

MARIA PORTINARI

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Maria Portinari, a detail of whose portrait by Hans Memling is shown on the cover, was born Maria Bandini-Baroncelli of Florence. Although she belonged to a prominent Florentine family, little or nothing is known about her before her marriage, a circumstance scarcely to be wondered at, for Maria was but fourteen years old in 1470 when she was wed to Tommaso di Folco Portinari, then thirty-eight. Like his bride Tommaso belonged to an important family of Florence. Back in Dante's day the Alighieri and the Portinari had been near neighbors, and the fifteenth-century Tommaso was descended from a brother of Beatrice, the thirteenth-century damsel made famous by the fervent account of her in the *Divine Comedy*.

As to Tommaso Portinari, only the extreme ends of his life were spent in Florence. As a boy of about twelve years, he was sent across Europe to the great seaport and Hanseatic town of Bruges, there to work his way up in the local branch of the great Medici bank and mercantile establishment. He started as a *giovane*, or office boy, under the protection of the branch manager, his cousin Bernardo Portinari. Soon afterward his cousin was replaced by Angelo Tani, but Tommaso proved to be an ambitious and energetic employee and his importance in the enterprise grew steadily.

The Medici in the third quarter of the fifteenth century operated probably the largest banking system in Europe. Besides the Bruges office they had established branches in Geneva, Avignon, London, Venice, Rome, and Milan. Raymond de Roover (in *The Medici Bank*, 1948, and in *Money, Banking, and Credit in Mediaeval Bruges*, 1948), and also A. Warburg (in *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 1932, pp. 185 ff.) have written brilliant analyses of the Medici business organization, from which it appears that in most cases the managers of the branch offices had capital of their own in-

vested and were partners in the complex enterprise, bound to it by various sorts of contracts. The branches not only engaged in banking but also carried on a lively trade in commodities, acting, for instance, as outlets for the Medici's silk and wool manufactories.

In 1470, when youthful Maria Baroncelli married Tommaso Portinari and came to live in Bruges, she found there a considerable coterie of Italian merchants and their wives. Among others was her kinsman Pierantonio Baroncelli, representing the Pazzi interests, the chief rivals of the Medici. Her own husband, now become manager of the Medici branch in Bruges, was the most prominent member of the Italian colony. Two years earlier the wedding of Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy and ruler of the Low Countries, and Margaret of York had been celebrated in Bruges. The streets were draped with tapestries, silks, and cloth of gold, and numerous *tableaux vivants* had been arranged illustrating scenes from sacred and profane history. In the procession marched Tommaso Portinari, extravagantly dressed and esteemed as a favored counselor of the duke. Following him came the "factors" (*i.e.*, agents or commission merchants) and the lesser employees from his own branch and the other Italian houses.

As time was to reveal, however, Portinari was an imprudent business man and an unmanageable agent. Indeed Charles the Bold possessed a dangerous fascination for Portinari. Charles seemed as accessible as he was powerful, and although there was an explicit clause in the Medici partnership agreement of 1455 which forbade the branch offices to lend money to any lord whatsoever, whether temporal or spiritual, only two years had passed when Portinari persuaded the then manager, Angelo Tani, to sell on credit to the duke a large amount of Florentine silk.

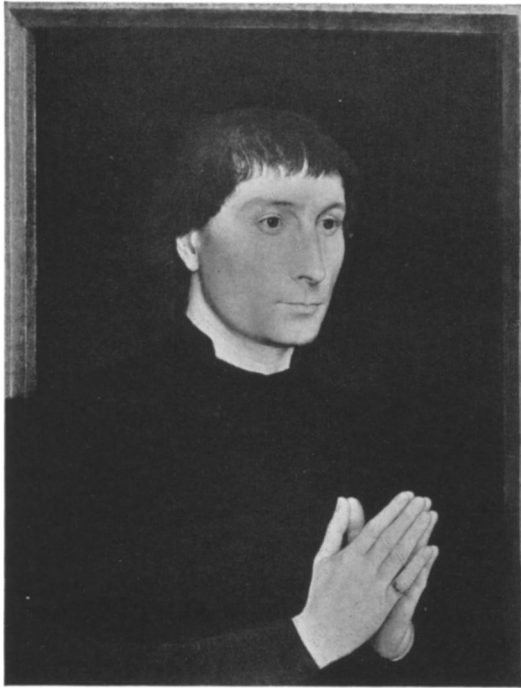
Despite the complicated contracts with the



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Tommaso and Maria Portinari, by Memling. Flemish, xv century. These portraits were painted about 1472, a few years after their marriage. Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913

separate concerns and the difficult distances from Florence, old Cosimo de' Medici, Pater Patriae, kept a vigilant eye on their transactions. Because of Portinari's unauthorized loans and general tendency to take risks, Cosimo blocked his promotion. But in 1465, only a year after the old gentleman's death, Tani was recalled and Portinari made manager.

Cosimo's sons, Piero and Lorenzo the Magnificent, were evidently more interested in philosophy and letters than in business, and their top executive officer in Florence, Francesco Sassetti (of whom this Museum owns a portrait by Ghirlandaio), was by no means as watchful as he should have been. Thus Portinari was more than ever able to indulge his venturesome spirit. Contrary to express Medici policy he acquired two Burgundian galleys, thus embarking on the shipping business. Before long one was captured by a Danzig privateer, and the other went down in a storm. His most disastrous undertaking, however, was an attempt, in partnership with the Pope, to form a cartel which would control the western

European supply of alum, a compound essential in dyeing textiles. It was necessary also to have the connivance of Charles the Bold. But despite very heavy loans of money from the Medici branch, Charles was unable to help maintain the needed monopoly because of the protests of his subjects against the resulting price. For some years Portinari continued his effort to corner this commodity. To his consternation in 1477 Charles the Bold was killed in battle at Nancy, leaving unpaid his immense debts to the Medici bank. The following year saw the Pope confiscate Medici holdings in the crucial alum mines, and in the same year the Medici family withdrew altogether from the branch at Bruges. Except for the branch at Milan, all the others had already failed. Tommaso Portinari, deprived of capital, continued a vain attempt to retrieve his private fortune. In 1495 his wife, Maria, not yet forty years old and the mother of ten children, died. Finally in 1497 Tommaso returned to Florence and four years later died in the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, founded

in 1285 by his ancestor, Folco Portinari.

During his affluent period Portinari had fortunately been a liberal patron of Flemish art, and thus to this day his memory remains green for lovers of beauty. In the year 1470, when Maria Baroncelli came to Bruges, Tommaso had ordered from Hans Memling a complicated painting of the Passion of Christ (now in the Pinacoteca at Turin). In the foreground at the extreme left and right are small portraits, kneeling, of himself and of his still girlish wife. It must have been about two years later that he had the same artist make the pair of straightforward portraits (17 $\frac{3}{8}$ by 13 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches) owned by this Museum. The prayerful attitude of each subject suggests that they faced a painting of the Madonna and Child, forming with it a folding triptych.

One of Memling's most marvelous works is his altarpiece of the Last Judgment. It was ordered by Angelo Tani, whom Portinari had contrived in 1465 to supersede as manager, and handsome portraits of Tani and his wife are to be seen on the wings. Tani had continued some of his capital in the Bruges branch. He revisited that city in 1469, and it may have been then that he gave the commission for the altarpiece and sat for his portrait. In the main panel, where Saint Michael is depicted weighing the souls on Judgment Day, Tommaso Portinari, entirely nude, occupies the heavier pan of the scales, while a pathetic little female creature, probably Maria, watches the ordeal in frightened suspense. The favorable verdict of the scales seems to indicate that Tani was still well disposed toward Portinari. In 1473 the altarpiece was consigned to Italy on one of Portinari's ships, but unfortunately this was the very voyage on which the ship was taken by privateers. The altarpiece was taken forthwith to Danzig and there installed in the Marienkirche.

One of the greatest paintings in the entire course of early Flanders is the large triptych with the Adoration of the Shepherds by Hugo van der Goes. It is now in the Uffizi in Florence, having been commissioned by Tommaso Portinari—doubtless the most useful enterprise of his entire career. On the left wing, in



Maria Portinari, detail of the right wing of the Adoration of the Shepherds, by Hugo van der Goes. Flemish, about 1475. Uffizi

a glorious landscape setting, is a portrait of himself kneeling as donor, accompanied by two young sons and patron saints, while the similar right wing shows Maria with her eldest child of the same name, born presumably in 1471. The boys, Antonio and Pigello, are thought to have been born in 1472 and 1474 respectively. Although Saint Margaret is shown as patroness in the right panel, Margherita, the fourth child, does not appear. Perhaps the painting was too far advanced when she came into the world. The altarpiece must have been painted about 1475 or 1476.

In this kneeling portrait by Hugo van der Goes, Maria Portinari appears as a somewhat grander lady than in Memling's portrait in this Museum. She wears the same necklace, but her headdress is beaded with pearls and she has a sterner and more assured bearing. Although only about four years had passed, she seems decidedly older, but those years cannot have been easy ones, what with the increasingly large family and its diminishing financial security.