



by Lucy Gordan

# Fra Carnevale

## A Rediscovered Maestro

From Milan to New York, a first-ever exhibition retraces the career of painter/architect Fra Carnevale, a maestro from Urbino

**W**ho was **Fra Carnevale**? What did he paint or design? The first-ever exhibition dedicated to this almost-forgotten artist of the Italian Renaissance, "From Fra Filippo Lippi to Piero della Francesca: Fra Carnevale and the Making of a Renaissance Master," aims at least to clarify, if not answer, these questions. Organized jointly by the Brera Gallery of Milan and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, it is on at the Brera until January 9 and then will move to the Met from February 1 to May 1, 2005.

After three years of meticulous archival research, the exhibition's curators, **Matteo Ceriana** in Milan and **Keith Christiansen** in New York, have painstakingly pieced together a tentative biography of Fra Carnevale, although the information about his youth is sketchy at best.

Through their study of contemporary documents and analysis of paint pigments, they have also been able to prove the authorship of several of his works which for centuries had been attributed to rival painters.

Fra Carnevale's real name was **Bartolomeo di Giovanni Corradini**. He was born on an unknown date in the

Marches — either in Camerino or in Urbino — and worked as an apprentice there in the workshop of **Antonio Alberti**. From April 1445 to September 1446 he studied in Florence with **Fra Filippo Lippi**, a Dominican, helping to paint Lippi's *The Coronation of the Virgin*, now in the Uffizi. He was on Lippi's payroll as an "assistant," which suggests that he already had some experience.

In 1449, when he took his vows as a Dominican at the Church of San Domenico and gave himself the unusual name of **Fra Carnevale** or **Brother Carnival**, Corradini had moved back to Urbino where he remained until his death in 1484.

Between 1449 and 1451, together with **Maso di Bartolomeo** and **Luca della Robbia**, he executed the portal of San Domenico and in 1455 designed some architectural details for Urbino's new cathedral.

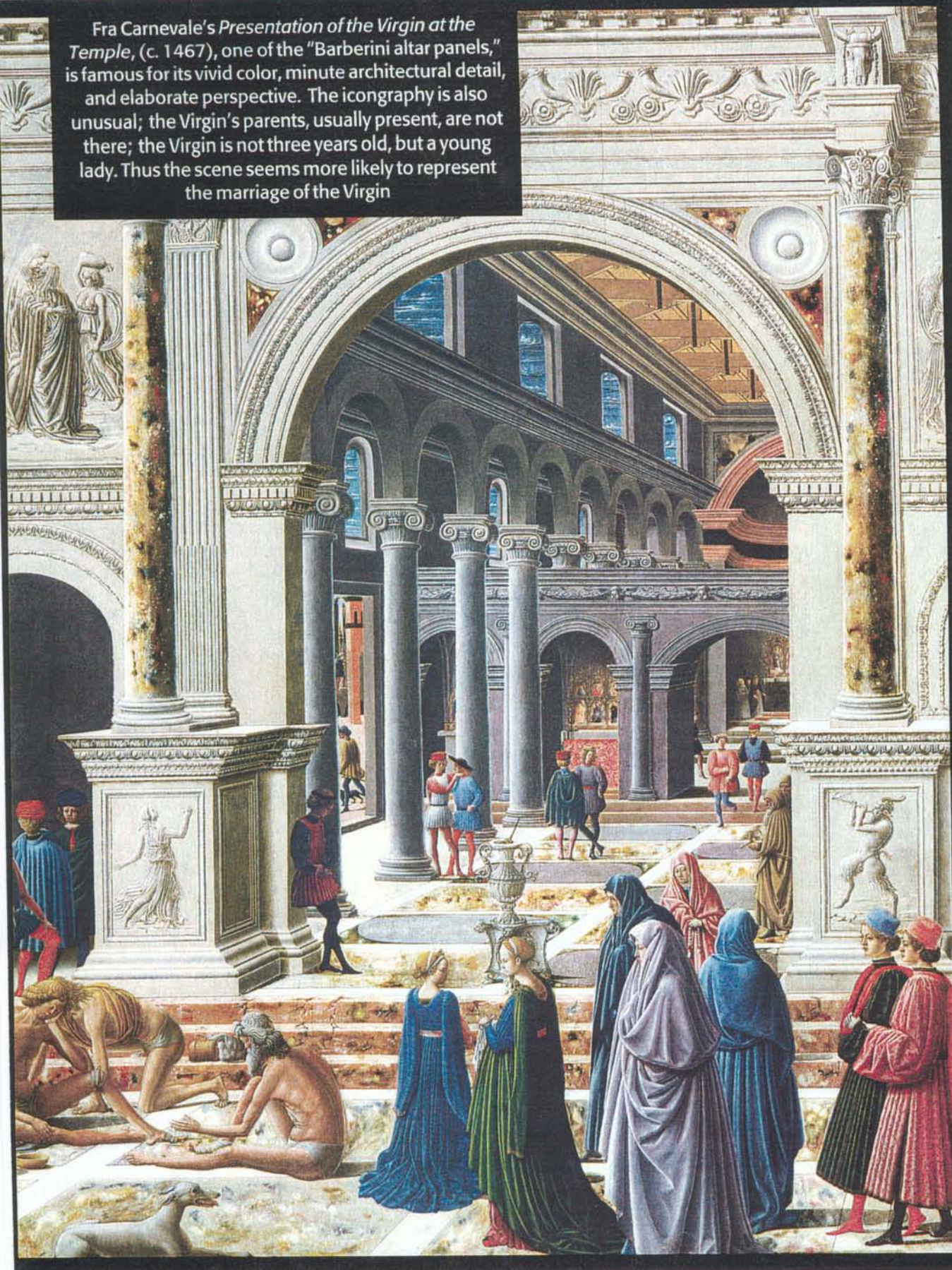
Later as parish priest of San Cassiano in nearby Castelcavallino, he was part of a team of architects, sculptors, and painters, including **Leon Battista Alberti**, **Piero della Francesca** and **Antonio del Pollaiuolo**, who worked on Urbino's Palazzo Ducale, commissioned by Duke **Federico da Montefeltro**, the important patron of



Fra Carnevale's *The Birth of the Virgin*, like the other "Barberini altar panel," is rich in architectural detail. This panel is especially enigmatic. Why is the birth of the Virgin not in the foreground, but tucked away to the side? Why is St. Anne portrayed as an odalisque in Greek clothing?



Fra Carnevale's *Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple*, (c. 1467), one of the "Barberini altar panels," is famous for its vivid color, minute architectural detail, and elaborate perspective. The iconography is also unusual; the Virgin's parents, usually present, are not there; the Virgin is not three years old, but a young lady. Thus the scene seems more likely to represent the marriage of the Virgin





the arts. Fra Carnevale almost certainly entered religious life so that he would no longer be obliged to work for money and could indulge his interest in perspective, mathematics, and architecture.

Although mentioned as one of the Duke's architects, he most likely painted "architectural canvasses," in the style of his mentor Piero della Fran-

cesca, only with much more detail. still preserved in Urbino's Palazzo Ducale and traditionally attributed to Montefeltro's favorite architect **Luciano Laurana**, although the famous English art historian Sir **Kenneth Clark** always argued for **Piero della Francesca**.

Despite the fame that he enjoyed in his lifetime, almost no trace has remained of Fra Carnevale's artistic activity. There are only eleven of his certain works and another two still contested on exhibition.

The core of his work as a painter consists of two outstanding altar panels — the most important works of Italian Renaissance art: *Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple* and *The Birth of the Virgin*. Both were previously part of the Barberini Collection in Rome and traditionally attributed to an unknown "Master of the Barberini Paintings."

Their story, uncovered by Ceriana and Christiansen, is intriguing and provided the curators' point of departure for the reconstruction of Fra Carnevale's oeuvre. In 1632, papal legate **Antonio Barberini**, Pope **Urban VIII's** nephew, stole these two altar panels from Santa Maria della Bella in Urbino and smuggled them by mule to Rome, where they remained until 1934, when they were sold with "government permission" to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Metropolitan, respectively.

A total of some 60 works — paintings, drawings, and sculptures — on loan from 35 European and American museums, is on display.

They include the Barberini panels, exhibited together for the first time in Italy, masterpieces by Filippo Lippi and **Domenico Veneziano**, works by other contemporary painters such as the mysterious Master of Pratovecchio and the prolific Master of Città di Castello, as well as the splendid painting *The Madonna and Child with Four Angels*, attributed to Piero della Francesca.

Owned by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute of Williamstown, Massachusetts, this painting is on exhibition in Europe for the

first time.

"Although it is now possible to draw an outline of his career as an artist and man-of-the-cloth," said Christiansen, "Fra Carnevale remains an enigmatic figure. We still do not know what he looked like or why he chose the name Carnevale."

Perhaps it derives from the Italian proverb, "*A Carnevale ogni scherzo vale*" ("During Carnival all tricks are worth playing").



Piero della Francesca's *Madonna and Child with Four Angels* from the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown (Massachusetts)

cesca, only with much more detail.

One of the documents examined by Ceriana and Christiansen mentions Fra Carnevale as a witness for a will, together with the Duke's stepbrother, proving that he was close to top figures in this magnificent court.

Thought by **Vasari** to be the architect **Bramante's** teacher, Fra Carnevale has recently been identified as the author of the famous "Ideal City,"





Filippo Lippi's *Saint Gregory and Saint Jerome* from the Accademia Albertina in Turin



Filippo Lippi's *Madonna and Child* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York

Fra Carnevale's *Saint Peter* (c. 1460) from the Brera Gallery in Milan