



PONTORMO

Jacopo Carucci, called Pontormo

The Birth and Naming of John the Baptist

Elizabeth Pilliod
with Robert B. Simon

ROBERT SIMON FINE ART

Front and back covers:
Jacopo Carucci, called Pontormo, *The Birth and Naming of John the Baptist*, obverse and reverse.

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and a condition report are available upon request.

ROBERT SIMON FINE ART

22 EAST 80TH STREET · NEW YORK · NY · 10075
TEL: 212-288-9712 FAX: 212-202-4786

BY APPOINTMENT AT: SATIS HOUSE
53 TOWER HILL ROAD EAST · TUXEDO PARK · NY · 10987
TEL: 845-351-2339 FAX: 845-351-4332

ROBERT B. SIMON
RBS@ROBERTSIMON.COM

DOMINIC FERRANTE JR.
DFJ@ROBERTSIMON.COM



Introduction

Giorgio Vasari's description of Pontormo's personality—his solitary and melancholic nature, and personal eccentricities—colored appreciation of his work for centuries, but has found resonance and sympathy in our times. And while so acute an observer as Bernard Berenson could describe the artist as an “academic constructor of monstrous nudes,” the strange and sinuous figures that Pontormo drew and painted find a passionate audience among both specialist and casual viewers today.

Painted almost contemporaneously with Pontormo's staggering *Entombment* in the Capponi Chapel of Santa Felicita in Florence is the most unusual object presented here: a painted shallow bowl, intended as a ceremonial gift to a mother on the birth of her newborn. While of wholly different purposes, materials, and size, there is much in common between the two works—the elongated figures that respond to the limitations of the spaces in which they are placed, the elegance and poignancy of gestures, the unexpected palette, and the spiraling motion that informs the compositions.

Our work has long been known, but seldom seen, and following its recent conservation treatment, can now be appreciated as both object and painting, and as a significant work by this most modern of Renaissance artists.

Robert B. Simon



Jacopo Carucci, called Pontormo
(Pontorme 1494 – 1557 Florence)

The Birth and Naming of John the Baptist

Oil on shaped round panel (*a tafferia da parto*)
20 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches (52.4 x 49.8 x 6.4 cm)

PROVENANCE

Charles Butler, Warren Wood, Hatfield, Hertfordshire, and London (1822–1910); his estate sale, Christie's, 25 May 1911, lot 12, as Florentine School, *The Naming of John the Baptist* (£78-15); to:

Thos. Agnew & Sons, London (Stock book no. 3664); for

Charles Fairfax Murray, London

Elia Volpi, Palazzo Davanzati, Florence; sold, American Art Galleries, New York, 27 November 1916, lot 997, as Pontormo (sold for \$1000); to:

Herbert Nathan Straus, New York and Middletown, New Jersey, until 1933; thence by descent to his wife Therese Kuhn Straus, until 1977

Private Collection, New York; their sale, Christie's, New York, 19 January 1982, lot 125, as "Attributed to Pontormo" (sold for \$30,800); to:

Private Collection, Europe, 1982–Present.

EXHIBITED

Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA, 1955 – 1956.

“Un Pontormo ritrovato,” Loggia Rucellai, Florence, 30 September – 14 October 1992.

“Rinascimento segreto,” Palazzo Ducale, Urbino, Italy, 13 April – 1 October 2017, no. 33.

LITERATURE

Bernard Berenson, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*, London and New York, 1909, p. 176, as Pontormo.

Fritz Goldschmidt, *Pontormo, Rosso und Bronzino*, Leipzig, 1911, p. 46, as Pontormo.

Paul Schubring, *Cassoni; truben und trubenbilder der italienischen frührenaissance: ein beitrage zur profanmalerei im quattrocento*, Leipzig, 1915, vol. 1, p 407.

Frederick Mortimer Clapp, *Jacopo Pontormo: His Life and Work*, New Haven, London, and Oxford, 1916, pp. 57, 130, 242, as by Pontormo, ca. 1530.

De Triomf van het Manierisme, exh. cat., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 1955, p. 79 s.v. cat. no. 93, as a near identical version of the Uffizi tondo by Pontormo.

Mostra del Pontormo e del primo manierismo Fiorentino, exh. cat., Florence 1956, p. 33, as a replica of the Uffizi version.

Kurt W. Forster, *Pontormo*, Munich, 1966, p. 140, as a contemporary copy.

Luciano Berti, *Pontormo*, Florence, 1966, p. CVI, dating the Uffizi version 1525–1526, citing the present work as Pontormo following Clapp, but stating that it unclear which came first.

Luciano Berti, *L'opera completa del Pontormo*, Milan, 1973, p. 101, s.v. no. 89, as a version of the Uffizi tondo.

Gli Uffizi: Catalogo Generale, Florence, 1980, p. 431.

Roberta Ferrazza, *Palazzo Davanzati e le collezioni di Elia Volpi*, Florence, 1994, pp. 117, 140n.135, as Pontormo.

Alberto Bruschi, Roberta Ferrazza, and Giuseppe de Juliis, *Un Pontormo ritrovato: Il Desco da Parto Ughi-Antinori già della collezione Elia Volpi*, Florence, 1992.

Luciano Berti, *Pontormo e il suo Tempo*, Florence, 1993, p. 254, cited as a version of the Uffizi tondo.

Philippe Costamagna, *Pontormo*, Milan, 1994, pp. 282-283, the condition making it impossible to determine whether by Pontormo or workshop, though most likely the latter.

Anna Forlani Tempesti and Alessandra Giovanetti, *Pontormo*, Florence, 1994, no. 33, pp. 128-129, as Pontormo.

Carlo Sisi, in *L'officina della Maniera*, Florence, 1996, p. 276.

Cecilia DeCarli, *I deschi da parto: e la pittura del primo Rinascimento Toscano*, Turin, 1997, pp. 186-189.

Jacqueline Maria Musacchio, “The Medici-Tornabuoni Desco da Parto in Context,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, Vol. 33 (1998), p. 149n.39, as Pontormo.

Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, New Haven and London, 1999, pp. 83-85, figs. 65-66, as Pontormo.

Roberta J. M. Olson, *The Florentine Tondo*, Oxford, 2000, pp. 27, 276, fig. A 116, as workshop of Pontormo, ca. 1526–1528.

Claudia Däubler-Hauschke, *Geburt und Memoria: Zum italienischen Bildtyp der deschi da parto*, Berlin, 2003, pp. 48, 71, 197-206, cat. no. 11, as Pontormo workshop.

Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, in *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by Andrea Bayer, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New Haven and London, 2008, pp. 161-62, s.v. cat no. 74, as Pontormo.

Vittorio Sgarbi, in *Rinascimento segreto*, exh. cat., ed. Vittorio Sgarbi, Santarcangelo di Romagna, 2017, p. 14, as the “disegno” by Pontormo, but uncertain who is responsible for the painting.

Pietro di Natale, in *Rinascimento segreto*, exh. cat., ed. Vittorio Sgarbi, Santarcangelo di Romagna, 2017, no. 33, pp. 92-92, as Pontormo, dating it after 1526.

The Florentine practice of creating ceremonial birth-trays for newborns—what were called *deschi da parto*—was essentially a 15th-century phenomenon. The most famous of these is the *Triumph of Fame* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), painted to commemorate the birth of Lorenzo de' Medici in 1452. By the beginning of the 16th century, these flat, tondo, or octagonal panel paintings with mythological or allegorical subjects were replaced by commemorative shaped bowls called *tafferie da parto*. These generally featured religious imagery, but their vogue was even shorter-lived as they fell out of fashion by the 1540s. The most celebrated of these were the two painted by Jacopo Pontormo in the late 1520s. Both feature depictions of the Birth and Naming of John the Baptist on the obverse (the inner part of the bowl) with the coat-of-arms of the newborn's parents on the exterior. One of these, in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence (Fig. 1), commemorated the 1527 birth of Aldighieri Della Casa, the son of Girolamo della Casa and Lisabetta Tornaquinci. The present work, with the coat-of-arms of Mariano di Giorgio Ughi and Oretta di Amerigo Antonori on the verso (Fig. 2), celebrated their first-born son, Giorgio, born 19 August 1526.¹

The two Pontormo *tafferie* essentially follow the same composition, with variations in the color of the garments, the characterizations of some of the figures, and slight repositioning of details. It is assumed that both relied on a single compositional cartoon, and the recent Infrared reflectogram (Fig. 3) of the present work reveals underdrawing in Pontormo's inimitable style (the Uffizi version has not been imaged). The critical history of the two works has been hampered both by their inaccessibility—the Uffizi version frequently in storage and the present work in a succession of private collections—and by their disparate conservation histories, both having been handled over the centuries and subjected to a variety of treatments of varying quality. The Uffizi *tafferia* was last treated in 1992—a creative restoration that obscured the work's actual condition and which was not fully documented. The present work was cleaned in 2022, removing all passages of old restoration and layers of discolored varnish to reveal an original paint surface with very few minor losses. The high quality of the painting can now be appreciated and Pontormo's authorship fully established, supported as well by the evidence of the Infrared reflectography.



Fig. 1. Pontormo, *The Birth and Naming of John the Baptist*, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Fig. 2. Pontormo, *The Birth and Naming of John the Baptist*, Verso, with the Ughi and Antinori Coat-of-Arms, Robert Simon Fine Art.





Fig. 3. Infrared reflectogram of the present work.

Dr. Elizabeth Pilliod has prepared the following catalogue entry on this remarkable recovery:

The present painting, a *tafferia*, is a wooden birth bowl painted with a sacred scene used to celebrate the birth of children in the Renaissance. The tray would be used to transport special foods, drinks, medical necessities, toiletries, or small gifts to the new mother.² This scene, the naming of the newly born Saint John the Baptist based on the account in the gospel of Luke (I:11-13, 57-63), was specifically used on bowls intended for the mothers of male babies. According to the account in Luke the elderly couple of Elizabeth and Zacharias despaired of having a child, but miraculously became pregnant. Zacharias had doubted a child would come, and in punishment for his lack of faith he was struck mute. But, eight days after the birth, when asked to give the child's name, as Zacharias wrote the name "John" on a tablet, his speech was miraculously restored.

The present *tafferia* is apparently round in shape, but in fact is slightly oblong. Given the designated function of the bowl, to be carried into the room with the new mother and child, the slightly wider oblong point would likely be where the person carrying the *tafferia* would instinctively grasp it. Pontormo factored that reality into his composition. A line drawn through the widest point of the bowl line passes through the face of the figure to the far left, the shoulder of the woman next to her, the face of little Saint John, and the tip of the quill with which Zacharias is writing his name (Fig. 4). It should be noted that this orientation places the face of the newborn child at the center of the bowl. The care with which the composition has been fitted to the *tafferia* is a testament to the skill of the artist who designed it: Jacopo da Pontormo.

The presence of the coat-of-arms of the Ughi and Antinori families on the back of the *tafferia* has made it possible to identify the newborn child celebrated with this *tafferia* as Giorgio Ughi, born August 19, 1526.³ The painting of Elizabeth, Zacharias, baby Saint John, and several serving women was first closely analyzed and attributed to Pontormo by the earliest great scholar of the artist, Frederick Mortimer Clapp in 1916.⁴ Clapp judged its condition to be pristine. He also discussed a nearly identical version in the collection of the Galleria degli Uffizi since 1704, which he accepted as equally autograph by Pontormo.⁵ It bears the coat-of-arms of the family by whom it was commissioned, the della Casa and Tornaquinci and it has been linked to the birth of Aldighieri della Casa on January 15, 1527. Pontormo must have supplied the two identical birth bowls to celebrate the births of boys to these families because the fathers of each boy were cousins. Thus the similar design linked the families as it feted their good fortune in adding male successors to their family lines.



Fig. 4 The present work rotated.

The present painting by Pontormo is demonstrably the earlier of the two. That is proved not only by the relative dates of birth of the two boys, but also is suggested by other factors. First, the visible underdrawing in the present painting shows Pontormo exploring and revising his composition (Fig. 3). The dashes for mouths and eyes, and choppy angles for the ankle of the baby Saint John are entirely characteristic of Pontormo. In addition, in the present picture Saint Elizabeth is depicted as an old woman, with sagging skin and deep wrinkles. In the Uffizi picture her features are much smoother, giving her a more idealized appearance. The more aged woman is more faithful to the biblical source and it would seem likely that Pontormo began with the standard approach to depicting the aged Elizabeth. It is, as well, more credible that she was softened in a subsequent version rather than depicted incorrectly in the first version. The old face in the present *tafferia* (Fig. 5) is in fact very similar to the face of Saint Anne (Fig. 7) in Pontormo's *Saint Anne Altarpiece*, variously dated 1524-29, in the Musée du Louvre (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. Detail of Saint Anne the present work.



Fig. 6. Pontormo, *Saint Anne Altarpiece*, Musée du Louvre.



Fig. 7. Detail of Saint in the *Saint Anne Altarpiece*.

There are in addition pronounced similarities with a painting known to have been executed by Pontormo in 1525, the *Supper at Emmaus* for the Certosa at Galluzzo outside Florence (Fig. 8). The apostle in the lower right corner crosses his legs like those of Zacharias in the birth bowl. It is striking that the way his proper left foot joins his leg at the ankle is very similar to the outline of the foot of Zacharias. The feet in both cases are slightly too large for the rest of the body. The same comparison could be made with the foot of Christ in the Certosa *Lamentation*. The oversized feet resemble flattened flappers.



Fig. 8. Pontormo, *Supper at Emmaus*, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Other figures in the frescoes Pontormo was completing in the same year at the Certosa have very similar anatomies to the figures in the birth bowl. For instance, in the *Way to Calvary* painting of 1525-26 (Fig. 9) the bent arm of both the kneeling figure of Veronica and the soldier behind her are slightly elongated with a bunched or exaggerated shoulder.⁶ Their arms echo the arm of the servant lady in yellow in the present *tafferìa*. This detail, together with the previous comparisons suggests that the *tafferìa* should be dated around 1526.



Fig. 9. Pontormo, Way to Calvary, Certosa del Galluzzo, Florence.

There are as well differences in the quality of the painting in the two *tafferie*. In the Uffizi version the painting of the white veil of Saint Elizabeth as it falls on her neck is muddled, while it is painted in clearly articulated folds in the present painting. In the first version Zacharias has written “Iohannes” across the paper on his lap, the letters disappearing beneath his fingers and respecting the gentle arc of the paper. The Uffizi version is much simpler, with only the first two letters “Io” transcribed. A tell-tail detail that is missing in the Uffizi version is the differentiation between Zacharias’s tunic and his under shirt. In the present version the undershirt is dark green while the tunic over it is yellow. The contrast between these two areas of color was clearly intended as Pontormo outlined it in the underdrawing.

The escutcheons of the respective original owners of the *tafferie* are found on the outside of the bowls. The Uffizi *tafferia* displays the della Casa and Tornaquinci arms (Fig. 10) On the left is that of the della Casa which contains a green tree and a mountain made of three balls of green on silver.⁷ The Tornaquinci arms

to the right are dark green and gold quartered. If the interior of the bowl with the scene of the *Naming of the Baptist* is compared to the escutcheon on the exterior the dark green found in the arms of both families is a common element (it appears on the hanging curtain, the coverlet, and the garment of the women holding the fan). The two hideous flanking dragons also echo the colors in the *tafferia*. The body of the dragon on the left is rose, with shading; the one to the right, is vermillion with shading. If we turn over the *tafferia* these colors correspond to the garments of the lady at the far left and to those on Zacharias.

The same clever interweaving of colors is present on the present *tafferia* (Fig. 11). The arms of Ughi on the left are pellets of miniver, a brownish color, on a beige background; the Antinori arms are composed of small elements at the summit with a large field of yellow below. If the *tafferia* is turned over, it is evident that the main colors in the coats-of-arms correspond to the garments worn by the two attendant ladies to the far right (beige and yellow).

The careful calibration of colors in the scenes of the naming of the son of Saint Elizabeth and Zacharias with the escutcheons on the rear of each *tafferia* demonstrates Pontormo's brilliance in designing these otherwise utilitarian items. He has put into visual form both the relationship of the two fathers by using the same design for both *tafferie*, and the understanding that the *tafferie* represent the combining of two families by using subtle color repetitions. It was a brilliant solution to a duplex problem.



Fig. 10. The Uffizi *tafferia* recto and verso.



Fig. 11. The present *tafferia* recto and verso.





