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Abraham Janssen

Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist, 1622 - 1623

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ABRAHAM I JANSSEN

(Liège 1571/75 - 1632 Antwerp)

MADONNA AND CHILD WITH THE INFANT SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST, 1622 - 1623

Oil on panel, oval, in an elaborate carved and gilt wood frame.

86.3 × 69 cm; 34 x 27 ¼ in.

Provenance

Anonymous sale, Sotheby's London, 15 April 1999, Lot 38;
Private collection, Belgium.

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The Virgin Mary tenderly supports the Christ Child on her lap, as the infant St John the Baptist approaches in adoration, offering Jesus a handful of red cherries, a common prefiguration of the Passion. Mary's gaze is gentle and contemplative, directed toward St John, who kneels at lower right.

The present painting exemplifies Abraham I Janssen's mature aesthetic at the apex of his career, situated at the intersection of Flemish tradition and the revolutionary Caravaggesque idiom. The oval format, a configuration particularly favoured by the artist for intimate religious subjects, structures a pyramidal composition of hierarchical clarity, in which the three figures occupy the pictorial plane with characteristic sculptural weight.

Janssen treated this subject in at least three autograph versions during the mid-1610s. Besides the present oval panel (formerly in the 1999 Sotheby's sale), a larger version on canvas (Fig. 1) was documented with Galleria Caretto in Turin, whilst another related version survives in the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp (Fig. 2). That museum version presents notable compositional variations: the architectural backdrop drapery is absent, whilst the column positioned to the right of the composition does not appear; furthermore, the Saint John's attribute cross is positioned behind rather than distanced from his figure, and the Virgin's left hand rests on the Baptist's shoulder in a noticeably different caress.

Following his apprenticeship to the rather mediocre painter Jan Snellinck the Elder (1548-1638), Janssen continued his studies in Italy. According to surviving documents he was in Rome in 1598 and again in the spring of 1601, when he is recorded as a collaborator of his compatriot Willem van Nieulandt the Elder (1561?-1626).¹ Janssen became one of the first Flemish painters to absorb Caravaggio's naturalistic idiom. With his return to Antwerp in 1601 (or at the latest 1602) Janssen joined the local painters' guild, taking over several administrative functions as of 1606. In the years up to 1610 - in this period he was undoubtedly the most important painter of large-scale history pieces in the city - Janssen received many important commissions, among others for the decoration of the town. By 1615, Janssen's position within the Antwerp artistic establishment had undergone significant transformation. Rubens' triumphant return to the city in 1608 had gradually eclipsed the pre-eminence Janssen had enjoyed as the leading history painter of the Low Countries; nevertheless, the continuing demand for devotional half-length figures sustained his productive engagement throughout the second and third decades of the century. During the period in question, Janssen had abandoned the more overtly Caravaggesque idiom that had characterised his production between approximately 1606 and 1612 - a phase marked by dramatic chiaroscuro and pronounced narrative intensity exemplified in his monumental *Scalds and Antverpia* (1609, fig. 3). By 1615, his

¹ P. van der Ploeg et al, *Dutch and Flemish Old Masters from the Kremer Collection*, 2002, pp. 88-90.

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engagement with Caravaggio's innovations had matured into a more classicising synthesis.²

In the present work, the strong lateral illumination characteristic emphasises volumetric form rather than to generate dramatic pictorial tension; the light coalesces upon flesh and drapery in passages of luminous, controlled tonality, rendering the figures with that calculated plasticity which distinguished Janssen's approach from the more effusive naturalism of his contemporaries in Utrecht and Rome. This subordination of Caravaggist chiaroscuro to the imperatives of sculptural rendering, reflects the influence of Bolognese Baroque classicism, the Carracci school and Domenichino, upon Janssen's later development.³

The figures, arranged in a compact pyramidal grouping, are constrained within the shallow pictorial depth characteristic of Janssen's Madonna compositions (see *The Virgin and Child with the Infant St John the Baptist* in the Kremer collection, fig. 4); the background provides minimal recession, instead functioning as a unified surface against which the sacred figures assert their tangible presence. The tonal harmonies, dominated by the warm incarnation tones of the Virgin and Child, the rich crimson of the Madonna's garment, and the cooler greys and ochres of the drapery, establish a chromatic equilibrium that eschews the violent luministic contrasts of the earlier Caravaggesque phase.

² See J. Müller Hofstede, "Abraham Janssen. Zur Problematik des flämischen Caravaggismus," *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, XIII (1971), pp. 208-303.

³ W. A. Liedtke, *Flemish Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1984, p. 108-110.

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Fig. 1. Abraham Janssen, *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1615, oil on canvas, 98 x 122,5 cm. Previously with Galleria Luigi Caretto, Turin.

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Fig. 2. Abraham Janssen and workshop,⁴ *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, oil on canvas, 112,8 × 81,2 cm. Antwerpen, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, inv. 211.

⁴ Attribution suggested by Dr. Joost Vander Auwera.

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Fig. 3. Abraham Janssen, *Scaldis and Antwerpia*, 1609, oil on canvas, 174 x 308 cm. Antwerpen, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, inv. 212.



Fig. 4. Abraham Janssen, *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, 1619 - 1620, oil on canvas, 142 x 121,2 cm. Kremer Collection, Stedelijk Museum Alkmaar.

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COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com