

**DUVEEN AND THE QUATTROCENTO:
THE EXAMINATION AND TREATMENT OF A TONDO
FROM THE CIRCLE OF BOTTICELLI**

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ISABELLE TOKUMARU
Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts
New York University

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ISABELLE TOKUMARU

Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU

ABSTRACT — The 1926 restoration of the *Madonna and Child* by a follower of Botticelli from the Samuel H. and thirties. It reflected the expectations and tastes of the dealers and collectors of the time, which was Kress Collection was typical of Quattrocento paintings that went through the hands of the Duveen Galleries in the twenties for bright, clean paintings with smooth surfaces. The thick varnish and retouches had become discolored with time, and a previous treatment to correct bloom in the varnish had produced an uneven surface. The cleaning of the panel painting revealed extensive damage to the background and Madonna's robe and two large diagonal losses. Some of the damages were caused by the 'Duveen' restoration, which included a transfer to wood, and some to earlier alterations and treatments, such as the overpainting of the background and the subsequent removal of the overpainting. The extensive losses were retouched and a portion of the Madonna's robe was reconstructed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Madonna and Child*, which is now in the El Paso Museum of Art in Texas (61.1.13), was purchased by Samuel Kress from Duveen Brothers in 1940 (fig. 1).¹ It is one

of four paintings which came to the Conservation Center through the Samuel H. Kress Foundation for treatment in a class taught by Dianne Dwyer Modestini. The examination and cleaning of this panel painting was interesting, especially for a conservation student, because of what it revealed about the historical context of restorations.

The tondo is generally attributed to either the school of Botticelli or to a follower of Botticelli. Bernhard Berenson, The early 20th century cataloguer of Italian Renaissance paintings, dated the panel to 1500 to 1505, and expertised it as by Botticelli himself. The back of a photograph in the Samuel H. Kress Foundation's archives bears his inscription, which reads, "Sandro Botticelli, a noble work, one of his last monumental designs."

Before the turn of the century, there were very few old master paintings in the United States. The situation changed dramatically in the first decades of the 1900s as a number of Americans amassed vast fortunes. The firm, of Duveen Brothers, led by the dynamic Joseph Duveen, helped create a major redistribution of great works of European art by catering to American multi-millionaire collec-

tors, such as J.P. Morgan, Isabella Stewart Gardner, Benjamin Altman, John D. Rockefeller, Jules Bache, Andrew Mellon, the Huntingtons, the Wideners, and Samuel Kress.

The firm of Duveen Brothers was established in 1890 and had branches in London and Paris, as well as New York. While Joseph Duveen was knowledgeable in British, French and Dutch art, he relied on Bernhard Berenson for opinions on the authenticity of Italian paintings as well as for locating works that might be for sale. By 1912 the demand by American collectors for Italian Renaissance art was so great, that Duveen entered into a profit-sharing partnership with Berenson. In exchange for providing Duveens' with first refusal of "First Class" Italian paintings that he knew of, Berenson received 25% of the profits (Strachy and Samuels 1983). A meticulous record, the "X Book," was kept of expenses relating to paintings bought on Berenson's advice.

This 25 year partnership was not without difficulty, since Berenson relied on income from Duveens' to maintain his princely lifestyle. In a letter to her family, Berenson's wife, Mary, complained that, the Duveens were "continually at him to make him say pictures are different from what he thinks, and are very cross with him for not giving way and 'just letting us have your authority for calling this a Cossa instead of School of Jura' or 'allowing us to take [it], you will ap-

prove us calling this by the master's hand, as it is so close, etc. etc.'" (Strachy and Samuels 1983).

Joseph Duveen counted on the beauty of works of art to charm his clients into buying them. He had them cleaned, restored, and re-framed so that they would be ready to hang in the well-appointed homes of his American clients. Edward Fowles, Duveen's right-hand man and the co-inheritor of the business at his death, wrote in his memoirs, "Pictures which we purchased from private collections were almost always in dire need of cleaning and reframing. Without such treatment, the qualities beneath the grime would remain hidden, and the painting be of little interest to the collector" (Fowles 1976).

Some 'Duveen pictures,' such as the *Madonna and Child* by Luca Signorelli (49.7.13) and the *Madonna and Child* by Carlo Crivelli (49.7.5) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art were, and are, in excellent condition, and required little restoration. Damaged works, however, necessitated aesthetic compensation. The amount of restoration varied, and Duveens' has been criticized for "improving" some works with liberal repainting.

2. EXAMINATION

Ronald Lightbown's catalogue raisonné of Botticelli's work describes the El Paso panel as only having "slight abrasions" (1978). The damages to the painting revealed during

cleaning proved to be much more extensive. Fortunately, the Duveen restoration of this *Madonna and Child*, aimed at regaining aesthetic unity by restoring damaged areas rather than at "improving" the painting with liberal overpainting. The poor condition of the background and the lower portion of the Madonna's robe compared with that of the figures, though, suggests that the damages were partly due to treatment. Aging or environmental conditions alone would have produced more even damages across the painting (fig. 2).

In a photo from around 1925, in the Kress Foundation's archives the background, the back of the throne, and the rays of light within the haloes have been painted out.² This overpainting is confirmed by traces of a thick black paint visible in these areas. Generally the practice of silhouetting figures was a way to disguise the fact that a painting was cut from a larger composition, such as the *Pietà* by Fra Bartolomeo in the Palazzo Pitti. In this case, however, the panel was not cut down,³ and with the exception of the throne, the background was empty. Perhaps a former owner may have thought the silhouetted look was more fashionable, or it may have been an expedient way to treat blistering and flaking paint. The New York restorer, William Suhr (1932) wrote "Many times pictures have come to my attention from which the blisters and all loose paint had been recklessly scratched and unneces-

sarily large areas of the picture repainted" (1932).

Panel paintings were especially prone to crack and blister in the harsh environments of centrally heated American homes. As a result, they were commonly transferred to either another panel or to canvas. This procedure was often carried out in Paris, where the technique is said to have been invented by Picault in the mid-eighteenth century.

In describing one panel painting's horror story, Berenson writes, "they put it over a register with the result that the tempera began to come off like shavings. You never saw a more pitiable sight. Davis [the owner] was in blank despair, and I with him. But he packed the thing off to Paris, there had it transferred to canvas, and now you can not possibly tell that it ever was in anyway in danger" (Strachy and Samuels 1983).

Duveens' bought the *Madonna and Child* tondo from Kleinberger's in New York at the beginning of 1925 (Kleinberger Archive) and proceeded to prepare the panel for sale in the typical Duveen manner. The entry in the "X Book" reveals that after an initial restoration in New York, the painting was "packed off" to Paris in 1926 to Leguay to be transferred. A few months later the painting was restored again, this time by Madame Helfer, Duveens' Parisian restorer. It was shipped back to New York in 1927, where it was fitted with an elaborate frame commissioned from Vannoni, an Italian framemaker.

Photographs from the Duveen Brothers' files show that at some point the painting was "improved." The haloes and the borders of the Madonna's veil were gilded, perhaps in an attempt to make the work more salable.

Other early photographs from the files appear to depict the tondo before it was transferred to a new panel, since damages such as on the Madonna's forehead, and extending across her proper left arm and the child's toes, are not present. A close inspection of the photos of this state suggested that the history of the panel may be more complicated than expected. Weave texture appears to be present in some areas. The painting may have been transferred to canvas before it was purchased by Duveens, who then had it transferred to wood. Now, with a thinner varnish, the canvas texture is visible in raking light. The impression of a fine-weave facing cloth used in a transfer is also visible.

At first we did not know that the painting had been transferred at all, since the edges of the painting were obscured by a veneer, and there was a cradle on the back. The surface, though, was rather flat for such a large panel painting. Then we noticed that the orientation of the grain of the panel and the back panel of the cradle were different, which is contrary to the purpose of a cradle. Cradles are generally aligned with their sliding members across the grain of the wood, allowing the panel to shrink and expand in this direction.

The panel was re-cradled in the studio of the New York restorer, Steven Pichetto, after

it entered the Kress Collection. This style of cradling is a hallmark of restorations during the early decades of this century (fig. 3). Fine-grained hardwood strips are glued onto the back of the panel parallel to the grain, through which sliding cross strips are slotted, in order to keep the panel straight while permitting free expansion and contraction. Pichetto's cradles were exceptionally well crafted, and many, such as this one, have cross bars that still slide freely. These cradles typically cover 50-75% of the back of the panel and, as in this case, add a significant weight to the piece (Rosen 1941).

Confirmation that the painting had been transferred came during the removal of some of the overpaints and retouches. In several areas the original paint lay on top of a purplish-gray material, sometimes with no intervening gesso layer, which could only happen if the painting had been transferred. In an x-radiograph of the tondo, scrape marks from the removal of the wooden panel and the thinning of the gesso appear to be visible. A transfer ground, the purplish-gray material, was applied to level the back surface before the painting was adhered to a new support. The radio-opacity of this material suggests that it contains some lead, which was confirmed with a microchemical test.

3. TREATMENT

The treatment of the El Paso tondo involved the removal of the majority of the Duveen

restoration, which was thick and discolored. Instead of trying to make the painting look like new, which was the type of restoration preferred by Duveens', we aimed at retouching the losses to restore unity to the painting, while taking care to preserve the aged appearance one expects of a Quattrocento panel (figs. 2 and 5).

The surface was covered with a thick varnish that was characteristically applied to paintings in the twenties and thirties to give them a smooth surface. The varnish had yellowed and was partially removed due to local treatments for bloom, producing an uneven surface (Kress Archive). New, cool tonalities were revealed by the cleaning. For example, the Child's drapery and the Madonna's veil turned out to be lavender rather than gray.

The Duveen retouching in the background was cupping and flaking. We consolidated these areas, because at first we planned to leave this restoration, since there appeared to be very little original paint left. Later, the overpaint in the background was removed because it was decided that in addition to its poor condition, its warm brown color was at odds with the original cool dark brown that was revealed by the cleaning.

There was also a great deal of old retouching in the panels of the throne. It was also removed, since the reddish brown color was not easily toned with glazes and scumbles to match that of the original purple. It was also significantly thicker and had more

texture than the original paint. Not all of the old retouching was removed, since some of it, especially in the white areas of the throne, could be adjusted to match the original paint.

Before cleaning, the Madonna's blue robe appeared to be in poor condition with a large amount of retouching or overpainting. We were pleasantly surprised that proper left sleeve of the robe was in fairly good condition below the overpaint, despite abrasions and a number of large losses. This led to hope that the rest of her robe, which appeared to be more heavily restored, was in a similar condition. Local tests, however, and the presence of deep incised lines imitating craquelure suggested that there was not much of it left. It appeared that the original paint had been scraped off and the portion of the robe which extended from the Madonna's proper right sleeve to the bottom of the panel, repainted.

At first we simply thinned the varnish in this area. We were hesitant to remove the reconstruction, since it was such a large area, and we had no indication of the original design. Later, in consultation with Mario Modestini, it was decided that it would be difficult to integrate the reconstructed area of the robe with the sleeve, due to differences in color, texture and thickness. Figure 4 shows the Madonna's robe with the dark blue paint, which was very thick and oily, removed. With the exception of a few patches of bleached original paint present at the left, that had probably been discolored by an early al-

kali cleaning, it is not the original paint that is visible, but the underpaint for the restoration. This underpaint was in an aqueous medium, probably casein or tempera.

When we looked for a model to base our restoration of this area, we noticed that the Uffizi's "Madonna and Child with Six Angels" by Botticelli had served as the model for the underpaint of the reconstruction. The design had been simplified, though, during the application of dark blue glazes. We based our reconstruction on the underpainting for the previous restoration as well as on the Botticelli tondo. The aim was to provide enough detail to give some structure to the area, but to keep the reconstruction from drawing attention away from the original paint in the sleeve.

The losses were first toned to match the surrounding areas with dry pigment in a PVA AYAB medium. The various blues, including the discolored original paint and the underpainting for the previous reconstruction, were then glazed with watercolor and Maimeri paints to unify the drapery. Our goal was to create an aged appearance similar to that of the original blue paint.

Happily the paint in the flesh areas was in fairly good condition. Besides the large damage which runs across the faces, the figures only suffered surface abrasion, such as on the Child's forehead. The abrasions revealed an interesting aspect of the underpainting, which is also seen in works by Botticelli's contemporaries. While the shad-

ows were underpainted with a bright yellow-green, the underpainting in the areas of highlights are a cool green, probably terre verte, such as on the Madonna's forehead and knuckles.

4. CONCLUSION

The restoration of the *Madonna and Child* by a follower of Botticelli from the Samuel H. Kress Collection was typical of Quattrocento paintings that went through the hands of the Duveen Galleries in the twenties and thirties. It reflects the expectations of dealers and the wealthy American collectors of the period for paintings to bright with smooth surfaces. To this end Duveen had paintings cleaned, sometimes 'improved,' and thickly varnished. The inclination to transfer and cradle panel paintings to solve problems of blistering and flaking is also characteristic of the period.

'Duveen pictures' were not only cleaned and restored, they were systematically re-framed as well. Duveen frequently had frames for early Italian Renaissance pieces such as the Kress tondo, made by the Florentine framer, Vannoni. While Duveen frames incorporated elements from the Renaissance, they were designed to suit the fashions of the time. The essence of a Quattrocento tondo is to be round, and a tabernacle frame, such as the one on the El Paso tondo, would have been out of place in a

Quattrocento home, which is the environment for which a tondo was intended.

Joseph Duveen, who became Sir Joseph Duveen and then Lord Duveen of Millbank, cultivated his public image to appear a wealthy and powerful connoisseur (Behrman 1952). In a catalogue for an exhibition of Duveen paintings, Dr. Valentiner (1926) writes,

Among the quantities of Italian paintings that, thanks to the growing interest in this school, have flooded America, there have been only a few works of the first importance which did not pass through the hands of Sir Joseph Duveen. His steady endeavour to direct this interest only to works of the highest quality has not only been of value to the private collector, but also to the connoisseur who was only too prone to let the historic interest of a painting influence his aesthetic judgment.

Most of 'Duveen pictures' are today in museums through donations by American collectors, and many bear the imprint of their passage through the Duveen galleries.

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NOTES

1. The provenance of the painting is primarily French. It was in the collections of the Count de Sarty, the Baron de Vendevre, and the Grassets. The tondo was purchased by Duveen Galleries from Kleinberger at the end of 1924 – beginning of 1925. After the painting was restored, Duveens' displayed it in several exhibitions in the United States before selling it to Samuel Kress in 1940.
2. The photograph was found among the papers of Count Contini Bonacossi, and was taken at the Exportation Office of the "Regia Soprintendenza all'Arte Medioevale e Moderna", Florence, Italy. The overpainting is also noted in Lightbown's catalogue entry. It appears that these areas were overpainted when the tondo was belonged to the Kleinberger galleries, since the stock card mentions a stone bench, rather than a throne, "La vierge est assise sur un banc en pierre..."
3. Art historians have speculated that this panel was cut down from a rectangle some time before 1867 (Lightbown 1978). This is highly unlikely because of the grain of the original panel slants upward to the right. A rectangular panel would have had a grain that was parallel with its edges.

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