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Reviews: Pentimento:

The Master of Frankfurt's 'Virgin and Child'. Queensland Art Gallery; December 2002 – June 2003

Tucked away downstairs in a corner of the QAG in Brisbane is a small, yet remarkable, focus exhibition. It highlights the value of scholarship not only in the appreciation and understanding of objects in museum collections, but of the moral issues involved in acquiring and displaying them. Pentimento: The Master of Frankfurt's 'Virgin and Child', focuses on a single work, a painted panel dating to c.1496.

The exhibition is in a box of a room, some nine by six metres in size, a scale that enhances the intimate and contained nature of the story. Across the centre of the longer axis is a freestanding wall in which the painting is centrally presented. It is obviously the focus around which the display rotates. Clever design allows the work to be viewed through glass from both sides of this wall - a technique that is both interesting and crucial to the tale.

The work's attribution to the anonymous Dutch 'Master of Frankfurt' is explained and the identity of key figures and elements clarified. The painting depicts the Virgin and Child attended by various saints, in the company of an unknown patron, kneeling and fingering his prayer book. An eccentrically-clipped poodle(?) sits unfazed in front of them all.

Turning left in the gallery are two small display boxes, each with a beautiful book echoing the one held by the patron. The backdrops are blown-up details of the painted foliage, whose symbolic meaning would have been understood by a viewer in its own time but now requires explanation: the Virgin's purity in the white of the strawberry flower, her humility by violets, cinquefoil for its healing ability. At the far end are shelves displaying the materials used in mediaeval and Renaissance paintings, including gorgeous lapis lazuli and gold leaf, highlighting the cost of commissioning art in these times.

The term pentimento in the exhibition title derives from the Italian 'to repent', and is used to describe the changes and overpainting that artists sometimes make to their work. It is highlighted by scientific techniques such as infra-red reflectography, showing that the artist changed the figures and explaining inconsistencies such as the donor's male head atop a more feminine-shaped body. The Saints' altered identities are equally fascinating, and closer inspection with the naked eye after seeing the photographs reveals shadows of the changes described, missed at first sight.

The gallery's back wall explores the work's provenance, focusing on intriguing clues on its reverse, clearly visible at this point. The stories told on the verso through labels, sketches and scribbles provide invaluable clues to the life

of the work. The uncertainty of its ownership during and just after WW2 led the QAG to include it in its Provenance Research Project.

A small round label denotes that it was part of the Oscar Bundy collection in Vienna, and a blue handwritten number on a cross-brace constitutes its Nazi identification number; they must have rung loud alarm bells when the Provenance Study began. Research proved that the painting had indeed been confiscated by the Nazis from its Jewish owner in 1939, but recovered by the Allied Forces and returned to the owner's widow in 1947. She subsequently sold it to an American collector. The work was therefore declared free from restitution claims and the Gallery has full legal title to it.

This section of the exhibition presents the simple lesson that not all works with what may appear to be sketchy provenance are bound to have been acquired under suspicious circumstances. The piece of correspondence from the Commission for Provenance Research in Austria, displayed with other documents, must have elicited a collective sigh of relief when it arrived in Brisbane. It enables the Gallery to confidently share its research with the public.

An unobtrusive monitor in this section plays dramatic news footage of WW2 soldiers moving artworks from their hiding places onto rickety old trucks (warning: registrars should not watch). Further correspondence on display indicates that the work had been selected for inclusion in nothing less than the Führer's own museum which he had planned for Linz.

A quirky component of the exhibition is the music. Not only is one surrounded by predictable, although lovely, 16th century devotional pieces, but at an unexpected moment they are replaced by Josephine Baker, and then Marlene Dietrich. What a clever exhibition.

Annette Welkamp is Director of Cultural Connotations in Melbourne.

*The Master of Frankfurt, The Netherlands 1460-c1520-33, Virgin and Child with Saint James the Pilgrim, Saint Catherine and the Donor with Saint Peter c.1496, oil on oak panel
Purchased 1980 with funds from the Utah Foundation through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery. An image of this work can be found on the Gallery's website at http://www.qag.qld.gov.au/collection/historical_international_art/the_master_of_frankfurt*

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