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RECONSTRUCTION NO. 73, 1979.
Fabric, 74½ x 54½".
Courtesy The Pace Gallery.

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FROM LEONARDO TO TITIAN

Of the recent loan exhibitions from the Soviet Union, "From Leonardo to Titian: Italian Renaissance Paintings from the Hermitage" is certainly the smallest in size and most austere presented. Comprised of but eleven paintings, the exhibition comes to New York's Knoedler Gallery following appearances at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The nature of long-distance travel sensibly proscribed the inclusion of any panel pictures in the exhibition. Five of the works on view have been transferred from a wood to a canvas support; four remain on their original canvas; and one, a small Primiticcio, is painted on slate. They form what could not be called either a unity of masterpieces or an amalgam of minor works—rather a choice selection, admittedly of varying (though usually high) quality, and all of great interest. In these times of well publicized shows of international scope and broad popular appeal, the Hermitage exhibition is a most welcome oddity, one that affords a rare opportunity for a viewer to study a limited number of important works of art in a relatively sedate and unhurried atmosphere devoid of the intrusive "educational" devices which seem too often only to intensify his exhaustion.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is Leonardo's *Benois Madonna*—seen for the first time on these shores and out of the Hermitage only once before. The young Madonna is depicted in the darkened room of a palazzo joyfully proffering a jasmine flower to her child. The mood, however, is scarcely light-hearted, but, rather, intense, sacred, somber—permeated by some sidereal sorrow, imbued by what Pater called "a cloudy mysticism . . . refined to a subdued and graceful mystery." Despite the not inconsiderable ravages of time and man, the painting retains its enigmatic awe. The delicate glazes and subtle impasto may be irretrievably lost, the powerful illusionism now irregularly effective, and the evidence of Leonardo's surface finish only in part apparent; but immutable are its majesty, grace, and tragic power. Viewed (as are all the paintings in the ex-

hibition) through a protective plexiglass barrier, the Leonardo is displayed in its own light-dimmed room, strongly evoking a most appropriate feeling of reverence.

Of the other paintings in the exhibition, Francesco Melzi's *Flora* is a surprising and welcome choice. Melzi, a young friend and companion of Leonardo's, is known principally as the recipient, compiler, and caretaker of the Master's manuscripts. He evidently painted very little and, if the signed portrait in Milan (Gallarati-Scotti Coll.) is a typical indication, was rather vapid, even crude, when removed from Leonardo's immediate presence. The Hermitage *Flora*, by contrast, is an attractive work, one in which the force of Leonardo's style is notable throughout. The obvious comparison to his master's works may be propaedeutic to the critic but grossly unfair to the artist: Melzi was no more than a dilettante. But despite the too-apparent failings in modeling, the *Flora* is quite amiable and in parts painted with much delicacy and finesse. The best passages may seem little more than labored imitation, but

that they manifestly derive from the greatest of paradigms makes them worthy of esteem.

Pontorno's *Holy Family with Saint John* is not one of the artist's more familiar works, partly because of some question in the past concerning its attribution (it had been acquired as a Rosso Fiorentino and later held by some to be by Bronzino). A recent cleaning leaves no doubt as to its authorship. (Though damaged at either side, most of the picture seems in prime condition.) The coloration, shocking in its intensity, underscores the bewildering visionary aspect of the work; the expressions of the figures are most wonderfully bizarre, strange—charged with vivid manifestations of deep, disconcerting emotions.

More mundane is the large *Annunciation* by Cima da Conegliano, who presents the sacred event on a warm Venetian stage but cast with cold actors. The rich chromaticism that ordinarily infuses the artist's work is missing in this damaged altarpiece; what otherwise might be charming—the Venetian cityscape, the hill town in the distance,

and the domestic interior—here seems protracted. The wasp on the *cartellino*, though, is a nice touch.

By contrast, a somewhat compromised condition does not diminish one's appreciation of Andrea del Sarto's *Madonna and Child with Saints*. The composition is so well reasoned that it might seem almost casual. The Madonna sits at center, holding the active Christ Child, beside St. Elizabeth and the infant St. John; St. Catherine is behind and to the right, leaning forward on her wheel like a visiting *contadina*. Among them some unknown communication, as weighty as their bodies, silently passes. The setting is arcadian, but the joyous salutation of the event seems transformed into an elegy; Mary gazes at Elizabeth, and Catherine stares out into the distance—with pensiveness, knowledge, and depth.

Of related subject is Primiticcio's *Madonna and Child with Saints Elizabeth, Zacharias and John the Baptist*, a small virtuoso piece of highly contrived composition, deft painting, and subtle coloration. The artist here excels in a most sophisticated rendering of controlled emotions and expressive postures.

Lorenzo Lotto's *Double Portrait* places a husband and wife within a domestic environment filled with emblematic objects and iconographic contrivances. In the hands of another artist a picture such as this might seem little more than a symbolic rebus, incidentally populated by two faces. But Lotto's primary concern, despite the putative disclosure of the couple's ethos through representational analogy, remains the portrayal of an emotional state; the personalities are trenchantly evoked as strong (and complex) psychological presences.

The exhibition catalogue by Everett Fahy is a handsome, well-illustrated volume of over one hundred pages. An introductory chapter is followed by short essays on each of the paintings, as well as a brief history of the formation of the Hermitage collection of Italian pictures and the provenances of the works included in the exhibition. (Knoedler, August 21-September 30)



Leonardo da Vinci, *Madonna and Child (The Benois Madonna)*.
Tempera and oil on wood, transferred to canvas, 19½ x 12-3/8".
Courtesy M. Knoedler and Co.