



Fig. 1 / Luigi Amici, Violoncello with a painted copy after Giorgione's *Benson Holy Family*, 1778, New York, Private Collection.

## Copies of Venetian Renaissance paintings on stringed instruments and the provenance of Giorgione's *Benson Holy Family* in Washington<sup>1</sup>

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Copies of Renaissance paintings on musical instruments are rare on keyboard instruments, and even rarer on stringed instruments of the violin family. In this article two exceptional examples of this genre are investigated from an art historical perspective for the first time. They are two violoncellos, dated Rome 1778, and 1816. The first copy is on an unusual violoncello, made at Rome in 1778, by Luigi Amici. The violoncello has a partial copy on the back, framed in a medallion, after Giorgione's *Benson Holy Family*, in the National Gallery of Art, Washington (figs. 1-3). The instrument is of considerable quality,<sup>2</sup> carved at the end of the eighteenth century from seventeenth-century maple in order to create a fine sound from older wood.<sup>3</sup> The copy is so accurate that the copyist could have had the original to hand in Rome, when it was dated. Indeed it may have been commissioned by a violoncellist who owned the painting. The forms of Giorgione's figures are manipulated into the medallion, dispensing with the background, inventing some green leaves on the left, and emphasizing the lines of the facial features. It is correct in colour, even if the varnish has yellowed, the image on the back of the violoncello never having been restored.

The Giorgione violoncello contains a label with the name Luigi Amici, a maker of stringed instruments, celebrated for his guitars and mandolins, who was working in Rome between 1778 to 1825.<sup>4</sup> Amici's label: "LUIGI AMICI/ FABBRICATORE

D'ARMONICI/ROMA/Via Pellegrino No. 44" is found in his extraordinary double mandolin, that couples instruments from Milan and Naples, now in the Museum of Musical Instruments, at the University of Leipzig (fig. 4).<sup>5</sup> Among the instruments he made, Luigi Amici<sup>6</sup> is said to have built three violoncellos, that have always been in private collections, one without decoration in Venice, the other two with painted copies in medallions after Renaissance Madonnas, both containing the Amici label. These stringed instruments have passed from one distinguished cellist to another and have never been on the art market.

The second decorated violoncello, hereafter called the Dürer violoncello, has on the back a copy of a detail of a Madonna and Child from Albrecht Dürer's *Madonna of the Rosegarlands*, painted for the German church, in Venice, San Bartolommeo at Rialto (figs. 5-7). Unlike Giorgione's *Benson Holy Family* this altarpiece was immediately celebrated, has a documented provenance and was copied in paintings from the early Cinquecento. In 1608 the Emperor Rudolf II brought Dürer's altarpiece from Venice to the Prague Castle. En route it was damaged. Once in Prague the altarpiece suffered from neglect and an unprofessional restoration.<sup>7</sup> In 1793 it was sold to the Strahov Monastery. From 1839 to 1841 Dürer's altarpiece was "restored" to its present appearance. In 1934 it was acquired by the National Gallery, Prague.



Fig. 2 / Detail of the copy of the *Madonna and Child*, after Giorgione, on the back of the Violoncello.

Fig. 3 / Giorgione, *The Benson Holy Family*, ca. 1497, oil on panel transferred to hardboard, 37.3 x 45.6 cm, Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art.





Fig. 4 / Luigi Amici, Double Mandolin, Leipzig, Musikinstrumentenmuseum der Universität Leipzig im Grassi.

The copy on the Dürer violoncello is dated "Rome 1816", when Dürer's altarpiece was in the Abbot's Chambers at Strahov Monastery, out-of-sight except to exceptional visitors. There are many early copies of Dürer's altarpiece, including one which was in the Palazzo Grimani,<sup>8</sup> made before the painting left Venice. The copies differ greatly from one another<sup>9</sup> and document the everchanging appearance of the altarpiece. The condition of Dürer's altarpiece in 1823 is recorded in a drawn copy by Václav Mánes (fig. 8). Of all the copies it is closest to the Madonna and Child on the Dürer violoncello, suggesting that the instrument was indeed made with knowledge of the original at that time. The Strahov Monastery has a distinguished tradition of music which may explain the transmission of the copy and the patron, perhaps

Fig. 5 / Luigi Amici, Violoncello with a painted copy after the Madonna and Child in Dürer's *Madonna of the Rosegarlands*, 1816, California, Private collection.

a musician and a lay member of the Brotherhood of the Rosary, who had this instrument made in Rome.

From the sixteenth century keyboards usually had some decoration, beginning with Baldassare Peruzzi's remarkable vision of *Apollo dancing with the Muses* (Florence, Galleria Palatina), that was devised to enhance the elegant case of a musical instrument. From that time there is a long tradition of decorating spinets or harpsichords, always with images by contemporary artists. The Amati family of Cremona were luthiers who made the first cellos in the sixteenth century as expensive diplomatic gifts. The earliest example of a decorated violoncello is by Andrea Amati (1505-1577), known as *The King*, or the *Viola Medicea* in the National Music Museum, Vermillion, South Dakota (figs. 8-9). It was commissioned by Catherine de' Medici for her son, Charles X in 1572 and has elegant coats of arms and *impreses* as well as allegorical figures.<sup>10</sup> Andrea's grandson Nicolò (1596-1684) is said to have inspired Antonio Stradivari, the most famous of all luthiers.

These mysterious copies of Madonnas problematize what they represent. The *Benson Holy Family* was unknown until it reached the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC with the Kress Collection in 1951.<sup>11</sup> Unlike other Renaissance artists, Giorgione's paintings were never copied until David Teniers the Younger made painted and engraved copies for the Archduke Leopold Wilhelm II in Brussels in the seventeenth century. Conceivably the copyist could have been the maker, owner, or player of the violoncello, who dabbled in painting, who may have wanted to have it decorated with his favourite religious image, which he or a friend may have owned. Whatever the identity of the copyist, it is the fact of the copy that is so intriguing. The copies are on the back of the violoncellos and would not have been visible to the audience, unlike the inside lid of a harpsichord. It was above all a copy of significance for the player.





Fig. 6 / Detail of Dürer's *Madonna of the Rosegarlands*, 1506, oil on wood, 162 x 192 cm, Prague, National Museum.

Fig. 7 / Václav Mánes, detail from his drawn copy after Dürer's *Madonna of the Rosegarlands*, 1823, pencil and tusch on paper, 59.4 x 69.4 cm, Prague, Academy of Fine Arts Prague.



The copies are placed in medallions where only the cellist could see them. During a performance the images were on the breast of the player, at his heart as it were, and when resting on a stand, the player could pray to the Madonna.

A unique dated reproduction inevitably raises questions about the provenance of the *Benson Holy Family*, for it was never previously known to have been copied. The *Benson Holy Family* was first discussed when it emerged in 1894 in the collection of Robert Henry and Evelyn Holford Benson.<sup>12</sup> Their collection of 114 paintings was sold to the Duveen brothers in 1927.<sup>13</sup> The first account of the provenance of the *Benson Holy Family* was given in the Benson catalogue by Tancred Borenius:

Formerly in a French collection under the name of Cima. It was discovered in a Brighton curiosity shop about the year 1887 and bought for £5. On the death of the purchaser it was sold by auction in Brighton and bought for about £20 by the late Henry Willett, who exchanged it with the present owner for the Madonna and Child and Three Angels on a gold ground by Le Maître de Moulins [Jean Hey],<sup>14</sup> now Brussels Gallery.<sup>15</sup>

The *Benson Holy Family* was first shown in a lively exhibition of *The Early Venetian School* at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, London, in 1912.<sup>16</sup> It was one of a series of exhibitions on Italian art, arranged by a club of collectors and connoisseurs, who were responsible for the display and catalogues of works from friends' collections.<sup>17</sup> The exhibition gives us a glimpse of the connoisseurship of Giorgione in early twentieth-century England, created by a patrician club of celebrated English collectors, which also involved Europeans, notably Giovanni Morelli and Wilhelm von Bode.<sup>18</sup> Borenius's account of the provenance of the *Holy Family* is repeated in the catalogue, and unquestioned in reviews of the exhibition. The true discoverer of the painting was Henry Willett (1823-1905), a brewer, the founding father of the Brighton Museum, primarily known for his collection of popular ceramics that illustrates British social history. Willett also collected Old Master paintings, although that part of his collection was sold after his death.<sup>19</sup> Benson must have valued Giorgione's painting highly in order to have exchanged it with Willett, for his gorgeous *Madonna and Child and Angels* by Jean Hey, now in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Belgium.



Fig. 8 / Andrea Amati,  
Decorated Violoncello, called  
*The King*, 1595, Vermillion,  
South Dakota, National Music  
Museum.

Fig. 9 / Detail of fig. 8.



There have been a number of attempts to discover the early provenance before Benson owned the painting. All remain questionable. While at Duveen's George Martin Richter suggested that it may have been earlier in the collection of the Dutch landscape artist, Allard van Everdingen (1621-1675), described in the 1709 sale catalogue of his collection as: "Mary, Joseph and the Child by Giorgione da Castelfranco, small figures the best known in this country".<sup>20</sup> Another possibility, here suggested for the first time, might be a painting of Giorgione's Holy Family, in the collection of the American artist, John Trumbull, and bought by him in Paris from a collector called Rouge, and sold at the London auction on 17 February 1797 to a Mr Knight.<sup>21</sup>

Once in Washington, the *Benson Holy Family* acquired a royal lineage, as the picture mentioned by Gustav Waagen in his *Treasures*, in the collection of King James II of England, as "Giorgione. 'The Virgin and Child, and St Joseph.' Mantuan Collection. (J., no 699)."<sup>22</sup> Catalogues of the Kress Collection, and of

the Italian paintings in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, have continually assumed that an early provenance for the painting was *possibly* the British Royal collection.<sup>23</sup> Yet this must be refuted as there is no trace of a Holy Family by Giorgione in the earlier inventories of the Royal Collection, nor in the Mantuan one.<sup>24</sup> Nor has it proved possible to trace a direct a chain of connection with any of the many recorded paintings in the nineteenth century, listed by the Getty Provenance Index, of the "Holy Family" said to have been by Giorgione before the provenance given by Borenius.<sup>25</sup>

These copies on beautiful musical instruments of great value as luxury objects, pose more questions than might be imagined, opening up a new avenue of enquiry about the provenance of a now celebrated painting. Where was the Benson Holy Family in 1778 when it was copied by a luthier, in Rome? Could the same patron/musician, with a passion for Venetian painting, have commissioned both instruments?

## NOTES

- David Alan Brown generously encouraged me to publish the violoncello with the copy after Giorgione. I am grateful to the owners of the violoncellos, who wish to remain anonymous, but who granted permission to publish their instruments. For much material about the copies after Dürer's *Madonna of the Rosegarlands*, I am indebted to Dr Olga Kotková, who suggested the importance of the Manes drawing and to Dr Léna Widerkehr in Lyons for information about their collection. Eveline Perroud, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, gave permission to reproduce images of the Dürer violoncello.
- The Giorgione cello has been recorded on a CD by Jelena and Ljerka Ocic, *The BaRock Experience. Masterpieces for cello and organ*, Challenge Classics, Austria, 2013.
- According to an unpublished dendrochronology report (2014) by Patrick Gassmann, Chez-le-Bart, Switzerland, a specialist in dendrochronology for stringed instruments, the wood may be dated to about 1680.
- Willibald von Lütgendorff, *Die Geigen- und Lautenmacher vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Frankfurt: Verlag von Heinrich Keller, 1904), p. 18.
- Georg Kinsky, *Musikhistorisches Museum von Wilhelm Heyer in Köln*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Kommissionsverlag von Breitkopf & Härtel, 1912), no. 660, pp. 210, 220, 231. In 1954 the mandolin was transferred to the Universitätsmuseum, Leipzig.
- Claude Lebet and Riccardo Minarcento, *Roma e i suoi liuteria: storia della liuteria romana dal secolo XVI al secolo XVIII* (Rome: Lebet, 2007), pp. 326-327.
- Olga Kotková, "The Feast of the Rose Garlands. What remains of Dürer?," *The Burlington Magazine* 134 (2002): pp. 4-13.
- Last seen on the art market, when dated circa 1506, *Gemälde Alter Meister und des 19. Jh. Russische Kunst, Zeichnungen, Alter Graphik, Bücher*, Koller Zürich, 18 September 2009, lot 3014, pp. 114-115. Later copies are reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, Karl Schütz, *Albrecht Dürer im Kunsthistorischen Museum*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1994), pp. 130-133.
- Madeleine Vincent, "Une copie de la *Fête du Rosaire* de Albert Dürer," *Bulletin des Musées et Monuments Lyonnais* 4 (1969): pp. 165-170. The copy at Lyons was sent to Paris in 1809. It was originally at Stallburg, where Emperor Maximilian lived, a palace later used by the Archduke Leopold Wilhelm. There are significant changes from the original, for example Saint Catherine taking the place of the pope.
- When the King Cello was on loan to the Metropolitan Museum in New York it was analyzed in some detail, see the blog by Andrew Dipper, "Taking a closer look at the Amati King cello," online at <https://metmuseum.org/blogs/of-note/2015/amati-cello-details>, accessed 26 June 2020.
- Fern Rusk Shapley, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection, Italian Schools XV-XVI Century*, vol. 3 (New York: Phaidon Press, 1968), pp. 150-151.
- See the catalogue of their collection by Robert Henry Benson and Tancred Borenius, *Catalogue of Italian Pictures at 16, South Street, Park Lane, London and Buckhurst in Sussex* (London: privately printed at the Chiswick Press, 1914), no. 83.
- Before leaving England, the collection was shown in the: *Loan Exhibition of the Benson Collection*, City of Manchester Art Gallery, 27 April to 30 July 1927.
- The Master of Moulins [Jean Hay]. *Madonna and Child Adored by Angels*. Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Belgium.
- Borenius, *Catalogue of Italian Pictures*, no. 83.
- Burlington Fine Arts Club. *Catalogue of a Collection of Pictures of the Early Venetian School and Other Works of Art* (London, privately printed for the Burlington Fine Arts Club by the Chiswick Press, 1912), no. 17, p. 23. The painting was in these English exhibitions always as by Giorgione: New Gallery London, 1894-1895 (*Venetian Painting chiefly before Titian*); Burlington Fine Arts Club, London, 1905-1906; National Loan Exhibition, Grafton Galleries, London, 1909-1910; Benson Collection, Manchester, 27 April to 30 July 1927.
- Stacey J. Pierson, *Private Collecting, Exhibitions and the Shaping of Art History in London, The Burlington Fine Arts Club* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017).
- Editorial, "The Burlington Fine Arts Club," *The Burlington Magazine* 94 (1952): pp. 96-98.
- Catalogue of the Collection of Pictures by Old Masters of Henry Willett, Esq.* Christie, Manson & Woods, 10 April 1905. Willett's papers, now in the East Sussex Record Office, fail to reveal how he acquired Giorgione's *Holy Family*.
- "Maria Joseph en het kindetje van Gyor Gyone da Castel Franco klein Levent beste hier te Lande beste hier te Lande bekennt", George Martin Richter, *Giorgio da Castelfranco, called Giorgione* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), p. 231.
- A Catalogue of a most Superb and Distinguished Collection of Italian, French, Flemish, and Dutch Pictures, a Selection Formed with Peculiar Taste and Judgment by John Trumbull, Esq. during his late Residence in Paris, from some of the most Celebrated Cabinets in France*, London, Christie, Manson & Wood, 17 February 1797, lot 36, "Giorgione. The Holy Family. A fine specimen and in excellent preservation". It was acquired from the collection of M. Le Rouge and bought by Knight for 53 pounds and ten shillings.
- G. F. Waagen, *Treasures of Art in Great Britain. II, Appendix A. Catalogue of the Capital Pictures in the Collection of Charles I, King of England* (London: John Murray, 1854), p. 471.
- Shapley, *Kress Collection*, pp. 150-151.
- Klara Garas, "The History of Collecting Giorgione in America-An Outline," *Acta Historiae Artium: Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 59 (2018): pp. 42-44.
- There are many Holy Families by Giorgione in early nineteenth-century sales, listed by the Getty Provenance Index, but none may be convincingly identified as the *Benson Holy Family*.

