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

Andrea di Vanni
Sienese, c. 1330 - 1413

Scenes from the Passion of Christ: The Descent into Limbo [right panel]

1380s

tempera on panel
painted surface: 47.2 × 25 cm (18 9/16 × 9 13/16 in.)
overall: 56.7 × 29.2 × 3.3 cm (22 5/16 × 11 1/2 × 1 5/16 in.)
Inscription: in black paint on the scroll held by God the Father: Destruxit quidam mortes inferni / et subvertit potentias diaboli; in black paint on the scroll held by Saint John the Baptist: ECCE.ANGIUS[AGNUS]. (Behold the Lamb)
Corcoran Collection (William A. Clark Collection) 2014.79.711.c

ENTRY

This highly detailed panle from a triptych by the Sienese painter Andrea di Vanni is a recent addition to the National Gallery of Art collection. One of the most prominent works acquired from the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the altarpiece consists of three panels depicting stories from the Passion of Christ. Attached by modern hinges, the two lateral panels can be folded over the central painting to protect it and facilitate transportation. When opened, the triptych's panels represent, from left to right, *Christ's Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane*, the *Crucifixion*, and the Descent into Limbo. Placed against a gold ground, each scene is set on a rocky outcropping that extends from one panel to the next, creating a formal coherence among scenes that took place at different times and places.

The altarpiece's left wing contains several episodes presented in a continuous narrative. In the middle ground, Christ kneels in prayer above a well-tended garden on the Mount of Olives. With his arms folded across his chest in a gesture of humility, he gazes heavenward toward a descending angel who holds out a chalice. The chalice here evidently refers to Christ's supplication: "Oh my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want," i.e., his imminent sacrifice upon the cross.[1] The anguish weighing upon Christ's countenance is physically manifested by the drops of blood that he sweats in

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accordance with the Gospel account.[2] In the foreground, Jesus is represented a second time, admonishing the disciples for sleeping when he had asked them to stay awake and pray with him. His rebuke is a slight one, however, for Christ pulls Saint Peter up from the ground to signify his selection of that apostle to head his church. In the background, a group of soldiers led by torch-bearers and the traitor Judas Iscariot depart from Jerusalem to arrest Jesus. The villainy of the former apostle Judas is clearly denoted by the black halo surrounding his head.

The central panel, which depicts the Crucifixion, reflects a growing concern among fourteenth-century artists to historicize the Biblical narrative. To accomplish this, the painter attempted to recreate, with the greatest possible accuracy, the details of the events on Mount Calvary. These details, moreover, are carefully arranged to enhance the narrative legibility of what would otherwise be a chaotic scene. Already dead upon the cross, Christ is portrayed amid a large cast of characters and vignettes arranged symmetrically across the picture. On either side of Jesus are the two thieves with whom he was crucified. Groups of soldiers dressed in mail and Pharisees with long beards crowd around these figures to witness their demise. Like Christ, the thief on the left has passed away and his slumped body shares a similar greenish hue. This is the penitent thief mentioned in the Gospel of Luke (23:39–43). Having confessed to Christ as he hung on the cross, the soul of this thief (represented as an infant) is carried to heaven by angels. On the right is the unrepentant thief who taunted Jesus. His ruddy flesh tones and pained expression indicate that he continues to suffer the torments of execution. Only now does he receive the coup de grace: the breaking of his legs, which will hasten his death and relinquish his soul to the black devils that hover above him.

As in all three panels, the painted surface of the Crucifixion scene is exquisitely worked. Each figure's physiognomy and gestures are individualized so that the two soldiers on horseback that frame Jesus, for example, respond to him in different ways. With his hands clasped in prayer, the figure on the left leans forward as if to see Christ more clearly. His lance identifies him as Longinus, the visually impaired soldier who pierced Jesus's side and whose vision, according to one legend, was miraculously restored when the blood and water flowing from Christ's wound fell upon his eyes.[3] The other equestrian is the Good Centurion who recognized Christ's divinity at his crucifixion despite his debased appearance, exclaiming: "Truly this man was the Son of God."[4] With his hand placed over his heart, this figure's gesture suggests that his belief must come from within. At the foot of the cross, Mary Magdalene caresses Christ's feet as she grieves, while next to her the

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young Saint John weeps visibly as he stares adoringly at the Savior. In the left foreground, a group of lamenting women in vibrantly colored mantles surrounds the Virgin Mary, who has collapsed at the sight of her son's lifeless body. To the right of these women, three soldiers grapple over Christ's blue garment. The Gospel of John states that upon discovering that Jesus's tunic was woven without a seam (and thus expensive), the soldiers decided to choose a new owner according to lot, rather than cut it into shares.[5] As was common in Tuscan crucifixion scenes from this time, the soldiers draw straws rather than cast dice.[6]

Between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, Christ is said to have descended into the realm of the dead where he liberated the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets. This event, known as the Decent into Limbo, is represented on the right wing of the triptych. The story is not recorded in the canonical Gospels, but comes instead from the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, the contents of which were widely disseminated throughout medieval Europe.[7] In Andrea's interpretation, Christ the Redeemer has descended victoriously into hell, where he has demolished the gateway and crushed the devil beneath it, visualizing the words inscribed on the banderole held by God the Father, who floats overhead: "Destruxit quidam mortes inferni et subvertit potentias diaboli" (He has destroyed the shades of hell, and has overthrown the powers of the devil).[8] The painting also reaffirms an article of the Apostles' Creed ("he descended into hell"). Here—at the very edge of the underworld (*limbus patrum*)—the righteous who lived before Christ kneel in a cavern. Foremost among these figures is Adam, with his long, white beard, followed by Eve, and then King David (holding a psaltery). On the far right is Saint John the Baptist with his scroll saying "Ecce Agnus [Dei]" (Behold the Lamb of God). Having overcome death, Christ appears in a transformed state indicated not only by his lustrous mantle and the golden rays emanating from his body, but also by the reactions of Limbo's inhabitants: several figures shade their eyes from Christ's radiance. With the standard of victory in his left hand, Jesus reaches forward with his right to grasp hold of Adam in a gesture reminiscent of the one he performs on the triptych's left wing, where he clutches Saint Peter's hand.[9] The formal correspondence between these scenes underscores a causal relationship between the two events, for while Christ submitted himself to God's will in the garden at Gethsemane, the result of his obedience (i.e., his triumph over death) is conveyed in the harrowing of hell.[10] In both scenes, the action of lifting up those overcome by sorrow and regret stresses the charity of Christ.

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The sophisticated compositional organization, brilliant, jewel-like colors, and luxuriously textured patterns of Andrea's paintings exemplify a skillful conflation of elements derived from the previous generation of Sienese painters, particularly Simone Martini (Sienese, active from 1315; died 1344) and the Lorenzetti brothers. The exquisite miniaturist quality of execution and glowing palette recall the works of Simone, as do some of the figure types Andrea employed in the Crucifixion scene. The recumbent form of the Virgin Mary and her attendants, for example, are comparable to those in the Crucifixion panel [fig. 1] of Simone's Orsini Polyptych in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, as is the figure of Andrea's Christ, whose proportions and knobby knees also appear dependent on the prototype. Despite that, the heavy, robust forms and simplified contours of Andrea's other figures mark a departure from the art of Simone and reveal the impact of the Lorenzetti. The voluminous mantle and lost profile of the Magdalene, for example, resemble the same figure in *Pietro Lorenzetti's* small *Crucifixion* [fig. 2] at the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena (inv. no. 147), as does the pose of Saint John the Evangelist. Also reminiscent of Pietro's art is Andrea's inclusion of provocative anecdotal details, dynamic use of space, and construction of depth. Despite the flattening effect of the gilded background, Andrea succeeded in creating a convincing spatial setting defined by the overlapping of figures and rocky landscape that not only diminish in scale but also darken as they recede.[11] The result is a narrative vivacity combined with an intimate expressive force.

The putative Neapolitan provenance of the Gallery's triptych has led several scholars to suggest that it was produced *in situ* while the artist was acting as an emissary to the city.[12] As explained in his *biography*, Andrea undertook lengthy diplomatic missions to Avignon, Rome, and elsewhere on behalf of the Republic of Siena, and he is documented in Naples between 1383 and 1385.[13] It is to this period that scholars routinely assign the triptych.[14] And yet, Andrea is believed to have traveled to Naples on other occasions and it is just as plausible that he completed the altarpiece during one or several undocumented visits.[15] Alternatively, he could have produced the work in Siena and exported it to a distant patron. For these reasons, a definitive date of execution and place of origin for the altarpiece have yet to be determined.

Equally problematic for the study of the panels is the question of whether they were originally intended to form a portable altarpiece or if they were once part of a larger, stationary polyptych. The panels clearly belong together, but technical analysis has revealed conflicting evidence, suggesting that they may not have

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always been arranged in the present configuration. The most perplexing incongruity concerns the presence of four large dowel holes along the lateral edges of the central panel as well as a punched decorative pattern on its reverse, now hidden beneath a layer of gesso. Neither of the side panels contains traces of corresponding joinery and no punchwork has been detected on their backs. These observations present more problems than solutions, for the evidence of dowel joints in the central panel indicates that at one time this painting might have been immovably attached to adjacent panels or a larger framing structure. However, it is entirely possible that the *Crucifixion* was painted on a reused plank that had been prepared for another commission or that the side panels were originally wider and included portions containing dowel joints that were subsequently cut off.[16] The spacing of the dowel holes is also unusual, as they are not located at equal distances from the top and bottom edges of the panel, as one would expect. In fact, the close proximity of the upper dowel holes to the top of the panel implies that the painting originally may have been taller and included an upper register.[17] This could strengthen the idea that the central panel was originally part of a different altarpiece configuration and was repurposed for this triptych. Apart from the modern hinges, all three panels reveal additional indications of what might be traces of an earlier means of attachment, but it remains to be determined whether they are in fact vestiges of a previous joining mechanism.[18]

If the panels contributed to a stationary polyptych, then their rectangular shape suggests that they were located along the ensemble's lower register and presumably with other, as of yet unidentified, paintings of Christ's Passion. The strongest evidence against this scenario lies in the presence of decoration on the back of the central panel. In the later fourteenth century, most large, double-sided altarpieces consisted of separate panels for the front and back.[19] If Andrea's paintings were components of such an altarpiece, they would have been installed into a larger, thicker framework that would have concealed their reverses. It seems more likely that the paintings contributed to an altarpiece of modest dimensions intended for a side altar or domestic setting in which the decoration on the central panel's reverse could be admired. The precise size of this hypothetical altarpiece and the means by which its panels were attached remain open questions.

Among the various works attributed to Vanni or his followers, Bernard Berenson associated the Gallery's triptych with two small panels: the *Resurrection*, formerly in the Ingenheim Collection, and the *Ascension* in the State Hermitage Museum at St. Petersburg [fig. 3] [fig. 4].[20] As Federico Zeri first noted, the two panels share

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similar dimensions, ornamental motifs, and arched formats.[21] It is safe to assume that they were components of the same altarpiece, but one unrelated to the Gallery's triptych. Close scrutiny has revealed that the tooled and punched designs of the halos as well as the raised gesso or *pastiglia* ornaments in the pointed arches and cusping of the ex-Ingenheim and Hermitage paintings are markedly different from those found in the spandrels of the Gallery's panels. These discrepancies militate against correlating the triptych with the *Resurrection* and *Ascension*.[22]

Since it was first published, the triptych has been considered the artist's only remaining signed work.[23] Inscribed freehand on the bottom edge of central panel's engaged frame is "ANDREAS VANNIS DE SENIS ME PINXIT" (Andrea Vanni of Siena painted me). Several of the letters have been repaired with new gilding and the blue paint has been reinforced at least twice, but the signature appears legitimate. Nevertheless, the inscription once may have contained other information for the decorative pattern that brackets the signature has been reworked and the location of the inscription appears decidedly off-center. Moreover, a significant space to the right of "PINXIT" is filled with an unusual motif that occurs nowhere else on the frame. Given the consistency of the frame's ornamentation, one can only speculate why this highly abstracted motif was incorporated, but it may supplant letters that had become illegible. The space is not large enough to have recorded the date of execution, but it may have contained a modifier such as the supplication "AMENA," which concludes the inscription adorning the polygonal base of *Lippo Memmi's Madonna dei Raccomandati* at Orvieto Cathedral.[24]

What is beyond speculation is the supremely high quality of the triptych. The deep, saturated hues of red, yellow, and blue create rhythmic alternations of color that play against the gold backgrounds and halos to animate the scenes. Such dazzling effects are carried over into the patterns decorating the soldiers' armor and the mantle of the Pharisee in the Crucifixion scene, as well as Christ's garment in the Descent into Limbo, which are executed in sgraffito, a technique that mimics the effects of brocade by scraping away areas of paint laid over gold leaf and tooled with patterned punches. The elaborate costumes join the carefully diversified facial features and body movements to communicate the narrative in a concise but vivid manner. Andrea di Vanni is often regarded as lacking the skill and sophistication of his great predecessors, but the refined execution, balanced organization of complex iconographic elements, and compelling depiction of human emotion that

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characterize the Gallery's triptych should prompt a revision of his stature.

Jason Di Resta

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Simone Martini, *Crucifixion* (from the Orsini Polyptych), c. 1335, tempera on panel, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp

fig. 2 Pietro Lorenzetti, *Crucifixion*, c. 1325–1326, tempera on panel, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena

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fig. 3 Andrea di Vanni, *Ascension*, c. 1380s, tempera on panel, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Gift of the heirs of Count G. S. Stroganov, 1911

fig. 4 Andrea di Vanni, *Resurrection*, c. 1380s, tempera on panel, location unknown, formerly in the Ingenheim collection

NOTES

[1] Matthew 26:39. Gertrud Schiller notes that the chalice was an Old Testament symbol of divine wrath, but since it is tied to the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper it may also be considered the cup of Christ's

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sacrifice. See Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, trans. Janet Seligman, 2 vols. (Greenwich, 1971–1972), 2(1972): 48, 51; as well as Victor Schmidt, unpublished article written for the Corcoran Gallery of Art, September 11, 1995, in the NGA curatorial files.

[2] Luke 22:44: "In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground."

[3] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1993), 1:184.

[4] Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39.

[5] John 19:23–24. In his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, Saint Augustine interpreted the casting of lots as a positive act, for it was by way of lots, the traditional means by which one invoked a decision from God, that the seamless garment of Christ remained undivided. Likewise, it was by the will of God that the Church remained undivided. Saint Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, trans. John W. Rettig, 5 vols. (Washington, DC, 1988–1995), 5:42–43 (tractate 118). The Bible does not reveal the winner of the garment. According to *The Golden Legend*, Pontius Pilate gained possession of the seamless tunic and wore it before Tiberius to subdue the Emperor's wrath when the Emperor learned that Pilate had unjustly condemned Jesus. See Jacopo de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1993), 1:212–213. Lynette Muir has noted several Passion plays from Northern Europe that mention Pilate as the winner of Christ's garment. See Lynette Muir, *The Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1995), 254 n. 54. The mystery surrounding the outcome of the event has led to the discovery of several seamless garments over the centuries. The Holy Robe at the cathedral of Trier in Germany is considered the most authentic; however, at least five cities claim to possess the original. See Franz Ronig, *Trier Cathedral*, trans. M. Maxwell, 4th ed. (Trier, 1986), 14, 26, 29–30, 32; and Friedrich Lauchert, "Holy Coat," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15 vols. (New York, 1907–1913), 7(1910): 400–402.

[6] A few other examples include Andrea da Firenze's fresco of the Crucifixion (1365–1367) in the Spanish Chapel at the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella, the Crucifixion fresco (c. 1340) by "Barna da Siena" in the collegiate church of San Gimignano, *Andrea di Bartolo's* painting of the Crucifixion (late 14th century) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Crucifixion scene (c. 1390) by *Agnolo Gaddi* at the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, and *Jacopo di Cione's* Crucifixion panel (1369–1370) at the National Gallery, London.

[7] See George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York, 1954), 153–154; and Gertrud Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, 6 vols. (Gütersloh, 1966–1990), 3(1971): 56–66.

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[8] Like the image, the phrase celebrates Christ's triumph, but the particular wording is nearly identical to one of the responses performed during Tenebrae on Holy Saturday: *Destruxit quidem claustra inferni et subvertit potentias diaboli* (He has destroyed the gates of hell and has overthrown the powers of the devil). Tenebrae (meaning "shadows" or "darkness") is a ceremony performed during the last three days of Holy Week to commemorate the death of Jesus. The structure of the ceremony is the same on all three days, but on Good Friday the service includes a gradual extinguishing of candles while a series of psalms and readings are chanted. On Saturday, the ceremony is conducted entirely in darkness with the exception of a single candle, symbolizing Christ as the Light of the World. The incorporation of a phrase drawn from the responsorial for one of the most important commemorative services celebrated during Holy Week could operate as an additional means by which the artist sought to bring sacred past into the devotional present for the viewers of his painting.

[9] A detail noted by Victor M. Schmidt, *Painted Piety: Panel Paintings for Personal Devotion in Tuscany, 1250–1400* (Florence, 2005), 193.

[10] Cf. Thomas Fletcher Worthen, *The Harrowing of Hell in the Art of the Italian Renaissance* (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1981), 387 n. 31.

[11] This technique was recommended by Cennino Cennini and frequently practiced by Trecento painters. See Cennino Cennini, *Il libro dell'arte*, ed. Fabio Frezzato (Vicenza, 2003), chap. LXXXV, 127; and Miklós Boskovits in this catalog, entry for Jacopo di Cione's *Madonna and Child with God the Father Blessing and Angels*, note 23.

[12] According to David Alan Brown, a note in the Fototeca Berenson at the Villa I Tatti, Florence, records that the pictures belonged to Count Carlo Zezza, who obtained it from wife, a member of the Naples branch of the Medici family. However, the Zezza provenance is not confirmed. See David Alan Brown, "Andrea Vanni in the Corcoran Gallery," in *The William A. Corcoran Collection: An Exhibition Marking the 50th Anniversary of the Installation of the Clark Collection at the Corcoran Gallery of Art* (Washington, DC, 1978), 36.

[13] See Gaetano Milanesi, *Documenti per la storia dell'arte senese*, 3 vols. (Siena, 1854–1856), 1(1854): 295–302; and Scipione Borghesi and Luciano Banchi, *Nuovi documenti per la storia dell'arte senese* (Siena, 1898), 54–55.

[14] A notable exception is Valerie Linda Wainwright, who dates the triptych to c. 1360–1370. See Valerie Linda Wainwright, *Andrea Vanni and Bartolo di Fredi: Sienese Painters in Their Social Context* (PhD diss., University of London, University College, 1978), 156.

[15] Cf. Andrea Costa, *Rammemorazione istorica dell'effigie di Santa Maria di Casaluce* (Naples, 1709), 172; Ferdinando Bologna, *I pittori alla corte angioina di Napoli, 1266–1414, e un riesame dell'arte nell'età fridericiana*

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(Rome, 1969), 325–326; and Enzo Carli, *La pittura senese del Trecento* (Milan, 1981), 246.

[16] Unlike the lateral panels, the central panel also has a slight concave warp which is unusual. As Joanna Dunn has observed, if the panel was repurposed, its former arrangment and function could have induced the warping as well as account for the punchwork on its reverse. See Dunn's examination report dated December 21, 2015 in the NGA conservation files, where she also mentions the possibility of each side panel originally including two scenes of equal width.

[17] Joanna Dunn, examination report dated December 21, 2015, in the NGA conservation files.

[18] Joanna Dunn, examination report dated December 21, 2015, in the NGA conservation files.

[19] See Julian Gardner, "Fronts and Backs: Setting and Structure," in *La pittura nel XIV e XV secolo, il contributo dell'analisi tecnica alla storia dell'arte,* eds. Hendrik W. van Os and J. R. J. van Asperen de Boer (Bologna, 1983), 297–322.

[20] Bernard Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: Central Italian and North Italian Schools*, 3 vols. (London, 1968), 1:442. The current location of the *Resurrection* is unknown. It was sold on July 22, 1981 at the Neumeister, Münchener Kunstauktionhaus, sale 203, lot 749. Other scholars who attribute the *Resurrection* to Andrea di Vanni include Federico Zeri, "Appunti nell'Ermitage e nel Museo Pusckin," *Bollettino d'arte* 46, no. 3 (1961): repro. 221, 225; Ferdinando Bologna, *I pittori alla corte angioina di Napoli, 1266–1414, e un riesame dell'arte nell'età fridericiana* (Rome, 1969), 325–326; and David Alan Brown, "Andrea Vanni in the Corcoran Gallery," in *The William A. Corcoran Collection: An Exhibition Marking the 50th Anniversary of the Installation of the Clark Collection at the Corcoran Gallery of Art* (Washington, DC, 1978), 34. The *Ascension* once belonged to Count Gregory Stroganoff in Rome and has been variously attributed to Andrea, to one of his followers, and to Bartolo di Fredi. Cf. Antonio Muñoz, *Pièces de choix de la collection du Comte Grégoire Stroganoff à Rome*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1912), 2: 11; Raimond van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting*, vol. 2, *The Sienese School of the 14th Century* (The Hague, 1924), 504–505 n. 1; Bernard Berenson, "Quadri senza casa. Il Trecento senese, 1," *Dedalo* 11 (1930–1931): 274; Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* (Princeton, 1951), 31; Viktor Nikiti Lazarev, *Proischoždenie italjanskogo vozroždenija*, vol. 2, *Iskusstvo treento* (Moscow, 1959), 289–290, n. 283; Zeri (1961): repro. 221, 223–226; and Svetlana Vsevolozhskaya and Albert Kostenevich, *The Hermitage: Italian Paintings* (Leningrad, 1984), 227.

[21] Federico Zeri, "Appunti nell'Ermitage e nel Museo Pusckin," *Bollettino d'arte*

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46, no. 3 (1961): 223–226.

[22] Laurence Kanter has suggested that the ex-Ingenheim and Hermitage panels are from an entirely different period in the artist's career. Communicated in an email dated October 21, 2015, in the NGA curatorial files.

[23] F. Mason Perkins, "A Triptych by Andrea Vanni," *Art in America* 9 (1921): 186.

[24] For the inscription on Lippo's painting see Michael Mallory, "Thoughts Concerning the Master of the Glorification of St. Thomas," *The Art Bulletin* 57 (1975): 17 n. 26; and Bonnie Apgar Bennett, *Lippo Memmi, Simone Martini's "fratello in arte": The Image Revealed by His Documented Works* (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1977), 17, 105–107, 124 n. 21.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

This panel is is the right-hand part of a triptych that also includes *Scenes from the Passion of Christ: The Agony in the Garden [left panel]* and *Scenes from the Passion of Christ: The Crucifixion [middle panel]*. Each panel is made from a single board with a vertical grain. Each side panel is attached to the center panel with two modern butt hinges. The original means of attachment is unknown, but x-radiographs reveal holes that may be evidence of prior dowels or hinges along both edges of *The Crucifixion*, the right edge of the *The Agony*, and the left edge of *The Descent*. The x-radiographs also show four long dowel shapes in the center panel that do not have counterparts in the side panels. These may be evidence that the center panel was repurposed. Each of the three panels is bordered by an engaged frame composed of wood moldings adhered to the front of the panel.

The panels were prepared with gesso, and no fabric layer is visible in the x-radiographs. *Pastiglia* decoration forms a pointed arch with trefoil cusping on the tops of *The Agony* and *The Descent* and a cusped frieze along the top of *The Crucifixion*. The *pastiglia*, frames, and backgrounds are gilded and these gilded areas were prepared with a red bole. Punchwork was used to decorate the *pastiglia* and the figures' halos, garments, and mail. The gilded areas of the composition also bear decorative borders formed by punchwork. In addition, Christ's robe in *The Descent*, the robes of the two Pharisees in *The Crucifixion*, and the armor and mail of the soldiers in *The Crucifixion* are decorated with sgraffito. Silver gilding was used in the mail, armor, and shields of the soldiers in *The Crucifixion*.[1] There is a sgraffito design in blue paint in the flat part of the frame

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with punchwork in the gold portion of the design. There is a signature in the sgraffito in the bottom of the center panel.

The painted areas of the composition were demarcated with incised lines. Infrared examination at 1.1 to 2.5 microns[2] reveals broadly brushed washes under the landscapes and fine lines marking the folds in the drapery of the kneeling Christ in *The Agony* and the Madonna in *The Crucifixion*, but no other underdrawing. The paint was applied in narrow, parallel strokes.

The backs of all three panels have been covered in white ground and painted in a faux finish resembling woodgrain. Modern wooden moldings have been attached to the backs of the panels to create engaged frames that resemble those on the front. The back of the center panel has a bumpy texture, as though particles were mixed into the ground. In contrast, the backs of the side panels are smooth. X-radiographs show a double row of circular punches forming a border in the center panel. These punches do not relate to the design on the front of the panels. X-ray fluorescence also detected silver on the back of the center panel,[3] indicating that originally it may have been silver gilt. In contrast, no punchwork or silver was found on the backs of the side panels. This further supports the idea that the center panel was repurposed.

There is a fairly thick layer of natural resin varnish on the front of the paintings. The frames on the fronts are covered with a layer of shellac, as are the entire backs of the paintings.

The Crucifixion panel has a slight concave warp, but both *The Agony* and *The Descent* remain in plane. There is a large knot in the wood that runs through the torchbearers and Judas in *The Agony*, and another in the foreground of *The Crucifixion* below the figure of Mary. The paint is in good condition with a minute craquelure pattern throughout. There are scattered, small losses and the paint has been reinforced in some areas. At least two generations of inpainting are visible with ultraviolet light. The most recent inpaint is very discrete, but the older inpaint was applied less carefully and blended onto the original. The gilding in the flats of the painting is in good condition, but in the area of the *pastiglia* there is a fair amount of shell gold restoration. The frame moldings have been regilded and the blue paint on the frames has been reinforced at least twice. Raking light also reveals another “S” between “DE” and “SENIS” and possibly two other letters at the end of the inscription. Also, the inscription is off-center and at the end of the signature is a three-centimeter-long area where the design differs from the circular

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design found in the rest of the border. It is unclear if the signature originally extended into this area or if the design change was added to center the signature. The varnish is somewhat glossy and has discolored slightly. It is also blanched in the darks, especially in the silver gilt areas of *The Crucifixion*.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The painting was analyzed while in the collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Gwen Manthey, "X-ray Fluorescence Spectroscopy Report," January 2012 in conservation department files.

[2] Infrared examination was performed with a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with H, J, and K astronomy filters.

[3] X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy was performed by the NGA scientific research department (see forthcoming report in conservation files).

PROVENANCE

William Andrews Clark [1839-1925], New York, by 1919; bequest 1926 to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2014 by the National Gallery of Art.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1959 Loan Exhibition. Masterpieces of the Corcoran Gallery of Art: A Benefit Exhibition in Honor of the Gallery's Centenary, Wildenstein, New York, 1959, unnumbered catalogue, repro., as Portable Altarpiece.

1978 The William A. Clark Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1978, fig. 27.

2002 Antiquities to Impressionism: The William A. Clark Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 2001-2002, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

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