This panel, along with its two companions The Birth, Naming, and Circumcision of Saint John the Baptist and Madonna and Child with Five Angels, are fragments of a dismantled altarpiece whose original provenance is unknown but which was presumably commissioned for the high altar of a church dedicated to the Baptist in Emilia Romagna or, perhaps, in the Marche. [1] Keith Christiansen (1982) [2] proposed a reconstruction of the altar [fig. 1] (see also Reconstruction) as follows: four stories of the Baptist would have accompanied, on either side, the central Madonna and Child with Five Angels now in the National Gallery of Art; to the upper left, Annunciation of the Birth of the Baptist [fig. 2] formerly in the Street collection in Bath, [3] flanked by Birth, Naming, and Circumcision of the Baptist now in the Gallery. The lower register on the same side would have consisted of Young Baptist Led by an Angel into the Wilderness [fig. 3], now in the Pinacoteca Vaticana, [4] and The Baptist Interrogated by the Pharisees [fig. 4], of which only a fragment survives, in the Seattle Art Museum. [5] The upper register on the right side would have consisted of Baptism of Christ in the Gallery (this panel) and The Baptism of Christ

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Baptist Sends His Disciples to Christ [fig. 5], formerly in the Street collection in Bath. [6] Two more panels formed the lower register on the same side: Feast of Herod [fig. 6], now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Robert Lehman Collection) in New York, [7] flanked by The Baptist's Descent into Limbo [fig. 7], formerly in the collection of Charles Loeser in Florence, its whereabouts now unknown. [8] A possible argument against Christiansen's reconstruction, as Laurence Kanter has informed me (in correspondence), is the fact that the vertically grained wood of the central Madonna seems to exclude its common origin with the panels representing the stories of the Baptist, which are painted on panels with horizontal grain. Kanter considers the possibility of two different altarpieces or one double-sided altarpiece. These proposals are interesting, but all the fragments share a common author, their dimensions are comparable, and similarity of pictorial conduct makes the hypothesis of a single-sided panel more likely after all. Complete disappearance (except for the Madonna) of the paintings on the back of a double-sided altarpiece would also seem rather unlikely. And for an altarpiece as large as two meters or more, instead of a single wooden support, the use of three panels was preferred. On the whole, Christiansen's hypothesis is likely to be correct.

The altarpiece of Saint John the Baptist had evidently been dismantled by the first half of the nineteenth century, for by the 1840s fragments of it had begun to emerge on the art market. [9] Adolfo Venturi (1906) was the first to attempt to classify more precisely the Baptism of Christ and the other two fragments then in the Sterbini collection in Rome. [10] Venturi recognized Bolognese influences deriving from the activity of Giotto (Florentine, c. 1265 - 1337) in that city. He suggested that the artist might have been someone like Jacopo di Paolo, active in Bologna from the close of the thirteenth century. A few years later Osvald Sirén (1916), unfamiliar, it seems, with Venturi's publication, asserted the common origin of the Birth, Naming, and Circumcision of the Baptist; Annunciation of the Baptist's Birth; The Baptist Sends His Disciples to Christ; and Feast of Herod. [11] He correctly attributed them to Giovanni Baronzio, the master who had signed and dated (1345) the altarpiece now in the Galleria Nazionale in Urbino. The great Swedish art historian erred, however, in thinking that the panel of Saint John the Baptist Enthroned in Christ Church Gallery in Oxford stood in the center of the altarpiece. This painting is clearly Florentine, even if its proposed attribution to Lippo di Benivieni remains under discussion. [12] Sirén's proposal, indeed, convinced few scholars. [13] Later contributions to the problem accepted instead the proposal of Richard Offner (1924), who recognized in Madonna and Child with
Five Angels the work of an anonymous painter from the Romagna, to whom he attributed the stories of the Baptist. [14] Raimond van Marle (1924) also placed the attribution to Giovanni Baronzio in doubt. He preferred to classify The Baptism of Christ and its companion panel now in the Pinacoteca Vaticana as works of the “Cavallinesque Riminese school.” [15] Lehman (1928), on the other hand, retained the attribution to Giovanni Baronzio and, in his analysis of Feast of Herod, linked it with the fragment depicting the Baptism. [16] Both Lionello Venturi (1931, 1933) and Bernard Berenson (1932, 1936) also assigned to Giovanni Baronzio the panels they recognized as forming part of the same series. [17] Other art historians and catalogers followed suit. [18] Doubts then grew about Giovanni’s authorship: the fragments were assigned instead to an ad hoc Master of the Life of Saint John the Baptist. This opinion prevailed in the literature of the following decades; it was also expressed in the catalogs of the Gallery and repeated in more recent publications. [19] Since 1987, however, the attribution to Giovanni Baronzio has been reinstated, and reinforced with fresh arguments, both for the group of panels that concerns us here and for other paintings that had in the past been attributed to the artist; scholars have increasingly supported this suggestion. [20]

Altarpieces in the elongated horizontal form of thirteenth-century dossals, approximately one meter (or a little more) in height and two and a half meters in width, such as the dismantled altarpiece of the Baptist being discussed here, are rare in Tuscany in the fourteenth century, but must have been fairly common in a region like Emilia Romagna. [21] They usually showed the Madonna and Child Enthroned (or, more rarely, a story of Christ) at the center flanked by saints or biblical or legendary narrative scenes. An extended cycle of stories of the Baptist comparable to that of our altarpiece has only survived in Emilia Romagna in the field of mural paintings, more particularly in those of the dome of the baptistery of Parma. [22] Our altarpiece dedicated to Saint John the Baptist is unusual in its iconographic program: it lacks scenes usually included in cycles of the Baptist, such as the Visitation, the Ecce Agnus Dei, the Dance of Salome, or the Burial of the Baptist, while it includes such rare episodes as Saint John the Baptist Praying in the Wilderness or the Baptist’s Descent into Limbo. [23] Nor did the artist hesitate to introduce into the individual episodes motifs that diverge from the usual iconography. [24] As regards the panels in the Gallery (as seen in The Birth, Naming, and Circumcision of Saint John the Baptist), it is unusual for the episode of the Washing of the Infant Saint John, often placed in the foreground with an intentional allusion to the theme of baptism, to be dispensed with, as it is here; it is replaced instead by the scene in the background, more homely than symbolic in
tone, of two handmaids wrapping the newborn child in swaddling cloths. The Naming of the Baptist, which often represents a self-sufficient scene, is here inserted in the scene of the Birth, and indeed placed in the foreground and combined to the far right with the episode of the Circumcision of the recalcitrant child. [25] On the other hand, in The Baptism of Christ, the painter remains faithful to the tradition of representing Christ submerged up to his hips in the water of the Jordan, the Baptist placed to the left, standing on the rocky banks of the river, and two angels holding Christ’s clothes to the right. In the upper part of the panel the heavens open, and we catch a glimpse of the half-length figure of God the Father blessing. [26] A motif of archaizing character that gradually disappeared in the fourteenth century is that of John imposing his hand on Christ instead of pouring water over his head. [27]

With regard to the Madonna and Child, a motif for which the painters of Rimini had a special predilection was the cloth of honor supported by angels behind the Virgin’s throne [fig. 8]. On the other hand, the motif of the child grasping his mother’s veil—an allusion to the Passion [28]—is more widespread in fourteenth-century painting in Tuscany than in Emilia Romagna. The miniature lions on the throne armrests allude to the throne of Solomon, while the enormous locust in the hand of the child reminds us of the diet—locusts and wild honey—on which the Baptist lived during his years in the wilderness. [29]

The precision in representing the insect [30] attests to the artist’s acute interest in various aspects and curiosities of daily life. Here as elsewhere in his paintings, he consciously participated in the more naturalistic and descriptive tendencies of Gothic art. The pursuit of naturalistic detail—in costume, in attributes, in setting—distinguished an innovative current in Italian painting in the second quarter of the fourteenth century that sought to disassociate itself from the solemn and classicizing manner of previous decades. Additional proof of this interest are the elaborate architectural settings of many of the episodes of the Baptist’s legend (as in the temple porch in Birth of the Baptist, with its cantilevered upper floor and Gothic double-lancet windows), the attention devoted to characterizing the protagonists’ states of mind, and, not least, the costumes worn, in particular in Feast of Herod. Peculiarities of fashion in turn provide useful clues for pinpointing the date of the altarpiece. [31] Other features of Madonna and Child, such as the use of chrysography and the sharp proportional difference between the figures of Mary and the angels, might at first sight appear retrograde. More careful observation shows that the artist used gilded highlights not in the Byzantine
manner but to accentuate the volumetric relief of the forms below the precious garments and to enliven the sweeping folds of the drapery. The motif of angels peering out from behind the cloth of honor as if playing hide-and-seek is itself an indication of the merry, make-believe spirit that animates the gothicizing artistic current of the time.

Several clues confirm the attribution of our panels to Giovanni Baronzio. First, there are clear analogies between the fragments of the altarpiece of Saint John and other works generally attributed to the artist, such as the solemn mantle-clad men to the right of our Birth of the Baptist and those of Christ before Pilate now in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, or the peculiar, splayed-leg pose of the Baptist in the baptism scene that recurs in the figure of Adam in Descent of Christ into Limbo, also in the Gemäldegalerie. [32] The facial features also coincide: characterized by drooping heads, squared forms, high foreheads, eyes reduced to narrow slits, flattened noses, powerful chins, rounded jaws, they are found in all the works of the artist. The incised decoration of the gold ground is also an important clue for associating our panels with Giovanni Baronzio. [33]

As for the date of our dismantled altarpiece, it may be placed in or shortly before the mid-fourth decade of the fourteenth century, on the basis of comparisons with the artist's only signed and dated work. [34] A motif like the swirling and zigzagging folds of the mantle as it falls to the ground is rendered in a very similar way both in the Madonna in Washington and in the altarpiece in Urbino. The latter, however, is likely to be the later of the two, as a number of features make clear. Evidence of its modernity includes the wider décolleté of Mary's dress than that of the Virgin in Washington, and the fact that her head is covered with a transparent veil, enabling us to glimpse her elaborate and modish hairstyle with two braids raised and knotted together over the crown of her head. Abandoning the usual position of Christ in the Virgin's lap, Giovanni Baronzio represents him instead standing on the ground and gesturing insistently to be restored to his mother's arms. No such liberties are found in the Gallery Madonna, which is characterized by softer modeling and by an absence of the delicate and incisive contours that delineate the forms of the faces and hands in the Urbino Madonna and Child. In observing the stories of the Baptist, moreover, we cannot fail to notice the absence of the stiff and formal reserve of the conduct that distinguishes the narrative scenes of the altarpiece dated 1345: the protagonists of the Nativity and of the Baptism in the Gallery are squatter in proportions but more natural and spontaneous in the way they express themselves with gestures. The attitude of the
man who observes Zacharias writing the name of John on a sheet of paper reveals all too clearly the disapproval of those present in the choice of this name, underlined by the narrative in Luke’s Gospel. [35] The energetic pose of the Baptist, bending forward as far as he can to place his hand on the head of Jesus, immersed in the waters of Jordan, is a powerful expression of his zeal and the profound consciousness he has of his role.

The period that elapsed between the execution of the dismantled altarpiece of the Baptist and the panel now in Urbino cannot have been brief, but its duration is difficult to gauge given the lack of other securely datable works by Baronzio. A probable terminus post quem could be offered by the dossal now divided between the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica di Palazzo Barberini in Rome and the collection of the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio in Rimini; according to a plausible recent proposal, the dossal must have been commissioned for the high altar of the Franciscan church of Villa Verucchio and must date to c. 1330. [36] The essential immobility of the individual compositions contained in this altarpiece, the rudimentary architectural backdrops, and the strongly simplified drawing that still recalls models of Pietro da Rimini suggest that this is an early work of Giovanni Baronzio. The putative Villa Verucchio dossal, which Cesare Brandi compared with the stories of the Baptist, [37] resembles the fragments being discussed here, especially in its delicate modeling, sharp chiaroscuro, and facial characteristics, but it can be assumed to belong to an earlier creative phase in the career of Giovanni Baronzio. The most probable date for the panels in the Gallery therefore would seem to be c. 1335.

Miklós Boskovits (1935–2011)
March 21, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES
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.

Reconstruction of a dispersed altarpiece by Giovanni Baronzio as proposed by Keith Christiansen (1982)

a. Annunciation of the Birth of the Baptist (Entry fig. 2)
b. The Birth, Naming, and Circumcision of Saint John the Baptist
c. Young Baptist Led by an Angel into the Wilderness (Entry fig. 3)
d. The Baptist Interrogated by the Pharisees (Entry fig. 4)
e. Madonna and Child with Five Angels
f. The Baptism of Christ
g. The Baptist Sends His Disciples to Christ (Entry fig. 5)
h. Feast of Herod (Entry fig. 6)
i. The Baptist’s Descent into Limbo (Entry fig. 7)

NOTES

[1] In the infrequent cases in which their original destination is known, horizontal dossals come from churches and altars dedicated to the saint whose legend they illustrate; cf. Edward B. Garrison, Italian Romanesque Panel Painting: An Illustrated Index (Florence, 1949), 140–144; Miklós


[7] Purchased by Philip Lehman from the Galerie Trotti in Paris in 1921, the panel was donated by Robert Lehman to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1975 (no. 1975.1.103). See John Pope-Hennessy and Laurence B. Kanter, *The Robert Lehman Collection*, vol. 1, *Italian Paintings* (New York, 1987), 86–88. The painting had already been introduced to the art historical literature by Osvald Sirén, who had seen it on the art market in Paris; Osvald Sirén, “Giuliano, Pietro and Giovanni da Rimini,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 29 (1916): 320. Pope-Hennessy and Kanter identified the coat of arms on the reverse of the panel as that of the Agnelli dei Malerbi family and suggested that “the panel may have been preserved in the Agnelli collection in Rome or in the Casa Malerbi at Lugo (Ravenna).” A possible connection between the presumed provenance from Lugo (Ravenna) and the life and interests of Luigi Malerbi (1776–1843), canonico, musician, and collector from that little town, has also been surmised. See Anna Tambini, in *Il Trecento riminese: Maestri e botteghe tra Romagna e Marche*, ed. Daniele Benati (Milan, 1995), 264, but without convincing evidence.

[8] This panel formed part of the Sterbini collection in 1906 (cf. Provenance note 1) but was probably acquired shortly after by Charles Loeser.
(1865–1928) for his Florentine collection. In 1926, however, the painting was auctioned in Florence; it was attributed in the sale catalog to the "scuola dell'Orcagna." See Impresa Vendita Cesare Galardelli: Catalogo della Vendita di Arte Antica di proprietà del Sig. L. M. Banti, Florence, April, 14–16, 1926, lot 220. Wilhelm Suida stated that the panel had been the property of Mrs. R. Calnan. Wilhelm Suida, Paintings and Sculpture from the Kress Collection acquired by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation 1945–1951 (Washington, DC, 1951), 36. The painting's measurements are unknown.


[12] The panel (no. 6), which Richard Offner assigned to the Florentine “following of the St. Cecilia Master,” has also been attributed to Buffalmacco and, by the present writer, to Lippo di Benivieni. In any case the more recent literature generally has recognized it as the work of a Florentine artist. See Richard Offner and Miklós Boskovits, A Critical and Historical Corpus of Florentine Painting: The Fourteenth Century, sec. 3, vol. 1, The St. Cecilia Master and His Circle, new ed. (Florence, 1986), 178–180. It has further been shown that it used to belong to the church of Santa Maria degli Ughi in Florence.


[14] It is worth recalling that Robert Lehman (1928), commenting on Decollation of the Baptist and Presentation of His Head, cited Richard Offner’s verbal opinion, evidently pronounced some years previously, in favor of Giovanni Baronio’s authorship. Robert Lehman, The Philip Lehman Collection, New York (Paris, 1928), no. 74. But by 1924 Offner had changed his mind. He then argued that the Lehman panel and the other two stories of the Baptist formerly in the Pratt collection had been painted around 1340 by the

[15] Raimond Van Marle gathered under this loose definition various artists' works, some of which have more recently been recognized as the work of Giovanni Baronzio. Apart from the two stories of the Baptist mentioned in the text, they include the stories of Christ now in the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica di Palazzo Barberini in Rome, the six small panels with stories of Christ in the Accademia in Venice, and Adoration of the Magi now in the Courtauld Institute Art Gallery in London. See Raimond van Marle, The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting, vol. 4, The Local Schools of North Italy of the 14th Century (The Hague, 1924), 288.

[16] Robert Lehman and following him some other authors cited an otherwise unspecified story of the Baptist in the Ryerson collection in Chicago that allegedly formed part of the same series. Robert Lehman, The Philip Lehman Collection, New York (Paris, 1928), no. 74. But the fact that this painting was not among those that entered the Art Institute of Chicago from the Ryerson collection suggests the claim is based on a misunderstanding.


[21] Altarpieces of this type and of similar size originally must have included Giovanni da Rimini’s *Madonna and Child with Saints* in the Museo Correr in Venice (apparently a triptych but, as the horizontal grain of the wood shows, originally a type of dossal enriched with gables); Pietro da Rimini’s fragmentary panel *Christ, the Madonna, and Saints* now in the Denver Art Museum; Francesco da Rimini’s similar altarpiece now dismantled and dispersed among the Cini Collection in Venice and museums in Lausanne and Barcelona; Giovanni Baronzio’s stories of Christ divided between the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica di Palazzo Barberini in Rome and the...
Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio in Rimini; and Giovanni Baronzio’s still intact altarpieces of this type in the Galleria Nazionale in Urbino and in the church of San Francesco at Mercatello. We may also recall the early fourteenth-century dossal of an anonymous master in the Museo Civico at Reggio Emilia, cf. Carlo Volpe, *La pittura riminese del Trecento* (Milan, 1965), figs. 64, 78, 159–163, 208, 210, 198, 206, 315, and some Bolognese examples, such as the dossals by the Pseudo Jacopino in the Pinacoteca Nazionale, for which see Jadranka Bentini, Gian Piero Cammarota, and Daniela Scaglietti Kelescan, eds., *Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna, catalogo generale*, vol. 1, *Da Duecento a Francesco Francia* (Venice, 2004), 78–83. In rare cases, horizontal dossals even larger in size than the abovementioned were produced, such as that by Giuliano da Rimini in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston (164 × 300 cm).


[24] For example, *Annunciation to Zacharias*, formerly in the Street collection in Bath, is very unusual in iconography. It takes place in a Romanesque church packed with worshippers, and the priest is kneeling before the altar as if celebrating Mass. The iconography adopted in the other former Street panel is equally rare. Here, in the scene in which the disciples are sent by John to interrogate Christ, instead of the miracles performed by Christ we see a group of believers sitting on the ground and listening to the Savior’s words. Also rare is the twofold presence of Salome in *Feast of Herod*, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: in one she is dancing, and in the other she is presenting the decapitated head of the Baptist on a charger to...
the banqueters.

[25] The episode of the Circumcision, if shown at all, substitutes either the scene of the Birth of the Baptist, as in the relief on the façade of San Giovanni in Venere at Fossacesia (Chieti), or that of the Naming of the Baptist, as in the reliefs of the cathedral of Auxerre. See Otto Lehmann-Brockhaus, Abruzzen und Molise: Kunst und Geschichte, Römische Forschungen der Bibliotheca Hertziana (Munich, 1983), 175–176; Camille Enlart, “La sculpture des portails de la cathédrale d’Auxerre du XIIIe à la fin du XIVe siècle,” Congres archeologique de France 74 (1907): pl. between 602 and 603.


[29] With reference to Proverbs 30:27 ("the locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank"), Herbert Friedmann explained that in medieval thought, locusts were sometimes considered symbols of converted pagans. See Herbert Friedmann, “The Iconography of the Madonna and Child by Giovanni Baronzio in the Kress Collection, National Gallery, Washington,” Gazette des Beaux-Arts 35 (1949): 345–352. But in the case of the altarpiece being discussed here, in which the Madonna and Child is flanked by stories of the Baptist, the locust in the Christ child's hand presumably was intended to allude, more prosaically, to the food on which the Baptist lived in the wilderness of Judea (cf. Mt 3:4; Mk 1:6). As for the figures of lions on the throne, in medieval theology Mary was considered the personification of wisdom, seated on the throne of Solomon, in which (1 Kings 10:19) “two lions stood beside the stays” (i.e., beside the armrests). Cf. also Gregor Martin Lechner, “Sedes Sapientiae,” in Marienlexikon, ed. Remigius Bäumer and Leo Scheffczyk, 6 vols. (St. Ottilien, 1994), 6:113–118.

Gazette des Beaux-Arts 35 (1949): 350, underlined this aspect.

[31] A very important aspect of women’s dress of the period, the depth and width of the décolleté, is exemplified by the dresses in Feast of Herod (but also by the dress of Mary herself in the Washington Madonna). This wider and deeper neckline reflects a fashion that spread in the 1330s; cf. Luciano Bellosi, “Moda e cronologia: A) gli affreschi della Basilica Inferiore di Assisi,” Prospettiva 10 (1977): 21–31. Details such as the length of the dresses of the courtiers portrayed in the foreground in front of Herod’s table, or the length of their caps with side flaps, also reflect a phase of the development of fourteenth-century court fashion that precedes that illustrated by Giovanni Baronzio in the altarpiece dated 1345 in the Galleria Nazionale in Urbino. Bellosi’s studies are useful in elucidating these aspects. Luciano Bellosi, Buffalmacco e il Trionfo della morte (Turin, 1974) 41–54. The details of dress I have cited, to which others can be added, therefore suggest a date for our panels in the 1330s.


[33] As Brigitte Klesse has shown, the ornamental motifs incised in the gold ground in the Gallery’s panels depicting stories of the Baptist recur in the abovementioned panels in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, in the fragments belonging to the same series now in the Accademia in Venice (no. 26), and in the altarpiece signed by Giovanni and dated 1345 in the Galleria Nazionale in Urbino; Brigitte Klesse, Seidenstoffe in der italienischen Malerei des 14. Jahrhunderts (Bern, 1967), 281.

[34] For the altarpiece Madonna and Child with Angels and Saints and Stories of Christ in Urbino’s Galleria Nazionale (no. 125), cf. Carlo Volpe, La pittura riminese del Trecento (Milan, 1965), 82; Pier Giorgio Pasini, La pittura riminese del Trecento (Cinisello Balsamo, Milan, 1990), 141–143.

[35] The Gospel narrative (Lk 1:59–63) explains that Elizabeth’s kinsfolk and neighbors had suggested the boy be called Zacharias like his father and not John, as indicated by the angel at the time of the Annunciation (Lk 1:13: “and you shall call his name John”), objecting: “There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name.”

[36] It is Massimo Medica who observed that the two surviving fragments are similar in subject and iconography to those preserved in the church of San Francesco a Villa Verucchio until the mid-nineteenth century. The same scholar also assumed that, since this church was completed in 1324, the altarpiece for its high altar would have been commissioned and installed not many years later. Massimo Medica, “Una proposta per la provenienza del
TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a panel made from a single piece of wood with horizontal grain. It has been thinned to approximately 1 cm, and cradled. The x-radiographs show pieces of fabric between the wood and the gesso. Areas to be gilded were prepared with red bole. Major contours were delineated with incised lines, which were reinforced with dark paint in the early stages of painting. The artist used gold and silver leaf in the brocade of the figure on the right and gold leaf in the background. [1] The gold is tooled freehand. The ornamental gold leaf border survives in its original width along the bottom and right sides of the panel but it is partially truncated along the other two sides. [2] The panel has suffered some worm damage in the past. Stephen Pichetto treated the painting and applied the cradle c. 1934, and Mario Modestini treated it again in 1955. [3] The panel was vandalized in 1974, causing a vertical crack above the heads of the figures on the right. The painted surface also suffered scattered losses in the figures, as did the gold ground on the right. Local treatments were performed in these areas at that time. Old, discolored inpainting can be noted in the rocks below the figure of the Baptist, in the saint's robes, and in the head of the angel to the far right. There is a fair amount of inpainting in the figure of God at the top of the panel and in the gold around this area. The varnish has darkened to some degree.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Silver and gold leaf were identified by the NGA scientific research department using x-ray fluorescence spectrometry (see report dated...
PROVENANCE

Possibly commissioned as part of the high altarpiece of a church dedicated to Saint John the Baptist in Emilia Romagna or in the Marche, Italy. Probably Monsignor Gabriele Laureani [d. 1849], Rome; Guilio Sterbini [d. 1911], Rome, by 1874;[1] Pasini collection, Rome, by 1924;[2] (Count Alessandro Contini Bonacossi, Florence); purchased June 1933 by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York;[3] gift 1939 to NGA.

[1] David Farabulini (La pittura antica e moderna e la Galleria del cav. Giulio Sterbini, Rome, 1874: 29) cites “varie storie della vita del Battista” in the Sterbini collection, while Adolfo Venturi (La Galleria Sterbini in Roma, Rome, 1906), in publishing The Baptism of Christ, then forming part of that collection, comments that two additional Stories of the Saint, the “San Giovanni che parla a due seguaci” (i.e., the Baptist Interrogated by the Pharisees) and “S. Giovanni tra i Padri del Limbo” (i.e., the Baptist’s Descent into Limbo) also formed part of this collection. Farabulini further explains (1874, 13) that Sterbini had acquired paintings for his collection in Rome from Monsignor Gabriele Laureani, prefect of the Vatican Apostolic Library, who was engaged in acquiring paintings by “maestri primitivi” for the Vatican’s collections. Since the works later gathered in the Pinacoteca Vaticana also include a panel from this series, namely the Young Baptist Being Led into the Wilderness by an Angel (no. 40185), there are good grounds for assuming that it had arrived in Rome together with the fragments acquired by Sterbini. On the

February 16, 2000, in NGA conservation files).

[2] A photograph published by Pietro Toesca shows that much of the original gold leaf along the bottom is missing, indicating that it has been heavily inpainted. Pietro Toesca, Il Trecento, Storia dell’arte italiana 2 (Turin, 1951), 732.

[3] Fern Rusk Shapley, Catalogue of the Italian Paintings, 2 vols. (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:316, reported that this painting was “cradled, cleaned, restored, and varnished” by Stephen Pichetto and “last varnished” by Mario Modestini. The photographs reproduced by Adolfo Venturi and Pietro Toesca show numerous losses in the painting and therefore must have been taken prior to Pichetto’s treatment. Adolfo Venturi, La Galleria Sterbini in Roma: Saggio illustrativo (Rome, 1906), 51; Pietro Toesca, Il Trecento, Storia dell’arte italiana 2 (Turin, 1951), 732.

[2] Lionello Venturi (Pitture italiane in America, Milan, 1931) was the last to report the painting’s presence in the Pasini collection. Federico Zeri wrote to Robert O. Parks that Pasini was the dealer who sold the entire Sterbini collection; Parks in turn passed this information on to John Walker (letter, Parks to Walker, 27 December 1949, in NGA curatorial files).

[3] The bill of sale for a large number of paintings, including this one, is dated 28 June 1933 (copy in NGA curatorial files). See also The Kress Collection Digital Archive, https://kress.nga.gov/Detail/objects/2083.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1932 An Exhibition of Italian Paintings, Lent by Mr. Samuel H. Kress of New York to Museums, Colleges, and Associations, twenty-four venues in the United States, 1932-1935, no. 32.


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