

Cima da Conegliano's Madonna and Child in a Landscape (c. 1490)
Photograph courtesy of The Los Angeles County Museum of Art



CIMA DA CONEGLIANO:
MADONNA AND CHILD IN A LANDSCAPE

Cima da Conegliano (1459/1460 — 1517/1518) ranks among the most significant artists of the Renaissance in Venice. A painter of religious subjects, including altarpieces as well as numerous representations of the Madonna and Child, Cima occupies a key position between the school of Jacopo and Giovanni Bellini on one hand, and that of Giorgione and Titian on the other. His work illustrates the stylistic shift that took place in Venice at the turn of the sixteenth century. Because of Venice's longstanding ties with Constantinople and her political and economic presence in the Adriatic, the Venetian painters of the early Renaissance often derived their compositions from Byzantine models, and adopted for instance the frontal, hieratic, compositions of the icon painters in their own depictions of the venerated image of the Madonna and Child. Following the example of Giovanni Bellini, painters of the next generation — such as Cima da Conegliano — while maintaining the imposing effect of the frontal presentation of their subjects increasingly imbued their compositions with naturalistic details and greater verisimilitude. Thus, in this Madonna and Child, the artist conferred his figures a touching and immediate humanity while setting them against the background of an evocative landscape. To the right, the artist depicted a small hill hamlet that may be his hometown of Conegliano just northeast of Venice, and on the left, he featured a delicately rendered landscape that introduces scenes from the life of Mary and of Christ, an iconographic innovation Cima may have copied from Flemish or Dutch contemporary paintings.

Little is known of the life of Cima. Born in Conegliano, a small hillside town on the Venetian *terraferma* in 1459 or 1460, Cima probably received his early training locally before moving to Venice. Although there are no known documents linking Cima to the studio of any famous Venetian painter of the time, Cima's early biographers unanimously believed that he had been apprenticed with Giovanni

Bellini. It was, in any case, the older artist's example that helped Cima define his own style. In time Cima's abundant production and prodigious success not only established him as a leading *madoniero*, or painter of Madonnas, but also as a dangerous rival for the already more established studio of Giovanni Bellini. It was from Bellini that Cima borrowed and developed his own type of half-length Madonnas, of which the painting acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum with the support of The Ahmanson Foundation is a supreme example. According to Peter Humpfrey, the author of the definitive study of Cima: "Cima takes over from Bellini all the essential characteristics of the type, including the device of the foreground parapet, which serves both as a means to rationalize the half-length format, and as a repoussoir, defining the surface plane and pushing the figure group deeper into pictorial space." Cima often repeated his compositions, introducing in each version differences in details, colors, and backgrounds which confer each work its singularity. The *Madonna and Child* now in Los Angeles belongs to a group of pictures of similar subject and composition, notably at the National Gallery, London, the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, the Hermitage and the Louvre, in which the child is precariously balanced on His Mother's hand, the unusual movement adding an unexpected and lively note to the composition.

The Los Angeles painting was unknown until its recent reappearance on the English art market. It has since been recognized as the best version of this composition and a particularly significant addition to the known autograph works by Cima da Conegliano.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art is particularly grateful to The Ahmanson Foundation for supporting this acquisition in memory of Robert H. Ahmanson whose dedication to the growth of the museum's collections will never be forgotten.

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