The Crucifixion is enacted in front of the crenellated wall of the city of Jerusalem. The cross is flanked above by four fluttering angels, three of whom collect the blood that flows from the wounds in Christ's hands and side. To the left of the Cross, the Holy Women, a compact group, support the swooning Mary, mother of Jesus. Mary Magdalene kneels at the foot of the Cross, caressing Christ's feet with her hands. To the right of the Cross stand Saint John the Evangelist, in profile, and a group of soldiers with the centurion in the middle, distinguished by a halo, who recognizes the Son of God in Jesus. [1] The painting's small size, arched shape, and composition suggest that it originally belonged to a portable altarpiece, of which it formed the central panel's upper tier [fig. 1]. [2] The hypothesis was first advanced by Evelyn Sandberg-Vavalà (originally drafted 1939, published 1969), who based it on stylistic, compositional, and iconographic affinities between a small triptych now in the Galleria Nazionale of Parma [fig. 2] and a series of small panels now in the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts [fig. 3]. Sandberg-Vavalà recognized the latter as fragments of the shutters of a triptych [fig. 4] very similar to the one now in
Thus, as in the example at Parma, the dismantled triptych would have represented on the exterior Saints Christopher and Blaise (fig. 1, panels a and e). When opened, the left shutter would have shown Saints Michael Archangel and John the Baptist at the top, and in the lower register Saints George and Francis; the Ecstasy of Saint Mary Magdalene would have appeared at the top of the right shutter, and below it Saints Barbara and Anthony Abbot (in the Parma triptych, the place of Saint Barbara is taken by Saint Ursula). The Washington Crucifixion therefore may be assumed to have formed part of the centerpiece of a triptych, probably placed, as at Parma, above an image of the Madonna and Child. The measurements of the fragments would seem to confirm that the painting in the National Gallery of Art and the fragments in Worcester belonged to the same altarpiece. Other scholars later independently proposed the same conjectural reconstruction of the complex. It was further developed by the suggestion that it could be completed with the triangular gable panels depicting the Angel of the Annunciation and the Virgin Annunciating now in the J. Paul Getty Museum at Los Angeles (fig. 5), and with the Madonna and Child now in the Musée du Petit Palais at Avignon (fig. 6) proposed as the lower register of the central panel of which our Crucifixion formed the upper part. Not all authorities have found these proposals convincing, and some have rejected them, but at least the common origin of the panels now in Avignon, Washington, and Worcester seems quite plausible.

As for the hand that painted the panel in Washington, apart from the first tentative attributions to Nicoletto Semitecolo and to Lorenzo Veneziano (an artist who belonged to a younger generation and was probably a disciple of Paolo Veneziano, but someone to whom early twentieth-century art historians frequently attributed Paolo’s paintings) made during the time when it was still on the art market, Paolo’s authorship is now almost universally recognized. Uncertainties concern not so much the painting’s attribution as its chronological position in Paolo’s oeuvre. This is variously assessed depending on the chronological sequence of the master’s paintings proposed in the literature. Roberto Longhi, followed by many, argued for an execution toward the middle of the fourteenth century, but other art historians have preferred an earlier dating, proposing the 1340s, the years around 1340, or even the third decade. In the absence of secure points of reference, it may be assumed that the panel in the National Gallery of Art should precede the polyptych with the Crucifixion and saints now in the Museum of the Cathedral of Rab, or the painted cross in the church of Saint Dominic at Dubrovnik (both in Croatia), works generally and
convincingly dated after the mid-fourteenth century. [18] In their conspicuous elongation of the figures’ proportions, their more realistic treatment of the anatomy of the body of Christ, their measured language of gesture and less dynamic linear rhythms, these works have undeniable affinities with paintings securely dated to the artist’s last creative phase. On the other hand, a terminus post quem for our painting can be deduced from the Crucifixion in one of the panels of polyptych no. 21 in the Gallerie dell’Accademia in Venice, a work that the more recent literature tends to place within or not long after the fourth decade of the fourteenth century. With its more animated and crowded composition and its more schematic description of the slender body of Christ, it can undoubtedly be assumed to belong to a phase preceding the Washington version of the subject. [19]

If, as seems to me plausible, we accept that the painting discussed here belongs to the same complex of which the fragments in the Worcester Museum and the Madonna in Avignon formed part, the scope for comparisons and for formulating more precise chronological parameters is widened. The Saint Francis of the Worcester Museum seems more slender than the corresponding image of the saint in the Museo Civico in Vicenza, dated 1333, [20] and should be later in date. Conversely, a period of some length must have elapsed between the figure of the Baptist in the Worcester Museum and that in the polyptych in the church of San Martino at Chioggia in 1349: there, the Baptist, a very tall, aristocratic personage who turns with timorous discretion to the Christ child on his mother’s knee in the central panel, reveals characteristics rather different from those of the Worcester Baptist. [21] The slight hanchement of the Worcester Saint George, holding his lance between his fingers with inimitable nonchalance, seems to repeat in a very similar way, though perhaps with an even more studied quest for elegance, the pose of another warrior saint, the Saint Theodore in the Pala feriale of 1343–1345. [22] As for the Madonna in Avignon, the liveliness of the Christ child’s gesture, his arms outspread, and the slender figure of Mary, with her wan face and melancholic gaze, invite comparison with the panel dated 1340 in the Crespi collection in Milan and, even more persuasively, with the Madonna now in the Museo Diocesano in Cesena with a provenance from Carpineta, dated 1347. [23]

To these stylistic observations we may add some comments on the iconography and costumes worn by the figures in the panels. Bearing in mind that iconographic changes may depend on the requirements of particular patrons and that their use as criteria for dating a work of art should be evaluated with a great deal of caution, I do not think it accidental that in the Madonna of Carpineta and in Paolo’s later
representations of the same subject Mary is always shown with a dress
sumptuously decorated with floriated motifs in gold and that the child, instead of
wearing the traditional long tunic, is represented nude (even if draped in a mantle)
or is shown wearing a transparent chemise that leaves his legs exposed. This
motif, of Byzantine origin, soon spread in Tuscan painting, [24] but it apparently
enjoyed less success, or made less rapid headway, in northern Italy. Rare in
Venetian paintings of the early fourteenth century, it is still not present in Paolo’s
Crespi Madonna (1340), though it appears in his later works and also in the panel of
the Madonna in Avignon. The conclusion that the triptych in question might have
been executed within the 1340s seems further corroborated by the costume of
Saint Barbara in Worcester. Her dress is characterized by a conspicuous
manicotto (a long sleeve whose upper fitted part reaches down to the elbow,
where it sharply widens and then hangs down in a loose flap to the mid-thigh).
[25] This dernier cri of fourteenth-century court dress, a fashion by no means
confined to ladies, appears here in a less evolved form than in the dresses that
adorn the Saint Ursula of the polyptych of San Severino Marche (1358) [26] or the
Dancing Salome in the mosaic of the baptistery of San Marco (c. 1350), [27] but in a
far wider (and presumably later) variant than in the elegant dresses of the female
saints depicted in the laterals of the triptych of Saint Clare in the Museo Civico of
Trieste, executed by Paolo within the third decade. [28] From the sum of these
observations, it seems possible to deduce that the triptych of which the
Washington Crucifixion formed part should date to the early 1340s, soon after the
triptych in the Galleria Nazionale in Parma, which it follows in composition and, in
large part, iconography.

Miklós Boskovits (1935–2011)
March 21, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES
fig. 1 Reconstruction of a portable triptych by Paolo Veneziano. Panel A: Saint Christopher (reverse of panel B). Panel B: a. Angel of the Annunciation (fig. 5); b. Saint Michael Archangel (fig. 3); c. Saint John the Baptist (fig. 3); d. Saint George (fig. 3); e. Saint Francis (fig. 3). Panel C: a. The Crucifixion; b. Madonna and Child (fig. 6). Panel D: a. Virgin Annunciate (fig. 5); b. The Ecstasy of Saint Mary Magdalene (fig. 3); c. Saint Barbara (fig. 3); d. Saint Anthony Abbot (fig. 3). Panel E: Saint Blaise (reverse of panel D)

fig. 2 Paolo Veneziano, Portable Triptych, c. 1335, tempera on panel, Galleria Nazionale, Parma

fig. 4 Saints Christopher and Blaise on the reverse of the lateral panels of Paolo Veneziano, *Portable Triptych*, c. 1335, tempera on panel, Galleria Nazionale, Parma

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 portable triptych by Paolo Veneziano

Panel A
Saint Christopher (reverse of panel B)

Panel B
a. Angel of the Annunciation (Entry fig. 5)
b. Saint Michael Archangel (Entry fig. 3)
c. Saint John the Baptist (Entry fig. 3)
d. Saint George (Entry fig. 3)
e. Saint Francis (Entry fig. 3)

Panel C
a. The Crucifixion
b. Madonna and Child (Entry fig. 6)
Panel D
a. Virgin Annunciate (Entry fig. 5)
b. The Ecstasy of Saint Mary Magdalene (Entry fig. 3)
c. Saint Barbara (Entry fig. 3)
d. Saint Anthony Abbot (Entry fig. 3)

Panel E
Saint Blaise (reverse of panel D)

NOTES

[1] The artist follows the iconography developed after the iconoclastic period in Middle Byzantine art; it is here that such motifs as the mourning angels, the centurion (cf. Matthew 27:54), the walls of Jerusalem in the background, and the skull of Adam hidden in a fissure of the rock of Golgotha below the Cross appear for the first time; cf. Marcus Mrass, “Kreuzigung Christi,” in Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst, ed. Klaus Wessel, 7 vols. (Stuttgart, 1995), 5:312–350. Motifs of Western origin, on the other hand, also are present in the painting: Mary Magdalene embracing the Cross, or the swooning Madonna; cf. Evelyn Sandberg-Vavalà, La croce dipinta italiana e l'iconografia della Passione (Verona, 1929), 123–124, 148–151. On the haloed centurion, a widespread motif in Italian fourteenth-century painting, cf. Gertrud Schiller, Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst, 6 vols. (Gütersloh, 1966–1990), 2:166–167.

[2] The relatively small dimensions of the panel and its particular format, favoring width at the expense of height, preclude the hypothesis that it formed the central gable of a polyptych. The alternative suggestion, that it might have been part of the predella of an altarpiece, would seem to be discounted by the vertical graining of the wood. For small portable triptychs in which the Crucifixion appears above the image of the Madonna and Child, cf. Rodolfo Pallucchini, ed., La pittura veneziana del Trecento (Venice, 1964), fig. 74, 202, 366, 524.

[3] The article by Evelyn Sandberg-Vavalà (in English) was prepared for the Worcester Art Museum Bulletin in 1939 but long remained unpublished. It was finally printed in an Italian translation by Michelangelo Muraro, as Evelyn Sandberg-Vavalà, “Maestro Paolo Veneziano: Suoi dipinti in America e altrove,” in Paolo da Venezia (Milan, 1969), 99–101. Sandberg-Vavalà was the first to point out the close resemblances between the panel then in the Kress Collection and the corresponding scene in the small triptych of the Galleria Nazionale in Parma (no. 438), for which see Rosa D’Amico, in Galleria Nazionale di Parma, vol. 1, Catalogo delle opere dall’antico al Cinquecento, ed. Lucia Fornari Schianchi (Milan, 1997), 44–46. More especially, she noted the virtual identity in iconography and composition between this triptych and a very similar altarpiece of which the fragments
now in the Worcester Art Museum originally formed part (no. 1927.19); see Martin Davies, “Italian School,” in European Paintings in the Collection of the Worcester Art Museum, vol. 1, Text, ed. Worcester Art Museum (Worcester, MA, 1974), 412–417. She concluded that the Crucifixion now in the National Gallery of Art originally belonged to the same ensemble.

[4] The dimensions of the panels with figures of saints in the Worcester Museum, cut from the shutters of a triptych, vary between 27.7 and 28.3 × 9 and 9.2 cm, while the Ecstasy of Saint Mary Magdalene, the only panel to preserve the entire width of the triptych’s right wing, is 27.7 × 18.1 cm. Therefore, the shutters—without the upper gables, which could (on the analogy of the model in Parma) have been some 20–30 cm high—would have measured c. 56 × 18 cm; see Rodolfo Pallucchini, ed., La pittura veneziana del Trecento (Venice, 1964), pls. 77–78. After various transfers on the Italian art market, where they were recorded at least until 1925, the seven fragments were purchased by the Worcester Museum in 1927 from the dealer Paul Bottenwieser (New York and Berlin). See Martin Davies, “Italian School,” in European Paintings in the Collection of the Worcester Art Museum, vol. 1, Text, ed. Worcester Art Museum (Worcester, MA, 1974), 415–416.


[6] No. 87.PB.117; 22.5 × 13.5 each; see David Jaffé, Paintings: An Illustrated Summary Catalogue of the Collections of the J. Paul Getty Museum (Malibu, 1997), 129. The two fragments come from the Florentine collection of Charles Loeser (1864–1928). Joanna R. Dunn of the National Gallery of Art’s conservation department, who has examined the two panels at my request, thinks they probably were cut down along the diagonal sides as well as on the acute-angle corners. She estimates that their original width might have been as much as 18 cm.

[7] No. 20194; 44 × 40 cm. See Michel Laclotte and Esther Moench, Peinture italienne: Musée du Petit Palais, Avignon (Paris, 2005), no. 224. The painting, first recorded in the famous Roman collection of Giampiero Campana (1808–1880) in the mid-nineteenth century, was sold in 1862,
together with the entire Campana collection, to the Musée Napoléon III in Paris. It was subsequently placed on loan in the museum in Montargis, where it remained on display for almost a century before being transferred to the Musée du Petit Palais in Avignon. Since the Madonna was catalogued as a work of Ottaviano da Faenza in the Campana collection, it may be, or has been, inferred that it was originally intended for a patron in Emilia-Romagna. Cf. Roberto Longhi, *Viatico per cinque secoli di pittura veneziana* (Florence, 1946), 44–45.


[9] For the problems of chronology, see below. With regard to the tiny disparity of 1.1 cm between the present width of the panels in Washington and Avignon, it should be borne in mind that the latter only partially retains its engaged frame; originally it must have been wider. The cropping of the panels now in Worcester is far more considerable, but not even their measurements contradict, in my view, the proposed reconstruction. It is difficult, however, to incorporate the gable panels in Los Angeles in the reconstruction.


[11] In a handwritten expertise on the back of a photograph of the painting, Raimond van Marle declared, “No doubt it is a work of Lorenzo Veneziano.” Other expert opinions supporting an attribution of Paolo Veneziano were sent to Samuel H. Kress by Bernard Berenson, Giuseppe Fiocco, Roberto Longhi, F. Mason Perkins, Wilhelm Suida, and Adolfo Venturi. Presumably written at the same time as van Marle’s, most bear the date 1934; copies in NGA curatorial files.
The only dissenting voice was that of Edoardo Arslan (1956), who thought that the Crucifixion was a work by an assistant of Paolo’s. Edoardo Arslan, “Una nuova Madonna di Paolo Veneto,” Commentari 7 (1956): 21 n. 8.


[19] The polyptych, with a provenance from the Venetian church of Santa Chiara, was considered until not many years ago as indicative of Paolo’s presumed return to or reuse of Byzantine figurative models in the final phase of his career. More recently, Andrea De Marchi (1995), followed by Robert Gibbs (1996), proposed its execution, surely more correctly, around 1340. Filippo


[21] Filippo Pedrocco, Paolo Veneziano (Milan and Venice, 2003), 180–183. The fragmentary inscription, still legible on the panel, also contains a date, usually interpreted as 1349.

[22] Filippo Pedrocco, Paolo Veneziano (Milan and Venice, 2003), 170–173. Commissioned in 1343, the Pala feriale bears not only the signatures of Paolo and of his two sons but also the date 1345.


[25] On the motif of the manicottolo and its significance as a clue for dating, see the perceptive remarks of Luciano Bellosi (1974), the first to evaluate its importance in art historical terms. He developed his proposals further in later studies. Luciano Bellosi, Buffalmacco e il Trionfo della morte (Turin, 1974), 51–54.


TECHNICAL SUMMARY
The painting, executed on a single piece of wood with vertical grain, has triangular additions of relatively recent date at the upper corners. [1] Narrow strips of wood have been attached to the vertical edges of the panel, which has been thinned and cradled at least twice. The paint is applied on a gesso ground; there is a layer of red bole under the gilded areas. The x-radiographs reveal two pieces of fabric under the gesso, which were probably applied to conceal flaws in the panel. An incised line marks the inner periphery of the now lost original frame. The paint was applied thinly with green underpaint beneath the flesh tones. The halos are punched, and the soldiers’ armor is embellished with mordant gilding.

The panel has numerous old wormholes and some small cracks along the bottom edge. A light overall abrasion can be observed on the painted surface, which has two significant paint losses: one on Christ’s torso, and the other on his left arm. Other, smaller losses are present in Christ’s loincloth, Mary Magdalene’s nose, and in the face and torso of the lower right-hand angel. The right half of the gold background has been regilded. The dark outer contours have been reinforced in some areas. Stephen Pichetto removed a discolored varnish and inpainted the panel when he cradled it in 1934–1935. [2]

TECHNICAL NOTES


[2] According to Fern Rusk Shapley, the panel was “cradled, cleaned, restored and varnished by S. Pichetto c. 1934/35.” Evidently, it had also been treated before Pichetto’s intervention, which presumably occurred after the painting entered the Kress collection. Indeed, according to the examination report of the NGA painting conservation department dated December 5, 1988, x-ray documentation proves that “an earlier, heavier cradle [probably added during the early twentieth century restoration] was replaced by the present one.” Fern Rusk Shapley, Catalogue of the Italian Paintings, 2 vols. (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:335 n. 6.

PROVENANCE

The Crucifixion

© National Gallery of Art, Washington

[1] In his article of 1912, Roger Fry reproduces the painting together with another, similarly attributed to the school of Semitecolo, explaining that it was present “some years ago in the market in Italy” (Roger Fry, "Exhibition of Pictures and the Early Venetian School at the Burlington Fine Arts Club," The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs 21 [1912]: 47, pl. 2). Fry had probably seen it in October 1902; in fact, in a letter dated 10 October 1902, written to his wife from Venice, he reports, “I’ve had great luck today, managed to get to see some pictures by Semitecolo what I’ve never managed before”; Letters of Roger Fry, ed. Denys Sutton, 2 vols., New York, 1972: 1:196.

[2] The collection of Achillito Chiesa, which the great art dealer Luigi Bellini calls the “più importante e intelligente collezione di oggetti d’arte italiana fondata in questi ultimi cinquant’anni in Italia” (“the most important, and intelligent, collection of Italian art objects formed in Italy within the last fifty years”) (Luigi Bellini, Nel mondo degli antiquari, Florence, 1947: 223–224), was dispersed between 1925 and 1931 because of the collector’s financial difficulties; see Elisabeth E. Gardner, A Bibliographical Repertory of Italian Private Collections, 3 vols., ed. Chiara Ceschi and Katharine Baetjer, Vicenza, 1998: 1:227-228.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


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