

# . AGNEWS .

EST. 1817

THOS. AGNEW & SONS LTD.  
6 ST. JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON, SW1A 1NP  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7491 9219.  
[www.agnewsgallery.com](http://www.agnewsgallery.com)

**Giovanni Battista Salvi, il Sassoferrato**  
(Sassoferrato 1609–1685 Rome)

*The Virgin in Prayer*

Oil on copper

8 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 6 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (22 x 17.5 cm.)



## **Provenance**

Private European collection, until 2019.

The present painting is a version of a popular design known in at least two other paintings by Sassoferrato. This particular design showing the Virgin at prayer is one of at least four evolved by the artist.

This small work on copper represents one of the most celebrated subjects from Sassoferrato's oeuvre. The Virgin is shown in prayer, with her hands together and her gaze downturned, her head slightly inclined; emphasising her ivory skin tone, she wears the typical blue mantle with a white veil over her head and shoulders.

The compositional elegance, the enamel-like application of paint and the purity of the representation attest to the great pictorial quality of this work. Moreover, its small dimensions and its particular copper

# · AGNEWS ·

EST. 1817

THOS. AGNEW & SONS LTD.  
6 ST. JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON, SW1A 1NP  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7491 9219.  
[www.agnewsgallery.com](http://www.agnewsgallery.com)

support make this painting a statement of precious refinement. It is therefore likely that this work once belonged in the private oratory of a high-ranking prelate.

Over the course of his career Sassoferrato repeatedly painted the Madonna in Prayer, and various versions of the subject exist, such as one on canvas, of larger dimensions than the present work, which is conserved in the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo (inv. no. 81LC00215), as well as the one at the Nation Gallery, London (fig. 1).

The simplicity and sobriety of the composition made this one of the most effective and iconic images of the seventeenth century, a time when the Marian cult, thanks to the directives of the Counter Reformation, gained new traction. In this context Sassoferrato's intense yet tender production of religious subjects, largely conceived for private use, attained great success. The artist's aspiration to restore a timeless ideal of beauty looked back to the high Renaissance, and especially to Raphael, and it precociously promoted the recovery of a devotional register.

Giovanni Battista Salvi called il Sassoferrato after his native city in the Marches was principally active in central Italy. After initial training with his father, he made a crucial formative journey to Rome where he entered the studio of Domenichino. This experience brought him into direct contact with the classical painters, the Carracci and Guido Reni, as well as fostering his admiration for Renaissance art which he wished to emulate. Indeed, Sassoferrato's painting style is characterised by a refined archaism which refers back to the great masters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Sassoferrato was greatly appreciated as a portraitist but above all he became celebrated for his highly refined religious cabinet paintings were characterised by a quiet, private, intimacy, which is apparent in the present work.

Sassoferrato places emphasis on the softly modelled draperies, the white veil and brilliant blue cloak, painted in ultramarine. The face remains largely in shadow, the eyes downcast, and this has the effect of highlighting the hands joined in prayer. The gold of her halo is in gold and in relief, further emphasising the three dimensional quality of the work, as does the use of the support, copper, which is unusual for the artist.

# · AGNEWS ·

EST. 1817

THOS. AGNEW & SONS LTD.  
6 ST. JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON, SW1A 1NP  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7491 9219.  
[www.agnewsgallery.com](http://www.agnewsgallery.com)

The painting recalls works by such artists as Raphael, and anticipates certain Pre-Raphaelite paintings of the 19th century.

François Macé de Lépinay has confirmed the attribution of the present painting on the basis of a high-resolution digital photograph.



Fig. 1: Sassoferrato, *The Virgin in prayer*, oil on canvas, c. 1640-50, 73 x 57.7 cm, National Gallery, London.