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AUCTION DATE

Session 1 29 Jan 09 10:00 AM

LOCATION

New York

LOT 8



PROPERTY FROM AN
EAST COAST PRIVATE
COLLECTION
○ - **LORENZO MONACO**
ACTIVE 1389 - 1423 OR
1424 FLORENCE(?)

800,000—1,200,000 USD **Lot
Sold.** Hammer Price with Buyer's
Premium: 1,426,500 USD

THE MAGUS
HERMOGENES CASTING
HIS MAGIC BOOKS INTO
THE WATER

MEASUREMENTS

measurements note

11 ³/₄ by 8 ¹/₂ in.; 30 by 21.6 cm.

DESCRIPTION

gold ground, tempera on panel

PROVENANCE

Commissioned by Bernardo di Cino Bartolino dei Nobili, Florence,
1387/8 (see note);
With Robert Langton Douglas, London, by 1920;
Frederic Fairchild Sherman, Westport, CT;
By whom sold Parke-Bernet, 4 June 1942, lot 46 (as School of
Lorenzo di Niccolò Gerini) there purchased by the family of the
present owners.

EXHIBITED

Springfield, Massachusetts, Smith Art Gallery, *A Showing of the
Private Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Frederic Fairchild Sherman*, 31
March - 4 May 1941, cat. no. 83 (as "Legendary Scene Florentine
14th Century");
Florence, Galleria dell'Accademia, *Lorenzo Monaco : a bridge from
Giotto's heritage to the Renaissance*, A. Tartuferi and D. Parenti,
eds. 9 May - 24 September 2006, cat. no. 5i.

LITERATURE AND REFERENCES

F. Zeri, "Investigations into the Early Period of Lorenzo Monaco—I." in *Burlington Magazine*, 106, no.741, December 1964, 554-8; reprinted in *Giorno per Giorno nella Pittura: Scritti sull'Arte Toscana dal Trecento al primo Cinquecento*, Turin 1991, pp. 103-6; B. Cole, *Agnolo Gaddi*, Oxford 1977, pp. 84-87 (as by Agnolo Gaddi); M. Boskovits, "In margine alla bottega di Agnolo Gaddi, in *Paragone*, XXX, 1979, no. 335, p. 60, note 1; D. Gordon, *National Gallery Catalogues. The Fifteenth Century Italian Paintings*, vol. I, London 2003, p. 192; *Lorenzo Monaco: A bridge from Giotto's heritage to the Renaissance*, entry by E. Skaug, Florence 2006, cat. no. 5i.

CATALOGUE NOTE

Although rightly seen today as one of the leading artists of his time and the greatest proponent of the last flowering of the elegant Gothic style of painting in Florence, Lorenzo Monaco remains nevertheless a somewhat enigmatic figure. While his artistic output was robust and well delineated, the particulars of his life have remained elusive to scholars, who have not been able to ascertain the year or even the place of his birth.¹ This dearth of information appears to have resulted partly from changing tastes; his reputation suffered in the years immediately following his death with the startling innovations of the subsequent generation of Florentine artists, and thus early sources treated him scantily. It was only in the latter half of the 19th and the early part of the 20th century that scholarship restored Lorenzo to his rightful place, and that a clearer picture of his primacy in Florentine painting in the final two decades of the 14th century was understood.

The *Magus Hermogenes Casting his Magic Books into the Water*, in fact, represents a sort of "document" of the young Lorenzo's early career, clearly indicative of this future promise. It is part of a *predella* of an altarpiece painted for the chapel of San Jacopo e San Giovanni Decollato in Santa Maria degli Angeli, Florence. The painting was commissioned by Bernardo di Cino Bartolino dei Nobili, who had founded the chapel in July of 1387 apparently in honor of his wife Piera degli Albizzi who had died in February of that year.² This has allowed a firm dating of 1387/8 for the altarpiece and the other extant panels of the *predella*, which are divided between the Louvre (the three principle scenes of the *Feast of Herod*; the *Crucifixion*; *Hermogenes before Saint James*, and the *Martyrdom of Saint James*; inv. 1302, see figs. 1, 2 and 3); the National Gallery, London (*Baptism of Christ*, inv. 4208); as well as one location unknown (a donor panel of *Piera degli Albizzi and her daughters*). Thus, the present panel— together with its companions— is amongst the very first works by Lorenzo Monaco, made when he may have still been in his teens and completed before he had even taken holy orders at the very monastery, for which it was painted. Some scholars, in fact, regard this series of paintings as the artist's first known work.³

The present panel depicts an extremely rare subject; in fact, it appears to be the unique treatment of it in Italian art.⁴ The episode is described in the life of Saint James the Greater as told in the *Golden Legend* by Jacopo da Voragine, and occurs after a sort of magical competition between the saint and the Magus (or sorcerer) Hermogenes.⁵ Saint James had returned to Judea from Spain, and was confronted by a certain Philetus, a follower of Hermogenes, who hoped to discredit him as a false prophet to the Jewish populace. However, Philetus himself was converted, which so enraged Hermogenes that he used his magical powers to torment his erstwhile disciple and dispatched demons to fetch Saint James to him. The creatures, however, were powerless against the Saint, who promptly sent them back to bind and drag the necromancer before him (as shown in one of the Louvre panels, see fig. 3). Confronted by Saint James, Hermogenes also became a Christian, and was ordered to destroy his magical texts. This he accomplished by throwing them in the water, rather than by burning them, the fumes of the smoldering volumes being considered possibly dangerous to innocent bystanders. Lorenzo Monaco depicts this moment in the present panel. The newly enlightened Hermogenes is shown, dressed in rich robes and with the headdress of a wealthy Florentine merchant, standing by a rushing mountain river. He carefully casts the books away, aware of both the danger they present and of course their great, if nefarious, value.

The original makeup of the Nobili altarpiece from which the *Magus Hermogenes* and its associated panels come has been a particularly vexing problem for scholars. The polyptych was apparently broken up in the early 19th Century and the various components divided amongst different private and public collections, the relationship between them all subsequently lost or misunderstood. This, of course, is not unusual. It is rather the fact that the polyptych was painted by two different artists that has caused confusion, and delayed a satisfying reconstruction. The young Lorenzo Monaco, not yet a recognized master, worked on the *predella*, while the principle panels and the pinnacles were painted by Agnolo Gaddi. These are divided between the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin which conserves the central *Madonna and Child Enthroned flanked by Saints John the Evangelist, John the Baptist, James and Bartolomew* (inv. no. 1039), and a private collection which contains the three pinnacles of *Christ Blessing, the Archangel Gabriel and Virgin Annunciate*⁶ (see suggested reconstruction, figs. 5a-j). Gaddi, of course, would have been a natural choice for the patron; he was an established and important artist. The fact that the *predella* was given to Lorenzo Monaco, however, is indicative of the young artist's association with Gaddi—a relationship that had been suspected on stylistic grounds, and even hinted at in early sources.⁷ This makes it seem, therefore, very likely indeed that the young Lorenzo (while he was still Piero di Giovanni, before he entered Santa Maria degli Angeli and took Lorenzo as his monastic name) received early training by Gaddi, who recognizing his promise, entrusted the painting of the *predella* panels of the Nobili commission to him.

In fact, it was Lorenzo's *predella* that was initially reconstructed and

understood, rather than Gaddi's contributions to the altarpiece.⁸ Hans Gronau was the first to recognize that the three panels in the Louvre were part of the Nobili altarpiece, painted by Lorenzo Monaco, and his earliest known work⁹ (see figs. 1-3). On this foundation, Federico Zeri was able to expand greatly in an article in 1964, adding the *Baptism* in the National Gallery (fig. 4) and the present *Magus Hermogenes*, which he correctly recognized as auxiliary parts of the *predella*. He was the first scholar to correctly view these two as works of Lorenzo Monaco, as well as correctly identifying the unusual subject of the present panel.¹⁰ These two new "additions" he hypothesized might have been placed on pilaster elements of the altarpiece, and other scholars have supposed that they were placed on piers on either side of the altarpiece, their grain running vertically rather than horizontally as in the case of the Louvre panels.¹¹ He also recognized the donor panel of Piera Albizzi, which he first saw with the London dealer Rothman, and suggested the existence of a now lost matching panel of Bernardo dei Nobili and his sons. The pictures were all painted within punched, octagonal reserves, and in fact the present *Magus Hermogenes* has had the corner made up at a later date, no doubt to allow its presentation as an independent work of art. This is most clearly visible in the upper corners, which have been regilded, but which have retained the innermost element of the same punched decoration at the edge of the pictorial plane which the other panels in the Louvre, London and even in the donor panel have to some degree retained. The *Baptism* in London and the *Magus Hermogenes* are clearly related stylistically and form a satisfying "pair"; both are set in rocky landscapes with the same type of spiky leafed trees. It appears in fact, that Lorenzo even used a bit of artistic license in the present panel, showing Hermogenes throwing his book into a river, in order to harmonize it with the *Baptism* more closely.¹² In addition, the figure of Hermogenes in the Louvre panel is dressed in the same clothing as in the present panel, a long green tunic with a gold border, red boots and headdress, although he is shown without the yellow and red overmantle that he wears here.

The final association of the *predella*, fully reassembled by Zeri, with the rest of the altarpiece by Gaddi would take place a decade later. Again, it was Zeri who had presciently suggested the solution to the problem: that the young Lorenzo would not have been given such a prestigious commission, but would only have been used by a more established artist to paint the "secondary" parts of the painting, and that Agnolo Gaddi might be considered a candidate for that more senior partner.¹³ Miklós Boskovits tentatively suggested some decades later that the Berlin *Madonna and Child Enthroned flanked by Saints John the Evangelist, John the Baptist, James and Bartolomew* may have been part of the Nobili altarpiece and connected to the *predella* at the Louvre.¹⁴ Bruce Cole, although attributing the various elements of the *predella* to Agnolo Gaddi himself, finally associated it firmly with the Berlin *Madonna*, noting that the measurements and the iconography of all the various parts correctly corresponded. Subsequently, Erling Skaug was able in 2004 to recognize in the three ex-Cook panels of the *Christ Blessing, the Archangel Gabriel and Virgin Annunciate* the missing

pinnacles of the Nobili altarpiece. With this final piece of the puzzle in place, the full reconstruction and display of the polyptych in the recent monographic exhibition on Lorenzo Monaco was possible, and all of the parts of the Nobili altarpiece (by Gaddi and Lorenzo and including the present *Magus Hermogenes*, but with the exception of the still missing donor panels) were together again for the first time since they were separated two centuries ago.

1. It is likely that he was indeed born in Florence, as would seem natural given that all of his artistic career was spent there. An early document suggests that he was from the parish of San Michele Visdomini in Florence, although a document of the 29th of January 1415 mentions him as "*don Lorenzo dipintore da siene*" (see J. Czarnecki, "Lorenzo Monaco," in *Grove Dictionary of Art*, 1996, vol. 19, p. 678).
2. The foundation was recorded on a now lost inscription on the altarpiece recorded in 17th Century sources: *An.D.1387 Bernardus Cini di Nobilibus fecit fieri hanc Cappellam* (ASF, Monoscritti 625, ff. 1324-5, no.16, cf. Gordon op. cit., note 3). The altarpiece itself was finished by March the following year, and was installed in the chapel when Easter mass was celebrated there (see Skaug, op. cit., p. x).
3. See Skaug, op cit, as well as H. Gronau, "The Earliest Works of Lorenzo Monaco," *Burlington Magazine*, XCII [1950], pp. 183 *passim*; p. 217 *passim*.
4. See Zeri, op. cit, p. 557.
5. See Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, (trans. W.G. Ryan), Princeton 1993, vol. II, pp. 4-5.
6. These three pinnacle panels were in the Cook collection, Richmond, and sold in the mid-1980s (Sale: Christie's, London, 1984); Skaug recognized their early provenance, and was the first to associate them with the Nobili altarpiece.
7. Vasari, who did write a *Vita* of Lorenzo, suggested that he was a student of Taddeo Gaddi; since Taddeo was dead in 1366, it seems likely that Vasari was confusing Taddeo for his son Agnolo.
8. Skaug (op. cit) and Zeri (op cit.) give a full discussion of the attributional history of the Louvre panels and the *Baptism*. The group of three first appeared in 1814, when then left the Musée Napoleon for the Louvre, and when they were given to Taddeo Gaddi. Oswald Sirén subsequently reattributed them to Agnolo Gaddi, closer to the mark (see O. Sirén, 1906, p. 327). The *Baptism* in London had been given to Pietro Cavallini, until Sirén again suggested Agnolo Gaddi (see Giottino, 1908, p. 93).
9. See H. Gronau, "The Earliest Works of Lorenzo Monaco," in *Burlington Magazine*, XCII [1950], pp. 183 *passim*; p. 217 *passim*.
10. The present panel had been considered to be by Niccolò di Pietro by Douglas when he owned it (annotation on a photograph at FARL, 1927), as well as by Niccolò di Pietro Gerini, and as by an artist close to Lorenzo di Niccolo by Richard Offner (also in annotations in the FARL). It was later catalogued simply as Florentine school when exhibited in 1942.
11. See Cole (op. cit. p. 84-87); Boskovits (op. cit. p, 60, note 1) and Gordon (op. cit. p. 192).
12. The *Golden Legend* (see footnote 5), specifically notes that Hermogenes threw his books into the sea, and not a river.
13. "If it is true to say that the *predella* in question is the earliest work of Lorenzo Monaco, it becomes all the more difficult to imagine that a young man, little more than 20, having only just embarked on

his career, should have succeeded in obtaining a commission of such enormous importance. The possibility, therefore, arises that Lorenzo took part in the undertaking only as an assistant (to whom subsidiary elements would be entrusted to a painter of much greater reputation and experience. It would be risky to speculate on the identity of this *maestro di bottega*, but there are a sufficient number of indications to make us realize that Agnolo Gaddi is not a candidate to be ruled out—an artist, that is, who has been shown by stylistic analysis to have been of crucial importance in the formation and earliest production of Lorenzo (F. Zeri, op. cit., pp. 557-8)."

14. See M. Boskovits, *Pittura Fiorentina alla vigilia del Rinascimento*, Florence 1975, pp. 133 and 242, note 193)