NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Italian Paintings of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

Duccio di Buoninsegna
Sienese, c. 1250/1255 - 1318/1319

The Nativity with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel

1308-1311

tempera on single poplar panel
painted surface (left side image): 43 × 16 cm (16 15/16 × 6 5/16 in.)
painted surface (center image): 43 × 43.9 cm (16 15/16 × 17 5/16 in.)
painted surface (right side image): 43 × 16 cm (16 15/16 × 6 5/16 in.)
overall (including original frame): 48 × 86.8 × 7.9 cm (18 7/8 × 34 3/16 × 3 1/8 in.)
Inscription: left section, on the scroll of Isaiah: ECCE VIR / GO CONCI / PIET [et] PA / RIET FILIU[M] / [et] VOCABI / TUR NOM / EN EIUS / [E]MANUE[L] (Behold a Virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Immanuel; from Isaiah 7:14); middle section, on the scroll of the announcing angel: A[nnunti]o / Vobis / Gaudiu[m] / Magnu[m] (Behold, I bring you tidings of great joy; variant of Luke 2:10); right section, on the scroll of Ezekial: VIDI PORTA[M] / I[N] DOMO D[OMI]NI / CLAUSA[M] / VIR / NO[N] TR[AN]SIBIT / P[ER] EA[M] DOM / IN[US] SOLUS / I[N]TRAT ET[?] / IT [?] P[ER] EA[M] (I saw a door in the house of the Lord which was closed and no man went through it. The Lord only enters and goes through it; variant of Ezekial 44:2)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.8

ENTRY

The Nativity is flanked by the full-length figures of the two prophets who foretell the birth of Christ [fig. 1] [fig. 2]. Isaiah, to the left, as revealed by the text of his scroll and his leftward-turned gaze, is thematically linked to the previous scene of the front predella, representing the Annunciation [fig. 3], now in the National Gallery of London. The iconography of the Nativity follows the figurative tradition of Byzantine art, combining the scene with the subsidiary episodes of the Glad Tidings to the Shepherds and the First Bath of the Child. Mary is shown

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semirecumbent on a mattress inside the cave setting, into which a simple wooden hut with sloping roof is inserted. At the center of the hut, in the background, we see the manger with the child and two animals. In the foreground the episode of the First Bath occupies a central position, with the two midwives portrayed in slightly smaller proportions than the Madonna.[1] To the left we see Saint Joseph seated on a rock, sunk in meditation, while to the right appear the two shepherds conversing with one of the fourteen angels that throng the upper part of the scene.

The painting was the second of seven scenes ([fig. 4] [fig. 5] [fig. 6] [fig. 7] [fig. 8]) interspersed with standing figures of prophets that formed the predella of the front side of the two-sided altarpiece placed over the high altar in Siena Cathedral [fig. 9] (see also *Reconstruction*). For a discussion of the multipart complex of which this work has always been recognized as an integral part, see the entry on *The Calling of the Apostles Peter and Andrew*.

Miklós Boskovits (1935–2011)

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Detail of Ezekiel, Duccio di Buoninsegna, *The Nativity with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel*, 1308–1311, tempera on poplar, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

fig. 2 Detail of Isaiah, Duccio di Buoninsegna, *The Nativity with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel*, 1308–1311, tempera on poplar, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

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fig. 3 Duccio di Buoninsegna, *The Annunciation*, 1308–1311, tempera on panel, The National Gallery, London. © National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY

fig. 4 Duccio di Buoninsegna, *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1308–1311, tempera on panel, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena. Image: Soprintendenza per le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio di Siena, Grosseto ed Arezzo

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fig. 5 Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Christ among the Doctors*, 1308–1311, tempera on panel, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena. Image: Soprintendenza per le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio di Siena, Grosseto ed Arezzo

fig. 6 Duccio di Buoninsegna, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, 1308–1311, tempera on panel, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena. Image: Soprintendenza per le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio di Siena, Grosseto ed Arezzo

fig. 7 Duccio di Buoninsegna, *The Presentation in the Temple with Salomon (or David?) and the Prophet Malachi*, 1308–1311, tempera on panel, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena. Image: Soprintendenza per le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio di Siena, Grosseto ed Arezzo

fig. 8 Duccio di Buoninsegna, *The Flight into Egypt with the Prophets Jeremiah and Hosea*, 1308–1311, tempera on panel, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena. Image: Soprintendenza per le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio di Siena, Grosseto ed Arezzo

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fig. 9 Reconstruction of the front of the predella of Duccio di Buoninsegna's *Maestà*: a. *The Annunciation* (fig. 3); b. *The Nativity with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel*; c. *The Adoration of the Magi* (fig. 4); d. *The Presentation in the Temple with Salomon (or David?) and the Prophet Malachi* (fig. 7); e. *The Massacre of the Innocents* (fig. 6); f. *The Flight into Egypt with the Prophets Jeremiah and Hosea* (fig. 8); g. *Christ among the Doctors* (fig. 5)

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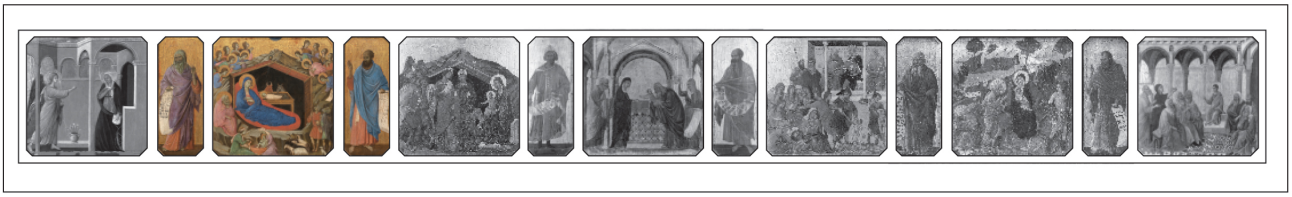
RECONSTRUCTION

Click on any panel in the altarpiece reconstruction below to see an enlarged version of the image. Color reproductions in the reconstruction indicate panels in the National Gallery of Art collection.



a. b. c. d. e. f. g.

Reconstruction of the front of the predella of Duccio di Buoninsegna's *Maestà*:

a. *The Annunciation* (Entry fig. 3)
b. *The Nativity with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel*
c. *The Adoration of the Magi* (Entry fig. 4)
d. *The Presentation in the Temple with Salomon (or David?) and the Prophet Malachi* (Entry fig. 7)
e. *The Massacre of the Innocents* (Entry fig. 6)
f. *The Flight into Egypt with the Prophets Jeremiah and Hosea* (Entry fig. 8)
g. *Christ among the Doctors* (Entry fig. 5)

NOTES

[1] On the iconography of the scene, cf. Gertrud Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, 6 vols. (Gütersloh, 1966–1990), 1:69–98; and Günter Ristow, “Geburt Christi,” in *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst*, ed. Klaus Wessel, 7 vols. (Stuttgart, 1971), 2:637–662. The motif of the cave setting for the Nativity first appeared in the East in the sixth century, while the amalgamation of this tradition with that usual in the West, in which the scene is placed in a hut, took place in Italy about 1300. The presence of the two animals next to the child lying in the manger is found in the earliest examples of the iconography, dating to the fourth century. The Church fathers linked the image of the ox and the ass with a passage in the Prophet Habakkuk (3:2): “O Lord, revive thy work in the midst of the years,” a text that in Hebrew and in the Greek version of the Septuagint reads, “You will reveal yourself between the two animals.” Christian exegetical literature later related these words to the two Churches: the one that descended from the Jewish people, and the other that derives its origin from the gentiles. The motif of the First Bath of the Child, with an evident baptismal reference, was especially disseminated in Byzantine art on the basis of the apocryphal “Protoevangelium” of Saint James. An aspect peculiar to Byzantine art is the inclusion of the scene of the Glad Tidings to the Shepherds, found in representations of the Nativity starting in the tenth century.

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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

This is one of the few early Italian panels in the collection that has not been cradled. The wooden support is a two-member poplar panel [1] of remarkable thickness (6 cm), with horizontal grain; engaged to this is a simple gilded molding that demarcates the three areas of the support to be painted. The panel and moldings were prepared with a fine fabric followed by gesso. A thin, orange bole was applied under the gilded areas. The ornamental border along the edges of the gold ground, the halos, and the contours of the figures of the prophets were incised in the preparation before painting. Mordant gilding is evident in the robes of the Virgin and of the angels. Infrared reflectography reveals a simple underdrawing.[2]

A photograph taken in or shortly before 1885 [3] suggests that the painting was subjected to a rather drastic restoration, of unspecified date but probably carried out before the acquisition for the Gemäldegalerie der Königliche Museen in Berlin, in order to integrate the abrasions and render the image more pleasing by extensive retouching. The inscriptions were also reinforced. Helmut Ruhemann treated the painting in 1929;[4] photographs made after this treatment show the worn areas of the painting. The figures of the prophets in particular are damaged by abrasion and by small flaking paint losses as well as by sharp craquelure. A Dr. Friedlander “cleaned” the painting at some point between 1929 and 1937.[5] According to information in the William Suhr archives at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, William Suhr removed a varnish, inpainted, and revarnished the painting.[6] On the whole the painted surface, in spite of some abrasion, is fairly well preserved. Numerous small areas of inpainting affect the faces of the angels, the hair and beard of Isaiah, and the face of the Virgin.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The NGA scientific research department analyzed the wood using cross-sectional microscopy, and it was determined to be poplar (see report dated January 31, 1989, in NGA conservation files).

[2] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Hamamatsu c/1000-03 Vidicon camera fitted with a lead sulphide tube and a Kodak Wratten 87A

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filter.

[3] Reproduced in Eduard Dobbert, "Duccio's Bild Die Geburt Christi in der Königlichen Gemälde-Galerie zu Berlin," *Jahrbuch der Preußischen Kunstsammlungen* 6 (1885): 158–159.

[4] On this treatment, see Helmut Ruhemann, *The Cleaning of Paintings: Problems and Potentialities* (London, 1968), 41. The same restorer noted that on seeing the painting again in 1952, it looked "finished" with "invisible retouchings." The evidence of an old photograph in the photographic archive of the Kunsthistorisches Institute in Florence suggests that a partial cleaning of the panel may have occurred sometime before Ruhemann's.

[5] A telegram dated April 6, 1937, recorded in the Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles: reel 92, box 237, folder 23, stated, "picture cleaned off several years ago by Dr. Friedlander."

[6] William Suhr archives at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (notes in NGA conservation and curatorial files). This treatment was probably accomplished in 1937, because a telegram dated April 6, 1937, in Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles: reel 92, box 237, folder 23, stated, "Absolutely cannot be shown its present state although no important parts missing yet much small detail work necessary get proper effect," and another telegram dated May 7, 1937, stated, "Duccio marvelous perfectly exquisite color enchanting very happy with it far superior Benson Duccios."

PROVENANCE

NGA 1937.1.8 formed part of the front predella of Duccio's double-sided altarpiece the *Maestà*, which was in the course of execution by October 1308 and was placed on the high altar of the Cathedral of Siena on 30 June 1311;[1] the altarpiece was removed from the cathedral in 1506, first stored by the Cathedral authorities, and then later displayed on the wall of the left transept, close to the altar of Saint Sebastian, but probably by this time the predella and gable panels had already been separated from it;[2] the altarpiece was moved to the church of Sant'Ansano in 1777, where its two sides were separated and returned to the cathedral;[3] in 1798 the gables and eight panels of the predella were reported as being kept in the sacristy of the cathedral, whereas the rest, including NGA 1937.1.8, must already have been in private hands.[4] probably with Charles Fairfax Murray [1849-

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1919], London and Florence, in the early 1880s,[5] who seems to have been the seller, in 1884, to the Gemäldegalerie der Königliche Museen, Berlin; deaccessioned 1937[6] and exchanged with (Duveen Brothers, Inc., London, New York, and Paris);[7] purchased 26 April 1937 by The A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh;[8] gift 1937 to NGA.

[1] The documents are published in Jane Immler Satkowski, *Duccio di Boninsegna. The Documents and Early Sources*, ed. Hayden B.J. Maginnis, Atlanta, 2000: 69-81, and in Allesandro Bagnoli et al., eds., *Duccio: Siena fra tradizione bizantina e mondo gotico*, Siena, 2003.: 577-579.

[2] See Alessandro Lisini, “Notizie di Duccio pittore e della sua celebre ancona,” *Bullettino senese di storia patria* 5 (1898): 24-25. According to this author, in 1506 the altarpiece "venne confinata in certi mezzanini dell'Opera [del Duomo]...e per introdurvela fu necessario di togliere tutte le cuspidi e gli accessori" ("was stored in certain passages in the Opera del Duomo...and to enter there it was necessary to cut off all the pinnacles and accessories"). This latter term presumably comprises the predella. Lisini stated that only "sulla fine del secolo" - i.e., at the end of the sixteenth century - was the painting brought back to the cathedral. In Giovanna Ragionieri's opinion, however, the altarpiece had already been returned to the cathedral in 1536 and installed near the altar of Saint Sebastian. See Giovanna Ragionieri, in *Duccio: Siena fra tradizione bizantina e mondo gotico*, ed. Alessandro Bagnoli et al., Siena, 2003: 212.

[3] See Pèleo Bacci, *Francesco di Valdambrino, Emulo del Ghiberti e collaboratore di Jacopo della Quercia*, Siena, 1936: 185-186. The author did not mention the gables and predella; these had probably been separated earlier from the rest of the altarpiece (see the previous note). After the separation of the two sides of the main panel, the front with the image of the Madonna and Child enthroned in majesty surrounded by saints and angels was hung in its former place in the left transept, and the narrative scenes of the back were hung in the opposite transept.

[4] See Bacci 1936, 187. Vittorio Lusini specified that, apart from the twelve scenes of the gable, eight panels of the predella were present in the sacristy at this time, i.e., one more than the predella panels now preserved in the Museo dell'Opera

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Metropolitana del Duomo in Siena. The identity of this eighth scene is uncertain, but presumably it was different from those that reappeared in private hands in the second half of the nineteenth century. See Vittorio Lusini, *Il Duomo di Siena*, 2 vols., Siena, 1911-1939: 2:77. The seven predella panels now in the Siena cathedral museum represent the Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation in the Temple, the Massacre of the Innocents, the Flight into Egypt, and Christ among the Doctors from the front predella, and the Temptation on the Temple and the Wedding at Cana from the rear predella. James Archer Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle, around the mid-nineteenth century, were only able to see six predella panels in the sacristy of the cathedral: the much damaged *Temptation on the Temple* and the eighth panel of unknown subject were no longer there. See Joseph Archer Crowe and Giovan Battista Cavalcaselle, *A New History of Painting in Italy from the Second to the Sixteenth Century*, 3 vols., London, 1864: 2:44 n. 1. Curt H. Weigelt discovered *Temptation on the Temple* in the storerooms of the Opera del Duomo in 1909, whereas the eighth panel has so far not been identified. See Curt H. Weigelt, "Contributo alla ricostruzione della *Maestà* di Duccio di Buoninsegna nel Museo della Metropolitana di Siena," *Bullettino senese di storia patria* 16, no. 2 (1909): 191–214. The predella, its many panels now divided among various museums in the world, was probably disposed of by the Opera del Duomo during the eighteenth century, and was at first privately owned in Siena.

[5] No source, as far as Miklós Boskovits knows, claims that Fairfax Murray actually owned the painting; however, James Stubblebine plausibly suggests this (*Duccio di Buoninsegna and his school*, Princeton, 1979: 37). In fact, in 1883 the English painter-dealer sold two other panels of the predella of the *Maestà* to the National Gallery in London, those representing the *Annunciation* and the *Healing of the Man Born Blind* (nos. 1139, 1140). In 1886 he sold four additional panels of the predella to Robert Benson in London (one of these is NGA 1939.1.141). It seems that he initially had hoped to sell them all to the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin and had tried to convince the gallery to purchase them, offering to give one of the panels as his gift. Significantly, Eduard Dobbert ("Duccio's Bild 'Die Geburt Christi' in der Königlichen Gemälde - Galerie zu Berlin," *Jakrbuch der Berliner Museen* 6 (1885): 153-163) thanked Fairfax Murray for having helped him with information in his hypothetical reconstruction of the *Maestà*.

[6] Königliche Museen zu Berlin, *Beschreibendes Verzeichnis der Gemälde*, Berlin,

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1891: 77, as no. 1062A. The painting is mentioned as having been relinquished by the Gemäldegalerie ("1937 abgegeben") in the museum's *Gesamtverzeichnis*, Berlin, 1996: 601. Helmut Ruhemann, *The Cleaning of Painting*, London, 1968: 41, remembers that the painting was "exchanged [...] for an average Holbein," and Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings*, 2 vols., Washington, D.C., 1979: 1:172 n. 12, quotes a letter of the same restorer to the National Gallery of Art, according to which the Duccio predella panel "was exchanged in the 1930s by the Gemäldegalerie for a painting by Cranach." This was evidently a slip of the pen; the exchanged picture was the *Portrait of a Man with Lute* by Holbein, no. 2154 in the Berlin gallery, which came from an American private collection and was acquired by the Gemäldegalerie in 1937 (*Gesamtverzeichnis*, Berlin, 1996: 60); see the following note.

[7] Duveen Brothers wrote to the director of the paintings department at the Berlin museum on 26 February 1937, offering the portrait by Holbein (then “said to be . . . of Jean de Dinteville,” from Henry Goldman’s collection) in exchange for two paintings in Berlin, this painting by Duccio and the Fra Filippo Lippi *Madonna and Child*, also in the National Gallery of Art (NGA 1939.1.290; Miklós Boskovits and David Alan Brown, *Italian paintings of the Fifteenth Century*, Washington, D.C. and New York, 2003: 401-405). Bernard Berenson’s opinion about the painting came in a letter dated 15 March 1937. By April, Duveen’s offices in Paris and New York were exchanging messages concerning conservation work on the painting, and David Finley had seen the painting for Andrew Mellon by early May. Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles: reel 48, box 139, folder 4; reel 92, box 237, folder 23; reel 189, box 334, folder 2; reel 192, box 237, folder 23; copies in NGA curatorial files. See also Duveen Brothers, Inc., *Duveen Pictures in Public Collections of America*, New York, 1941: 6.

[8] The Mellon Trust purchase date is according to Mellon collection records in NGA curatorial files and David Finley's notebook (donated to the National Gallery of Art in 1977, now in Gallery Archives).

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