

PONTORMO

MIRACULOUS ENCOUNTERS

Jacopo da Pontormo (1494–1557) was one of the greatest Italian artists of the sixteenth century, a brilliantly innovative painter and draftsman. His large altarpiece of the *Visitation*, which counts among his supreme masterpieces, has never been shown outside Italy before this exhibition. *Miraculous Encounters*, by presenting portraits and religious works alongside their related drawings, gives us a rare opportunity to reconsider Pontormo's artistic evolution at a crucial stage in his career. In particular, recent conservation of the *Visitation* has provided insight into his creative process, from the planning of the altarpiece to its final execution. Pontormo's paintings and drawings presented here were produced between 1528 and 1530, during an ongoing crisis in Florence. Though Republican



The Siege of Florence, 1558, by Giorgio Vasari (Italian, 1511–1574) and Giovanni Stradano (Flemish, 1523–1605). Palazzo Vecchio, Sala di Clemente VII, Florence. Image: De Agostini Picture Library/Bridgeman Images

forces had driven out the powerful Medici family in 1527, the triumph was short-lived. Dramatic military clashes culminated in a devastating siege that returned the Medici to power, establishing their autocratic regime as dukes of Florence. Pontormo was not actively engaged in defense of the city, but he had recently purchased a house, a lifelong aspiration, and he stayed to protect it. He sought commissions among Florentines who remained in spite of the danger. Some commissioned portraits to preserve their image for posterity, wearing new fashions that announced military readiness and active support of the Republic, while others commissioned devotional works as they prayed for deliverance from strife and starvation.

▶ 1710

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The exhibition has been organized to raise support for the conservation of the Parish Church and the former Franciscan convent of San Michele Arcangelo in Carmignano.

The Visitation

In the *Visitation*, Pontormo reimagined the encounter between the Virgin Mary and Saint Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, when each reveals to the other her miraculous pregnancy. In the biblical account from the Gospel of Luke (1:39–45), Mary journeys to a town in Judea and meets Elizabeth inside her house, while Pontormo places them in a typical Tuscan urban environment. The two saintly protagonists are joined by handmaidens, following a long-established Florentine visual tradition reflecting the custom that high-status women were to be accompanied in public. The handmaidens gaze outward, drawing the viewer into the painting.

The *Visitation*, though first recorded in 1677 by the historian Giovanni Cinelli, remained virtually unknown until its re-discovery in 1904 in the small parish church of Carmignano, a hill town west of Florence. The altarpiece may have been commissioned by Bonaccorso Pinadori, an apothecary who regularly sold artists' materials to Pontormo and perhaps supplied the pigments for the painting himself. The intricate arrangement of the draperies and the stunning range of arresting colors in intense, saturated hues—fully revealed by the recent conservation—produce an effect of abstraction that was greatly admired by twentieth-century artists and connoisseurs.

The Visitation: From Drawing to Painting

The only known preparatory drawing for the *Visitation* (illustrated below) was recorded as early as 1677 as the *modello* for the altarpiece. Multiple contours in the drawing,



particularly around the feet of the figures, and *pentimenti* at the corresponding point in the painting demonstrate that Pontormo's uncertainty lingered even after he began painting.

Study for the Visitation, about 1528–29. Black chalk, traces of white chalk, squared with red chalk, 32.7 × 24 cm. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, Florence. Image © Roberto Palermo / Gabinetto Fotografico delle Gallerie degli Uffizi / Su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e del Turismo

Infrared reflectography of the painting (illustrated at right) revealed that the squaring of this drawing was replicated on the panel as a means of transferring the design, without the use of a full-sized cartoon.



Infrared reflectograph of the *Visitation*. Su concessione della Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la Città Metropolitana di Firenze e per le Province di Pistoia e Prato. Image © Teobaldo Pasquali

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