Fresco - Virgin and Child

Object: Fresco
Place of origin: Florence (painted)
Date: 1520s (painted)
Artist/Maker: Puligo, Domenico, born 1492 - died 1527
Materials and Techniques: Fresco
Credit Line: Given by Mrs A. Blyth
Museum number: 1361-1904
Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description
Domenico Puligo (1492-1527) was born in Florence and successively trained there with Ridolfo Ghirlandaio (1483-1561), Antonio del Cerraiolo and Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530). He appeared as a member of the Guild of St Luke in Florence in 1525 and chiefly produced religious scenes and portraits.

This fragment of a detached fresco represents a Virgin and Child embraced and bears some characteristics features of the Florentine painter Domenico Puligo. The very poor conditions of the fresco however do not allow warranting any definitive attribution.

Descriptive line
Fresco fragment, 'Virgin and Child', Ascribed to Domenico Puligo, 1520s

Physical description
The Virgin, represented as a very young woman, is gazing at the beholder. She wears a simple white veil on her hair and presses her chin against the Child's head, also gazing at the beholder and stretching out his arm around his mother's neck.

Dimensions
Height: 36.8 cm estimate, Width: 30 cm estimate

Museum number
1361-1904

Object history note
Given by Mrs A. Blyth, 1904

Historical significance: This painting is a fragment of a detached fresco originally attributed to Federico Barocci, the Umbrian painter famous for the delicateness of his Virgins' faces. Although close to Barocci's style, this attribution is no longer sustainable due to some similarities with the Florentine school of the first 16th century, especially Domenico Puligo whose art also echoes the manner of Andrea del Sarto and Pontormo.

Despite the very poor conditions of the fresco that complicate any attempt of attribution, one can see that the painting bears some characteristic features of Domenico Puligo's style, especially the round face of the Virgin, the slightly round eyes and very clean eyebrow line as well as the form of the pug nose slightly turned up. The colours have faded over the centuries and can no longer be taken in consideration whereas the design is close to such works as the Virgin and Child in a landscape with the young St John the Baptist, Galleria Borghese, Rome as well as the drawing Head of a Veiled Woman Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence (Inv.290F).

Puligo was an eclectic artist who was described by Giorgio Vasari in his Lives (1550 and 1568) as a lazy painter inclined to borrow and repeat the same motifs in different compositions. The child gesture, stretching out his arm around his mother's neck, is indeed a recurrent motif in such works as Fra Bartolomeo's Virgin and Child, Museo di San Marco, Florence (in reverse).

The relatively small size of the fragment suggests that it may have been part of a wall decoration, possibly for private devotional purposes.

Historical context note
Fresco painting is among the most complex projects undertaken during the Renaissance. This technique, i.e. painting on wet plaster, originated in the Antiquity (see the surviving fresco of Pompeii, near Naples, destructured during the eruption of the Vesuvius in 79 B.C.), was reintroduced and developed in the late 13th century and the 14th century particularly in the work of the Isaac master, Giotto and his followers and perfected during the Italian Renaissance, culminating in Michelangelo's technological tour de force in the Sistine chapel, Rome (1508-12).

This medium was used to decorate large wall areas of both private and public buildings. Such sizable paintings, in which timing was of critical importance, took careful planning and involved a number of assistants. A precise plan in the form of a drawing or of many drawings was required so that the composition would fit exactly on the wall. The artist could draw directly on the wet plaster (this underdrawing technique is called sinopia) or use cartoons (from the Italian word cartone) from which the composition was then transferred onto the wall. Another method of transfer, used especially in the 17th century for vast ceiling frescoes, was squaring, which replaced the time-consuming and costly cartoon technique.

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