

Preface



This study attempts to explain why Parmigianino's painting of the *Madonna of the Long Neck* in the Uffizi (frontispiece) looks the way it does. The painting has fascinated and baffled art historians through the decades, and has been taken as the exemplar of that sixteenth-century phenomenon called Mannerism. It seemed to me that there might be a logical explanation for why the painting is so intriguing. Consequently, the premise of this study is that the artist did not pursue eccentricity and exaggeration for its own sake or as a matter of artistic whimsy, but that the style of the painting was a deliberate choice and was dictated by its subject. I attempt to interpret every detail in the composition as related to the Virgin, the Christ Child, and the patron. Parmigianino's ambiguity, which is to say, his multivalent approach, allows the painting to be read as a nursing Madonna (*Madonna del Latte*), a Madonna of Mercy (*Madonna della Misericordia*), and an Immaculate Conception, and I argue that the former two are variants on the latter subject, and that it is the latter that dictates the panel's appearance. Parmigianino's altarpiece introduces cultural issues and questions of dogma, and in the end is an exercise in theology.

Whereas patrons did not commission paintings in the early modern era by name, their paintings did have subjects. Over the years I have engaged with artworks that have been enigmatic, and have tried to suggest subjects for them, such as Pollaiuolo's engraving of *Ten Battling Nude Men*, his *Hercules and Antaeus*, Piero di Cosimo's so-called *Cleopatra/Simonetta Vespucci*, Donatello's neglected marble *David* in the Bargello, Rosso Fiorentino's Uffizi *Moses*, Bronzino's London *Allegory*, and several works by Goya. This study continues that pursuit.

Many paintings and writings are introduced as the cultural context for Parmigianino's Madonna. This is not to say that he was aware of all the visual sources cited here, or that he had read all of the written commentaries, although he would certainly have been familiar with a number of the paintings, and would have been well read to a degree. He could be expected to know biblical writings and secular sources such as Petrarch and Dante. His intercourse with churchmen would have introduced him to commentaries on the gospels and church dogma. He socialized with patronal families of greater or lesser sophistication. In the end, however, the many visual examples and written sources indicate how widespread many of these ideas were, and that they comprised the cultural context that the artist negotiated.

Drawings are identified by reference to their catalogue numbers in Achim Gnann's monographic study of Parmigianino's drawings (2007), which includes more sheets related to Parmigianino's painting than listed by Popham in his landmark study of the artist's draftsmanship in 1971. I collate both sources in the Appendices, and identify drawings by their illustrations in the text. Gnann

generally ignores drawings that Popham identified as old copies (O.C.). These I cite by their inventory number in Popham, such as, British Museum, O.C. P25. In addition to drawings directly related to Parmigianino's *Madonna of the Long Neck*, I note several not usually related to the Baiardi panel, but which I find useful as possible points of departure from other projects. These are: Gnann 20, 70, 131r, 254, 555r, 564, 705, 779, 780, 781, 782v.

For biblical passages, I depended on *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, Revised Standard Version* (eds. Herbert May and Bruce Metzger, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).