



Francesco La Marra

(Martina Franca 1728 – Naples 1787)

Virgin and Child with Saint George, Saint Francis, and Donors

Pen and brown ink on graphite lines

Dimensions: 15 ½" x 10 ½" (39.5 x 26.7 cm) – Framed: 25 ¼" x 20 ¾" (64 x 51.8 cm)

Provenance: private collection, Brussels

Italian molded and gilded wooden frame – Emilia Romagna, 18th century

Price on request

This vigorous drawing presents a brilliant synthesis between the Venetian tradition of Titian, of which it is a distant echo, and the Neapolitan Baroque of Solimena, which strongly influenced Francesco La Marra, a painter and engraver from Puglia whose rich graphic work has recently been rediscovered thanks to the work of several art historians.

In addition to the highly characteristic outlines of the numerous figures that animate this large composition, La Marra is recognizable by his almost systematic use of "patches" bearing a repentance, an example of which can be seen here on the left for the figure of Saint Francis.

1. Francesco La Marra, Neapolitan painter and engraver

Francesco La Marra was an artist from Puglia (he was born in Martina Franca in 1728) who moved to Naples in 1748. While little is known about his life, he is an artist whose body of work is still being compiled, but whose importance among Neapolitan artists of the second half of the 18th century is becoming increasingly clear.

He worked as an engraver illustrating religious books, but also as a cartographer, as he is believed to have been one of the engravers of the gigantic *Map of Naples* commissioned by the Duke of Noja (1768-1775). He is also thought to have worked alongside Pierre Yves d'Hancarville on engraving reproductions of antique vases to illustrate Lord Hamilton's collections. In 1792, a collection of prints reproducing drawings by La Marra after the great Neapolitan masters Mattia Preti, Luca Giordano, and Francesco Solimena (or supposed to be such) was published posthumously, demonstrating his graphic virtuosity and knowledge of the work of the great Baroque artists who worked in Naples. This graphic virtuosity and frequent homage to the great Neapolitan masters explain why La Marra's drawings were often attributed to Giordano or Solimena, before being gradually attributed to La Marra by contemporary critics¹.

¹ For example, Marco Riccomini argues that the drawing in the Louvre depicting *Clorinda freeing Olindo and Sofronia* (Inv. no. RF 38581), which was attributed to Solimena, is in fact a work by La Marra (M. Riccomini *La Marra in New York*). For other examples of these reattributions, see also Viviana Farina's article *Una voce polifonica del secondo Settecento napoletano: altri disegni e bozzetti per Francesco La Marra*.

While his graphic output appears to have been very prolific, few of his paintings are known today, the most famous being the three canvases he produced in the 1750s for the church of Santi Filippo e Giacomo in Naples, which have remained *in situ*.

2. A drawing with a complex iconography

The drawing we present features a complex iconography: the Virgin Mary is seated on a throne supported by a lion and a griffin at the foot of a large column; two cherubs carry the cross in the sky. The Virgin presents the Child she is holding in her arms to a first circle of holy figures, among whom we recognize Saint Francis on the left of the composition and Saint George on the right, his foot resting on the broken spear with which he defeated the dragon. A second circle represents donors kneeling at the bottom of the composition.

The composition is clearly inspired by one of Titian's masterpieces, the *Pesaro Madonna*, and the fact that it has been depicted in reverse suggests that La Marra was probably familiar with this painting, preserved in Venice, through Valentin Lefèvre's print, as prints had been used since the Renaissance to convey formal innovations throughout workshops.



Titian - *The Pesaro Madonna*

Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari – Venice



Valentin Lefèvre – *Print after Titian*

Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent

La Marra appropriates this composition entirely, reworking it in a manner that is both perfectly Baroque and highly personal: from a low angle (*da sotto in su*) that reinforces the monumentality of the composition, the Virgin appears in a centered position at the foot of a single column that symbolizes her role as mediator between the earthly realm occupied by both the viewer and the large assembly surrounding her, and the divine realm, conventionally located in the heavens. Saint Francis is now depicted as a *Rückenfigur* (while remaining recognizable by his habit and tonsure); this change in composition, made visible by the addition of the famous patch, allows the viewer to fully enter the composition at first glance.

Next to the enlargement of the figure of Saint Francis, we present a drawing from the Metropolitan Museum attributed to La Marra, which shares several features with our composition: an elongated format and low-angle view, a bipartite composition, significant repentance on a laminated sheet, and the presence of a *Rückenfigur* that draws us into the composition...



On the left, **Francesco La Marra** – *Virgin and Child with Saint George, Saint Francis, and Donors* (detail)

Right, attributed to **Francesco La Marra** – *The Hospitality of Abraham* (61.158.2) – Metropolitan Museum – New York

Although we have not found any prints or paintings by La Marra using this composition, a drawing presented by the *Drawingsonline* gallery using the same finished composition leads us to believe that it must have been produced.



On the left, **Francesco La Marra** – *Madonna and Child with Saint George, Saint Francis, and Donors*

On the right, **Italian anonymous artist** – *Virgin and Child with Saint George, Saint Francis, and Donors* – whereabouts unknown

3. Provenance and framing

We chose to frame this drawing in an Italian molded and gilded wooden frame (Emilia-Romagna, 18th century) with a particularly elaborate profile that truly highlights and emphasizes the Baroque monumentality of this composition.



Francesco La Marra - *Virgin and Child with Saint George, Saint Francis, and Donors*