in fact, commissioned and painted for this chapel. However, it now appears that it must have been designed for some earlier edifice since its completion antedates the construction of the Certosa by at least fifty years. There is a cartellino at the lower center which once bore an inscription and a date, but they have been obliterated by successive generations of restorers, although the rest of the panel is in excellent condition. Our knowledge of the inscription and the date rests, therefore, on somewhat contradictory literary sources.

The altarpiece was first mentioned in 1765, the year in which the Certosa in Padua was suppressed, by Giovanni Battista Rossetti in Descrizione delle pitture, sculture, ed architetture di Padova. Rossetti described the inscription as reading “Opus factum Venetiis per Bartholomeum Vivarumin de Murano 1475.” In a subsequent edition Rossetti noted that the altarpiece had been moved to the Certosa in Venice, then sold and taken to London in 1775.

While the painting was in Venice it was cleaned and restored by Giovanni Maria Sasso, whose information regarding the inscription was transmitted to Giannantonio Moschini for use in his Guida di Murano (published in 1808). Moschini recorded the inscription as “Hoc opus factum fuit Venetiis 1499 per Bartholomeum Viva/rinum de Muriano.” Not only does the wording of the inscription differ from that recorded by Rossetti but the date has been changed from 1475 to 1499.

The purchaser of the altarpiece after its removal from Padua was the English Resident to the Republic of Venice, John Strange. While representing His Majesty George III in Venice from 1773 on, Strange formed an imposing collection of books, manuscripts, antiquities, and paintings, particularly of works of the Venetian school. When he returned to England in 1788 he took his collection with him and installed it in his house at Ridge, near Barnet, in Middlesex County. At his death in 1799 Strange directed that his entire collection be sold, the paintings by private contract, the prints, drawings, busts, and antiquities by Christie’s, the library by Leigh & Sotheby (this sale consumed twenty-nine days in 1801), and his cabinet of natural history specimens by King. However, the majority of Strange’s collection of paintings, some two hundred and ninety-four, were sold at auction by Christie’s in 1800. Vivarini’s altarpiece was not included in this sale; so it may be that it was sold, as directed, by private contract.

At some time, probably after the altarpiece had left John Strange’s collection, the inscription was altered to read “Giotto . . . tum . . . Veneti-\(\)hi pe./\(\)int. . . olomeum vive/ . . . m o\(\)iMu.\(\)iano l . . . .” And, as a painting by Giotto, it was lent to the great exhibition of Art Treasures at Manchester in 1857 by Lord Northwick. The compiler of the exhibition catalogue expressed his doubts about the attribution to Giotto, saying it was “more probably a production of some early North-Italian painter of Venice or Verona.” Two years later, at the sale of the collection of John Rushout, Baron Northwick, at Thirlestane House, Cheltenham, the altarpiece was sold under the name of Giotto, and was described as a “noble picture . . . incomparably the finest example of the early Italian school in Thirlestane House . . . . The whole subject is treated in a bold and striking manner, full of
The Death of the Virgin, by Bartolommeo Vivarini (active 1450-1499). The apostles, with the exception of Saint Thomas, are gathered around the Virgin, whose soul is received by Christ. On the left is Saint Lawrence and on the right Saint Stephen. Gift of Robert Lehman, 1950
character, and with a dignity and grandeur ... worthy the reputation of its great master.

After the Northwick sale the altarpiece changed hands several times and was shortly acquired by William Graham. While it was in Graham’s collection the inscription was again cleaned and the authorship restored to Bartolommeo Vivarini. When it was shown in the Royal Academy exhibition of Old Masters in 1885, the inscription read: “opus factum venetiis per bartholomeum vivarinum de muriano 1480.” At the sale of Graham’s collection in 1886 the painting was purchased for the collector Charles Butler, from whose estate it was sold at Christie’s in 1911.

The representation of the death of the Virgin, surrounded by the apostles, follows closely the account given by the thirteenth-century writer Jacobus de Voragine in The Golden Legend. Two saints, Lawrence, with his gridiron and book, and Stephen, the Deacon, with his censer and the stones of his martyrdom on head and shoulders, have been introduced into the scene. They take no part in the action of the picture but seem rather disinterested spectators and may perhaps record the features of the donors who commissioned the altarpiece.

Bartolommeo Vivarini, in whose large and flourishing shop this altarpiece was painted, was a native of Murano. He probably served his apprenticeship as a painter in the shop of his elder brother, Antonio, in Venice, and then became his brother’s partner, setting up his own shop about 1460. He received many commissions for altarpieces for churches in Venice, Bari, and Padua. These paintings show not only the influence of the Gothic painters of his adopted city of Venice but also that of a visitor from southern Italy, Antonello da Messina, who came to Venice about 1475. The greatest influence on Vivarini’s work, however, was that of Andrea Mantegna. The features of Mantegna’s monumental style most clearly recalled in our altarpiece are the almost sculptured figures of the apostles surrounding the Virgin, and the dry, rather barren landscape with its sharply defined contours. The faulty foreshortening of the figures seems to point to execution by assistants in Bartolommeo’s workshop rather than by the master himself.