

Bulletin of
The Detroit Institute of Arts
of the City of Detroit



VIRGIN AND CHILD (DETAIL)
FRENCH (ILE-DE-FRANCE), FIRST HALF FOURTEENTH CENTURY
ACQUIRED THROUGH
THE RALPH H. BOOTH FUND, 1940

A FRENCH GOTHIC VIRGIN OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

The growing cult of the Virgin, which characterized the Middle Ages and especially the Gothic period, produced in fourteenth century France a very large number of representations of the Virgin standing holding the Christ Child on her hip. These cult and votive statues were executed in stone and marble or alabaster, in wood and metal, and in ivory. Of the relatively small number of such figures in marble, the Detroit Institute of Arts is fortunate in having been able to acquire a noteworthy example through the Ralph H. Booth Fund.¹

This group of the Virgin holding the Child is of fine white marble with traces of former gilding and polychromy which have almost disappeared leaving a rich golden patina, the color of honey. Typical of the first half of the fourteenth century in style and composition, this group differs in several features from the majority of its contemporaries. In pose the Virgin is more erect, showing little of the mannered curve of the body, the extreme contraposto of the hip under the supporting arm and the upper part of the body, which is so marked in most of the fourteenth century figures of the Virgin. The thirteenth century rendering of the mantle with long angular folds of vertical emphasis down the front of the figure has been replaced by a more horizontal arrangement of the mantle so that its hem forms an almost straight line across the legs and this line or gentle curve is paralleled by folds near the waist. Here one end of the mantle is carried across the

body and held under the left arm, falling in the usual cascade of tubular folds under the arm bearing the Child, but the other end, quite exceptionally, is drawn from the left to the right side and falls over the extended right arm of the Virgin, who holds in the right hand the stem of a symbolic lily or rose of which the flower, probably in metal, is now lost.

Although the fourteenth century saw an increasing tendency toward the expression of the maternal relationship in the group of the Virgin and Child, the Virgin is here still the stately Queen of Heaven and Mother of God, absorbed and aloof. On the other hand, the Child, who seriously holds toward the spectator an open book, perhaps once inscribed with the symbolic Alpha and Omega, and has the body and features of a young boy rather than of an infant, is a charming embodiment of childish character as he turns his head toward his mother for a word of commendation.

Tradition relates that this group came from the abbey church of St. Denis, about five miles north of Paris in the Île-de-France. This ancient foundation, from the seventh to the nineteenth century the burial place of the kings of France, was the frequent recipient of royal patronage. To the building of the two preceding centuries the fourteenth century saw the addition of a number of chapels along the north aisle of the nave, and the enlarging and redecorating of several older chapels under royal patronage. These additions and renovations may have occasioned the placing of the marble Virgin now in Detroit.

Outstanding among the royal benefactors of St. Denis in the fourteenth century was Jeanne d'Évreux (1310-1370), for the brief period of four years (1324-28) the third wife of Charles IV, last of the Capetian kings of France in the direct line, and for forty-two years his widow during the

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troubled reigns of the early Valois which saw the outbreak of the Hundred Years War (1337), the English victories over the French at Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356), the Black Death of 1348-9, the depredations of roving companies of discharged mercenary soldiers, the revolt of the burghers of Paris, and the uprising of the peasants in the Champagne. From this political and social unrest Jeanne d'Évreux appears to have retired and devoted herself to the patronage of the arts in the service of religion and the commemoration of her husband and herself. At St. Denis she completed her husband's tomb in 1329; in 1339 she presented a silver-gilt statuette of the Virgin, formerly in the Treasury of St. Denis, now in the Louvre; and in 1340 she redecorated the Chapel of Notre-Dame-la-Blanche, which takes its name from Jeanne's dedication of a white marble figure of the Virgin, now in the church of St. Germain-des-Prés in Paris. Although the allocation of an isolated figure from the fourteenth century must remain subject to question until research in this period of art has been carried further, it is tempting to see in the Virgin and Child, now in Detroit, a dedication of Jeanne must remain subject to questions unrelated in style to the Virgins in marble, stone, metal, and ivory which can be linked with Jeanne d'Évreux and the royal court. It is certainly a work of her period, executed probably in a Parisian workshop under the influence of the court of France.

From her position against a pier or a chapel wall in the church of St. Denis, this Virgin was the silent witness of history in the making. She was perhaps set up to assuage the miseries of the Black Death. She saw the burial of kings, the erection of their monuments, the occupation

of armies, the pillaging of soldiery, and at last the overthrow of monarchy in the French Revolution, the desecration of the royal tombs, and the dilapidation of the abbey church. The monuments of St. Denis were carried away, partly to the limekiln and stonemason's yard, partly to museums and private collections; some were returned in the nineteenth century,

but many were destroyed or scattered. At this period, about 1793, the Virgin here presented was preserved by being removed from St. Denis. In the twentieth century she has come to represent the spirit of fourteenth century France in the Gothic collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

FRANCIS W. ROBINSON

1 Accession Number: 40.1. Height: 40 inches. Tips of noses of Virgin and Child restored. Collections: Bossy, Paris; William Randolph Hearst, New York; Henry Schniewind, New York.

ITALIAN RENAISSANCE FURNITURE AT ALGER HOUSE

Thanks to the continued generosity of several friends of the Museum who are interested in building up a collection of Italian Renaissance decorative art at Alger House, four *cassoni* or chests and a small cabinet or *credenzino* have been added to the permanent scheme of interiors at the Branch Museum in Grosse Pointe Farms.

The Museum is especially fortunate in acquiring the group of *cassoni*, since a conspicuous distribution of them is essential to recreate persuasively the atmosphere of a dwelling of the period. The *cassone* was an indispensable appurtenance of the Renaissance household. It was varied and modified in size and form to serve many and divers purposes. It answered for wardrobe, storage chest, table, bench, and bed. In fact the *cassone* was considered so vital a requisite of refined living that it became almost a measure of a family's standing and affluence. We know from inventories and wills that the palaces of Renaissance Italy were filled with these adaptable repositories. Sometimes as many as twenty or thirty of them are recorded in one household, and as an indication of the high favor they enjoyed, are frequently catalogued to

the exclusion of all other furniture. During four hundred years, the *cassone* was looked upon as an object worthy of embellishment by great painters, sculptors, and decorators. Finally as the prerequisite of the established household, the *cassone* became the symbolic wedding gift of the Renaissance, and is frequently known as a marriage chest. It betokened domesticity as the hearth and the distaff.

The four *cassoni* at Alger House differ widely in provenience and age. Thus individually they illustrate local characteristics; considered together they provide a contrast between the general stylistic notions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as applied to one category of furniture.

The earliest of them, the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edgar B. Whitcomb, comes most probably from Venice. This magnificent chest¹ (Fig. 1) is exceptionally well preserved, and from the point of view of importance, takes its place in the collection beside the great Florentine sacristy cupboard, the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edsel B. Ford in 1936. Venice, partly because of her unique location away from the mainland, partly because she was enwrapped by the wondrous taste of the East

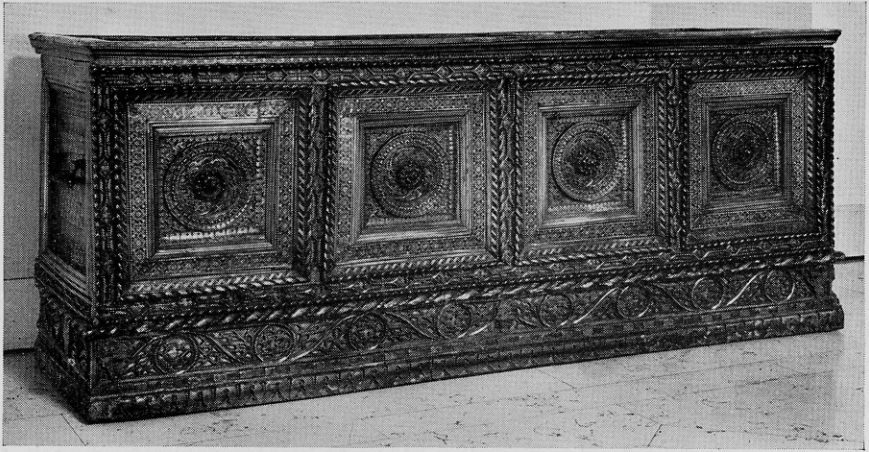


FIG. 1: CASSONE
 ITALIAN (VENICE), FIFTEENTH CENTURY
 GIFT OF MR. AND MRS. EDGAR B. WHITCOMB

with which she carried on a most lucrative maritime trade, was the last cultural center to succumb to the artistic ideas generated in Renaissance Florence. For decades after Michelozzo had built a palace for the Medici in the severe new style of the *Quattrocento*, the Venetians continued to adorn their city with fanciful gilded Gothic houses like the Ca d'Oro. It is in this spirit that our Venetian *cassone* was conceived. The piece dates from about 1450 to 1460 and betrays no influence of Renaissance classicism in its ornament. The Venetians were inspired to a degree unexampled by their fellow Italians by the intricate richness and the intriguing movement of flamboyant Gothic forms which had been brought down over the Alps from Northern Europe. The designer has retained both life and vigor in this transplanted ornament, but he has expressed his innate Italian sense for accenting the horizontal by placing the Gothic circles in four squares framed by a rectangle. A painted background, red in the borders, and blue in the panels, sets off the

pierced carving and enhances the natural warmth of the old walnut. In addition to the intricate carved ornament, the chest is adorned with a wealth of *intarsia*, or fine inlay.

Quite in contrast to the Venetian chest is the handsome Florentine *cassone*² (Fig. 2) of about thirty years later which is the gift of Robert H. Tannahill. Where the Venetian chest is profusely enriched with carving and inlay, the Florentine piece is reserved, almost severe in its embellishment. The form of the Venetian *cassone* is simple, a mere foundation for its elaborate ornament; the Florentine example has subtle, calculated profiles to which the carved ornament is subordinated. Both chests unmistakably reflect the prevailing architectural ideas of their time and place. A subconscious echo of the palace designs of *Quattrocento* Florence is preserved in the conformation of the latter *cassone*, not only in the physical similarities of a projecting cornice, the pronounced horizontal emphasis, and details of carved ornament derived from the antique, but in the conception of

the design, based upon solid masculinity and monumental dignity of form and proportion. The carving is limited to winged volutes embracing rosettes and shields at the front corners, the imbrications on the concave top and base, and small egg-and-dart and fluted moldings. Likewise *intarsia* is used with reserve.

The other two *cassoni* are productions of the second half of the sixteenth century, the one coming probably from central Italy, the other surely from Bologna. Though of approximately the same period, their striking dissimilarity is witness to the wealth of ingenuity and the inventive imagination possessed by Renaissance cabinet makers. The central Italian piece³, also the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Whitcomb, in its emphatic display of classical motives - claw feet, channeled sides, a wreath of flowers and fruit, in its more pronounced outlines and dark tone relieved with gilding, is characteristic of High Renaissance taste. Although strongly influenced by Floren-

tine design, the *cassoni* is more probably of Umbrian origin, which is suggested by the combination of decorative motives, the less refined profiles, and its rather provincial character. Like so much Renaissance furniture which was made to order, the arms of the family who commissioned the piece appear in the design, here surrounded by the wreath. The device, which has not yet been identified, consists of confronted bulls over which are six fleurs-de-lis.

Typical of High Renaissance Bolognese *cassoni* is the fourth example⁴ in the Alger House collection, which was the gift of the late Lord Duveen. Again the decorative themes of ancient Rome have been drawn upon, for the sides of the *cassoni* are enriched with a pattern of putti disporting themselves in a trellis. In a kind of degenerated *intarsia* technique, the ornament is inlaid in comparatively broad pieces of light colored wood elaborated with darker incised lines. The more detailed ornament is executed by filling

FIG. 2: CASSONE
ITALIAN (FLORENCE), FIFTEENTH CENTURY
GIFT OF ROBERT H. TANNAHILL



the carved designs with a whitish plaster. Like the great majority of Italian Renaissance furniture, the chest is made of walnut, while, true to its period, it is enriched with strong profiling and has considerable movement in its outlines.

The Alger House collection has been further enriched with the gift from John S. Newberry of a small cupboard or *credenzino*,⁵ (Fig. 3) restrained and *raffiné* in style. The piece is of High Renaissance, dating from the middle of the sixteenth century. We do not have to rely upon the word-of-mouth information that the cupboard comes from Siena, since that provenience is unmistakably pronounced in the distinctive character of its design. Siena had made her great artistic contribution in the late Middle Ages. Conservative and aristocratic in tradition she was inclined to give cool reception to the new Renaissance ideas of furniture design which emanated from Florence throughout Tuscany. Consequently the massive and richly elaborated designs of her rival neighbor were chastened and refined to create a local style which would be severe were it not tempered with a rare delicacy. Of the beauty of this Siennese taste, our cabinet is eloquent proof. In conception the design is quiet and reserved. It depends for its elaboration upon the unusual device of engaged columns, six of them raised upon high bases accenting the six corners of its oblong hexagonal form. Purely architectonic in derivation, the Tuscan colonnettes have individual molded entablatures and bases,



FIG. 3: CREDENZINO
ITALIAN (SIENA), SIXTEENTH CENTURY
GIFT OF JOHN S. NEWBERRY

the whole order being carried from top to bottom. The *credenzino* is provided with a simple paneled door and the top lifts back disclosing another compartment. Although uncommon in design, the piece is made of the usual dark-toned walnut of the period. Bode⁶ points to the prevailing influence in Siena of Peruzzi, the greatest sixteenth century architect of the city. The restrained use of simplified Roman elements in Peruzzi's architecture, its spirit of modest reserve, its elegance seem to have been transmitted to this little cabinet. It is even tempting to suggest the possibility of a definite correlation, for Peruzzi's courtyard of St. Catherine's house is graced with columns so like those of the cabinet as to intimate more than coincidence.

PERRY T. RATHBONE

- 1 Accession Number: 37.165. Length: 81 inches; Width: 25½ inches; Height: 32 inches.
- 2 Accession Number: 39.675. Length: 79¾ inches; Width: 28½ inches; Height: 35¼ inches.
- 3 Accession Number: 37.166. Length: 71 inches; Width: 23 inches; Height: 28¼ inches.
- 4 Accession Number: 37.57. Length: 69½ inches; Width: 23 inches; Height: 27 inches. In a fine state of preservation with the exception of the claw feet which have been restored.
- 5 Accession Number: 37.156. Length: 38¼ inches; Width: 18 inches; Height: 33 inches.
- 6 W. von Bode, *Italian Renaissance Furniture*, New York, 1921, pp. 25-26.

CALENDAR FOR APRIL AND MAY

EXHIBITIONS

- May 3 through June 3: The Age of Impressionism and Objective Realism. (Loan exhibition of European and American paintings celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the Detroit Institute of Arts under the Arts Commission of the City of Detroit.)
- Alger House, Apr. 7 through May 12: Theater Designs of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries.
- Alger House, May 17 through June 23: Exhibition of Flower Paintings.
- Alger House, May 21, Tuesday, 1-6 p.m.: Tulip Show by the Garden Club of Michigan: Specimen Blooms, Arrangements, and other Entries.

TUESDAY EVENING LECTURES

Tuesday evenings at 8:30 in the lecture hall of the Museum.

- Apr. 23: *Van Gogh as a Type of the Dutch Artist*, by E. P. Richardson.
- Apr. 30: *Ceremonial Gold Vessels of the Bronze Age*, by George Lechler.

GALLERY TALKS BY THE CURATORS

Thursday afternoons at 3:00 in the galleries. Chairs provided.

- Apr. 18: *The Making of Prints, IV: Lithographs*, by Isabel Weadock.
- Apr. 25: *Early Flemish Painting*, by E. P. Richardson.

GREAT PERIODS OF ART

A series of lectures on the history of art as represented in the collections, given in the galleries by the museum instructors on Friday evenings at 8:00. Chairs provided.

- Apr. 19: *Modern European Painting*
- Apr. 26: *Modern American Painting*.

ART AND MUSIC

In coöperation with the Michigan Committee for Music Appreciation. A series of lectures given in the lecture hall of the Museum on Saturday afternoons at 3:00, accompanied by musical recordings.

- Apr. 6: *The Art of Mozart's Day*, by Joyce Black Gnau.
- Apr. 13: *Bach and the Baroque Style*, by Joyce Black Gnau.
- Apr. 20: *Debussy and the French Impressionists*, by John D. Morse.
- Apr. 27: *Beethoven and the Romantic Movement*, by John D. Morse.

AN APPROACH TO ART

A series of popular illustrated lectures by the museum instructors serving as an introduction to the arts, given in the lecture hall of the Museum, unless otherwise noted, on Saturday afternoons at 2:30.

- Apr. 21: *Five Thousand Years of Glass*, by Marion Leland Heath.
- Apr. 28: *Our Colonial Homes and Portraits*, by Joyce Black Gnau.
- May 5: *The Significance of Paul Cézanne*, by John D. Morse.
- May 12: *The Portraits of Hans Holbein*, by Marion Leland Heath.
- May 19: *Europe Discovers the Orient*, by Joyce Black Gnau.

WHAT TO SEE IN AMERICAN MUSEUMS

A special series of lectures by the curators planned for summer travelers in the United States, Tuesday evenings at 8:30 in the lecture hall of the Museum. Admission free.

- May 7: *New England*, by Perry T. Rathbone.
- May 14: *New York City*, by Adèle C. Weibel.
- May 28: *Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington*, by Francis W. Robinson.
- June 4: *The Western Cities*, by John D. Morse.