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

Agnolo Gaddi
Florentine, c. 1350 - 1396

The Coronation of the Virgin with Six Angels

c. 1390

tempera on panel
painted surface: 161 × 79 cm (63 3/8 × 31 1/8 in.)
overall: 163.2 × 79.2 × 0.7 cm (64 1/4 × 31 3/16 × 1/4 in.)
framed: 172.1 x 87.3 x 7.9 cm (67 3/4 x 34 3/8 x 3 1/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.203

ENTRY

The iconography of the Coronation of the Virgin, the concluding stage of the glorification of the mother of Christ, developed relatively late in Italian art. The iconographic theme of Mary being crowned Queen of Heaven by her son developed from the concept of her bodily Assumption, recalled in ancient Christian literature from the fourth century onward,[1] but first appearing in pictorial representations no earlier than the twelfth century. The iconography began to spread in Italy from the late thirteenth century, in tandem with the development of theological trends that considered Mary the personification of the Church, mystic bride of Christ.[2] In the following centuries, it is often encountered as the main subject of altarpieces. In Florence, the model most frequently followed was that established by Giotto (Florentine, c. 1265 - 1337) in the Baroncelli chapel polyptych in Santa Croce,[3] but a throng of saints was not always placed at the sides of the central representation of the Coronation, as in Giotto's altarpiece. What remained constant in the iconography was the presence of a group of angels, often playing musical instruments,[4] in the foreground of the central panel, and of at least two pairs of saints in the lateral panels.[5]

There seems no reason to doubt that Agnolo Gaddi likewise followed this scheme,[6] even if attempts to identify other panels of the multipart altarpiece of

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which the Washington painting would have formed the center thus far have not led to convincing results. The present writer previously had argued (Boskovits 1975) that the polyptych of which the Washington *Coronation of the Virgin* formed the central panel also comprised three small gable panels representing the Blessing God the Father, the archangel Gabriel, and the Virgin Annunciate, formerly in the Cook collection in Richmond.[7] Erling Skaug (2004) rightly rejected this hypothesis,[8] suggesting instead that these three panels formed part of Agnolo Gaddi's Nobili triptych from Santa Maria degli Angeli, now in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin (no. 1039). More recently, Sonia Chiodo (2005) suggested that a figure of Saint Bartholomew (private collection) and two predella panels respectively representing stories of Saint Andrew (Richard L. Feigen collection) and stories of Saint Sylvester (Johnson Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art) were originally the companion panels of the Washington Coronation.[9] The stories of Saints Andrew and Sylvester undoubtedly were parts of the same predella and are securely attributed to Agnolo Gaddi, but given their size (respectively, 31.8 × 40 and 28 × 37.5 cm) they could hardly have been placed in a predella below a lateral panel that had the same dimensions as *Saint Bartholomew* (92.2 × 28.9 cm without its frame). This latter panel would seem rather too small to have fitted alongside the Washington Coronation, bearing in mind the customary proportional relation between central and lateral panels in other polyptychs by Agnolo Gaddi.[10] It may now be conjectured, albeit cautiously, that Gaddi's panel representing Saints Julian, James, and Michael now in Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven [fig. 1], might have belonged to the same altarpiece, both on account of its close stylistic affinity and the presence of no less than three saints in a single panel. The presence of more than two saints in a lateral panel that has a width less than that of the central panel is rare, but this does occur in the laterals of Coronation scenes; see, for example, the four saints on each side in a triptych by Giovanni dal Ponte (Musée Condé, Chantilly).[11] Admittedly, the hypothesis is difficult to verify because of the Yale panel's fragmentary nature and poor state of conservation.[12]

As for the artist who painted *The Coronation of the Virgin*, scholars have been unanimous, with the exception of an attribution to Orcagna in the sale catalog of 1934, in identifying the master as Agnolo Gaddi ever since Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti first published it in 1937.[13] On the other hand, views differ concerning the panel's dating. It is placed in the period c. 1370–1380 by the older literature and, with the exception of Fern Rusk Shapley (1979), by the catalogs of the National Gallery of Art.[14] Beginning with Miklós Boskovits (1968), the date now generally accepted is somewhat later than this, c. 1380–1390; Bruce Cole, in turn,

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suggested the period c. 1388–1393, pessimistically adding, “There is no way to make further or finer positional distinctions.”[15] Despite such misgivings, some attempt to clarify the sequence of works produced in Gaddi’s *bottega* in the last years of his life will perhaps not be entirely futile.

We may begin by examining the composition that Gaddi adopted for the groups of angels that appear in the foreground in front of the throne of Mary in various altarpieces. In Agnolo’s Berlin triptych, datable to 1387,[16] as in the triptych in Washington (see *Saint Andrew and Saint Benedict with the Archangel Gabriel [left panel]*; *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Twelve Angels, and with the Blessing Christ [middle panel]*; *Saint Bernard and Saint Catherine of Alexandria with the Virgin of the Annunciation [right panel]*), the three music-making angels on the left side seem virtually mirror images of the group facing them on the opposite side—in composition, pose, gesture, and details; the only variation is in the musical instruments in the hands of the pair of angels in the foreground. As it can be argued that the Berlin and Washington paintings are chronologically close, we can perhaps infer that this trait is characteristic of a moment in Gaddi’s career. The Coronation discussed here, however, differs from this scheme in various respects. Though the number of angels remains the same, their arrangement and pose differ, each reacting in a different way to the scene of the Coronation [fig. 2]. Even their physique is different: their bodies are longer and more slender; the oval of their faces is more elongated; and their aristocratic features and ecstatic expressions are wholly attuned to and absorbed in the music they play. In comparison with the two above-cited triptychs, their garments, moreover, seem more simplified in design, their draperies less minutely ruffled than before; articulated with deep folds, they confer a certain grandeur on these secondary eyewitnesses of the scene.

In the Gallery’s panel, not only the groups of music-making and chorister angels but also the central protagonists themselves, and the very composition of the scene, display innovative features in comparison with the triptych of 1387. The bodies of Christ and his mother [fig. 3], enthroned side by side in close juxtaposition and bowing their heads to each other, form a single monolithic bloc, integrated below by the two choirs of angels. The closely interwoven group of Mary and Christ recalls the Coronation frescoed by Agnolo Gaddi in the chapel of the Sacro Cingolo in Prato Cathedral,[17] at least with respect to their close proximity and the arrangement of the wide, undulating folds that furrow their mantles. However, comparison to the cycle of frescoes in Prato, realized with the

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participation of many studio assistants and, apparently, completed in considerable haste,[18] does not do justice to the far higher quality of the panel being discussed here [19]—the delicate chiaroscuro that models its forms; the subtlety of its color combinations; or the elegance of its facial features, characterized by high cheekbones, elongated pointed noses, and narrow almond eyes. These are characteristics that recall works of the artist's final phase, in particular such passages as that of the mourning saint John the Evangelist in the crucifix of the Pieve di San Martino at Sesto Fiorentino [20] or the two full-length panels of Saints Giovanni Gualberto and Miniato in the Cappella del Crocifisso in San Miniato al Monte in Florence.[21] The latter comparison is especially telling, since that altarpiece was begun in 1394 and probably completed only in the immediate aftermath of the artist's death in 1396.

To judge from the stylistic evidence, *The Coronation of the Virgin* in Washington ought to be placed in the phase of Gaddi's career in which he embarked with ever greater determination on the pursuit of the elegance of form, preciousness of color, and decorative richness typical of the late-Gothic style that was becoming increasingly fashionable in Florence; the panel's surface patterning and elaborate tooling are also indicative of this. Yet the Washington panel shows that Agnolo Gaddi cannot have remained unaware of the alternative current of Florentine painting headed by Niccolò Gerini, which in the years 1385–1400 tried to revive motifs and forms associated with painters of the school of Giotto in the first half of the century.[22] It seems to me reasonable, therefore, to suggest that the Washington Coronation is close in date to the San Miniato altarpiece, dating to c. 1390 or shortly after.

Miklós Boskovits (1935–2011)

March 21, 2016

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Agnolo Gaddi, *Saints Julian, James, and Michael*, c. 1390, tempera on panel, Yale University Art Gallery, University Purchase from James Jackson Jarves. Image: Yale University Art Gallery

fig. 2 Detail of angels, Agnolo Gaddi, *The Coronation of the Virgin with Six Angels*, c. 1390, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

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fig. 3 Detail of Christ and Mary, Agnolo Gaddi, *The Coronation of the Virgin with Six Angels*, c. 1390, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

NOTES

[1] Frank L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London and New York, 1958), 96–97.

[2] On the iconography of the Coronation of the Virgin in general, see Philippe Verdier, *Le couronnement de la Vierge: Les origines et les premiers développements d'un thème iconographique* (Montréal and Paris, 1980); Ulriche Liebl, "Krönung Mariens," in *Marienlexikon*, ed. Remigius Bäumer and Leo Scheffczyk, 6 vols. (St. Ottilien, 1991), 3:680–683; and, especially as regards Italian painting, Richard Offner, *A Critical and Historical Corpus of Florentine Painting: The Fourteenth Century*, sec. 3, vol. 5, *Bernardo Daddi and His Circle*, ed. Miklós Boskovits, Ada Labriola, and Martina Ingendaay

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Rodio, new ed. (Florence, 2001), 531–539.

[3] Giovanni Previtali and Giovanna Ragionieri, *Giotto e la sua bottega*, ed. Alessandro Conti, 3rd ed. (Milan, 1993), pls. 114–115, fig. 354.

[4] According to Terence Ford, *National Gallery of Art, Washington*, Inventory of Music Iconography 1 (New York, 1986), 1, no. 4, the angels in the Gallery painting are playing a lute and a gittern, respectively.

[5] While Giotto's composition prescribed the presence of far more numerous groups of saints to the sides of the Coronation depicted in the central panel, Florentine triptychs and polyptychs of the fourteenth century often show only two saints to the sides of the scene; cf. the polyptych by Puccio di Simone now divided between the museums of Ghent and Berlin, in Richard Offner, *A Critical and Historical Corpus of Florentine Painting: The Fourteenth Century*, sec. 3, vol. 5, *Bernardo Daddi and His Circle*, ed. Miklós Boskovits, Ada Labriola, and Martina Ingendaay Rodio, new ed. (Florence, 2001), 421–429, or that by Giovanni di Tano Fei, dated 1394, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, no. 50.229.2.

[6] Bruce Cole, *Agnolo Gaddi* (Oxford, 1977), 90, wrote that the Gallery Coronation "may have originally had side wings, but this is by no means certain." In fact, no panel of the Coronation of the Virgin that has the form and proportions of the one discussed here can be shown to have been a self-standing, single-panel painting.

[7] Miklós Boskovits, *Pittura fiorentina alla vigilia del Rinascimento, 1370–1400* (Florence, 1975), 303.

[8] Erling S. Skaug, "Towards a Reconstruction of the Santa Maria degli Angeli Altarpiece of 1388: Agnolo Gaddi and Lorenzo Monaco?" *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 48 (2004): 245–257.

[9] Sonia Chiodo, "Gaddi, Agnolo," in *Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon: Die bildenden Künstler aller Zeiten und Völker*, ed. Günter Meißner, 87 vols. (Munich, 2005), 47:113. See also Gaudenz Freuler, ed., *Manifestatori delle cose miracolose: Arte italiana del '300 e '400 da collezioni in Svizzera e nel Liechtenstein* (Einsiedeln, 1991), 202–203; and Laurence B. Kanter and John Marciari, *Italian Paintings from the Richard L. Feigen Collection* (New Haven, 2010), 26–28.

[10] For this panel, see Ada Labriola, in *The Alana Collection*, vol. 1, *Italian Paintings from the 13th to 15th Century*, ed. Mikós Boskovits (Florence, 2009), 8–11.

[11] Cf. Richard Fremantle, *Florentine Gothic Painters from Giotto to Masaccio: A Guide to Painting in and near Florence, 1300 to 1450* (London, 1975), fig. 739. On the other hand, three saints appear to the sides of subjects other than the Coronation of the Virgin, as in the case of a triptych by Niccolò Gerini with the Crucifixion in the center, now in the Galleria

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dell'Accademia in Florence (no. 3152).

[12] The Yale panel of Saints Julian, James, and Michael (no. 1871.20) measures 86.8 × 74.6 cm but has been slightly cropped along the sides and more substantially cut along the top and bottom; originally it must have measured between c. 110 and 130 cm in height, thus achieving dimensions that would be consistent with a triptych having the Washington Coronation at its center. The Yale panel is not easy to assess, however, given its present state of conservation. After a nineteenth-century restoration had completely regilded the heavily worn gold ground, including new halos with inscriptions bearing the names of the saints, the painting was subjected to a rather brutal cleaning in 1959, which stripped it of its previous additions and retouches and left visible a heavily abraded paint surface with all its lacunae. Cf. Charles Seymour, *Early Italian Paintings in the Yale University Art Gallery* (New Haven and London, 1970), 37–38.

[13] Christie's, *Pictures and Drawings by Old Masters* (London, June 29, 1934), no. 58; Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, "Su Agnolo Gaddi," *Critica d'arte* 2 (1937): 185–189. Apart from the authors cited in the Bibliography, the attribution to Agnolo Gaddi was also confirmed in manuscript opinions by Bernard Berenson, Giuseppe Fiocco, Roberto Longhi, F. Mason Perkins, Wilhelm Suida, Raimond van Marle, and Adolfo Venturi. Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:194–195, reported as the only dissenting voices the hypothesis of Hans Dietrich Gronau, "A Dispersed Florentine Altarpiece and Its Possible Origin," *Proporzioni* 3 (1950): 42, in favor of an anonymous "companion of Agnolo," and the one formulated by the present writer in the early days of his studies on Trecento painting, in 1964, and communicated to the Gallery (letter to Perry Cott, January 14, 1964, in NGA curatorial files). I had at that time proposed to unite the Washington Coronation with a group of paintings isolated by Roberto Salvini, but I have long since come to the conclusion that this group represents paintings belonging to the final phase of activity of Gaddi himself. Cf. Roberto Salvini, "Per la cronologia e per il catalogo di un discepolo di Agnolo Gaddi," *Bollettino d'arte* 29 (1935–1936): 279–294; and Miklós Boskovits, *Pittura fiorentina alla vigilia del Rinascimento, 1370–1400* (Florence, 1975), 295–304.

[14] Cf. Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:194–195.

[15] Cf. Miklós Boskovits, "Some Early Works of Agnolo Gaddi," *The Burlington Magazine* 110 (1968): 210 n. 5; and Bruce Cole, *Agnolo Gaddi* (Oxford, 1977), 31.

[16] Erling S. Skaug, in *Lorenzo Monaco: Dalla tradizione giottesca al Rinascimento*, ed. Angelo Tartuferi and Daniela Parenti (Florence, 2006), 106–110; Erling S. Skaug, "Towards a Reconstruction of the Santa Maria

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degli Angeli Altarpiece of 1388: Agnolo Gaddi and Lorenzo Monaco?" *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 48 (2004): 245–257.

[17] Bruce Cole, *Agnolo Gaddi* (Oxford, 1977), 32–39; Giuseppe Marchini, *La Cappella del Sacro Cingolo nel Duomo di Prato* (Prato, [1975]); Marco Ciatti, "Gli affreschi della Cappella della Cintola," in *La Sacra Cintola nel Duomo di Prato* (Prato, 1995), 163–223.

[18] Though he admitted the participation of assistants in some scenes, Bruce Cole, *Agnolo Gaddi* (Oxford, 1977), 39, was highly positive in his evaluation of the frescoes of the Cappella del Sacro Cingolo: "At Prato there is a harmony between fresco and frame, narrative and background, and figure and architecture.... The style of the Cappella...is, in a word, mature." Yet the crowded compositions of the Sacro Cingolo frescoes often seem somewhat confused, and the individual passages, repetitive in kind and perfunctory in technique, rarely achieve in this cycle the quality of the frescoes in the cappella maggiore of Santa Croce, not to mention Gaddi's most important panel paintings.

[19] Although the quality of execution is generally high, details like the foreshortened arms of the angels playing their instruments reveal some weaknesses in design.

[20] Bruce Cole, *Agnolo Gaddi* (Oxford, 1977), 16–17, 89, pl. 80, though he erroneously cited the painting among "Gaddi's first recognizable works." See also, following its recent restoration, Maria Matilde Simari, ed., *La Croce di Agnolo Gaddi della Pieve di San Martino a Sesto Fiorentino* (Florence, 1995).

[21] Miklós Boskovits, *Pittura fiorentina alla vigilia del Rinascimento, 1370–1400* (Florence, 1975), 123–124; Bruce Cole, *Agnolo Gaddi* (Oxford, 1977), 51–56, 72, pls. 87–96; Angelo Tartuferi, "Le opere d'arte e la decorazione pittorica della chiesa," in *La Basilica di San Miniato al Monte a Firenze*, ed. Francesco Gurrieri, Luciano Berti, and Claudio Leonardi (Florence, 1988), 1986. In contrast to most art historians, Cole did not believe that the documents of 1394–1396 referred to this work and considered it a product of Gaddi's followers.

[22] On the neo-Giottesque current in Florence that influenced many painters between the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, cf. Miklós Boskovits, *Pittura fiorentina alla vigilia del Rinascimento, 1370–1400* (Florence, 1975), 87–88, 100, 223 n. 37.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

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The wooden support is a three-member, vertically grained wood panel that Stephen Pichetto cradled in 1935–1936.[1] It was probably thinned to its present thickness of 0.7 cm at that time. Traces of the original barbe still remain along the pointed arch above, indicating the painting would have had an engaged frame. The barbe is not present along the vertical sides and bottom, signifying that the painting was probably cropped slightly in these areas. Originally, the panel may have been of rectangular shape and only later obtained its present form. Evidence of two nail holes at the top of the center board supports this theory, because they most likely corresponded to a batten. A batten would not be necessary in this area, where the arched panel consists of only one board, unless the panel was rectangular and all three boards extended to this height. The panel's shape probably was altered when it was inserted into the nineteenth-century frame still visible in the earlier photo of the painting, taken c. 1934; at the same time, no doubt, the painted surface was cropped slightly along its vertical and horizontal edges. Fine woven fabric, visible in the x-radiographs, was applied between panel and gesso as an interleaf. Lines were incised in the gesso to mark the boundaries between the gilding and paint, and areas to be gilded were prepared with red bole. The crowns and halos were decorated with punched and incised designs. The brocade was created using *sgraffito* technique. The paint is applied with small, discrete brushstrokes, with green undermodeling in the flesh areas.[2] The gold decoration on the drapery is mordant gilded.

The panel has been damaged by woodworm, requiring the replacement of lost wood and strengthening of the joins. Stephen Pichetto removed discolored varnish and inpainted the losses when he applied the cradle in 1935–1936.[3] Twenty years later, in 1955, Mario Modestini removed discolored varnish and inpainted the losses again.[4] Photographs taken before the inpainting process [fig. 1] show considerable damage along the right side join, obliterating the features of the second angel at this side and resulting in narrow losses along that join from the bottom edge to the elbow of Christ. There are also losses in the shoulder and nearer wing of the angel on the extreme right and small inpainted lacunae in the draperies and in the gold ground. The red lake pigments have faded significantly. The varnish is somewhat yellowed, and some of the inpainting has discolored.

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TECHNICAL COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Archival photograph, 1955, after cleaning but before inpainting, Agnolo Gaddi, *The Coronation of the Virgin with Six Angels*, c. 1390, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

TECHNICAL NOTES

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[1] Fern Rusk Shapley, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: Italian Schools, XIII–XV Century* (London, 1966), 40. A Cooper photograph (W. 8161) shows the state of the painting at the time of the 1934 auction. The rather rough retouching, evident especially in Christ's tunic and in the profile of the second angel on the right side, proves that the panel had been restored sometime earlier, probably in the late nineteenth century.

[2] The pigments were analyzed using x-ray fluorescence spectrometry (XRF). The analysis was performed by the NGA scientific research department (see report dated February 13, 1988, in NGA conservation files).

[3] See note 1 above.

[4] See Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:195, and several photographs in the NGA curatorial files, taken either during or after Modestini's treatment.

PROVENANCE

The Hon. William Keith Rous [1907-1983], Worstead House, Norfolk; (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 29 June 1934, no. 58, as by Orcagna); purchased by (Giuseppe Bellesi, London)[1] for (Count Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi, Florence); sold October 1935 to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York;[2] gift 1939 to NGA.

[1] Bellesi worked in London as Contini-Bonacossi's agent in the 1930s.

[2] The bill of sale for several paintings, including the Gaddi, is dated 10 October 1935 (copy in NGA curatorial files). The name of the British owner is incorrectly given as the Hon. Keith Bons.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1939 Masterpieces of Art. European Paintings and Sculpture from 1300-1800, New York World's Fair, 1939, no. 128.

1940 Arts of the Middle Ages: A Loan Exhibition, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1940, no. 59.

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