

Italian Altarpieces and Religious Sculpture of the 1300s

The Gothic style of the twelfth through fifteenth centuries sought to bring a vision of the heavenly paradise to earth. Architecture soared upward on thin columns, and light streamed through tall windows. The shapes of Gothic paintings and sculpture often reflect the pointed arches and steep gables of the churches they adorned.

Unified in their motifs, artistic ensembles made use of sumptuous, symbolic color schemes. The paintings' gold-leafed backgrounds, for instance, recall God's divine light, and much of the sculpture bears traces of original paint and gilding, too. Spiritual significance dictated figure scale; the more important subjects were rendered in larger sizes. Courtly figures with elegant poses and slender anatomy characterize Gothic art, as do the sweeping folds in their draped robes and their curvilinear silhouettes.

An adoration of Mary as the all-nurturing mother arose in the western Christian world during the later Middle Ages. Therefore, images of the Madonna (Italian for "My Lady") dominate this room and the two flanking galleries devoted to Gothic art throughout Italy. The Madonna appears both in specific scenes from her legend and as a sacred intercessor who offers her son Jesus as the way to salvation.



Bernardo Daddi
Florentine, active 1312–probably 1348

Saint Paul, 1333

The narrow shape and large size of this panel suggest it was meant to hang against a colossal pillar in a church. The original frame utilizes decorative motifs similar to those in the borders of Gothic illuminated manuscripts.

Saint Paul holds a book, recalling the Epistles he wrote. The sword he displays has several meanings: his early career as a Roman soldier; his position as defender of the Christian faith; and the instrument of his martyrdom by beheading. The great dignity of his erect figure and the monumental effect of the drapery correspond to his stern, direct gaze. His imposing presence implies that the painter Bernardo Daddi may have been a pupil of Giotto.

A sweeter, gentler mood emanates from the small figures representing the donors who commissioned this painting. Although depictions of donors are not unusual in Gothic art, it is rare to find so many husbands and wives shown kneeling together. The couples are separated, just as men and women were while worshipping in church during the Middle Ages.

Tempera on panel, 2.337 x .892 m (92 x 35 1/8 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.3



Agnolo Gaddi
Florentine, active 1369–1396

The Coronation of the Virgin, probably about 1370

According to Mary's legend, after her death she was crowned the Queen of Heaven by her son Jesus. Here, musical angels serenade her coronation. Dressed in pale olive green, one angel plays a lute while another, garbed in iridescent robes, strums a mandore. Such pastel colors infuse the poetic paintings of Agnolo Gaddi, who also preferred intricate, delicate patterns. The surface of the painted gesso plaster was textured by designs impressed with punching tools. The crowns of the Madonna and Christ are so deeply indented as to appear three-dimensional.

The large altarpiece in this room is also by Agnolo Gaddi. Several of the angels in that work have faces that nearly duplicate the angels here. Gaddi's *Coronation* probably formed the central section of a similarly complex altarpiece, the side panels of which are now missing.

Tempera on panel, 1.626 x .794 m (64 x 31 1/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.203



Agnolo Gaddi

Madonna Enthroned with Saints and Angels, about 1380/1390

This three-part altarpiece or triptych is still in a Gothic frame, but the spiral columns are modern replacements reconstructed from traces of the now-lost originals. In the larger center panel, angels worship Mary as she sits on an elaborate throne. Jesus, standing on his mother's lap, embraces her neck. Above them, in the main pinnacle, Jesus appears again as the adult Savior, holding open the Book of Revelation. In the pinnacles to either side, the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary face each other in an Annunciation scene.

Four saints flank the throne. At the far left, holding the cross upon which he was crucified, is Andrew the Apostle, one of Christ's first disciples. On the far right is Catherine of Alexandria. A princess and scholar, she wears a crown and carries a book. She stands upon a broken wheel with spikes, in reference to a torture from which she was miraculously rescued, and holds a palm frond to signify her triumph over death as a martyr.

Tempera on panel: 1.972 x .800 m (77 5/8 x 31 1/2 in.); 2.038 x .800 m (80 1/4 x 31 1/2 in.); 1.946 x .806 m (76 5/8 x 31 3/4 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.4.a-c

Saint Benedict, a sixth-century founder of monasticism, displays a text with the opening words of the Benedictine Rule, "Harken, O son, to the precepts of the master." Reading from another book is Saint Bernard, a twelfth-century monastic reformer who helped found the strict, Cistercian branch of Benedictine monks. The white robes of Benedict and Bernard suggest the altar was commissioned for a Cistercian monastery.

The clearly organized color scheme makes it evident why Agnolo Gaddi, whose father had been a pupil of Giotto, was the most sought after painter in late fourteenth-century Florence. Mary and Jesus are surrounded by the brightest colors in the painting, the reds and greens of the angels' wings and robes. Then come the neutral whites of the two monks' habits. Bracketing the entire design are the rose pink and lime green of the outer saints' robes and attributes, which echo, in pastel tints, the pure colors of the center angels.



Giovanni di Balduccio
Pisan, active 1318/1319–1349

Charity, about 1330

Giovanni di Balduccio's *Charity* is characteristic of the medieval and Renaissance practice of personifying the Christian virtues as human figures with identifying attributes. Charity here has a scroll bearing her name and a startling combination of the attributes associated with that virtue: a flaming heart, and infants who nurse on milk flowing from her bosom. She looks heavenward, the irises of her eyes inset with metal accents.

The quatrefoil or four-lobed shape of the lozenge from which Charity and the children seem to emerge is typical of ornamental forms that also appear in Gothic manuscript illumination, stained glass, and architecture. The marble relief comes from a set of at least sixteen, whose surviving elements represent Christ's twelve apostles and the virtues of Truth, Obedience, Poverty, and Charity. Most are still set into the outside walls of the church of Orsanmichele in Florence.

Marble, .451 x .353 m (17 ¾ x 13 ⅞ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1960.5.4



Orcagna and Jacopo di Cione
Florentine, active 1343–1368; active 1365–1398

Madonna and Child with Angels, before 1370

In the early Middle Ages, Mary normally was represented enthroned as the Queen of Heaven. At the beginning of the 1300s, though, partly due to the humanistic teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi, a new subject emerged—the Madonna of Humility—which shows Mary seated upon the ground or, as in this case, a cushion. This Madonna of Humility adds the theme of the baby Jesus reaching for his mother's breast to nurse. God the Father appears overhead, and the dove of the Holy Spirit flies down upon rays of light. Thus, the entire Trinity is present along with the Virgin.

Andrea Orcagna was the eldest of three artist brothers who often collaborated. Jacopo di Cione, the youngest brother, may have assisted Orcagna in the execution of this work. A small triptych or three-part altarpiece by their middle brother, Nardo di Cione, is in the adjoining Gallery 1.

Tempera on panel, 1.410 x .689 m (55 ½ x 27 ¼ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.18



Pisan
14th century

The Archangel Gabriel and The Virgin Annunciate, about 1325/1350

In this monumental Annunciation pair, Mary holds the Old Testament from which she has been reading the prophecies that a virgin would conceive. Arriving to announce to her that she has been chosen for this honor, the Archangel Gabriel places one hand over his heart to acknowledge her sanctity and greets her with the other hand. In exquisite Gothic refinement, Mary and the angel, with small, fine features and rhythmically waving hair, incline toward each other in graceful poses. The deep, curving folds of drapery create elegantly ornamental surface effects and add grace to their subtle movements.

These works are early copies after a pair of marble statues, very famous in their time, from the church of Santa Caterina in Pisa (now in a museum in that city). Such Annunciation pairs would perhaps have flanked the entrance to the high altar area of a church or the altar itself or have been set into a tabernacle. As with panel paintings of the Middle Ages, the wood sculpture was prepared with coats of a fine plaster, called gesso, in order to receive paint. Traces of pigment that once covered the surfaces remain—red, blue, green, and a red and gilt pattern on the mantle borders.

Painted and gilded wood: 1.594 x .473 x .360 m (62 ¾ x 18 ⅝ x 14 ¼ in.); 1.623 x .538 x .399 m (63 ⅞ x 21 ⅛ x 15 ¾ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.97–98



Possibly Pisan
14th century

Angel with Symphonia and Angel with Tambourine, about 1350/1370

These two little musical angels with their slight Gothic sway, pudgy faces, and abundant draperies may once have belonged to a larger group of angels whose other members are lost. Their instruments are of interest for the history of music. The symphonia, an early form of hurdy-gurdy, and the tambourine or timbrel with rattles would “Make a joyful noise unto God” (Psalms 66 and 150).

Such figures, carved in the round, might have stood on top of the pinnacles of a complex Gothic monument whose central image would have represented Christ, the Virgin, or both. Since both angels look to their right, they must have been placed on the same side of the main subject. The notable differences in their faces, movements, and drapery styles suggest more than one hand was involved in their creation.

Marble: .538 x .215 x .178 m (21 ⅛ x 8 ⅜ x 7 in.); .542 x .218 x .226 m (21 ¼ x 8 ½ x 8 ⅞ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1960.5.14 and 1960.5.15



Tino di Camaino
Tuscan, c. 1285–1337

Madonna and Child with Queen Sancia, Saints, and Angels, about 1335

Tino di Camaino, a sculptor born in Siena who died in Naples, could coax remarkably soft effects from marble. The figures in this relief, gentle and supple, with flowing garments, respond tenderly to each other. The saints standing on either side of the Madonna and Child are probably the early thirteenth-century Francis of Assisi and his follower Clare, who founded an order of Franciscan nuns. Saint Clare and the Virgin Mary both reach out to touch a nun who kneels before them.

The woman wearing a veil, but carrying a crown around her arm, has been identified as Queen Sancia of Naples. Out of devotion to the religious orders of Saints Francis and Clare, she reportedly often exchanged her regal garments for the habit of a nun, and thus she appears here—with her earthly crown removed in deference to the celestial crown worn by the Madonna. In 1343, after the death of her husband, Robert the Wise of Naples, Sancia joined the Order of Saint Clare.

Marble, .514 x .378 x .085 m (20 ¼ x 14 ⅞ x 3 ⅜ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1960.5.1