THE BEFFI TRIPTYCH

Preserving Abruzzo's Cultural Heritage

National Gallery of Art
June 15–September 7, 2009

Master of the Beffi Triptych, *The Madonna and Child with Scenes from the Life of Christ and the Virgin (The Beffi Triptych)*, early fifteenth century, tempera on panel, Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo, L'Aquila

The mountainous region of Abruzzo in central Italy has endured many earthquakes, most recently on the night of April 6, 2009, when a powerful quake registered 5.8 on the Richter scale. More than 300 people perished, 1,500 were injured, and 65,000 were initially left homeless. The Protezione Civile Italiana (emergency management agency) immediately intervened to rescue those trapped in the rubble, and temporary tent cities were set up, complete with hospitals and clinics, food services, and schools. More than half the original evacuees have since returned to their homes.

The earthquake also caused a great deal of destruction to the cultural heritage of Abruzzo. More than 25 percent of historic buildings were damaged, including many churches and museums containing precious works of art. The National Museum of Abruzzo, which is the region's largest museum of art and archaeology, and the offices of the Superintendency for the Historical and Anthropological Heritage of Abruzzo are housed in the sixteenth-century Castello Spagnolo in the city of L'Aquila (figs. 1, 2). This fortified structure also suffered extensive damage, and until it can be restored, the works of art have been removed. One of the most important paintings in the museum, the Beffi Triptych (above), fortunately escaped nearly unscathed, apart from a few scratches that have been repaired. Many other works of art, however, require significant conservation treatment. The Italian government has offered the altarpiece for display at the National Gallery of Art until Labor Day as a gesture of gratitude to the United States, which was one of the first countries to offer assistance, and as testimony to the Italian commitment to restore fully the cultural heritage of the region.

Named for the village of Beffi in Abruzzo for which it was painted, the altarpiece dates from the early fifteenth century. The anonymous painter may have been a follower of the Sienese artist Taddeo di Bartolo (1362/1363–1422) or of other painters from the Abruzzo region. His work

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is distinctive for its lively narrative detail, expressive figures, and vibrant color. For centuries the large triptych was displayed on the high altar of the Church of Santa Maria del Ponte, but it had to be removed to a safer location following an earthquake in 1915. The central panel of the triptych celebrates the Madonna and Christ Child Enthroned in Majesty, while stories of the life of Mary and Jesus appear on either side.

The left panel shows Christ's Nativity, which takes place in a cave under the watchful gaze of an ox and an ass, following Byzantine tradition. Mary holds the swaddled infant while Joseph, at right, ponders the miraculous event. At the top, angels announce the birth to shepherds tending their flocks; below them, two shepherds adore the newborn child, and at the lower left, maidservants prepare his first bath. Represented at a smaller scale, the kneeling figure to the right wearing red and black stockings is the unidentified donor of the altarpiece (fig. 3).

The right panel features scenes from the the Dormition, or Death of the Virgin, who lies on her funeral bier, surrounded by the twelve apostles. John the Evangelist holds a palm frond that was given to the Virgin by an angel to announce her coming death. Other angels scent the air with incense from censers incised in the gold ground, giving the scene a heavenly aura. In a scene rarely depicted in Italian art, the seated figure in the foreground represents the disbelieving priest who, according to an apocryphal story popularized by Jacopo da Voragine's *Golden Legend*, attempted to overturn Mary's bier, but whose hands were frozen when he tried to commit that sacrilege. The Assumption of the Virgin is depicted above the Virgin and apostles, with Christ holding Mary's soul, which traditionally takes the form of a swaddled infant. At the top, Christ crowns Mary as Queen of Heaven.

In addition to the reconstruction of public buildings and private homes in Abruzzo, the Italian government is strongly committed to preserving the art and architecture of the region as part of the world's cultural heritage. The Beffi Triptych is presented here as a "cultural ambassador" from Abruzzo that symbolizes the restoration effort.

For more information on the earthquake and rescue efforts, please visit the following Web sites: *www.protezionecivile.it*, *www.beniculturali.it*, *http://www.ambwashingtondc.esteri.it/ambasciata_washington*, and *www.iicwashington.esteri.it*.

The Beffi Triptych has been lent by the Soprintendenza dell'Abruzzo e la Direzione Regionale dell'Abruzzo. Its presentation at the National Gallery of Art is made possible by the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali and the Embassy of Italy in Washington, D.C. This guide is made possible by the Italian Cultural Institute in Washington, D.C.

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FIG. 1 National Museum of Abruzzo (aerial view), after the earthquake

FIG. 2 National Museum of Abruzzo (interior), after the earthquake

FIG. 3 The Beffi Triptych, detail showing the donor