

Venus and Cupid, ca. 1500
Girolamo di Benvenuto
Egg tempera and oil on wood panel
20 1/2 × 20 in. (51.1 × 50.8 cm)
Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado
1961.172 (K-222)



FIG. 1. *Venus and Cupid*, before cleaning and restoration.



FIG. 2. *Venus and Cupid* (fig. 1), after cleaning and restoration.

The Re-use of a *Descò da Parto*

Mika Okawa and Dianne Dwyer Modestini

IN 1995 THE GIROLAMO DI BENVENUTO *Venus and Cupid* (figs. 1, 2, and 3), from the Samuel H. Kress Collection of the Denver Art Museum, came to the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University for treatment. A Siennese painter, Girolamo (1470–1524) was the son of Benvenuto di Giovanni with whom he collaborated and whose style he imitated.¹ The painting in question is of particular interest as it is a *descò da parto* or birth tray, a salver presented to a mother on the birth of her child; in this case the form is a sixteen-sided polygonal panel painted in tempera and oil. It had sustained severe damages in the form of deep scratches, abrasions, losses and stains, probably from its use as a piece of household furniture, but also from deliberate vandalism of the nudes, a common occurrence. The perfectly legible coat of arms on the bottom has not been identified.

Two interesting features of this object emerged in the course of examination and restoration. The first has to do with its provenance and critical history. It was acquired by the Florentine dealer Count Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi from a Conte della Gherardesca, a member of an old and noble Florentine family. As Fern Rusk Shapley records:

When it was in the Gherardesca Collection, κ-222 was, according to Schubring ... decorated on the back with a standing Cupid in a circular simulated frame. In a letter of Feb. 19, 1949, R. Mather writes of having seen back and front as two separate panels before κ-222 entered the Kress Collection. An X-ray made by A. Burroughs soon after it entered the Kress Collections shows a circle

corresponding to the inner circle of the tondo frame but no further evidence of the tondo panel. Discussing the X-rays, Burroughs indicated that there was some kind of design at this time on the reverse of the panel: "In spite of the design on the reverse of this panel," he says, "the paint is well recorded in good condition." Whatever the design, it seems to have disappeared when the panel was treated for cradling in 1933. Not even the circle shows in an X-ray made in the 1950s. The present whereabouts of the cupid tondo is unknown.²

In a footnote in the third volume of the Kress Italian paintings catalogues,³ Shapley had identified the missing back of the *desco*:

The reverse of this salver has been given to the Castel Sant'Angelo, Rome (Menotti Bequest), as noted by Federico Zeri (in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. CIX, 1967, p. 477) and listed in the posthumous edition of B. Berenson (*Italian Pictures . . . Central and North Italian Schools*, vol. 1, 1968, p. 187).

Samuel H. Kress acquired the *desco* in 1932. As stated, Alan Burroughs's X-radiograph revealed a "circle" and "some kind of design on the reverse of the panel." After the painting was purchased, it

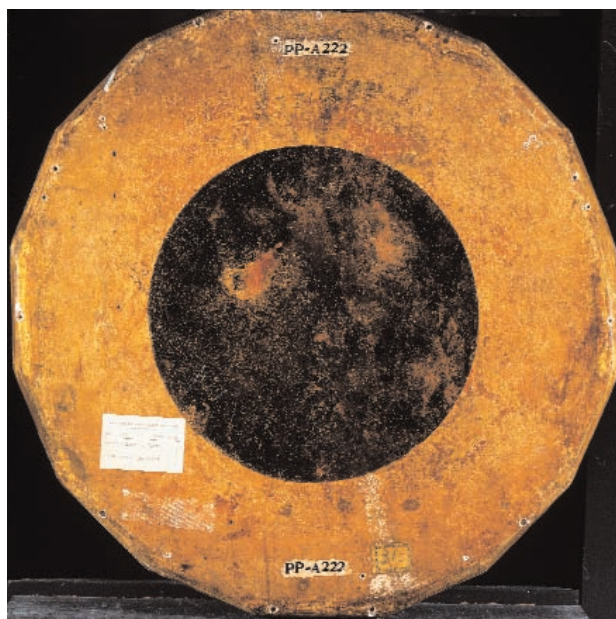


FIG. 3. *Venus and Cupid* (fig. 1), verso.

was cradled in Stephen Pichetto's studio according to usual practice, presumably by the carpenter Angelo Fatta, and fitted into a shadow box with a Masonite backing. When new radiographs were made in the 1950s, the heavy cradle made it impossible to determine if there was any design on the reverse. What is more, the very presence of a cradle would logically lead to the conclusion that the *desco* lacked its original back. Evidently no one saw the painting out of its shadow box and assumed that Zeri was right, that the double-sided *desco* had been split and sold as two separate paintings before 1932. As late as 1997 in a definitive study, *I Deschi da Parto e La Pittura del primo Rinascimento Toscano*,⁴ the presumed verso, the *Standing Cupid* in Castel Sant'Angelo, is illustrated together with the recto in Denver.

When the *desco* was freed from the shadow box with its Masonite backing we were surprised to see that it had retained its original back, a simple design of a large black circle on a white ground, consistent with Alan Burroughs's notes. On further examination we were amazed to discover that a cradle was concealed within the *desco*. The panel had been sliced in half and the inside hollowed out to accommodate a heavy cradle; the two halves were then rejoined with screws. There was no doubt that they had once been a single object. This bizarre undertaking was accomplished with great skill; a thin, barely perceptible cut separated the front from the reverse. While we have not had an opportunity to examine the Castel Sant'Angelo *Standing Cupid* that bears devices associated with the della Gherardesca family, the two *deschi* certainly were never part of the same object and may have entirely different provenances.

Parts of *Venus and Cupid* were reworked at an early date: the mordant gilding, the coat of arms, and the delicately painted flowers in the foreground appear to be by another hand, in a different medium (possibly aqueous or an emulsion), and were all added later. It is impossible to say with certainty how many years intervened between the creation of the original image and its later embellishments. They are certainly antique but were painted when the original, which appears to

be in an oil medium, was thoroughly dry. The later additions are brittle with a different craquelure pattern, and they sometimes cover losses. The entire coat of arms belongs to this reworking and gives credence to Mather's observation in 1949 that it was not original.

Noting that the verso of the *desco* was original and the recto bore later embellishments including the alteration of the coat of arms, it might be hypothesized that the panel had been used as a salver for another birth, perhaps fifty to one hundred years later. As already mentioned, the coat of arms has not been identified. Perhaps the simple decoration of the reverse, a black circle on a white field, has some significance. There is no doubt that the confusion, first introduced by Schubring in 1923, between the Castel Sant'Angelo Cupid and our *desco* is finally resolved. *Venus and Cupid*, though tampered with, is intact; the coat of arms, while not original, is antique. With this information in the future it may be possible to shed light on this intriguing instance of mistaken identity and re-use of a Renaissance ceremonial object in a later period.

Because of the history of the object, during the restoration we left the reworked passages in their entirety and tried to be selective in our retouching, particularly of the numerous gouges and depressions that characterize the Renaissance objects made for household use, such as *cassoni*, removing the most disturbing damages but not trying to make the image perfect.

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NOTES

1. Fern Rusk Shapley, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection, Vol. 1: Italian Schools, XIII–XV Century* (London, Phaidon, 1966), p. 161 and the entry on Benvenuto di Giovanni (di Meo del Guasta) by Cynthia Coté, *Grove Dictionary of Art* (New York, Grove Press, 1996), Vol. 3, pp. 750–51.
2. Shapley 1966 (cited in note 1), p. 162.
3. Fern Rusk Shapley, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection, Vol. 3: Italian Schools, XVI–XVIII Century*. London: Phaidon, 1973, p. 387.
4. Cecilia De Carli, *Archivi di Arte Antica*. Turin: Umberto Allemandi & Co., 1997, no. 60, pp. 200–201.

PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

Figs. 1, 2, and 3, pp. 94 and 96. Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO, Samuel H. Kress Collection (1961.172).

