

Discovering Signorelli

Dr Tom Henry, Lecturer in Italian Renaissance Painting at Oxford Brookes University, describes his work on a particular painting by Luca Signorelli, achieved during his term as British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Courtauld Institute, from 1997 to 2000.

The corpus of works by Luca Signorelli (c.1450–1523) is still being defined, and anyone studying the artist must establish what he painted. As with other artists of the Italian Renaissance, there is a core of signed, documented or universally accepted works by Signorelli, and wide margins of attributed works that have been favoured by some scholars, and rejected by others. In the course of my British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Courtauld Institute of Art, I have completed a catalogue raisonné of the paintings of Luca Signorelli, and have added my views to those of previous scholars. Although it was plainly

Figure 1. Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist and an Elderly Male Saint, by Luca Signorelli. 1485–7. Oil on panel. 83 × 53.5 cm (Institut de France – Musée Jacquemart-André).



incumbent on me to reach my own conclusions about the disputed attributions (on the basis that one cannot proceed to advanced study of Signorelli without knowing what he actually painted), it would be foolish not to recognise that my views will never represent the last word on the subject, and will, over time, become another voice in a babble of disagreement or consensus.

Although the same fate can befall any attribution, the discovery of new works by an artist has several virtues. Virgin territory is uncluttered by dispute and (in some circumstances) a newly discovered picture can install itself among the core pictures and enrich our knowledge of an artist's overall production. This appears to be the case with a painting by Signorelli that I was able to trace during my Fellowship. The picture in question (Figure 1) has been in the Musée Jacquemart-André at the Abbaye Royale de Chaalis for over one hundred years. Despite the fact that it was acquired as a work by the artist and is exhibited as by Signorelli, it had never been referred to in any of the books or articles that have discussed the artist's work, and it had never been reproduced. I 'discovered' a photograph of the picture in the Witt Library at the Courtauld (where it was labelled as 'Signorelli?'), and was subsequently able to study it at Chaalis. Having seen the original, it seemed clear to me that the picture was an important early work, and I published it as such in *The Burlington Magazine* in August 1999.

The painting, which measures 83 × 53.5 cm, is in oil (or a mixture of oil and tempera) on a poplar support. The painted surface is generally well-preserved, although there are several scattered damages and discoloured retouchings. The picture represents the Virgin and Child with a youthful Saint John the Baptist and an elderly male saint. Although Christ and the Baptist were commonly held to have been born within months of each other, it is not especially unusual for Saint John to be shown as a youth and Jesus as a baby. At Chaalis the Baptist is the only figure who is standing (the other two adults are shown on one knee) and his adolescence is suggested by his height as well as his facial features. The identity of the elder saint in the Chaalis picture is uncertain. He is clean-shaven and

wears a red cloak with an orange border over a green shirt. He is writing with a quill pen on a paper balanced on his left knee. In some circumstances the act of writing might identify the figure as Saint Zacharias (the Baptist's father), but this seems unlikely here. He is also unlikely to be Saint Joseph (whom Signorelli normally represents in orange, or with a very decorative scarf), Saint Paul (who is almost always bearded and traditionally wears red and green) or Saint John the Evangelist (who is usually younger). In the absence of any other attribute he must remain unidentified.

The attribution of the painting to Signorelli can be supported on the basis of various comparisons. The child can be compared to the *Circumcision* in the National Gallery, London, and there are close similarities with *Virgin and Child with Saints John the Baptist and Jerome (?)* in the Pallavicini-

Rospigliosi collection in Rome. The slightly unsatisfactory aspects of the painting (its unconvincing spatial recession, as well as the vertiginous disequilibrium of the heads and the uncomfortable crowding of the figures) all point to a date early in Signorelli's career. Since it seems overwhelmingly likely that Signorelli spent some time in Florence in the 1480s, it may not be a coincidence that the format of the picture is both typically Florentine, and unusual in Signorelli. This picture at Chaalis, newly incorporated into Signorelli's corpus, should probably be dated c.1485–7 and represents another building block in our understanding of the artist's work.

Dr Henry currently holds an Academy research grant for the completion of his *Catalogue Raisonné of the works of Luca Signorelli*.