AN EARLY SIENese PANEL
IN THE GRIGGS COLLECTION

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The small Madonna and Child illustrated on the following page is one of the thirteen gems of early Italian painting which came to the Museum last autumn as a bequest from the late Maitland F. Griggs. Though varied in subject and representing interestingly different phases of the early Renaissance, the pictures now belonging to the Museum all share a similar quality that reflects the personal taste and character of their recent owner. Religious and secular, Sienese and Florentine, ranging widely through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, they have in common an exquisite and reticent grace that anyone who remembers talking with Mr. Griggs will easily associate with his invariable gentle modesty, his friendly manners, and his tact.

From the early nineteen-twenties, when he first became interested in buying and owning pictures, he expressed a preference for the rare and excellent in painting, selecting for himself Italian panels, usually small ones, of the category popularly and misleadingly described as "primitives." Primitive pictures—at least in Italy—may date from as early as the beginning of the thirteenth century or as late as the end of the fifteenth. This was the time, it is true, when the Italian artist’s ability to solve the technical problems of convincing representation lagged far behind his ardent enthusiasm and affection for his subject, when his content far outran his means of expression. But even the most superficial study of these exquisitely elegant, so-called "primitive" paintings in the Griggs collection reveals that ascribing "primitive" properties to them is by no means intended as a patronizing charge of ineptitude or crudeness, but is on the contrary a tribute to a quality of promise, a springtime of quickening and budding as opposed to a summer of lush flowering and fulfillment. The quattrocento in Tuscany may be regarded as the antithesis of decadence, and the contemplation of any one of the pictures in the Griggs bequest leads to a reaffirmation of the belief that a man’s reach should exceed his grasp.

None of these pictures is more delicately beautiful than the small Madonna and Child long attributed to Lippo Memmi but recently, and with much justification, given to Barna da Siena, another Sienese painter who, like Memmi, followed closely after the great Simone Martini. Vasari devotes several appreciative pages to Barna but, with his usual propensity for creating utter confusion, refers to him as “Berna” and keeps him alive until 1381, a date far too late to be reconciled with the few other facts about him we can glean elsewhere. He observes that although Barna died young he left behind him so many paintings that he seems to have had a very long life indeed; he states that Barna met his death as the result of a fall from a scaffold at San Gimignano and ascribes to him a cycle of frescoes in the collegiate church of the town.

The frescoes at San Gimignano illustrate scenes from the life of Christ, and since Bartolo di Fredi completed the series between 1356 and 1362 by painting a section of Old Testament scenes, it is probable that Barna had died about the middle of the century. These frescoes and certain panels believed to be his reveal a style closely dependent on Simone Martini. They are extremely dignified in feeling and almost static, as if the actors were arrested midway in their passage across the stage and held quiet for tableaux. The faces show a strange and moving intensity of expression, conveyed largely through the emotional power of the eyes. It has often been observed that Barna had an odd fondness for combining in one picture figures of two dif-
ferent scales of proportion, and this queer trick, which occurs in the Boston Museum's Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine and in the Frick Collection's Christ Bearing the Cross, is to be found again in our painting from the Griggs collection. But it is still more the concentrated silence of the gracious central group and the implied feeling in the faces which confirm the attribution of our Madonna to Barna.

The picture was bought in Italy in 1849 by an Englishwoman, Mrs. Martin Tucker Smith, who considered it a work of the head of the Sienese school—a Duccio. Many years later she gave it to her son, Francis Nicholas Smith, and afterwards it passed through the hands of many owners, including Richard Norton of Boston and Carl W. Hamilton of New York, coming in the late nineteen-twenties to Mr. Griggs.

Many of the fourteenth-century paintings of the Madonna which have come down to us are remnants of long-dismembered altarpieces, and to be thoroughly understood they must be imagined as focal points in these big ensembles, surrounded by numerous other pinnacled and crocketed panels with respectful attendant saints. Barna's painting, in contrast, is a complete entity, a devotional image conceived as a microcosm of a great many-paneled altarpiece, with its pair of full-length saints, standing beside their Lady, and the entire angelic hierarchy worshiping her in the gable. Across the base, where in a large polyptych there would be a five- or seven-part predella, there is a whole row of tiny, jewel-bright half-lengths of saints, framed and isolated by tooled arcades. The painting was probably used originally as an image for private devotion, and its extremely feminine appeal fosters the wish to imagine it as the inspiration for the prayers of some high-born, gracious Sienese lady.

Probably the most noticeable feature of the little panel is the lovely purity of its preservation. The Virgin's robe, which has now darkened to a somber but gold-bordered black, was surely once the traditional blue mantle that we expect to find in both Italian and Flemish paintings. But the color harmony must always have been restrained. The Child, who holds in one hand a pale wild rose and with the other reaches a sprig toward his mother's face, wears a transparent, gauzy white chemise, and over it, lying in folds about his solid little legs, there is a cloak of gold brocade with a fine, flowerlike pattern. The angels are defined with little color but much tooling and ornament in

gold, seeming to blend into the burnished gold-leaf ground that glows like the very Paradise in which the Virgin is adored. By way of contrast there is a delicate and subtle use of paint in the representation of the terrestrial personages. The robes of Saint John the Baptist, at the left, are in scintillant tones of amethyst, Saint Francis's habit is pearly gray, and there are flashes of vermilion and clear blue in the garments of the saints in the miniature predella. Among these saints one may distinguish Saint Clare, a contemporary and follower of Saint Francis, Saint Lawrence with his grid, Saint Peter with his keys, and Saint Louis of Toulouse carrying a crozier and wearing a mantle adorned with fleurs-de-lys. At the left is a young saint who is probably Ansano, patron of Siena, and at the right, a royal martyr who may be Saint Miniato and another martyr difficult to identify on so small a scale.

The angelic hierarchy is divided in the conventional fashion into nine groups or choirs, which float into the ethereal gold ground from beneath the frame and hover about the heads of the Madonna and Child adoring. Although winged creatures had been revered as messengers between divinity and earthly clay since the days of Egypt and Nineveh and although angels played major roles in Old Testament dramas, it was not before the middle of the fifth century of the Christian era that they were divided into nine choirs, classified according to the degree and intensity of their knowledge and love of God, and ordered accordingly in ascending proximity to the heavenly throne.

The Coelestis Hierarchia, or Celestial Hierarchy, an elaborate treatise on this theme by the anonymous writer called Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, divides the nine choirs into three triads, each mounting higher toward the source of light. Starting with the lowest, they are Angels, Archangels, Principalities; next come Powers, Virtues, Dominations; and at the top, Thrones, Cherubim, and Seraphim. It is this formulation of the nine choirs that the Church has generally accepted, but there has been a good deal of diversity in the artistic representation of the separate orders. In our picture there is no doubt about identifying the lowest group at the left, bearing wands, as Angels; above them are probably Principalities, or Princedoms, with branches of lilies; and high up on the left the bearers of the books are surely Cherubim. On the other side, second from the bottom, are the Archangels, bearing the sword and orb, and next to the top the Thrones, carrying faldstools. In the pinnacle the highest order, the Seraphim, completely surrounds the Dove of the Holy Spirit. The other groups, to be identified as Dominations, Powers, and Virtues, carry croziers, garlands, and censers.

The painter of our exquisite little panel in all probability knew nothing of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite and was content to let the theologians formulate for him the laws of heavenly precedence. He may, however, have known what was written of Dionysius in the Paradiso. Referring to the belief that he had been the devotee and disciple of Saint Paul, who revealed to him all the glories of the seventh heaven, Dante wrote:

Desire
In Dionysius so intensely wrought
That he, as I have done, ranged them, and named
Their orders, marshalled in his thought;
. . . For he had learned
Both this and much beside of these our orbs
From an eye-witness to Heaven's mysteries.