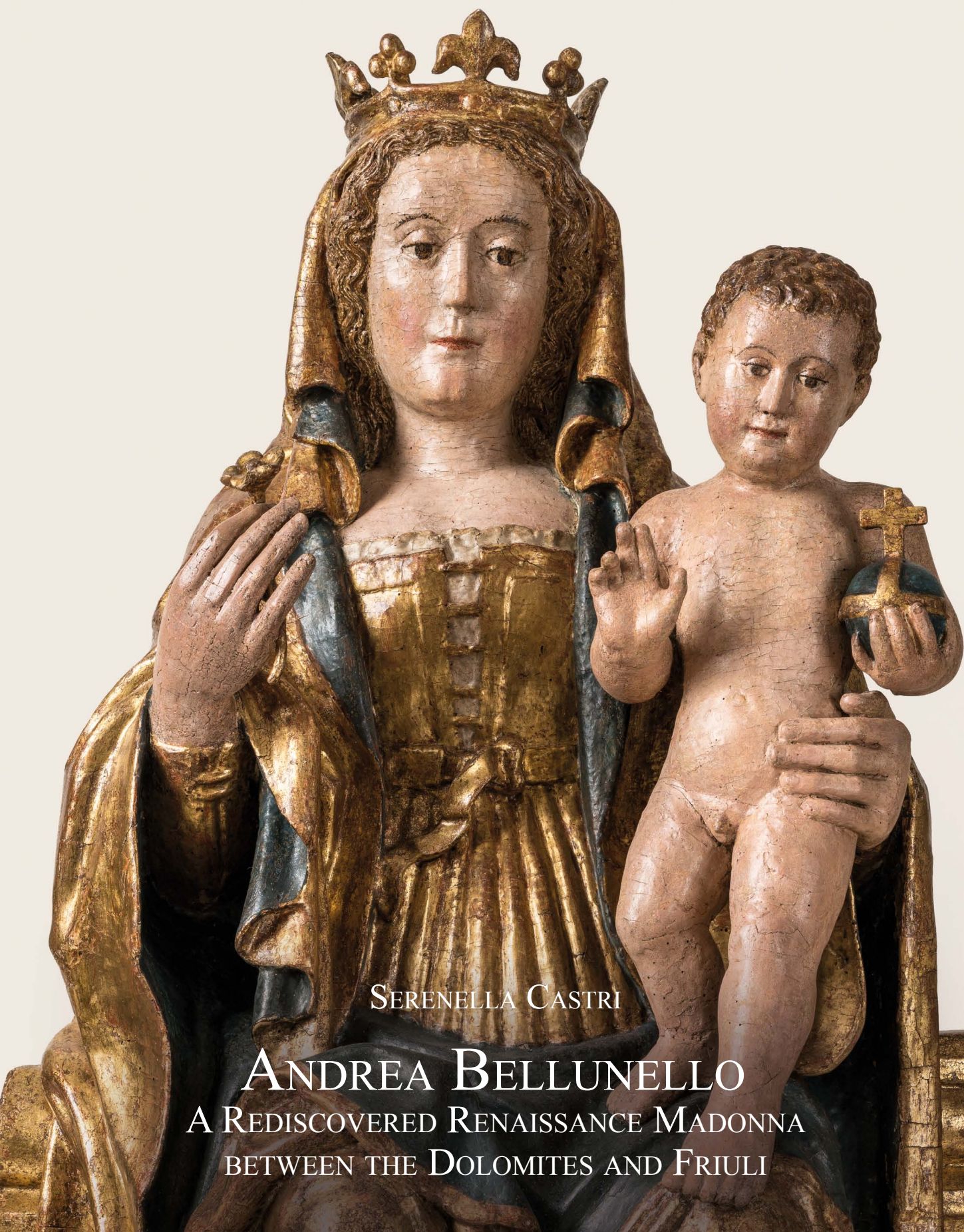




LONGARI arte MILANO

Early Italian and European Works of Art



SERENELLA CASTRI

ANDREA BELLUNELLO
A REDISCOVERED RENAISSANCE MADONNA
BETWEEN THE DOLOMITES AND FRIULI



ANDREA BELLUNELLO

*Enthroned Madonna
with the blessing Child, 1490 ca
109 × 74 × 23 cm*

ANDREA BELLUNELLO. A REDISCOVERED RENAISSANCE MADONNA BETWEEN THE DOLOMITES AND FRIULI

Andrea di Bertolotto, known as Bellunello (Campedello, near Belluno c. 1435 – San Vito al Tagliamento c. 1494), was one of the most important and versatile artists in the Cadore and Carnia-Friuli areas in the second half of the 15th century. His spectrum of technical skills indeed went from painting in all its forms, including the job of the Fassmaler (who painted carvings), to sculpture. This mirrored the dual role of his neighbouring colleagues, according to the common practice in the 15th century in alpine and mixed frontier eras such as Friuli, which did not provide for a rigid division between the trades of painter and sculptor. Such a division was instead predominant in more important and innovative centres, both in the Veneto region and in neighbouring zones linked to the Germanic culture.

Moving from Cadore to San Vito del Friuli early in his life, shortly before 1455, the first documentation of his pictorial works dates to the period after 1463. Bellunello probably also trained at the workshop of one of the mid 15th century artists frequently cited by Friulian sources and for whom little or nothing remains, but subsequently he also studied the work of carvers from South Tyrol (from the Val Pusteria?), which led him to develop a decisive and articulate sculptural sensitivity unknown to contemporary Carnian workshops in his carvings. However, hints of direct knowledge of Tyrolean sculpture and carving did not lead to any essential transformation of the stylistic substance of Bellunello's wooden Madonnas. In short, the few Tyrolean elements that can be traced in each of these works following careful comparative analysis are not sufficient to prove that he trained personally at the workshop of Leonhard Scherauff von Brixen, as was believed at length, neither in technical terms nor following verification of the carving techniques and polychromy of the statues. Bellunello's frequent presence in humanist circles in Friuli such as that of the aristocratic Altan di Salvarolo family, his first patrons, circles well aware of the innovations resulting first of all from the scholarly antiquarian culture, but also from Renaissance art in cities such as Padua (Mantegna) and Venice (Vivarini, and the Muranesi Dario da Treviso and Andrea da Murano), led him to become incredibly skilful in alternating late Gothic pictorial style with a more airy and fully Renaissance approach. This can be seen throughout his work on secular themes in frescoes on the façades and (perhaps also) the interiors of aristocratic palaces. Starting from the last third of the 15th century, the progressive Renaissance repertoire exploited by Bellunello, capable of translating stylistic features from book illustrations and the engravings of Mantegna into a simpler but appealing and prospective-based language, guaranteed him considerable entrepreneurial success and made him one of the most appreciated artists in Friuli in the late 15th century.

The unexpected “rediscovery” of this *Madonna Enthroned with Child* (Fig. p. 2), which had remained in a private collection for many decades, had its prologue in the publication of a photo dating to the 1920s and attribution (in 2004) of the work to Andrea Bellunello by Ganzer, who nevertheless believed the wooden sculpture had been lost (Fig. 5). The carving had suffered evidently from extensive loss of materials and of polychromy, as shown in the photo published in 2004, but the long and careful philological restoration carried out on the carving, by Ginevra Pignagnoli & Lucio Zambon (Udine, presso il Museo Diocesano e Gallerie del Tiepolo) enabled clearer interpretation, free of older and more recent superfluous additions dulling the original qualities, extraordinary in terms of their impeccable coherence with the artistic practice of Bellunello's workshop in San

Vito. Furthermore, it is possible to note the restoration work conducted in the first few decades of the 20th century, carried out by expert and scholarly hands, designed to restore what had been lost, without overriding the original substance of the work. Its rediscovery thus marks a fundamental stage in the history of woodcarving in Friuli and contributes to the necessary critical reinterpretation of the period of the artist's greatest achievements, between the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century.

In general terms, the Madonna Enthroned in this specific pose, presenting the Child in the action of blessing, belongs to an iconographic tradition very popular in Friuli for the production of these Marian icons from the mid 15th century onwards. The tradition then continued in almost identical form until the middle of the following century, with variants concerning almost exclusively the pose and figure of the Christ Child. In the second Madonna on the same subject stylistically attributable to Andrea Bellunello, but preceding it chronologically, today in the collections of the Museo Civico in Pordenone (Fig. 3), we find for example Jesus sitting on her knees, rather than standing as in our case.

However, even within the context of the meagre body of autograph sculptural works on the same subject by Andrea Bellunello – nevertheless much more varied than that of the contemporary workshop of Domenico da Tolmezzo, for example – the Longari carving has a very important role, not just due to its intrinsic quality, but also thanks to two original compositional devices. The first concerns the design of the lower part of the statue, which was planned by the sculptor starting from a base that slopes downwards in a surprising manner. In this way the whole surface of the platform where the Virgin's feet rest and her cloak stretches out could be observed with greater ease and a sense of depth, tricking the eye and leading to perception of the volume occupied by the lower part of Mary's figure as more solid and pronounced in terms of volumetry. This same slope can also be found in a *Madonna Enthroned* today lost and known only thanks to a photo dating to the 1920s (this too published by Ganzer in 2004), that would appear to belong to the environment of the painter/carver from Belluno (Fig. 6). This unusual device could suggest the artist's interest in the question of perspective and the gaining of a greater awareness of space, not just in his fresco paintings, as believed to date by the scholars, and as demonstrated by the cycles painted by Bellunello to decorate illustrious aristocratic residences (in Spilimbergo, Oderzo, San Vito), but also in sculpture. We should also recall that the Virgin's cloak originally stretched out more extensively, hanging down well over the platform, in some places covering almost its full height and creating an interesting play between the space of the sacred icon and the space of the onlooker. This device was well-known and widely practiced throughout the eastern alpine area (albeit rarely in Friuli) and in Tyrol, and was consistently adopted by Bellunello. Today the base is much lower due to lengthy erosion by woodworm, and its reduction has also led to loss of the interesting interplay with the hem of Mary's gilded cloak, which can instead still be perfectly appreciated in another masterpiece by Bellunello, on this occasion in its original form, the *Madonna Worshipping the Child*, now in Cavarzano (Fig. 2) but initially located in the church Santa Maria Nova in Borgo Tiera in Belluno, signed and dated 1481.

The second extremely original characteristic of this sculptural group regards the pose of the Child (Fig. 1). The slightly diagonal position and the sliding forwards of his supporting leg is indeed a particularly surprising spatial solution, considerably



Fig. 1. Andrea Bellunello, *Enthroned Madonna with the Blessing Child*, 1490 ca, detail Longari arte Milano



Fig. 2. Andrea Bellunello, *Madonna worshipping the Child*, signed and dated 1481, parish church, Cavarzano (Belluno)



Fig. 3. Andrea Bellunello, *Enthroned Madonna with Child*, 1475-80 ca, Pordenone, Museo Civico d'Arte

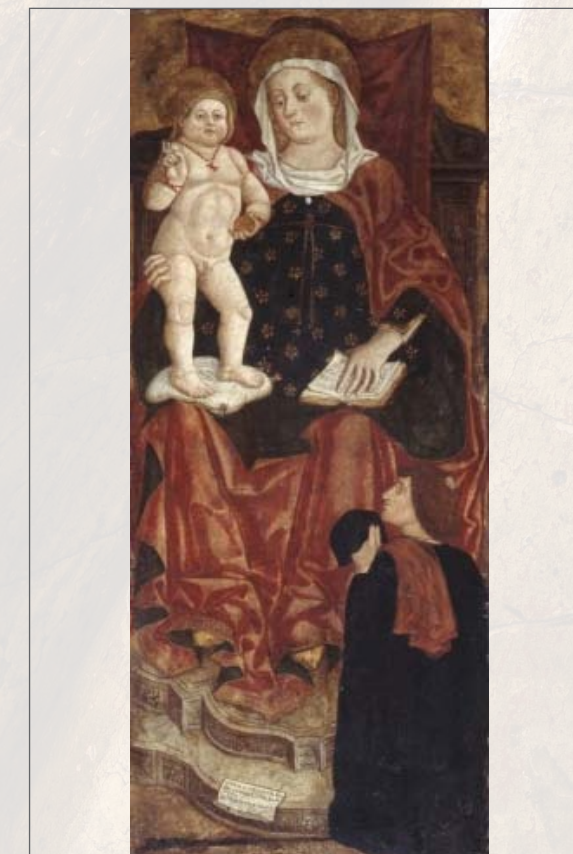


Fig. 4. Andrea Bellunello, *Triptych*, signed and dated 1488, San Vito al Tagliamento, Cathedral. Detail of the central panel with the Madonna enthroned and donor

different from the codified poses for children in other examples of the Madonna Enthroned known to us, starting with those by artists from Tolmezzo. Furthermore, it is certainly more creative and subtle than certain tired perspectives developed for the Christ Child standing on his mother's lap in Bellunello's painted versions of the Madonna Enthroned, as observed for example in the triptych with donor dated 1488, hindered and oppressed by "archaic" Paduan references, and which is now housed in the church of Saints Vito, Modesto and Crescenzia in San Vito al Tagliamento (Fig. 4). In the Longari carving, Jesus' stance and position are instead much more closely linked and coherent with the slight slope of the base for the sculptural group, compared with the poorly sloping perspective of the mixtilinear marble throne on which the *Madonna with Child* is seated at San Vito, offering new aesthetic and perceptive impetus to the overall composition.

This *Madonna Enthroned with Child* would appear to be irrefutably the work of Bellunello, due to the clearly evident similarities with the Madonnas in Pordenone and Cavarzano, but other works attributable to his workshop and/or circle should also be placed alongside this small nucleus. These include the statue currently missing, but known to exist due to the previously mentioned photograph, a *Madonna Enthroned* once in Venzone cathedral, a *Madonna* recently rediscovered in the parish church of Martignacco, now undergoing restoration work, and a number of others we do not have space to mention here. All these carvings must have belonged to the tradition of wooden polychrome and gilded altarpieces usually arranged in two register, as was typical of religious artefacts from this area. The work discussed here is thus evidence of another of the many important altarpieces made by the artist during the course of his brilliant career that has today been lost. While the stylistic features



Fig. 5. Andrea Bellunello, *Enthroned Madonna with the blessing Child*, Longari arte Milano, photo (first decades of the 20th century) before its restoration



Fig. 6. Circle of Andrea Bellunello, *Enthroned Madonna with Child*, photo (first decades of the 20th century), now lost



Fig. 7. Andrea Bellunello, *Madonna enthroned nursing the Child with donor*, 1490, fresco, Savorgnano, parish church, detail

that may be observed in his extensive body of work as a panel and fresco painter can be described as flexible, given the continuing oscillation between the late Gothic tradition (albeit updated by the influence of Mantegna and Vivarini) in ecclesiastical works and the fully Renaissance and humanist stylistic forms adopted for his secular output, in the case of his wooden Madonnas we instead find a coherent evolutionary process. An intimate stylistic development unfolds between one and another, made up of a few but always significant technical expedients and stylistic advances, in a dialogue that is first of all between the artist and his understanding of the innovations arriving from the artistic centres acting as his strongest points of reference, rather than with his patrons or public.

Thus the *Madonna Rusconi* in the museum in Pordenone, datable to the end of the 1470s due to the more uncertain distribution of form and the greater compositional rigidity, is followed by the drapery and relaxed forms so generously deployed in the Madonna in Cavarzano (Fig. 2), and finally by the more compact and tightly sculptural layout and the subtler psychological sensitivity of the Madonna Longari, the qualitative and expressive peak of this group of wooden carvings. It indeed represents the sculptor's further reflection on the spatial and prospective potential of the wooden medium available to him at the end of the 1480s, corresponding to his progress in updating his pictorial output in line with Renaissance canons.

Serenella Castri*

*This paper owes much to the reciprocal exchange of ideas and the contribution of Luca Mor, who first recognised Bellunello's Madonna in the Longari collection before its restoration.

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