LOT 119
PROPERTY OF A PRIVATE COLLECTOR
BARTOLOMEO DI FRUOSINO
FLORENCE 1366/69 - 1441
THE MONTAURI BIRTH TRAY
insribed with a date on the lower edge of the recto, QUESTO SI FE A DI XXV DAPRILE NEL MILLE QUATTROCENTO VENTOTTO (This was made on the 25th of April, 1428); and inscribed on the verso, FACCIA IDDIO SANA OGNI DONNA CHFFIGLIA EPADRI LORO... RO... ERNATO SIA SANZA NOIA ORICHDIA ISONO UNBANBOLIN CHESULI... A DIMORO FO LAPISCIA DARIENTO EDORO (May God give health to every woman who gives birth and to the child's father... may [the child] be born without fatigue or danger. I am a baby who lives on a [rock]... and I make urine of silver and gold)
tempera, gilt and silver on panel
dodecagonal; diameter (including rim): 28 1/4 in.; 71.8 cm.
recto, diameter of painted surface: 23 1/4 in.; 59.1 cm.
verso, diameter of painted surface: 24 3/4 in.; 62.9 cm.
ESTIMATE 1,200,000-1,500,000 USD
Lot Sold: 1,762,500 USD

PROVENANCE
Possibly commissioned by Tommaso di Paolo Montauri (documented 1437-1469), Siena, on the occasion of the birth of his son Paolo di Tommaso Montauri;
Alexis-François Artaud de Montor (1772-1849), Paris, by 1843;
His sale, Place des Bourses, 16-17 January 1851, lot 124, as Paolo Uccello;
Where acquired by Thomas Jefferson Bryan (1802-1870), New York;
By whom given to the New York Historical Society, New York, in 1867 (inv. no. 1867.18);
By whom sold, (The Property of the New York Historical Society), New York, Sotheby's, 12 January 1995, lot 161;
Where acquired by the present collector.

EXHIBITED
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, on loan from the New York Historical Society, New York, from 1979 (inv. no. L.1979.II.2a, b);
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Forth Worth, Texas, Kimbell Art Museum, Art and Love in Renaissance Italy, 11 November 2008 - 14 June 2009, no.69;
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, on loan from the present collector since 1995 (inv. no. L.1995.17).

LITERATURE
A.-F. Artaud de Montor, Considérations sur l'état de la peinture en Italie, 1811, pp. 106-107, no. 124 (as Paolo Uccello);
P.M. Gault de Saint-Germain, Guide des Amateurs de Peinture, 1835, p. 62;
A.-F. Artaud de Montor, Peintres primitifs; Collection de tableaux rapportée d'Italie, sous la direction de M. Challamel, 1843, pp. 46-48, no. 124, reproduced pl. 48 (as Paolo Uccello);
Bryan Catalogue, 1853, p. 3, no. 18 (as "Ocello");
R. Grant White, Companion to the Bryan Gallery of Christian Art, New York 1853, pp. 12-13, no. 18 (as Paolo Uccello);
A. Schmarsow, "Maîtres Italiens; à la galerie d'Altenburg et dans la collection A. de Montor," in Gazette des Beaux-Arts, XX, 1898, pp. 504-505;
W. Rankin, "Cassone Paintings in American Collections," in The Burlington Magazine, vol XI, 1907, p. 131 (as Follower of Starnina);
W. Rankin, "Cassone Paintings in American Collections," in The Burlington Magazine, vol. XII, 1907-8, p. 63 (as Follower of Starnina);
A. Schiaparelli, La casa fiorentina e i suoi arredi nei secoli XIV e XV, Florence 1908, pp. 278-279;
P. Schubring, Casoni, Lipsia 1915, vol. I, p. 236, no. 78; reproduced vol. II, plate XII (as Florentine School, 1428);
R. Offner, "Italian Pictures at the New York Historical Society and Elsewhere, II," in Art in America, vol. III, 1920, pp. 7-
8, reproduced figs. 1 and 2 (as Follower of Lorenzo Monaco);
R. van Marle, The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting, vol. IX, 1927, pp. 103, 105 (as Florentine School, dated 1428);
B. Berenson, Italian Pictures of the Renaissance, Oxford 1932, p. 196 (as Master of the Bambino Vispo);
M. Salmi, "Aggiunte al Tre-e al Quattro-cento fiorentina," in Rivista d'Arte, vol. XVI, 1934, p. 180 (as Master of the Griggs Crucifixion, today known as Giovanni Toscani);
B. Berenson, Pitture italiane del Rinascimento, Milan 1936, p. 168;
F. Antal, Florentine Painting and its Social Background, London 1948, pp. 355-356, reproduced fig. 145 (as Florentine);
F. Antal, Die Florentinische Malerei und ihr sozialer Hintergrund, Berlin 1958, p. 288;
M. Gregori, Miniatura e miniatori a Firenze dal XIV al XVI secolo. Documenti per la storia della miniatura, Florence 1962, pp. 44-48, reproduced fig. 4;
B. Berenson, Italian Pictures of the Renaissance; Florentine School, London 1963, vol. I, p. 219 (as between the Master of Bambino Vispo and Rossello di Jacopo);
B. Degenhart and A. Schmitt, Corpus der italienischen Zeichnungen 1300-1450, Berlin 1968, pp. 298-300, under no. 198, reproduced fig. 217a (as follower of Lorenzo Monaco);
P. Watson, Virtu and Voluptas in Cassone Painting, Ph.d. dissertation, Yale University 1970, p. 267-269;
M. Boscovits, "Su Don Silvestro, Don Simone e la 'scuola degli Angeli'," in Paragone, 23, 1972, p. 58, note 55 (as Florentine School);
B. Fredericksen and F. Zeri, Census of Pre-Nineteenth Century Italian Paintings in North American Collections, Cambridge, MA 1972, pp. 222, 609 (as Florentine School, 15th Century);
P. Watson, "A Desco da Parto by Bartolomeo di Fruosino," in Art Bulletin, 56, March 1974, pp. 4-9, reproduced fig. 1 and 2 (as Bartolomeo di Fruosino);
R. Freemantle, Florentine Gothic Painters from Giotto to Masaccio: A Guide to Painting in and near Florence, 1300-1450, London 1975, pp. 614, 630, reproduced fig. 1323 (as Unknown Painter, dated 1428);
D. A. Covi, The Inscription in Fifteenth Century Florentine Painting, diss. New York University 1986, pp. 100, 463-464, no. 156, reproduced fig. 81;
M. Eisenberg, Lorenzo Monaco, Princeton 1989, pp. 85, 134, 178, reproduced fig. 324 (as Bartolomeo di Fruosino);
CATALOGUE NOTE

Because of their special nature, representing familial domesticity in its most potent and human form, deschi da parto (or birth trays) remain amongst the most evocative works of art that have survived from the early Italian Renaissance. Given as gifts to commemorate the birth of a child, these trays are important elements of the material culture of the day, and the images painted on their surfaces provide a wealth of information about daily life in early Renaissance Italy. Their origin as a type appears to have derived from actual, quasi-ceremonial salvers which were used during the lying in of the new mother (as is clearly depicted in the present lot, see note below), and by extension they eventually became totemic of the birth of particular children themselves, and the aspirations of the families that owned them. While wealthy families such as the Medici specifically commissioned such objects, and presumably dictated the imagery that the artist was to employ, many examples appear to have been prepared for the market and depicted scenes of classical antiquity, old testament scenes, or general allegories by which the family wished their children—and naturally by extension themselves—would be represented. These could then be personalized with the addition of the mother’s and father’s coats-of-arms or other inscriptions. Deschi in their own day were considered to be highly personal objects, even into adulthood; it is not a coincidence that one of the most famous birth trays that has survived, the Triumph of Fame by Scheggia, which was painted to commemorate the birth of Lorenzo de’ Medici (now Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 1995.7) was listed amongst the objects in the great Medici prince’s bedroom at his time of his death.¹

This particular desco is one of the most interesting left in private hands. Dated quite specifically 25 April 1428, it is the earliest known dated desco da parto, and thus provides important information about the chronology of the art form. Iconographically it belongs to a small, but very particular type. Rather than a pure allegory, an ancient or biblical subject, or even a chivalrous scene, the image depicted is that of an actual, everyday event in early quattrocento Tuscany: the birth of a child and its attendant ceremony. In the present scene, the newly delivered mother rests, while her attendants tend to her infant child. The mother, who wears a red mantello da parto – or birthing cloak – clasped with a precious brooch, is laying in a lettiera, essentially, a head-boarded platform upon which a mattress is placed. Behind her, two young women carry a meal on plain trays. It is these which are referred to as deschi da parto or salvers used in the ceremony immediately following childbirth. Intarsia, plain wood or metal trays were likely used for the functional purpose of delivering food and drink to the prostrate mother, while elaborately painted trays such as this one were probably commissioned or bought as commemorative, decorative objects and must have been displayed in
the rooms or hung on the walls of the home. In the foreground, several women enter the lying-in chamber to give congratulations to the mother and to admire the child. Men were not allowed in for several days after delivery, which is why the only man depicted in the scene – possibly the child's father – is represented kneeling in the doorway on the right. A midwife swaddles the newborn on her lap while another woman distracts the child and a third plays the harp. A group of people gather in the left doorway bearing gifts for the mother and her baby. The architectural structure of the home, which is rather naively rendered in space, stands in a landscape of rolling hills. A boat, probably meant to symbolize the voyage of life, is at sail in a lake at the very top of the composition.

On the verso, is an even more unusual—and amusing—image. The elaborate inscription, which runs along the edge of the salver, clearly describes the iconography, and also asks for the good health and future prosperity of the mother, father and child: "May God grant health to every woman who gives birth and to their father... may [the child] be born without fatigue or peril. I am an infant who lives on [rock] and I make silver and gold urine" (translation, for original text, see above). As the text implies, this side of the desco is painted with a single, large scale figure of a naked boy, sitting on a rock. He wears a coral amulet around his neck and holds a pinwheel in his right hand. Under his left leg what appears to be a sword has been identified as a hobby-horse. It is this naked child (putto pissatore) who urinates a stream of silver and gold threads. Although the exact meaning of this image is unknown today, the child could have illustrated a long-forgotten proverb relating to fertility or good fortune, especially when it is compared with similar imagery on the versos of other deschi (see, for example, the Desco da Parto with the Triumph of Chastity and Naked Boys with Poppy Pods, attributed to the workshop of Apollonio di Giovanni; see Literature, Art and Love, op. cit., pp. 158-159, no. 72.)

This unusual iconography takes on a more compelling significance, however, when the identity of the probable first owner of the desco is considered. Although the coats-of-arms on the recto seem to have been effaced – or were, perhaps, never completed – the two coats-of-arms on the verso are legible. The mother's insignia on the left has not yet been identified; however, the father's arms on the right (a bull rampant on a hill of six monti) is that of the Montauri family of Siena. In 1994, Laurence Kanter was the first to tentatively suggest that the present desco may have been commissioned on the occasion of the birth of Paolo di Tommaso Montauri, the son of the noted goldsmith, Tommaso di Paolo Montauri. Not only would Paolo's birth correspond with the inscribed date of 25 April 1428, but the imagery of silver and gold urine would then take on an even more personal meaning, being, perhaps, not only an omen of good health, but also a clever reference to both the father's current and his newborn son's future profession. When this object left the Montauri family is still unclear, but its subsequent provenance is very distinguished, and it enjoys one of the longest and best documented histories of any desco. It first appeared in the collection of Alexis-François Artaud de Montor (1772-1849), one of the first and most important collectors of early pictures in the modern age, where it was catalogued in his collection as by Paolo Uccello (see fig. 1). De Montor was a trained diplomat who served in the French delegation to Switzerland from 1791-1792, headed the French Legation to the Holy See, and in 1805 was appointed prémier sécrétaire of the French Legation to Florence. It was in that fabled city that Artaud de Montor made his most important acquisitions of early Italian paintings, a field rife for a man of discerning taste and ample energy, as most of his contemporaries considered such works decadent and naïf. In addition to the present lot, Artaud de Montor also acquired Lorenzo de’ Medici’s desco of The Triumph of Fame (discussed above) as well as other amazing works attributed to such famous names as Taddeo Gaddi, Castagno and Giotto. After Artaud de Montor had passed away, his collection was sold over the course of two days and 150 lots in Paris. This desco was acquired at that sale by Thomas Jefferson Bryan (circa 1800-1870), an American collector and connoisseur who opened the Bryan Gallery of Christian Art in his New York residence in 1852. Later, in 1867, he transferred the collection to the New York Historical Society, which at that time, was the only art museum in New York, and which he hoped would one day develop along the lines of London’s National Gallery. The work remained in the Society’s collection for almost 130 years, and was on long-term loan and displayed in the Metropolitan from 1979 until it was sold, along with much of the rest of the New York Historical Society’s art collection, in 1995, where it was purchased...

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Fig. 1
Lithograph from A.-F. Artaud de Montor, Peintures primitifs, plate 48