

The Adoration of the Shepherds. 1549

oil on canvas 157.0 x 105.0 cm Collection: Galleria Borghese, Rome

Born in Lombardy, Pellegrino Tibaldi was raised in Bologna, where his father, the 'architect' Tibaldo, was active. The *Adoration of the Shepherds* is the earliest independent and undisputed work by Tibaldi known to us, as well as the only signed and dated painting in the artist's entire oeuvre. It is therefore a crucial document in any attempt to reconstruct his early years and formative experiences, about which little is known and which are still a matter of debate among scholars.

Unfortunately, the interpretation of the inscription on the dais in the painting — an inscription that in the view of the present writer is not autograph, although reliable in its content — has stirred up controversy over the date of the work. Even before the 1979 cleaning of the *Adoration*, scholars were divided into two camps: those who favoured the date 1548 and those who preferred to date the work to 1549. The controversy has not been settled by the results of conservation. Although the signature now reads 'peregrinus Tibaldi Bonon Faciebat/Anno Etatis sue XXI^o M D XLVIII' (Pellegrino Tibaldi Made This/In the 22nd Year of His Life 1548), the most recent studies date the painting to 1549, since the last letter of the inscription is followed by a stroke, which might indicate that originally the date read as 'M D XLVIIIJ' (1549). For a series of reasons that cannot be dealt with here, the latter reading is to be preferred.

In any case, the *Adoration* is crucial in revealing Tibaldi's complex artistic culture. It is a profoundly meditated work which marks the coming of age of an extremely talented artist, who, through his teacher Perino del Vaga, overcame the stalemate created by the cumbersome heritage left by Raphael and Michelangelo.

Previous scholars have justly emphasized the Michelangelesque figures in the painting: the sibyl in the left foreground, inspired by the prophets and sibyls of the Sistine Chapel ceiling; the shepherd in the right foreground, the result of a prolonged study of Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* and of the frescos of the Pauline Chapel in the Vatican; and the shepherd flanking the Virgin and Child, a 'brother' of the *ignudi* on the Sistine Ceiling (the coloration of this shepherd comes from the figures of Michelangelo's pupil Sebastiano del Piombo). At the same time, the two old shepherds in the right background derive from Perino (for example, from the prophets of the Pucci Chapel in the Church of SS Trinità dei Monti in Rome).

Only recently, however, have the essential names of Raphael and Giulio Romano been mentioned in connection with Tibaldi's work. Yet it is surprising that the two paintings by Raphael that most contributed to the *Adoration* have been ignored: the *St Cecilia* (Pinacoteca, Bologna) and *Transfiguration* (Pinacoteca, Vatican) altarpieces. The former, originally in the Church of S. Giovanni in Monte in Bologna, must greatly have impressed Tibaldi, so much so that the angels in the present painting, as well as its dominant colours (blue and yellow), derive from this altarpiece executed more than thirty years earlier. The *St Cecilia* must have encouraged Tibaldi to see more of the master's paintings, and once in Rome he studied Raphael's late works with great care. Indeed, the St Joseph of the Borghese *Adoration* is almost a quotation from one of the Apostles in Raphael's *Transfiguration*. But Tibaldi's debt towards Raphael does not end here. What he understood perfectly about Raphael's late works was the rhetoric of gesture: if the gesture of the shepherd in the *Adoration* echoes that of the sibyl in the left foreground, this is because Tibaldi here imitates the rhetorical principle of reiteration established by Raphael in his *Transfiguration*.

Equally important for Tibaldi was the art of the Rome-trained Giulio Romano — in the view of the present writer Tibaldi must have known the works of Giulio in Mantua extremely well. Indeed, Mantua is only about one hundred kilometres from Bologna, and it is only necessary to look at a drawing like Giulio's *Jonah and the Whale* (Hermitage, St Petersburg) to understand what Tibaldi may have learned before moving to Rome. His supreme penchant for the grotesque, and the witty irony that is evident from his very first Roman works, do not derive from Perino, his teacher in Rome, but from Giulio.



If these observations are correct, Tibaldi's early career, splendidly summarized by this *Adoration*, may finally be reconstructed. Seduced by Raphael's *St Cecilia* altarpiece in Bologna, he moved, perhaps with his father, to Mantua, where he may have excelled in the handling of stucco in the workshop of Giulio, Raphael's best known pupil. (The Gonzaga palaces in Mantua are richly decorated with stucco works, and the artists from the Valsolda region, like Tibaldi and his father, were particularly well known for working in this medium.) When Tibaldi, probably stimulated by Giulio's work, expressed the desire to move to Rome — in 1547 according to Vasari, and certainly sometime in the mid-1540s — Giulio could have recommended his talented assistant to Perino, who needed clever stuccoists for his papal enterprises and who had been a fellow pupil with Giulio in the workshop of Raphael. Once in Rome, however, Tibaldi could not escape the influence of Michelangelo's powerful frescos, as the *Adoration* makes clear.

For the very important drawings related to this work, see the British Museum's *A Seated Sibyl* (cat. no. 60).

A.N.



per se multo alio

*prograu. Alas. Jovis. Fuitat.
Anno. 615. sur. 204. M. D. XLVIIII*

*thias
Santissimus*

*Holy Family with St Jerome, a Female Martyr and the Infant
St John the Baptist.* c.1550

oil on panel 102.2 x 82.8 cm Collection: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Felton Bequest 1961

Prospero Fontana's birthdate is traditionally fixed as 1512 because Raffaele Borghini stated in his *Il riposo*, published in 1584, that the artist was then seventy-two years old. However, Fontana's *Nailing to the Cross* in the Saint-Etienne Museum is signed 'Prosper Fontana faciebat. Aetatis Annos LXXXIII' (Made by Prospero Fontana. In the 84th Year of His Life) and dated 'MDXCIII' (1593). If the latter inscription is correct, Fontana was born in 1509/10. Until his baptism certificate is traced, the date provided by the Saint-Etienne painting must be preferred to Borghini's information.

Fontana was an extremely erudite artist. Indeed, we know that he married (in 1539) the daughter of a distinguished Bolognese printer, and that he was a close friend of the most celebrated Bolognese humanists of the sixteenth century. These contacts explain his early interest in prints, as documented by Borghini, and his inclination towards sophisticated, sometimes even obscure, subject matter. This particular talent came in handy during a period in which Italian patrons were increasingly interested in decorating their palaces with fresco cycles inspired by Roman history, Greek mythology, and more or less abstruse allegorical programs. Fontana's work proved to be extremely appealing to many important patrons, not only in the artist's native Bologna and in the provincial courts of Umbria, but also in such thriving and competitive centres as Genoa (where in his youth he assisted Perino del Vaga in the frescoing of the palace of Andrea Doria), Florence (where he helped Giorgio Vasari in the decoration of the Palazzo Vecchio and participated in the artistic direction of the wedding festivities of Francesco de' Medici), and above all Rome (where between 1550 and 1555 he was intermittently employed by Pope Julius III).

Fontana's success was probably determined by his social skills as well as by his erudition, which was certainly above average as far as painters of his day were concerned. But his artistic talent was unequal to his intellectual pretensions. Indeed, his very long career was marked by eclecticism. His early education put him in contact with the rather dull Bolognese followers of Raphael, but when he moved to Genoa, possibly in 1528 as an assistant to Girolamo da Treviso (1497–1544), he encountered a new approach when he entered the workshop of Perino del Vaga. The Florentine Perino, with the Emilian artist Parmigianino (1503–1540), was to be an enduring influence on Fontana's style. However, when he settled again in Bologna on a more or less permanent basis, he was seduced by the Mannerist language of Florence and Rome imported there by Vasari, Francesco Salviati and Cristofano Gherardi, works by all of whom have been documented in Bologna in 1539.

All these different influences became part of Fontana's eclectic vocabulary. Although he often did not go beyond a passive assimilation of his models, when he was at his best, as in the Melbourne *Holy Family*, he was capable of mixing these heterogeneous elements in a personal and highly effective idiom. The faces of the Madonna and of the female saint are reminiscent of Bolognese Raphaelesque models, and it has been pointed out that the basket in the foreground, the curtain, and the figure of the scholar St Jerome derive from well-known works by the Emilian painters Correggio and Parmigianino, seen through a Vasarian filter. Yet this devotional painting also marks a strong return to Perinesque prototypes in the figures of St Joseph and the two children, and in the elegantly elongated hand of the Madonna. This panel thus shows how the artist could continuously shift his points of reference as he came in contact with new stimuli, and was probably executed around 1550, after his renewed contact with the late works of Perino in Rome.

A.N.

