This painting by the Perugian artist Benedetto Bonfigli is believed to have originally been the central panel in an altarpiece. When the Kress Foundation acquired it in 1942 from the international dealer Duveen Brothers, its provenance included the dealer/collector Baron Michele Lazzaroni of Paris and Rome.

Lazzaroni was an active supplier of pictures to Duveen, and has subsequently gained a reputation for his heavy handed restoration and the resulting similar look among paintings that had passed through his ownership.

Duveen Brothers, established in the mid-nineteenth century, became one of the most important art dealers of the twentieth century with branches in Paris, London, and New York. The firm’s business archives are preserved at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles and, thanks to a grant from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, are being digitized and made available online. As part of our systematic research into paintings acquired by Kress from Duveen, we were delighted to discover an entire file labeled “Bonfigli, Madonna and Child, Lazzaroni.” The contents of this consisted primarily of correspondence between members of the Duveen firm, the art historian Bernard Berenson and his wife Mary, and others. The first reference to the Lazzaroni Bonfigli dates from 1913, when Berenson recommends that Duveen acquire it. The next letter comes in 1925 when it is reported that Mary Berenson was ‘perfectly charmed’ by the Lazzaroni Bonfigli when she saw it in Paris. In 1939, the New York branch of Duveen writes to its Paris branch that the painting, which had just been shipped from Europe, is ‘possibly a picture that Mr. K. can use.’ The last document dates to 1941, just before the Bonfigli now in the El Paso Museum of Art in Texas was sold to Kress.

We were very excited to think that we now had an unbroken chain of ownership from 1913 until Duveen sold the painting to Kress almost thirty years later. However, a closer examination of the documents uncovered some odd references, including a description of the painting’s composition as including angels, and a mention of a “Kahn” Bonfigli. Further research revealed that, unlikely as it seems given the relative rarity of Bonfigli panels, Lazzaroni actually owned two Madonna and Child compositions attributed to the artist. The first he owned as early as 1913 and was sold by Duveen sometime before 1917 to banker Otto Kahn, who lent it to an important exhibition in New York that year. The second was owned by Lazzaroni by 1925 and probably acquired by Duveen in Paris shortly thereafter. In 1939, the Kahn picture was back on the market, but Duveen wasn’t interested until they had managed to sell the one they still had on hand, namely the one which was sold a few
years later to Kress. Despite not tracing the painting back to 1913 as initially hoped, we were nonetheless pleased to discover that Duveen did buy the El Paso panel directly from Lazzaroni, and to learn its whereabouts – in Duveen storage – between c. 1925 and its 1942 sale to Kress.

The Kahn Bonfigli was sold from that collection at an unknown date, and last seen at auction in New York in 2006. By that time, the published provenance had lost its association with Lazzaroni, and Duveen, and carried only the Kahn pedigree.