

CALLISTO FINE ARTS

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Lavinia Fontana (Bologna, 1552 – Rome, 1614)

Mystic Marriage of St Catherine

Oil on copper, 48.5 x 33.6 cm

Signed "LAVI. FON. FACI"

Expertise by Professor Maria Teresa Cantaro

This marvellous painting on copper signed 'LAVI. FON. FACI.' on the broken wheel in the bottom right corner (Figure 1) is an important discovery and an addition to the catalogue of Lavinia Fontana's paintings. The copper was not mentioned by contemporary sources and was unknown to scholars before its presentation to the public by Callisto Fine Arts in 2019.

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Figure 1.

At the centre of the verso of the support, the number “576” in italics is clearly visible. Engraved in the copper thorough an elegant graphic touch, it might be the reference to an unknown inventory. Below this number, another sign, similar to the letter “Z” in italics, is displayed (Figure 2).

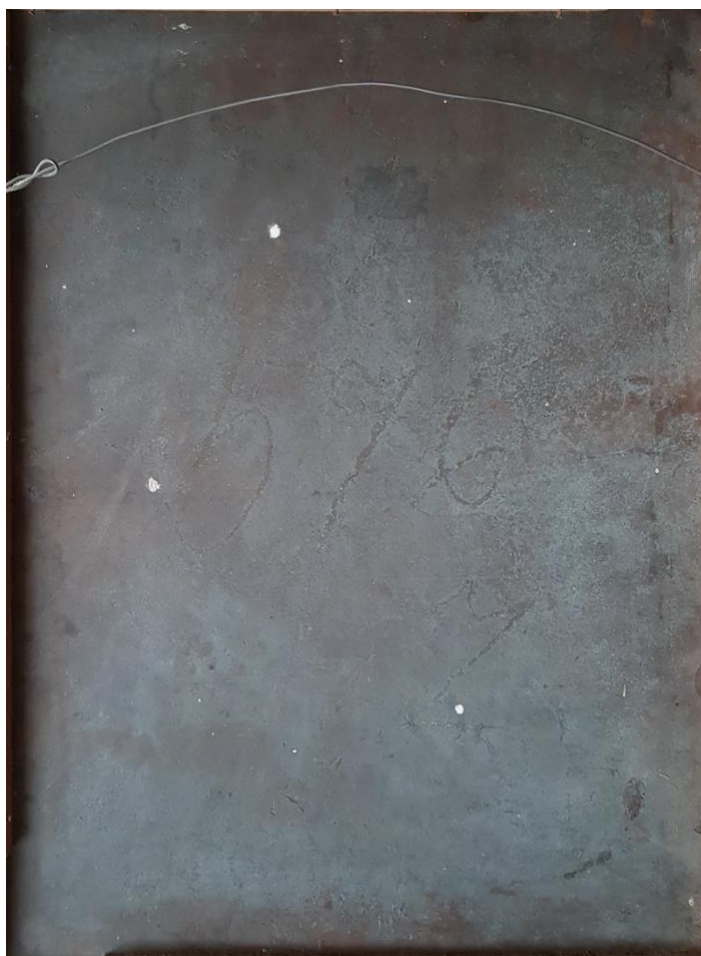


Figure 2.

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The small copper painting dedicated to private devotion belongs to the first production (1574-1577) of Lavinia Fontana, who debuted as a painter in 1574-1575 and got married at 25 years old to Giampaolo Zappi in 1577. Once married, she started signing her works with her husband's surname.¹ This exceptional painting hence brings new light on the very first production of Lavinia. In her 20s, she was deeply influenced by the composition schemes proposed by the late Mannerists, which were elaborated on Raphael's, Leonardo's, Correggio's and the Venetian school's lessons by her father Prosper and other fellow artists.

Lavinia sets the scene representing *The Holy Family with St Catherine of Alexandria* in an elegant hall presenting a colonnade with a Corinthian trabeation on the left, through which the beholder can glimpse at an alpine landscape. The door on the back wall is flanked by two telamons holding an epistyle and is opened on a garden decorated on the left by the same colonnade visible in the room in the foreground yet lengthened with the aid of perspective. The representation is crowned by a glory of musician angels sitting on some clouds in a luminous portion of sky. The space is very wide in the foreground and narrows in the background in a telescopic guise, re-proposing a composition technique frequently used by Lavinia's father Prosper and by Lavinia herself.

The main characters, all haloed, are positioned on a diagonal starting with St Joseph leaning on a wall on the left, moving towards the Madonna sitting on a bench holding the blessing Child leaning forward, and ending in the crowned St Catherine kneeling and praying. Close to St Catherine, the painter positions the emblems of her martyrdom: the broken wheel (the martyrdom itself), the palm branch (the recognition of the martyrdom) and the book (symbol of her erudition). The palace hosting the scene is characterised by a marble floor which helps measuring the depth of the room with the aid of perspective.

The chromatic impasto is characterised by smooth brushstrokes and by a deep sfumato, aiming at reproducing light effects in the landscape sections, close to Niccolò dell'Abate's (1509 ca. – 1571) solutions. The figures in the foreground are particularly suave for their research for transparency in the draperies and for their choice of a gradual chiaroscuro, interrupted by few iridescent brushstrokes. The chromatic scheme defined by balanced and sometimes vibrant tones is supported by a light drawing delineating the images with volumetric and composition clarity.

¹ The bibliography on Lavinia Fontana is quite extended. R. GALLI, *Lavinia Fontana pittrice. 1552-1614*, Imola 1940; A. GHIRARDI, *Una pittrice bolognese nella Roma del primo Seicento: Lavinia Fontana*, in "Il Carrobbio", X, 1984, pp. 148-161; V. FORTUNATI PIETRANTONIO, *Pittura bolognese del '500*, Bologna 1986, II, pp. 727-775; M. T. CANTARO, *Lavinia Fontana bolognese "pittora singolare"*, Roma 1989; M. T. CANTARO, *Aggiornamenti e precisazioni sul catalogo di Lavinia Fontana*, in "Bollettino d'Arte", 79, maggio-giugno 1993, pp. 85-102; C. P. MURPHY, *Lavinia Fontana. A painter and her Patrons in Sixteenth century Bologna*, New Haven – London 2003; M. T. CANTARO, *Lavinia Fontana: il primo "Autoritratto alla spinetta" ritrovato e una breve disamina sugli autoritratti della pittrice*, in "Bollettino d'Arte", XCIX, VII, 24, ottobre-dicembre 2014 (2015), pp. 99-110; A. DI LORENZO e M. T. CANTARO, *Ancora sugli autoritratti alla spinetta di Lavinia Fontana*, in "Bollettino d'Arte" CI, VII, 32, ottobre-dicembre 2016 (2017), pp. 129-132; S. F. MATTHEWS-GRIECO, *Self-Portraits, Self-fashioning and the language of things: Sofonisba Anguissola & Lavinia Fontana*, in *Archetipi al Femminile. Rappresentazioni di genere, identità e ruoli sociali nell'arte dalle origini a oggi*, a cura di A. Buccheri, G. Ingrao e E. Valenza, Milano-Udine 2017, pp. 23-39.

See also the exhibition catalogues: *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, edited by A. Sutherland Harris e L. Nochlin, Los Angeles-New York 1976-1977; *Lavinia Fontana 1552-1614*, edited by V. Fortunati, Bologna 1994; *Lavinia Fontana of Bologna 1552-1614*, edited by V. Fortunati, Washington 1998; *Italian Women Artists from Renaissance to Baroque*, edited by V. Fortunati, J. Pomeroy, C. Strinati, Washington 2007; *L'arte delle donne dal Rinascimento al Surrealismo*, edited by V. Sgarbi, H. Albert Peters, B. Buscaroli, Milano 2007-2008.

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The language of this copper resembles that of the well-known works by Lavinia's first production, including few canvases representing sacred themes (mostly Holy Families), some children's portraits and two self-portraits.² Among these, the early production of small coppers that Lavinia created, also as a mature painter, for patrons requiring precious objects for their mansions for private devotion is particularly relevant.

Paintings on copper were particularly appreciated for their longevity (when compared to panel or canvas), for the endurance of the pigments which do not create *craquelure*, for the brilliance characterising the surface painted with thin preparatory layers, and for the natural red colour of the metal which becomes part of the layers of the work.³ Since the second half of the sixteenth century, paintings on copper were widespread among Flemish and German artists, who brought the technique to Italy. Lavinia Fontana was one of the first artists to adopt this technique since very early in her career, probably directly influenced by the Flemish painter Denis Calvaert (1540-1619), a friend of her father who was frequently a guest in their home in Bologna. The small dimensions, the precious material, the easy transportation conditions made paintings on copper suitable for collecting and for private devotion.

This painting belongs to this genre and is strongly linked with another signed work of unknown location representing a very similar theme and from a comparable period of time: *The Mystic Marriage of St Catherine of Alexandria in front of St Francis, St Joseph and St John the Baptist* (Figure 3).⁴

² M. T. CANTARO, op. cit., 1989, pp. 56-57, 64-67, 70-74; C. MURPHY, op. cit., 2003, pp. 24- 34; M. T. CANTARO, op. cit., 2015, pp. 99-110; A. DI LORENZO e M. T. CANTARO, op. cit., 2017, pp. 129-132;

³ C. MURPHY, op. cit., 2003, p. 30, nota 54; Rame. Il metallo dell'arte fiamminga, exhibition by Caretto & Occhinegro, 7 novembre - 23 dicembre 2017; D. DOSSI, Alessandro Turchi e la pittura su rame: qualche ipotesi per il collezionismo di Alessandro Peretti Moltalto e Federico Cornaro, in "Arte-Documento", n. 33, 2017, pp. 162-169.

⁴ At Sotheby's, New York in 2002, lot 180, signed on the wheel: "LAV. FON. FA.", oil on copper, cm. 24 x 17,5, dated around 1575, see in M. T. CANTARO, op. cit., 1989, pp. 56-57; C. MURPHY, op. cit., 2003, pp. 29-30, already in the Leuchtenberg of Monaco collection, 1845.

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Figure 3.

In this painting, the scene is placed in a naturalistic setting and the wedding is very explicitly shown through the Child offering the wedding ring to St Catherine. The sweet domestic environment of the representation, the suffused and weightless chromatic impasto, the luminosity characterised every now and then by iridescent traits, are completely comparable to our painting. Moreover, St Joseph's, the Madonna and St Catherine's types are almost the same. Finally, the signatures on the broken wheel resemble each other.

The two paintings seem to belong to the same context: they might have been commissioned by the same patron, representing in the same technique two different moments of the holy episode: the blessing and the wedding. Alas, we do not have any archival element to support this hypothesis. However, Professor Cantaro underlines the connection between the two, coeval works.

C. Murphy studied works on copper, which were widespread in Bologna during the Counter Reformation.⁵ They were particularly suitable for, on the one hand, novice nuns' commissions for precious objects embodying loyalty to mystical devotion, and, on the other, for young brides as propitiatory objects for fertility and conjugal devotion. Hence, these paintings worked both in relation to the concept of mystic marriage and to that of Christian wedding.

⁵ C. MURPHY, *op. cit.*, 2002, p. 30, she mentions several artists who painted on small coppers, among which she talks about Calvaert and Lavinia Fontana, and then the Carracci brothers, Guido Reni, Domenichino, Albani as the pioneers.

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Another copper by the young Lavinia Fontana is part of the same trend: *The Annunciation*, today in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore (Figure 4), signed through the same expedient used in our painting and in the other *Marriage* presented above.⁶



Figure 5.

In this painting, the narrative is proposed through synthetic traits, the setting is essential: few pieces of furniture in a room, the sewing basket and the prayer book defined in Flemish-like details. The devotional aim is evident, as defined in cardinal Gabriele Paleotti's predications of the same years, which were transcribed in painting medium thanks to Prospero Fontana's aid.⁷

In Cantaro's opinion, two other small works from few years later mark the end of Lavinia's early production of small paintings, which precede her wedding.

⁶ Bought by the Walters Art Gallery of Baltimore in 1902 from Don Marcello Massarenti in Roma, oil on copper, cm 36 x 27, signed on the right on the side of the piece of: "LAVINIA / FONT. FA". Already published, see M. T. CANTARO, 1989, pp.66; M. SCOLARO, in *Lavinia Fontana 1552- 1614*, edited by V. Fortunati, Bologna 1994, pp. 123, 187; C. MURPHY, 2002, pp. 28, 30.

⁷ G. PALEOTTI, *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane*, Bologna 1582, in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento, fra Manierismo e Controriforma*, a cura di P. Barocchi, II, Bari, 1960-1962.

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The Holy Family with St John the Baptist and St Elisabeth, at the Gemälde Alte Meister of Dresda, signed (Figure 5)⁸, and *Christ with the symbols of the Passion*, at the Museum of Art of El Paso, signed and dated 1576 (Figure 6).⁹



Figure 5.

⁸ Signed on the step on the right: "... VINIA PROSPERI FONTANAE FACIEBAT A° MD ...", oil on beechwood, cm. 39,7 x 32. Provenance: collection of Branchetta di Bologna, in the collection of Dresda in 1747-1750 (Guarienti's inventory). In the signature Lavinia wants to be recognised as Prosper's daughter. M. T. CANTARO, op. cit., 1989, pp. 64-65; C. MURPHY, op. cit., 2002, p. 27.

⁹ Part of the New York collection of Julius Weitzner, from which it passed to the Kress Collection in 1945 to then become part of the Museum of El Paso in 1961, inv. K 1402. Signed on the bottom left on the plaque: "LAVINIA FONTANA VI(RGO) FACIEBAT 1576", oil on panel, cm. 40 x 30. Lavinia is still nubile when she creates the painting, as understandable from the 'virgo' in the signature. M. T. CANTARO, op. cit., 1989, pp. 70-71; C. MURPHY, op. cit., 2002, pp. 32-33.

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Figure 6.

Even though they are not on copper, but on panel, the two paintings belong to the same kind of production dedicated to private devotion. The general composition of the works resembles the schemes described above. The only thing that changes is the chromatic structure, which is more full-bodied in the two panels.

To sum up, the unpublished *Holy Family and St Catherine of Alexandria* here presented contributes in understanding, first, that Lavinia Fontana's career almost certainly began already in the first half of the 1570s and, second, that several small works on copper, panel and canvas of this period were commissioned to Lavinia by private patrons for private devotion to be pursued in their elegant mansions.

Through these works, Lavinia made herself a name in Bologna as skilled painter, clearly distinguishing herself from her master/father through her language aimed at translating in a domestic atmosphere evangelic themes narrated through schemes distant from the late Mannerist rhetoric and leaning towards the naturalistic tones experimented in the same years by the Carracci in Bologna.

The marvellous *Holy Family and St Catherine of Alexandria* hence has to be considered a very important piece in the catalogue of paintings by the young Lavinia Fontana, contributing in expanding the knowledge on the quite obscure production of the first years of this exceptional painter's career.