



BICCI DI LORENZO

(1373 Florence 1452)

The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine. Circa 1445–50.

Tempera and gold ground on panel.

165 × 98 cm.

Provenance: - John Temple Leader (1810–1903), Castello di Vincigliata, Fiesole, 1900. - bequeathed, probably to his nephew, Richard Luttrell Pilkington Bethell, 3rd Baron of Westbury (1852–1930). - Alberto Fassini Camossi (1875–1942), Rome. - to the heirs of Camossi, circa 1920. - Sotheby's auction, London, 20.4.1988, lot 5. - Private collection, Reggio Emilia, 1994. - European private collection. Literature: - Raimond van Marle: The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting, The Hague 1923–1938,

Vol. VIII (1927), p. 252, fig. 150. - Adolfo Venturi: Collezione d'arte del Barone Alberto Fassini. Pitture dal 300 all'800, Milan 1930, fig X. - Bernard Berenson: Italian Pictures of the Renaissance, Oxford 1932, p. 85. - Bernard Berenson: Pitture Italiane del Rinascimento, Milan 1936, p. 73. - Bernard Berenson: Italian Paintings of the Renaissance: Florentine School, Oxford 1963, Vol. I, p. 29. This imposing depiction of the "Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine", having been in private hands for decades, now makes its reappearance on the art market. A work of museum quality, this is a masterpiece by the Florentine artist Bicci di Lorenzo, dating from the beginning of the early Renaissance, and artistically closely bound to the tradition of the 14th century. The panel was first published by Raimond van Marle (1927), who associated it with Arcangelo da Cola di Camerino (active circa 1416–1429). However, just three years later, Adolfo Venturi (1930) recognised the true authorship as that of the Florentine painter Bicci di Lorenzo, with which later literature rightly concurred (Berenson 1932, 1936, 1963). Bicci di Lorenzo, to whom this panel can be attributed with absolute certainty, was born into an artistic dynasty and was a highly successful painter. The son of Lorenzo di Bicci (circa 1350–1427), he took over his father's painting workshop, which received numerous commissions in and around Florence during the early 15th century. Later, after Bicci di Lorenzo's death (1452), the workshop continued into the third generation with his son, Neri di Bicci (1418–1492) who was also very active. As one of the leading painters in Florence and the surrounding area, Bicci di Lorenzo was extremely active and received some of the most important commissions of that time. For example, he executed the (no longer extant) fresco of Sant'Egidio in Florence, where he worked alongside the most famous Renaissance painters of the time, Domenico Veneziano (circa 1410–1461) and Piero della Francesca (1416–1492). He received many commissions for paintings, but also for the cathedral and produced the frescos in the Compagni chapel in Santa Trinità. The frescos of the choir chapel of San Francesco in Arezzo were completed as far as the vault, as Bicci di Lorenzo died while the works were still in progress. Piero della Francesca completed the work with his series "The Legend of the True Cross" with which he was to create

one of the most famous pictorial cycles of the Renaissance. The monumental format of the panel presented here suggests that it formed the central section of a large altarpiece and was probably flanked by representations of standing saints. A comparable concept features in Bicci di Lorenzo's large altarpiece in Perugia, which also depicts the "Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine" (Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Inv.-No. 79). Professor Gaudenz Freuler conjectures that the panel was conceived as a central element in a multi-part altarpiece for a women's religious community. The "Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine" was a popular subject amongst the women's religious orders and symbolised their commitment to God. The liturgy for the consecration of nuns traditionally employed images of the heavenly bridegroom, and occasionally the nuns even wore a wedding ring, in order to demonstrate their spiritual bond as the "Sponsae Christi". This theme developed especially within the mysticism of the Dominican nuns north of the Alps and was captured in numerous written testimonies and pictures. Under the influence of Lorenzo Monaco (1370–1425) and Gentile da Fabriano (1370–1427), during his long career Bicci di Lorenzo developed a coherent, dynamic style, which on the one hand internalises the International Gothic style, while at the same time also testifies to his Florentine roots and reveals his familiarity with the works of the Florentine progressives Masaccio (1401–1427) and Masolino (1383–1447). The combination of Renaissance set pieces inspired by the antique, such as the thrones with twisted columns, the tabernacle and similar sumptuous elements, with the traditional pictorial world of the Gothic, coupled with Bicci di Lorenzo's extraordinary technique, as is powerfully in evidence in the present panel, found great favour with his clients, and was also later to characterise the work of his son Neri di Bicci. A comparison of the present panel with the painting of the Madonna from the altar of the Cathedral in Fiesole dated to 1450 (see Zeri Archive No. 10336), which is one of the late works by the artist, shows clearly that both were conceived in a similar way: the face of the Madonna, compared with the present panel as well as other late panels by Bicci, is painted after an identical pattern and with a consistency of style, which also applies to the figure of the young Jesus. There are also striking

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parallels with regard to the spatial sensibility, which was influenced by the pictorial compositions of Domenico Veneziano from the 1440s: for example, the imposing Renaissance architecture of the throne with its vault of stars, which leads towards the twisted columns modelled after the Cosmati columns, creating a convincing sense of space, which is further reinforced by the vanishing point formed by the floor tiles. Professor Gaudenz Freuler, whom we thank for his help with this catalogue entry, has therefore dated this panel to the artist's later years, circa 1445–50.

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