



ROBERT SIMON FINE ART

Suor Plautilla Nelli
(Florence, 1524 – 1588)

*Madonna and Child Enthroned
with Saints Catherine, Ursula, John the Baptist and John the Evangelist*

Oil on panel
14 ½ x 11 inches (37 x 28 cm)

Provenance: Private Collection, Europe.



22 EAST 80TH STREET · NEW YORK · NY · 10075
TEL: 212-288-9712 FAX: 212-202-4786

BY APPOINTMENT AT: SATIS HOUSE · 53 TOWER HILL ROAD EAST · TUXEDO PARK · NY · 10987
TEL: 845-351-2339 FAX: 845-351-4332

RBS@ROBERTSIMON.COM WWW.ROBERTSIMON.COM

Suor Plautilla Nelli was a Dominican nun celebrated as the first woman painter in Florence. She was born there to Francesca Calandri and Piero di Luca Nelli, a merchant, and was baptized as Pulisena Margherita Nelli on 24 January 1524.¹ Following the death of her parents, she became a nun at the age of fourteen, taking the name of the early Christian saint Plautilla. Both she and her elder sister Costanza, who took the name Petronilla, entered the Convent of Santa Caterina in Cafaggio, located on the Piazza San Marco in Florence and affiliated with the Dominican monastery of that name.

Plautilla's initial artistic education is not documented. Vasari, who wrote about her during her lifetime (and presumably knew her), tells us that she was essentially self-taught, studying the works of other artists and becoming adept first at drawing, then miniature painting. She may have received instruction in manuscript illumination from Fra Eustachio di Baldassare, a lay friar and artist at San Marco, whose style closely resembles that of the *Adoration of the Christ Child* attributed to Suor Plautilla in an antiphony made for her convent (Fig. 1). A miniature on copper of *Saint Catherine of Siena*, attributed to Plautilla (Fig. 2), seems roughly coeval. These are among the earliest known works by the artist, likely dating from the 1550s.



Fig. 1. Attributed to Plautilla Nelli, *Initial A: Adoration of the Christ Child*, Florence, Museo di San Marco, Ms San Marco 566.



Fig. 2. Attributed to Plautilla Nelli, *St. Catherine of Siena*, oil copper, 18 x 14 cm, Florence, Uffizi, Inv 1890, no.025.

The artist is best known today from three surviving signed or documented altarpieces on public view: the *Lamentation* (Museo di San Marco, Florence); the *Last Supper* (Refectory of Santa Maria Novella, Florence), and the *Pentecost* (San Domenico, Perugia). These recall the style, and may reflect the direct teaching, of Fra Paolino da Pistoia, the Dominican friar and principal student of Fra Bartolommeo. Fra Paolino had

inherited the contents of his master's studio in 1517, and at his death in 1547, bequeathed it to Nelli's convent. In fact, over five hundred of Fra Bartolommeo's drawings have remained together in an album inscribed with Plautilla's name, now in the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam.

Vasari reports that between her early work as an illuminator and the later large ecclesiastical paintings, Suor Plautilla painted many small-scale paintings as private commissions:

And because this revered and virtuous Sister, before working on panels and works of importance, studied the art of miniature painting, there are many beautiful small paintings by her hand in the collections of people whose names need not be mentioned." (Vasari-Milanesi, V, 80)

Two such panels long attributed to the artist are the *Madonna and Child with Saints Dominic and Catherine* in the Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht (Fig. 3) and an *Annunciation* in the Uffizi (Fig. 4). The Utrecht painting was acquired in Italy in the early nineteenth century by the celebrated collector Johan Anton Ramboux as by "Suor Plautilla Fiorentina." And the Uffizi panel came to the museum in 1853 from the Chapel of the Palazzo Granducale at Follonica, where it had long been known to be by her.



Fig. 3. Suor Plautilla Nelli,
*Madonna and Child with Saints Dominic and
Catherine of Siena*,
Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent.



Fig. 4. Suor Plautilla Nelli,
The Annunciation,
Florence, Uffizi, Inv. 1890, no. 9739.



Fig. 5. Comparison of the Heads of St. Catherine and the Virgin in our *Virgin and Child* (left images) with the Heads of Gabriel and the Virgin in the *Annunciation* in the Palazzo Vecchio (Suor Plautilla Nelli).

With these the present unpublished painting bears an obvious stylistic bond, sharing a similar linear description of forms and features and a gentle, if somewhat uniform characterization of the principal figures. A further technical bond can be noted in the color deficiency of the Virgin's robe and the sky in our painting and that in Utrecht—neither properly blue today—consequences of the limited resources of a nun to secure quality pigments such as expensive ultramarine. Furthermore, Christopher Daly has pointed out the closely analogous treatment of the facial types in our painting, with those in the *Annunciation* in the Palazzo Vecchio, a near replica of the Uffizi painting (Fig. 5).

Vasari mentions that Plautilla was adept at copying the work of other artists—he singles out a *Nativity* after a Bronzino original—and, although not a copy, the present work recalls in its composition the work of Plautilla’s predecessors. In the broadest of senses it can be seen as reduction of a Florentine altarpiece type current in the first half of the century, of which Fra Paolino’s *Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine* (Fig. 6), painted for Plautilla’s convent and itself a derivation of Fra Bartolomeo’s 1511 *Mystic Marriage* in the Louvre, is typical. Closer in scale and format to our painting is an Antonio del Ceraiuolo panel of a related subject, with a seated Madonna and Child, flanked by two kneeling female saints with two male saints standing behind them (Fig. 7). But beyond echoing earlier models, Plautilla’s painting manifests the inherent conservative tenor of her art, a reflection both of her own religious calling and that of her patrons, many of whom were women in close contact with the convent.



Fig. 6. Fra Paolino da Pistoia,
Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine,
Florence, Uffizi, Inv. 1890, no. 3471.



Fig. 7. Antonio del Ceraiuolo,
Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine,
Florence, Cenacolo di Foligno.

That audience is underscored by the prominent placement of the two female saints in the foreground, each clutching martyr’s palms, and with the instruments of their martyrdom visible. Catherine is at the left, a fragment of her iconic wheel behind her, while Ursula’s arrow points at her neck. Both saints are crowned—Catherine traditionally described as being of royal blood, while Ursula was the daughter of the king of Brittany. Behind them stand John the Baptist at left, wearing his hair shirt and holding a reed cross, while John the Evangelist proffers his traditional emblem of a chalice with a snake, emblematic of the poisoned drink that he survived through faith alone. All these elements are described with clarity and undeniable charm.

Our painting likely dates from the late 1550s and before 1563, the year Plautilla was elected Prioress of the Convent, a two-year position which she held twice more in later years. During these periods, she apparently was unable to paint, as she was occupied by the logistical and spiritual administration of the convent.

We are grateful to Christopher Daly and Dr. Sheila Barker for confirming Plautilla Nelli's authorship of this painting.

¹ For recent scholarship on the artist see the various contributions in *Plautilla Nelli (1524–1588): The Painter-Prioress of Renaissance Florence*, ed. Jonathan K. Nelson, Florence, 2008; and *Plautilla Nelli: Arte e devozione sulle orme di Savonarola*, ed. Fausta Navarro, exh. cat., Florence; Gallerie delle Uffizi, 8 March – 4 June 2017, Livorno, 2017, both with bibliography. For the sources and biography of Plautilla Nelli, see the contributions of Catherine Turrill Lupi, “Reviewing the Life and Literature of Plautilla Nelli,” pp. 19-33 in the 2017 exhibition catalogue, and *idem.*, “Nuns’ Stories: Plautilla Nelli, *Madre Pittora*, and her Compagne in the Convent of Santa Caterina da Siena,” pp. 9-27 in the 2008 publication --both cited above.