

# BEAUTY, SEDUCTION AND SHARING

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Art Collection  
Maria and João Cortez de Lobão

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In 1410, the Portuguese painter Álvaro Pirez (active 1410-1434) was given his first known commission in Italy: the fresco decoration of the façades of the palace in Prato belonging to Francesco di Marco Datini (c. 1335-1410), an important trader from Tuscany with interests all around Europe, including Portugal. Pirez was accompanied, in this vast undertaking intended to glorify the merchant's civic and charitable activity, by another four Florentine painters: Niccòlo Gerini (c. 1368-1415), Scolaio di Giovanni (1369-1434) Ambrogio di Baldese (c. 1352-1429) and Lippo d'Andrea (c. 1370-1451). Visitors to the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga might recall that, in its 2019-2020 exhibition devoted to Álvaro Pirez, in addition to some works by these artists, they will have seen the large panels showing prepara-

**Ventura di Moro**  
(Florence, c. 1395/99-1486)

*Virgin with Child between Saints Jude Thaddaeus,  
Simon, Anthony and Leonard*

c. 1430-1435  
Tempera and gold on poplar wood  
105,5 × 41 cm (central panel)  
c. 93,5 × 49,5 cm (side panels)

Gaudium Magnum Foundation /  
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tory drawings in red (sinopia pigment) for the frescoes at Palazzo Datini—all that remains today of the lost paintings from the monumental complex in Prato. Among this group of painters, Gerini was the oldest and most renowned, but they were all generally regarded as part of a traditional and severe trend in Florentine painting, exponents of which included Gherardo Starnina (1388-1412), a master who had worked on the Iberian Peninsula between 1395 and 1401, and Lorenzo Monaco (1370-1422).

In the large group of works attributed to one of these painters, Ambrogio di Baldese, it was possible to identify an individual *corpus* that differs from work by this artist documented with more certainty, which pointed, as suggested by Raimond van Marle, to an autonomous master with the provisional name “Pseudo-Ambrogio Baldese”. It was in a small painting attributed to this Pseudo-Baldese, a *Virgin with Child* at the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena, that Edoardo Carli identified the signature of Ventura di Moro, reading his name among the decorative characters that adorn the Virgin’s cloak, providing a basis for attributing a series of works to him. His production was later defined by Enrica Neri Lusanna, but this only encompassed a small part of the paintings attributed to “Pseudo-Baldese”. Linda Pisani later demonstrated that most of this group was in fact a body of paintings that could be attributed to Lippo d’Andrea, one of the contributors to the fresco works at Palazzo Datini.

Ventura di Moro was not an unknown figure in Italian art, but the circumstance of most of his documented paintings having disappeared, added to the fact that he frequently worked with collaborators and assistants, made it difficult to identify his work with any certainty. His longevity, in a period of profound change in Italian art, also makes it hard, even now, to attribute works to his later phase. Ventura di Moro was born in Florence between 1395 and 1399 and died in the same city, nearly 90 years old, in 1486. It is likely that during his training he made contact with painters such as those with whom his work was confused, like the above-mentioned Ambrogio di Baldese and Lippo d’Andrea. He was already a painter, and a member of the Compagnia di San Luca, in 1416, and lived through a period of intense revolution in Florentine art. To offer some perspective, when di Moro died, Leonardo da Vinci was already nearly 40. In 1427, he joined the Arte dei Medici e Speziali guild, which included painters. He shared his workshop, on Corso degli Adimari, with another painter, Giuliano di Jacopo, and with Marco di Filippo and one of Giuliano’s nephews, Jacopo di Antonio, as his assistants. In 1446, when he painted the façade of the Bigallo oratory, he worked with the brothers Rossello and Giunta di Jacopo Franchi. These collaborative fresco productions, the painting of small devotional works

and altarpieces for the outskirts of the city, are thought to have allowed Ventura di Moro to run a workshop that remained largely distanced from the major transformations in Florentine painting, maintaining the models and compositional solutions of the painting of the first third of the century, with highly decorative gilded and punched backgrounds and competent work that strictly adhered to archaic formulae. However, the later paintings attributed to him, from the 1430s and 40s, such as the *Coronation of the Virgin* in the Capitoline Museums, or the triptych of the *Virgin between Saint Anthony and Saint Peter* in the Pieve di Santa Maria in Dicomano, show an attempt to open up to the art of younger painters, such as Masolino.

The triptych in the collection of the Gaudium Magnum Foundation, now on display, is an excellent demonstration of the quality of Ventura di Moro’s work, but also of the atavism of his compositions, which adopt models from earlier in the century, rooted in the bygone severity of Giotto’s work. Against a gold background, on a uniform floor, to which the chromatic gradation seeks to give the illusion of perspective, two pairs of saints are arranged, in the traditional fashion, on the side panels, with the Virgin on the throne with the Infant Jesus on her lap in the central panel. The Virgin’s throne also shows the same intention of creating a space with perspective and the relationship between Mother and Child reflects an attitude of extreme humanity and tenderness. The iconography of the saints, varied as it is, did not allow for any great speculation as to the possible provenance of the paintings. Saint Simon and Saint Jude Thaddaeus, on the left-hand panel, are usually depicted together, united by their apostleship in Persia. On the other side, Saint Anthony, a much-venerated figure in the Florence region, is associated with Saint Leonard, patron saint of prisoners. This choice is undoubtedly related to the place where it was made and the devotion of the original patrons, neither of which can be specified. Other than this, the paintings only became known in the historiography of art when they were presented in the exhibition *The Art of Devotion. Painting of Early Renaissance Italy*, at Middlebury College Museum of Art, in 2009, on loan from their then owner, the Florence-born, New York-based art restorer and dealer Marco Grassi. The paintings were then on three separate panels, with semicircular tops and without their current framing. It is highly likely that their original arrangement included the traditional pinnacle tops, with the inclusion of *tondi*, as seen on the intensively-restored triptych of Santa Maria in Dicomano, mentioned above.

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