

JEAN GOSSART
*VIRGIN AND
CHILD*

LORNE
CAMPBELL

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INSCRIPTION AND PROVENANCE

Jan Gossaert (Jean Gossart)

NG1888

Virgin and Child

Oil on oak panel (arch-topped), 30.7 x 24.3 cm

Inscription

GE.3. MVLIERIS SEMEN IHS. SERPENTIS CAPVT CONTRIVIT (Genesis 3, Jesus the seed of the woman has bruised the head of the serpent).

This inscription is discussed below (Iconography).

Provenance

The picture was in the collection of Edmond Beaucousin (1806–1866), Paris. His collection of 46 paintings was purchased in 1860 for the Gallery; NG1888 was one of the 11 pictures considered ‘superfluous’ and offered to the National Galleries of Scotland and Ireland. Six, including NG1888, were selected for Dublin and sent there on 15 June 1860.¹ They were returned to London in 1926.

¹ Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, pp. 164–5 and references; Wornum’s Diary, 15 June 1860.

EXHIBITIONS AND VERSIONS

Exhibitions

At the National Gallery of Ireland between 1864 and about 1900; NG 2010;² New York 2010–11 (17 B); NG 2011 (17 B).

Versions

Several painted versions are known. None corresponds precisely with NG1888. In some, the Child's right arm is lowered:

1. Formerly Brussels, collection of Baron Descamps, sold at Sotheby's, London, 15 April 1999, lot 36. Oil on oak, 30.5 x 24.5 cm, with the same inscription as the original and: IOANNES MALBODIVS INVENIT 1527. The Virgin's dress is brownish, and may have been painted with smalt that has discoloured (compare the version in Munich, described below). It may originally have been purple or bright blue.
2. Munich, Alte Pinakothek, WAF 306. Oil on oak, 30.6 x 24.5 cm, with the same inscription as the original and: IOANNES MALBODIVS PINGEBAT 1527. The paint of the Virgin's dress contains deteriorated smalt and 'may have had more of a *couleur changeant* red/blue effect, but has turned brown owing to the discoloration of the smalt'.³

In others, the Child's right arm is raised:

3. Sold by Lempertz, Cologne, 16 May 2009, lot 1015. Oil on oak, 28.8 x 23 cm, with the same inscription as the original and, on the bench on our right of the Virgin's left thigh, 1522 (the date in its present form being clearly spurious).
4. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, inv. no. 942. Oil on panel, 30.5 x 24 cm (without later additions on both sides and below), with the same inscription as the original.

² Wieseman 2010, p. 20.

ENGRAVING

By Crispijn de Passe the Elder (c.1565–1637), 31 x 23.4 cm. Without the inscription that appears on the original and all(?) the painted versions but with the signature *Crisp. va. Passe excud.*, the date 'Anno. 1589. and the title EFFIGIES HÆC SCVLPTA EST PER CHRISPIANVM VANDE PASSE/ AD IMITATIONEM INSIGNIS ILLIVS TABELLAE/ DEPICTÆ PER IOANNEM A MABEVGE (This copy was engraved by Crispijn de Passe after that distinguished panel painted by John of Maubeuge).

TECHNICAL NOTES

The picture was surface cleaned and its 'perished' varnish was 'revived' in 1926, on its return from Dublin. Cleaned in 1995–6, it was revealed to be in very good condition.⁴ Before 1995, the painted surface was disfigured by overpaint and obscured by a very thick layer of degraded varnish, probably applied in the mid-nineteenth century before the picture was acquired by Beaucousin. There are a few pinhead-sized losses in the upper part of the painting and some small flake losses near the lower edge.⁵ The modelling of the Virgin's face is a little rubbed. The lower sleeve on her left arm was originally deep maroon-purple, with pink highlights, but because the medium has discoloured the shadows now appear to be dull greenish-brown.

The panel is a single board of oak, vertical in grain. It is painted up to the edges on all four sides. It has been thinned to 2 mm (measured at the centre of the bottom edge) and has been cradled. What remains of a bevel following the curve of the arched top is visible on the reverse. The cradle is of soft wood and comprises five vertical and five horizontal elements. Dendrochronological investigation has established that the panel is Baltic oak

³ Jan Schmidt, cited in Ainsworth et al. 2010, p. 179 note 10.

⁴ Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, pp. 165–72 for Dunkerton's report on her cleaning and on the physical state of the picture.

⁵ These may be studied in the X-radiograph and in the photograph taken after cleaning and before restoration: see Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, pp. 166 (fig. 5) and 168 (fig. 10).

and that the 180 growth rings were formed between 1313 and 1492.⁶ The ground is chalk, probably bound in animal glue, and is covered by a pinkish-grey priming (mixed from lead white, charcoal black and some fine particles of an opaque red pigment).⁷ A certain amount of underdrawing is visible with the aid of infrared imaging techniques. In the figures, the simple and linear drawing consists of a few marks and flourishes, the lines appearing broken as they skip over the texture of the priming. The underdrawing for the architecture is more extensive: straight lines have been ruled with the help of a straight edge and often extend further than is necessary, and some of the arcs have been lightly incised. Compasses were used to mark out the main arcs of the fictive frame, both at the underdrawing stage and afterwards to incise clean arcs into the wet paint. The repeated use of the same central point has punctured the paint and ground in the middle of the Virgin's neckline. The hole has been filled and disguised with the crossed ends of the drawstrings of the Virgin's chemise.⁸ No unusual pigments have been identified but there are some distinctive mixtures and juxtapositions. The Virgin's red mantle has modelled opaque-pink underlayers, containing lead white, vermilion and red lake, onto which an extremely thin red lake glaze has been applied.⁹ The subtle purple-red colour of the paint of the Virgin's dress is made from a mixture of red lake, lead white and coarsely-ground wood charcoal, with only a little blue pigment (azurite) present, mainly in the highlights.¹⁰ The shadows of her lower sleeve contain mainly azurite with some red lake and must therefore once have been a deep maroon-purple; discoloration of the medium has given them a greenish cast.¹¹ The highlights are pink, mixed from lead white and vermilion. The medium has been identified as heat-bodied linseed oil in a sample from the grey moulding near the right edge.¹²

The delicacy of handling in such details as the Child's head and the fingernails of his right hand shows extraordinary skill. The richness of colour, achieved with a very restricted

⁶ Report by Peter Klein dated 7 April 1995 in the NG dossier.

⁷ Chalk (calcium carbonate) was confirmed by SEM-EDX analysis. The pigments in the priming layer were identified by examination of a cross-section of a paint sample under the optical microscope (note from M. Spring in the Scientific Department file dated January 1995).

⁸ Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, p. 166 fig. 5, p. 170 fig. 14.

⁹ Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, p. 167 figs 7-8.

¹⁰ Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, p. 170 fig. 12.

¹¹ Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, p. 170 fig. 13.

¹² Report in the Scientific Department file by R. White and J. Pilc dated 21 November 1995. The medium was identified by GC-MS analysis and FTIR microscopy.

number of pigments, is also astonishing. Only a painter of enormous skill could have rendered the convex gilded letters of the inscription and the shadows that they cast across the concave wooden moulding behind.

DESCRIPTION

The Virgin's hair is held under a band of small pearls(?) and is covered by a semi-transparent white veil. She is wearing a white chemise, secured by a drawstring, and a purplish dress with undersleeves that once had deep maroon-purple shadows with pink highlights. Her mantle is red and she uses both hands to restrain, gently, the naked Child as he leaps forward with his arms outstretched. She rests her right foot on a wooden footstool carved with a winged head of a disembodied cherub between two volutes that are supported on clawed feet. She is seated on a bench of grey stone surrounded by a wooden frame. Inserted into a concave section of its elaborate moulding are the letters of the inscription. They appear to be made of gilded metal and are convex; they cast complicated shadows onto the concave surface behind. The lighting is from above and our left. As the original frames of NG1888 and all its versions have been lost without trace, it is not possible to say how the fictive frame would have appeared to relate to the real frame. The engraving by Crispijn de Passe, with the winged genii in the spandrels, does not seem to bear any relation to the lost frame. It seems likely that the original frame of NG1888 bore a signature and a date.

ICONOGRAPHY

The inscription paraphrases Genesis 3:15, where, after the Fall, God addresses the serpent. The Vulgate text reads *Inimicitias ponam inter te et mulierem, et semen tuum et semen illius: ipsa conteret caput tuum, et tu insidiaberis calcaneo ejus*. This is literally translated in the Douai Bible as (I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel). *Ipsa*, however, is a mistake for *ipsum*: it is not the woman, equated with Eve or the Virgin, but her seed,

equated with Christ, who is to crush the serpent's head. The Authorised Version gives a more accurate translation: (And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: it [the seed of the woman] shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel). In paraphrasing the Vulgate, Gossart has corrected the text. He has made the reference to Christ absolutely specific and, transposing from the future to the perfect tense, he has made clear that Christ has already triumphed over the serpent. In the London painting, though not in the Vienna or Munich versions, the Child looks up towards the word SERPENTIS. Running and holding out his arms in a pose suggestive of crucifixion, he is hastening to save mankind. A similar inscription, in which Gossart seems to be representing gilded metal letters displayed against a stone moulding, is found in his half-length *Virgin and Child* in Berlin.¹³

ATTRIBUTION AND DATE

Before the cleaning of 1995–6, the appearance of NG1888 was so altered by the overpaint and by the varnish that no accurate assessment of its quality was possible. In the Beaucousin collection, it was described as 'by Flamming' (perhaps meaning *Maître flamand*, Flemish master?).¹⁴ Wornum described it in his diary on 25 January 1860 as 'Mabuse' but then struck out the word; on 15 June 1860, he described it as 'School of Mabuse?'.¹⁵ Similarly Eastlake, writing to George Mulvany, future Director of the National Gallery of Ireland, called it 'Flemish School' (29 April 1860) and 'School of Mabuse' (12 June 1860).¹⁶ In Dublin in 1867 it was catalogued as by Gossart,¹⁷ in 1898 as 'School of Gossaert'; in London in 1929 as 'After Mabuse' and in 1945–68 as 'a late copy' after Gossart, 'perhaps of the seventeenth century'.¹⁸ After cleaning, it was published in 1996 by Campbell and Dunkerton as an original by Gossart.¹⁹ In 2010, however, Ainsworth called

¹³ Friedländer, vol. VIII, no. 36; Ainsworth et al. 2010, pp. 168–70.

¹⁴ List of the Beaucousin pictures, drawn up when they were packed in Paris, cited by Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, p. 165 note 9.

¹⁵ Wornum's Diary, under dates.

¹⁶ Cited in Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, p. 167 note 9.

¹⁷ 1867 Dublin catalogue, p. 51.

¹⁸ Davies 1945, p. 43; Davies 1968, p. 67.

¹⁹ Campbell and Dunkerton 1996.

NG1888 a copy and suggested that the Vienna version, previously disregarded, was probably the original, or the one closest to the original.²⁰

The Munich version, apparently signed and dated 1527, has also been taken to be the original from which all the other versions are taken.²¹ The ‘signature’, however, must be false; it may have been copied from the lost frame of the original.²² The underdrawing of the Munich version is schematic and very similar to the underdrawing of the version formerly in the collection of Baron Descamps.²³ Both underdrawings may have been transferred from the same tracing in the same workshop: for some reason, the Descamps version was inscribed, correctly: IOANNES MALBODIVS INVENTIT 1527, while the Munich version was inscribed, falsely: IOANNES MALBODIVS PINGEBAT 1527.

The London version is authenticated by the engraving dated 1589 by Crispijn de Passe the Elder. The engraving was certainly based on NG1888: in the other versions, the Child’s right arm is differently positioned, the Child’s head contrasts in type and expression, and the ring finger of the Virgin’s left hand is twisted into a rather inelegant contortion. The inscription on the engraving: ‘after that distinguished panel painted by John of Maubeuge’, provides good evidence that the London panel is Gossart’s original. The delicacy of the brushwork, the skill of the drawing and the subtlety of the colour fully support this conclusion. The underdrawing, moreover, shows the painter working out areas of his composition on the panel itself.²⁴

Ainsworth noted that in the Vienna version too the painter had worked out details of the architecture on the panel itself. She found ‘considerable use of ruled lines’ but also ‘more loosely drawn contours and shifts from the preliminary design at the lower right columnar base’.²⁵ There is ‘a small amount of freer pen work at the lower left of the Virgin’s draperies, where corrective drawing appears to be over rather than beneath the dense, opaque paint’; and, Ainsworth observed, ‘The grotesque head and flourishes on the

²⁰ Ainsworth in Ainsworth et al. 2010, pp. 173–9.

²¹ Peter Klein has established that the last ring of the Munich panel was formed in 1503 (Ainsworth et al. 2010, p. 432 [41]). The last ring of NG1888 was formed in 1492. No dendrochronological results are available for the Vienna and other versions.

²² See further Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, pp. 171–3.

²³ See the exh. cat. ‘Art in the Making: Underdrawing in Renaissance Painting’, London 2002, p. 42.

²⁴ Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, pp. 171–2.

²⁵ Ainsworth in Ainsworth et al. 2010, p. 178.

footstool support are quite freely drawn in a confident hand'.²⁶ This 'confidence' might be described as a rather naïve boldness.

The Vienna Child's grimacing head, his obese torso and the way in which his right arm appears to spring from his skull provide further evidence of the Vienna painter's inability to imitate Nature – or Gossart. Ainsworth noted that in the Vienna version, and also in the Munich and Descamps versions but most notably in the Vienna picture, 'the Virgin's right hand cups the seemingly engorged right breast of the Christ Child' and observed that this motif, as Caroline Walker Bynum had suggested, might refer to 'Jesus as Mother'.²⁷ Ainsworth concluded that the artist of the London picture had failed to understand the full meaning of this important reference.

In the Vienna picture the modelling is hard and laboured: the hair of the Virgin and Child looks like metal wire; areas of light and shadow in the flesh, draperies and elsewhere are demarcated with schematic harshness. This is particularly obvious in the letters of the inscription and the shadows cast by them. They are oversimplified in tone and unnaturally sharp; whereas in NG1888 they are a triumph of imaginative reconstruction of the fall of light and shadow over convex metal and concave wood.

Ainsworth may have had a poor reproduction in front of her when she claimed that 'The London version consistently shows soft and blurred modeling'. The Vienna painting, she argued, 'reflects Gossart's characteristically meticulous brushwork and polished flesh tones'. In fact the Vienna *Virgin and Child* could be a copy by one of Gossart's imitators. The London *Virgin and Child* may be compared with the half-length *Virgin and Child* in

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 178–9.

²⁷ Ainsworth was here citing and enlarging upon Caroline Walker Bynum's discussion of the composition in her 'Fragmentation and Redemption, Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion', New York 1991. Bynum illustrated the Munich version (p. 213 [Fig. 6.9]), which Ainsworth dismissed, with the London painting, as failing to demonstrate 'the full meaning of the representation'. Bynum observed (p. 206) that the 'motif of "Jesus as mother" may also help to explain the unusual northern Renaissance paintings by Jan Gossaert that depict the infant Christ with engorged breasts'. She continued, however (p. 381 note 88): 'Perhaps one should not seek a Christological explanation for this iconographic emphasis, since Gossaert appears in at least one place to represent "putti" with engorged breasts.' She cited the babies in the architecture of the wing panels of 'Saint John the Baptist and Saint Peter', dated 1521 (Toledo, Ohio). Ainsworth, discussing the Toledo panels (in Ainsworth et al. 2010, pp. 195–9), did not mention the breasts of these 'putti', which are very prominent – though not so large as those of the Vienna Child. Bynum finally concluded that, since Gossart 'shared the late medieval-Renaissance fascination with hermaphrodites', his 'hermaphroditic infants may reflect this interest or may indeed simply be Mannerist efforts to shock'.

the Prado, although the figures there are very much larger in scale. The delicacy, not always sharply focused, of the London picture recurs in the *Young Princess*, NG2211.

The versions may not all have been taken directly from the original. Indeed the Vienna version shows the Virgin wearing a blue, rather than a purplish, dress. In both the Munich and Descamps versions, the Virgin's dress seems once to have been purplish but the smalt in the mixtures has caused it to discolour. The Vienna, Munich and Descamps versions show the ring finger of the Virgin's left hand bent into an uncomfortable, if not an impossible, shape and in all three the Child has a fat and shining face – the Vienna Child being the fattest and shiniest of the three. They may well derive from the same copy or tracing; the different positions of the Child's left arm may have been deliberately chosen (or the tracings may have slipped). The change in the colour of the Virgin's dress may result from the first copyist's inability to match the subtlety of Gossart's mixture of red lake, charcoal black and white; or the Vienna copyist may have chosen to clothe the Virgin in traditional blue.

The date 1527 found on the Munich and Descamps versions may well have been copied from the lost original frame of NG1888. The same date is on Gossart's 'Danaë' (Munich), where the figure is on a much larger scale, and on many of the versions of the lost *Christ on the Cold Stone*.²⁸

THE FIRST OWNERS OF NG1888

On 28 August 1568, Maximilien Morillon wrote to his patron Cardinal Granvelle to inform him that he had received from the executors of Pierre Damant, who died on 19 July 1568, various legacies, including 'a small Virgin done by Jennin of Maubeuge, the one that you had copied by Pierre d'Argent'.²⁹ If this was a small full-length *Virgin*, it might well have

²⁸ Ainsworth in Ainsworth et al. 2010, pp. 207–10: she accepts as an original the Budapest version, which is not dated.

²⁹ 'une petite Nostre Dame faite par Jennin de Maubeuge que aultrefois aves faict copier par Pierre d'Argent': see Piquard 1947–8, p. 140. Morillon (1517–1586) became in 1561 Granvelle's First Vicar General in his Archdiocese of Mechlin.

been NG1888. Pierre d'Argent was a young painter from Besançon who frequently copied pictures for Granvelle.³⁰

Pierre Damant was by 1526 a trusted member of the household of Margaret of Austria and became in 1536 Keeper of the Crown Jewels, a post that he retained until his death.³¹ Damant may have obtained his picture from Gossart himself. Gossart had worked for Margaret in 1523 and apparently in 1526, when he painted his portrait of the children of Christian II of Denmark who were then living under Margaret's care. It was probably Margaret who commissioned Gossart to paint their portrait.³² The picture bequeathed by Damant to Granvelle may have passed out of his possession in the 1570s, when his residences in Brussels and Mechlin were plundered and his goods were confiscated or auctioned.³³ All that is known for certain is that by 1589 NG1888 was engraved by Crispijn de Passe, who was then living in Aachen or Cologne. There he engraved designs by Marten de Vos.³⁴ The tracing on which he based his engraving of Gossart's painting had probably been sent to him from the Low Countries.

³⁰ Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, p. 173 and references (note 29).

³¹ Michelant 1871, 1872; Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, p. 173 and references (notes 26–28).

³² The portrait is in the Royal Collection: Campbell in Ainsworth et al. 2010, pp. 272–3.

³³ Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, p. 173 and references (note 30).

³⁴ Campbell and Dunkerton 1996, p. 173 and references (notes 32–34).