

TECHNICAL IMAGING REPORT

TITLE	<i>The Holy Family with a Donatrix as Saint Catherine of Alexandria</i>
ARTIST	After Lorenzo Lotto, Italian (Venetian), c. 1480–1556
DATE	c. 1540–1545
DIMENSIONS	70.9 x 94.6 cm. (27 15/16 x 37 1/4 in.)
MEDIUM	Oil
SUPPORT	Lined Canvas
FRAME	
DISTINGUISHING MARKS	
ACCESSION	30.5

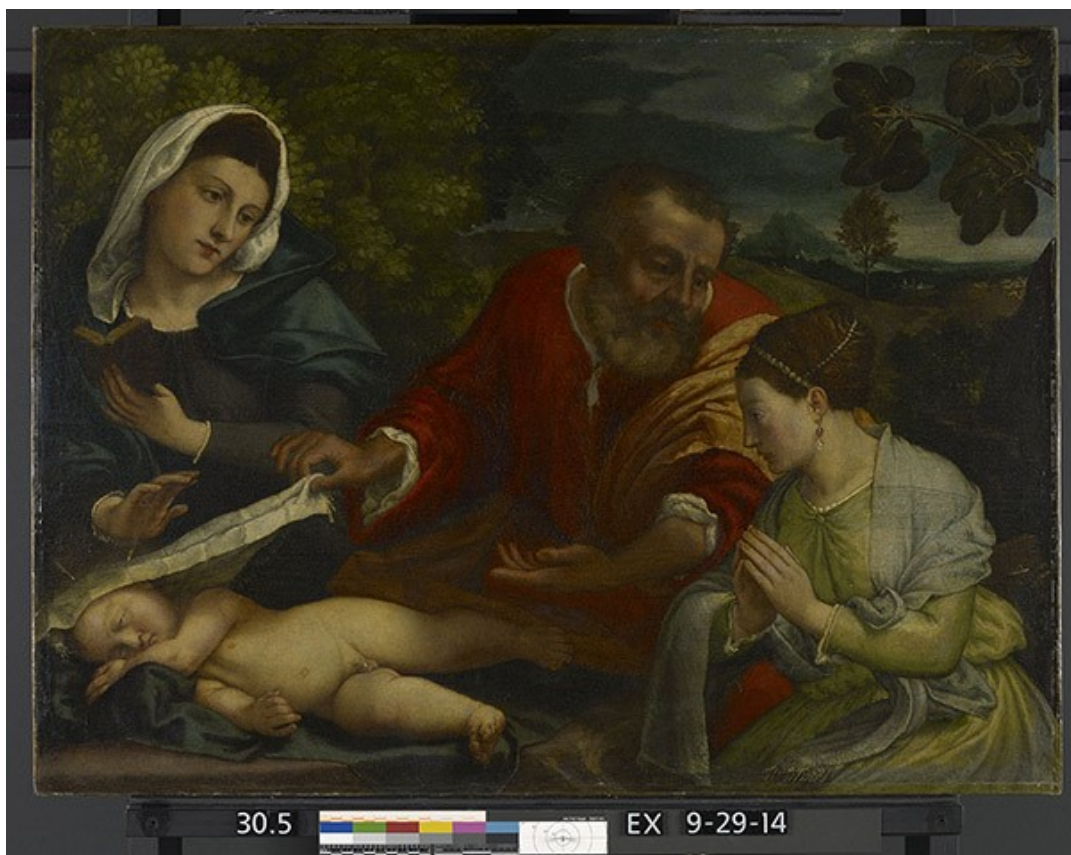


Figure 1. The Holy Family with a Donatrix as Saint Catherine of Alexandria recto in normal light. All images: Matthew Golden, unless otherwise noted.

SUMMARY

The painting shows the Holy Family in a landscape setting, with a kneeling female donor depicted as St. Catherine. The painting has undergone extensive restoration throughout its history which may have significantly altered its appearance and apparent quality. The attribution has historically oscillated between Lorenzo Lotto, studio of Lorenzo Lotto, or Lotto with contribution or assistance, and is now recorded as “After Lorenzo Lotto.” Questions of quality in specific details of the work, such as the hands and drapery, are difficult to answer reliably at this time because of the extensive restoration.

SUMMARY cont.

Six other versions of this composition are known, assigned various levels of authorship, suggesting it was popular with Lotto, his workshop, and his patrons. All versions vary slightly from each other in composition, iconography, and handling, likely related to both the progression of Lotto's style as well as the level of the commission.

The earlier Bergamo version (fig. 2), widely considered to be the finest, has a slightly wider format than the Houston version, in addition to being slightly larger overall. In the Houston version, dated stylistically some 10 years later, the fig tree has been moved to the right side of the composition, possibly to emphasize its association with Joseph (Wilson 355), and the bough of leaves has been omitted. The landscape has been simplified and is of noticeably lower quality, as are the figures.

Another composition lies underneath the present work, as seen in the x-radiograph (fig. 8) oriented opposite to the Holy Family composition. A veiled female head is visible at the top of the image, and thick draperies are noted at the lower right side. It is not clear what this underlying painting represents, though its apparent triangular composition may suggest a Pieta. The reuse of this canvas to produce a close variant of an oft-repeated composition with a bespoke donor portrait (Wilson p. 350-355) lends further complication to the question of authorship.

The restoration history of this painting is not well documented. Wilson notes the painting was likely treated within the years leading up to its acquisition by Samuel H. Kress in 1929, and may have suffered a significant loss of quality at that time (p. 350-355). It is likely that the painting was treated after its acquisition by Kress restorer Stephen Pinchetto, where it may have received the present lining and almost certainly received its present stretcher, which matches other paintings from the MFAH Kress Collection. In 1987, the painting was included in a conservation survey by Dianne Dwyer and it is noted at that time that Mario Modestini would treat the work later that year, although it is unclear whether that treatment was ever carried out.



Figure 2. Lorenzo Lotto, Holy family with Saint Catherine of Alexandria, 1533, 81.5 (h) x 115.3 (w) cm, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo Legacy of Guglielmo Lochis 1866. Image: National Gallery of Australia, nga.gov.au



Figure 3. Lorenzo Lotto, Rest on the Flight into Egypt with St. Justina, 1529-1530, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Image: Dr. Corina Rogge This version matches the Bergamo composition seen above, but the edges are heavily restored and therefore cropped out with framing.

SUPPORT

The auxiliary support is a wooden stretcher with lap bridle joints, with a vertical and horizontal crossbar attached with half-lap bridle joints. The members are 3 inches wide and 3/4 inches thick. There are 11 of 12 possible keys present. The verso has several numerical notations in pencil and crayon, and there are scratches at the proper right center that have been boxed-in with pencil. The edges of the canvas and stretcher have been papered over. This stretcher is not original to the painting.

The secondary support is a basket-woven (2/2 plain weave) lining canvas likely attached to the primary support with a glue-paste adhesive. There are approximately 28 vertical threads per inch and 34 horizontal threads per inch suggesting the warp runs in the horizontal direction. There is foxing throughout the secondary support. In the upper proper left quadrant, there is a dark splatter pattern which may have related mold growth.

The primary support is a course plain-woven canvas with wide-set cusping on all four-sides, which may indicate preparation layers (and possibly paint layers) were applied on a loom. The strength of the cusping indicates there has not been any significant change to the original format of the canvas. Because the edges are papered over and the verso is not accessible, little information about the primary support can be gathered at this time.

GROUND

The ground layer is not presently accessible for examination. X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF) indicates that the ground layer likely includes some lead pigment, either white or red. X-radiography indicates some ground layer losses in the lower left quadrant, as well as extensive damage and loss around the perimeter of the painting. Infrared reflectography suggests the presence of an interleaving ground layer and a dry, carbon-based drawing medium, used to denote the outline of the figures of the Holy Family composition. Broad elements of the underlying composition can be faintly seen in the IR image.

Figure 5. Detail of infrared reflectograph, showing underdrawing at Mary's



Figure 4. The Holy Family with a Donatrix as Saint Cath-



PAINT LAYERS

The paint is an oil medium applied opaquely and in some areas thickly. X-radiography indicates that another composition lies beneath the visible layer showing the Holy Family, likely composed in the opposite horizontal orientation, which may be a Pieta. Because of the heavily layered paint structure, discerning each composition, and its condition, in the x-radiograph is difficult. Many of the thicker areas of the paint layer, especially evident in Joseph's cloak, show large alligator cracks in the x-radiograph from faulty drying. These are not visible on the surface, where instead extensive wrinkling is visible throughout the painting. Martin Wyld suggested this wrinkling was inconsistent with Lotto's technique (Wilson, 1996, p. 350), but it may be due either to the thick accumulation of paint layers, or more likely it may be a result of previous treatment (high heat combined with moisture, as occurs during aqueous linings such as this one, can sometimes cause this type of damage).

XRF analysis suggests the presence of lead white, vermilion, yellow and red ochres, umber, lead tin yellow, Naples yellow, and copper-based blues and greens with no indication of organic lakes or ultramarine. This palette, while fairly basic and economical, is consistent with other paintings analyzed by Lotto and is appropriate to the period and region (see appendix for full XRF analysis).

The paint layer has suffered from over-cleaning in the past and likely has lost glazes that created a more nuanced aesthetic than the flat opaque planes of color we see today. Abrasion is visible in many areas, most distractingly appearing as dark lines in the faces and skin tones, and is compensated for extensively with re-touching. There is a fine branch craquelure throughout the painting.

SURFACE COATING

There is a heavily oxidized natural resin varnish present on this painting, and remnants of older, very darkened varnishes in the interstices of the paint and canvas weave. There is retouching throughout which is no longer matching, and in several areas the varnish is poorly adhered to the paint layer causing opacity and loss of saturation, with some areas of varnish loss due to flaking. XRF analysis suggest the possible presence of bleached shellac due to the overall high chlorine signal, which was known to be a favored material applied by Pinchetto (Dwyer 1987).

Figure 7. The Holy Family with a Donatrix as Saint Catherine of Alexandria recto under longwave ultraviolet radiation.

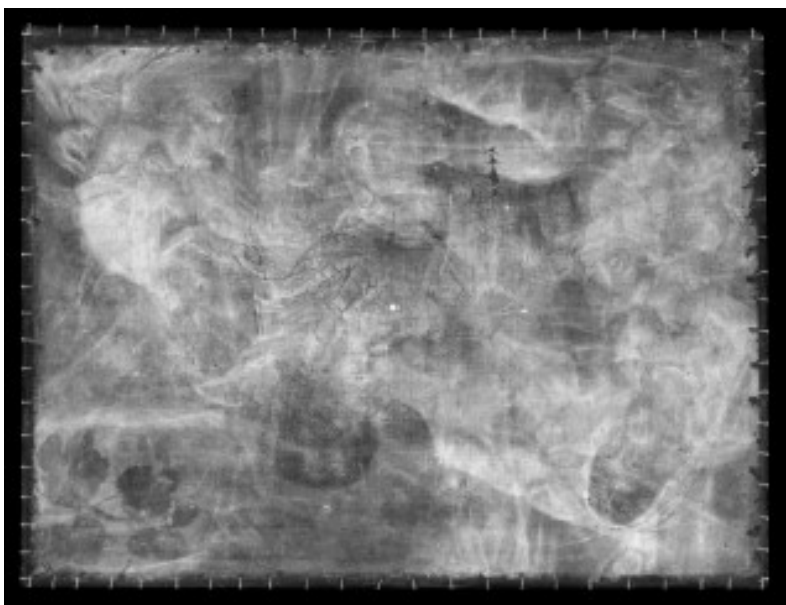


Figure 6. The Holy Family with a Donatrix as Saint Catherine of Alexandria x-radiograph, inverted to show underlying composition. X-radiography by Bert Sample and Samantha Skelton.



REFERENCES

Brown, D. A., et al. 1997. Lorenzo Lotto : rediscovered master of the Renaissance. Washington : National Gallery of Art.

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