LOT 49
ATTRIBUTED TO ANTONIO RIZZO (1430-1499)
ITALIAN, VENICE, SECOND HALF 15TH CENTURY

RELIEF WITH THE VIRGIN AND CHILD
Pietra di Nanto
64 by 48.5cm., 25¼ by 19 1/8 in.

ESTIMATE £180,000-250,000 GBP
Lot Sold: 218,500 GBP

PROVENANCE
private collection, Switzerland, from 2001

CATALOGUE NOTE
The Renaissance bas-relief of the Virgin and Child is traditionally associated with Florentine artists. The models of Ghiberti, Donatello, and of the next generation, Desiderio da Settignano, Mino da Fiesole and Antonio Rossellino, are amongst the most recognisable images of Italian art. The present relief is distinguished from these Florentine works by its delicate low relief and faces with rounded cheeks, sharply outlined full lips, and an arched brow. These features are distinctive of a number of sculptures attributed to the enigmatic sculptor Antonio Rizzo who was active in Venice in the second half of the 15th century. The use of pietra di Nanto, a stone from the Veneto, corroborates Rizzo’s possible authorship as he executed several sculptures and architecture in local stone instead of marble.

Little documentation of Antonio Rizzo’s life exists. During his lifetime he was described as “the best sculptor of our time” by Sabellico, as the worthy sculptor architect who had adorned the Doge’s Palace by Pacioli, and he was the subject of dramatic stories about the rebuilding of the east wing of the Palace by Sanudo and Malipiero. (Markham Schulz, op.cit., pp. 16-17) Rizzo was one of the best sculptor-architects of Venice, had an impressive knowledge of the arts and engineering, and was a distinguished soldier. However, nearly a century after his death his reputation had practically disappeared from the history books. In his guide to Venice, Francesco Sansovino, a scholar and Jacopo’s son, gave Rizzo’s prominently signed Adam and Eve in the Doge’s Palace and Niccolo Tron’s effigy in the Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari to the sculptor Antonio Bregno. Many writers, including Vasari, confused Rizzo with Andrea Riccio. (see Wolters and Huse, op.cit., pp. 134-135)

Today we know that Antonio Rizzo was born in Verona in the 1430s. His father Ser Giovanni is thought to have been a well-established trader in stone. Antonio is first recorded as a sculptor working on the altar for the Basilica of San Zeno in Verona in 1464. In 1469 Rizzo finished his first major commission in Venice, the three altars for St. Paul, James, and Clement for Saint Mark’s Basilica and started a prosperous career in the city which culminated in his promotion to protomaestro of the Doge’s Palace and the design and execution of the Scala dei Giganti. The end of the artist’s career was as dramatic as his ascent: in 1498 it became clear that Rizzo had embezzled an enormous amount of funds from the east wing project and he fled the city, an event which returned Rizzo, and probably his reputation, to obscurity.

Given Rizzo’s uncertain background and the lack of primary sources, his influences and body of work are the subject of some debate. In her extensive monograph on the sculptor, Markham Schulz supposes Rizzo must have been in Florence on one or two occasions based on comparisons of the Adam and Eve with the work of Pollaiuolo. (op.cit., p. 11) In the Apollo review of the monograph, on the other hand, Boucher suggests that Rizzo’s sculpture is distinctly different from Florentine art. He states that Rizzo’s superficial classicism and the approach to relief sculpture derive from the Venetian and Pavian schools. (op.cit., p. 287) The latter opinion is substantiated by more recent readings of the classicist sculpture of the Lombardo family and Venetian academia as exemplified by Pomponius Gauricus (Luchs, op. cit.). Both Boucher and Stefanac (op.cit.) attribute sculptures Markham Schulz gave to Rizzo to Pietro Lombardo and Agostino di Duccio, underscoring the challenge of attributing work to these three artists. Since Agostino and Lombardo are likely to have been both influences and competitors to Rizzo it is useful to compare reliefs of the Virgin and Child by these sculptors to the present relief too. All three artists ultimately relied on the composition and technical innovations of Donatello, who had worked for a decade in nearby Padua, but developed a more nervous fluid drapery style and tended more towards the classical ideal when executing both facial types and compositions. Agostino di Duccio had worked with Donatello and Michelozzo in Prato but fled from Tuscany and continued his career in Perugia, Rimini and Venice. His relief sculpture, such as the superlative work for the Tempio Malatestiano, is characterised by lively figures with fluttering sinuous drapery and angled foreshortened faces. The Virgin and Child in the Victoria and Albert Museum (A.14-1926) is equally shallow in its relief and has comparable slight facial features and heavy eyelids. Agostino, however, seldom undercut these figures to set them off against the background and clearly preferred compositions of greater complexity, filling the background with angels and ornament. Pietro Lombardo was Rizzo’s greatest competitor in Venice and the patriarch of the most celebrated dynasty of sculptors in the city. His tombs for Mocenigo and Vendramin are among the touchstones of Renaissance sculpture. Lombardo’s work possesses the classical calm of the present relief and the shallow reliefs of the Virgin and Child attributed to him in the Ca’ d’Oro, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Bode-Museum illustrated by Callegari are
akin in composition and technique. (op.cit., figs. 34, 36, 39 and 40) Their more linear drapery folds and mature, relatively tall Madonnas are markedly different, however.

Markham Schulz gave four reliefs of the Virgin and Child to Antonio Rizzo. One in high relief on the altar of St. Clement in St. Mark’s, a roundel formerly in a private collection in Amsterdam, a low-relief in the collections of the Prince of Liechtenstein, and one similar relief placed over a door in the Doge’s palace (op.cit., figs. 22, 29, 160 and 161). The latter three reliefs are attributed to Rizzo and constitute a somewhat heterogeneous group, partly due to being different in conception. Only the relief in St. Mark’s Basilica is a documented work by Rizzo. It is with that relief that this representation of the Christ Child here has affinity: the full cheeks droop, the hair line at the temples and the small foreshortened halo. In both reliefs the drapery hanging over the arms is thicker than on the dress. The cloth consists of meandering vertical lines that are bunched as they reach the frame. The technique of the sharp undercutting of an outline that Rizzo favoured is repeated at the leg of the Child in the St. Mark’s relief. More of the undercutting and comparisons for the face of the Virgin can be found in the Amsterdam Virgin and Child, the reliefs of Victories to the sides of the Scala dei Giganti illustrated by Markham Schulz (op.cit., figs. 195 and 201), and the figures on the paliotto di San Trovaso in the eponymous church in Venice tentatively attributed to Rizzo by Stefanac (op.cit., fig. 1). Most of the previously mentioned reliefs were executed in marble but comparisons can equally be made with Rizzo’s many projects made from stone. The sharply delineated facial features and sharp outline of the Istrian stone Pages from the tomb of Giovanni Emo now in the Louvre (inv. nos. RF 1627 and 28), for example, echo the present figures. Pietra di Nanto, also known as pietra tenera of Vicenza, was used in 1494-1495 for some of the features of the Loggia Zeno on the palazzo vescovile in Vicenza, a structure sometimes attributed to Rizzo.

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