Context and Meaning: An Investigation of *The Holy Family with the Young St. John the Baptist* Attributed to Giorgio Vasari in The Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens, Jacksonville, Florida

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Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), the ambitious and exceptional talent, was courtier, writer, painter, designer of ephemera, architect and the great mind that wrote the majestic *Lives*, published first in 1550 with a second edition to follow in 1568 (Vasari). He worked for popes, cardinals, prominent merchants, and bankers, especially Cosimo I Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany (1519–74). His early work was marked by awkward passages, and reflected a provinciality that was soon shed as Vasari entered the milieu of Florentine and Roman maniera, emerging as one of its influential and illustrious exponents (Corti 12–13). His artistic legacy is rightfully linked to grand and large-scale projects, such as the commissions by Cardinal Alessandro Farnese for the Palazzo Cancelleria in Rome, and the ambitious programs extolling the dynastic ambitions of Cosimo I in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence (Robertson 57–68). There are also the scores of major altarpieces completed by Vasari, including those by his hand and others as part of the remodeling and redecoration of the Florentine basilicas of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella (Hall). Vasari was a man of tremendous energy and even today seems larger than life. His artistic production calls to mind the confident self-appraisal by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) in 1621, “Each one according to his gifts: my endowments are such that I have never lacked courage to undertake any design, however vast in size or diversified in subject” (d’Hulst 1). With the many laudatory celebrations recognizing the fifth hundredth anniversary year of his birth, Vasari has been the subject of a considerable amount of contemporary scholarship (Vasari 404–418).

Somewhat overshadowed by these major commissions are a number of devotional works commissioned for family chapels and domestic settings. The focus of this paper seeks to place *The Holy Family with the Young St. John the Baptist* (Fig. 1) attributed to Vasari in the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens, dated to the decade of the 1540s, in the context of this category of the artist’s oeuvre. Major considerations in this first formal scholarly study of the painting will include how this work came into the museum’s collection, matters of authorship, aspects of iconography, and recent findings.

The oil on panel was purchased by the Cummer Gallery of Art (now The Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens) on June 9, 1989. It entered the formal inventory of the museum about three months later on

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September 5, 1989. The painting came into the collection in a very poor state of repair (Fig. 2). Thick varnish had discolored the work and there was a large crack down the center with areas of surface abrasions and loss of paint. X-ray examinations showed a number of revisions including the positions of Madonna and St. Joseph. St. John was originally on the right side, and the positions of Christ’s legs were also changed. The head of Joseph showed three sets of eyes, and in the upper center there appeared to be a child with a full face just beneath where the head of Christ is now.

Also in the museum file is a description of an illegible black seal on the verso of the panel. Examination of the back of the painting in December of 2010 revealed greater legibility than had heretofore been stated. The black seal on the back of the painting is located in the upper right quadrant and is partially obscured by a stretcher (Fig. 3). There appears to be an initial or letter in the center of the seal. At the top right there is a flower. At the very top there may be a crown or plant motif. Efforts to identify the seal are ongoing.

The painting was purchased from Sotheby’s from the estate of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr. (1909–1988) (Earle). Chrysler, the son of the famed auto magnate, was best known for his dedication to art collecting, having established the Chrysler Art Museum in Provincetown, Massachusetts. When his collection outgrew the space there, he moved it to Virginia where the Norfolk Museum of Arts and Sciences was transformed into the Chrysler Museum. He served as director from 1971–76 and then as chairman of the board of trustees between 1976–84. New York Times critic John Russell called Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., the most underrated American art collector of the past 50 years and more (Russell; Deknatel and Roskill 212–13; Gill 80–84).

The museum staff and the Norfolk community fully expected that the institution would be the recipient of Chrysler’s enormous collection upon the benefactor’s death. The community and the art world were stunned when Chrysler died on September 17, 1988 without updating his will, leaving his estate to his nephew Jack Forker Chrysler, Jr. Shock and disbelief rippled through the Norfolk community. There were seven hundred and fifty one art objects marked on loan to the museum from Chrysler (Reif; Earle). The Cummer painting was in the bulk of works auctioned off to pay estate taxes about ten months after Chrysler’s death.

A provenance prior to Chrysler’s ownership has not been determined. Correspondence between Cummer curator, Holly Keris, and associate registrar, Irene Roughton, at the Chrysler Museum indicates that the attribution of the Holy Family with the Young St. John the Baptist, as a painting by Giorgio Vasari, had not been made at the Chrysler Museum. Keris had inquired in January 2005, “Would the Chrysler have any information regarding Vasari, The Holy Infant (sic) and St. John the Baptist, c. 1540? It bears a sticker on the reverse, WPC 2053.” A discouraging response followed: “Unfortunately, I am not able to help you with information regarding Vasari, The Holy Family and St. John the Baptist, c. 1540. The Walter P. Chrysler works sold at Sotheby’s, 1989, left the museum before we were computerized. The work in your collection was not given to