Oil painting - The Adoration of the Shepherds

Object: Oil painting

Place of origin: Naples (painted)
Florence (Previously attributed to, made)

Date: Late 17th century - early 18th century (painted)

Artist/Maker: Unknown (artist)

Materials and Techniques: Oil on marble laid on slate, with a surround of black varnished slate

Credit Line: Given by the Museum of Art, Hove

Museum number: P.22-1962

Gallery location: Prints & Drawings Study Room, level D, case BECK1, shelf 2

Public access description
This painting was made in oil paint on marble, a practice fashionable in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Italy and Germany. The finest stones for marble paintings were quarried from Florence and the surrounding areas, possibly explaining the former attributed of this work to the Florentine school. It has since been recognised as a Neapolitan work. Paintings on marble were said to have been 'made by nature, helped by the brush.' The unidentified painter of the Adoration of the Shepherds used the veining of the marble to frame the visit to the Holy Family with trees and shelter. The Biblical subject matter of this work has been a popular theme for artists over many centuries and regions.

Descriptive line
Oil painting on marble, The Adoration of the Shepherds, Neapolitan School, 17th century

Physical description
Painting depicting the Adoration of the Shepherds at the birth of Christ. The scene takes place in the lower left corner of the painting. Mary and Joseph present Christ in his manger, as the shepherds enter from the right.

Museum number
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Object history note
This painting was formerly in the collection of Capt. F.H. Huth; sold at Christie's, 25 February 1916; Mrs Carswell (before 1923); Canon F.H.D. Smythe, given to the Museum of Art, Hove; given to the V&A Museum in 1962.

Historical context note
Paintings on stone were fashionable in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly in Italy. This piece is a marble panel laid on slate with a surround of black varnish. Originally attributed to the Florentine School when sold at Christie's in 1916 (25 Feb. 1916, lot 116/2), this oil painting on marble is now considered to be of the Neapolitan School. According to C.M. Kauffman's Catalogue of Foreign Paintings, before 1800, the material on which this has been painted is a mottled marble found in the Valley of the Arno and hence called pietra d'Amo or Pietra paesina (landscape stone). It is made primarily of limestone and clay, and is almost exclusively found in the Tuscan area of Italy. Some of the best quality pesinas come from near Florence and it is sometimes called the 'Stone of Florence', which would account for the original attribution to that school. These paintings, it was said, were 'made by nature, helped by the brush.' Their invention was attributed in 1530 to the Venetian Sebastiano del Piombo (1485-1547) and they were popular particularly in North Italy and in Florence (M. Chiarini, 'Pittura su pietra' in Antichità Viva, ix (2), Firenze, 1970, pp. 29-37, esp. fig. 2; L. Bartoli and E. A. Maser, Il Museo dell'Opificio delle Pietre Dure di Firenze, 1955, pp. 25 f., 44).

As is customary with paintings on stone, the natural configuration of the marble has been incorporated into the composition. The veining of the marble provides structure for the scene, with trees and branches and the suggestion of a shelter or stable around the Holy Family and their visitors. The figures are painted, but most of the landscape is made up of the markings of the stone. The colour of the stone is muted, as are most of the figures, except for the robes of the Virgin Mary and those of shepherds. The Adoration of the Shepherds is a common theme in religious art across the centuries and regions.

Other oil paintings on marble have been attributed to artists working in Southern Germany, including like Johann König (1586–1642) and Hans Rottenhammer (1564 – 14 August 1625). The V&A holds a number of paintings on stone including Virgin and Child (Museum no. M.179-1960) attributed to Rottenhammer; Virgin and Child with St Joseph (Museum no. 524-1872), and Baptism of Christ (Museum no. P.8-1956). These other works also have religious subject matter, although are painted on a variety of stones. In the exhibition Paintings on Copper, Slate and Marble at the Hazlett Gallery, London held in October 1967, only two paintings on marble were exhibited, demonstrating the relative rarity of such works.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O134383/the-adoration-of-the-shepherds-oil-painting-unknown/