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Italian Paintings of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

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Martino di Bartolomeo
Sienese, active 1393/1434

Madonna and Child, with the Blessing Christ [middle panel]

c. 1415/1420

tempera on panel
painted surface: 106.05 × 50.8 cm (41 3/4 × 20 in.)
original panel: 117.48 × 52.39 × 4.13 cm (46 1/4 × 20 5/8 × 1 5/8 in.)
overall (with added wood strips): 120.65 × 60.96 × 4.13 cm (47 1/2 × 24 × 1 5/8 in.)
depth (indicates warp of the panel): 8.57 cm (3 3/8 in.)
Inscription: on Christ's book: Ego S / um lu / x m / undi / [et] via / veritas / et vita / quise / gui ... (I am the light of the world and the way, the truth and the life; a conflation of John 8:12 and 14:6) [1]
Gift of Samuel L. Fuller 1950.11.1.b

ENTRY

This panel was originally part of a triptych that also included Saint Peter, with Saint James Major [left panel] and Deacon Saint, with Saint Anthony Abbot [right panel]. The image of the Madonna and Child recalls the type of the *Glykophilousa* Virgin, the “affectionate Madonna.” She rests her cheek against that of the child, who embraces her. The motif of the child’s hand grasping the hem of the neckline of the Virgin’s dress seems, on the other hand, to allude to the theme of suckling. [1] The saints portrayed are easily identifiable by their attributes: Peter by the keys, as well as by his particular facial type; James Major, by his pilgrim’s staff; Anthony Abbot, by his hospitaller habit and T-shaped staff. [2] But the identity of the deacon martyr saint remains uncertain; he is usually identified as Saint Stephen, though without good reason, as he lacks that saint’s usual attributes. Perhaps the artist did not characterize him with a specific attribute because the triptych was destined for

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a church dedicated to him. [3]

F. Mason Perkins saw the three panels in a private collection in London in 1924 and then published them under the name of Martino di Bartolomeo, thus confirming the attribution formulated by the panels' owner. [4] The proposal seemed convincing to various scholars but not to the authors of the catalogs of the National Gallery of Art, who, for reasons difficult to explain, registered the attribution to Martino with a margin of doubt; Carol Montfort Molten (1996) also maintained that reservation. [5] Thus, after the publications of Perkins and Raimond van Marle (1924, 1934), only Burton B. Fredericksen and Federico Zeri (1972), Mojmir S. Frinta (1998), and Silvia Colucci (2005) have cited the triptych as a work by Martino. [6]

As for its date of execution, most of the opinions expressed on the matter have accepted van Marle's (1924) hypothesis. [7] He asserted that the triptych should date to c. 1400–1410, probably following the artist's period of activity in Pisa, which ended in 1405. Fern Rusk Shapley (1979), however, was of the view that if the triptych were indeed an autograph work by Martino, it ought to date earlier than 1403. [8] For her part, Monfort Molten (1996) placed the Gallery panels among the works of Martino di Bartolomeo postdating 1410. [9] She argued, however, that in the Gallery triptych "there is less affinity with the elegant and graceful qualities of the Saint Barnabas altarpiece, [10] or with the Palazzo Pubblico Triptych." [11] Therefore, this work represented, according to Molten, "something of an anomaly in Martino's work," and the circumstance would make probable, in her view, the intervention of a studio assistant. [12]

The doubts about Martino's authorship of the triptych have never been clearly explained, nor does the judgment of the ostensibly limited qualitative level of the Washington panels seem well founded. It may be admitted that Martino was not one of the leading masters active in Lucca, Pisa, and Siena between the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century. In particular, his frescoes in the oratory of San Giovanni Battista at Cascina, undoubtedly executed with the help of assistants but proudly signed as an autograph work and dated 1398, [13] propose very schematic compositions and evince signs of some haste in execution, testifying to a quality that cannot be said to be outstanding. The polyptych now in the Museo Nazionale in Pisa, also signed by Martino and dated five years later, [14] is finer, but the forms of its robust figures, metallic in sheen and modeled with sharp chiaroscuro contrasts, seem rather far removed from the stylistic features of the triptych being discussed here. So the attempt to insert the Washington panels in Martino's Pisan phase cannot be found convincing. In those

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years, Martino seems especially to have based his severe forms on models derived from such masters as Antonio Veneziano and Piero di Puccio. His paintings are filled with figures whose draperies seem starched and whose human grandeur is mainly expressed by physical bulk.

The artist's style changed after his return to Siena and after his frescoes in the Sala di Balia at the Palazzo Pubblico (1404–1407) in that city. [15] In the polyptych dated 1408 now divided between the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena and a private collection, [16] the painter shows he has resumed contact with the Sienese figurative tradition and especially with Taddeo di Bartolo (who also was involved in the pictorial decoration of the Palazzo Pubblico). Martino's style now becomes more graceful and more animated. He seeks greater verisimilitude in softer complexions and in the silky fluency of hair and beards, and tries to imbue his figures with greater vitality through more complex and articulated movements. Martino also must have been struck by the imaginative pictorial narratives of Bartolo di Fredi, by now fully attuned to the late Gothic style, and possibly he attempted to keep abreast of the figurative language of some painters in the younger generation.

This must, however, have been a relatively brief phase. In paintings that can be dated to his last decades of life, Martino, without forgetting the experiences of the years between roughly 1405 and 1415, and without wholly rejecting the models proposed by Taddeo di Bartolo (with whom he fell out; indeed, Martino was fined in 1412 for slandering him), [17] seems to return to the ideals he had pursued in his earliest works, abandoning complex poses and simplifying the more animated profiles of his characters. His paintings are once again populated by solemn personages of massive physique, even though he now uses a soft and *sfumato* chiaroscuro to model their forms and makes some attempt to express the emotions that animate them. These developments are particularly evident in the four busts of the Evangelists [fig. 1] [fig. 2] [fig. 3] [fig. 4], recently (and rightly) proposed as components of the dispersed polyptych from the Sienese church of Sant'Antonio Abate in Fontebranda, formerly signed by the artist and dated 1425, [18] but similar aspects seem to be detectable in the Gallery panels [fig. 5]. The delicate modeling of the flesh parts, the vivacity and tension of the facial expressions, the vigor with which the powerful hands clasp the objects they hold, and the clear-cut definition of the contours of the bodies suggest for these panels a date of execution perhaps slightly earlier than the polyptych of 1425, approximately in the years 1415–1420. They are the products, I believe, of the same phase in which Benedetto di Bindo

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and Gregorio di Cecco, exponents of the younger generation, were the culturally most advanced painters on the Sienese artistic scene, [19] and in which the very youthful Stefano di Giovanni (known as Sassetta (Sienese, probably 1392 - 1450)) was about to express a full-fledged Renaissance figurative style.

Miklós Boskovits (1935–2011)

March 21, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Martino di Bartolomeo, *Saint Mark*, 1425–1426, tempera on panel, private collection. Image: Robilant + Voena, London, Milan & St. Moritz

fig. 2 Martino di Bartolomeo, *Saint John the Evangelist*, 1425–1426, tempera on panel, private collection. Image: Robilant + Voena, London, Milan & St. Moritz

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fig. 3 Martino di Bartolomeo, *Saint Matthew*, 1425–1426, tempera on panel, private collection. Image: Robilant + Voena, London, Milan & St. Moritz

fig. 4 Martino di Bartolomeo, *Saint Luke*, 1425–1426, tempera on panel, private collection. Image: Robilant + Voena, London, Milan & St. Moritz

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fig. 5 Detail of Saint Peter, Martino di Bartolomeo, *Saint Peter, with Saint James Major*, c. 1415/1420, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Samuel L. Fuller

NOTES

[1] The post-Byzantine term of *Glykophilousa* Virgin is used in the art historical literature to indicate a subtype of a wider iconographic group known under the name of *Eleousa* (compassionate) Virgin, in which the theme of affection

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between mother and son is predominant. Cf. Gregor Martin Lechner, "Maria," in *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst*, ed. Klaus Wessel," 7 vols. (Stuttgart, 2005), 6:17–114; also Nancy Ševenko Patterson, "Virgin eleousa," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. Aleksandr Petrovich Kazhdan (New York, 1991), 3:2171. For the gesture of the child as allusion to suckling, cf. Dorothy C. Shorr, *The Christ Child in Devotional Images in Italy during the XIV Century*(New York, 1954), 146–148.

[2] See George Kaftal, *Saints in Italian Art*, vol. 1, *Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting* (Florence, 1952), 800, 508, 61–64, respectively.

[3] The dalmatic worn by the youthful saint indicates merely that he was a deacon, while the palm branch in his hand is the symbol of martyrdom; he therefore represents a martyr deacon saint, not necessarily Stephen or Vincent, with whom F. Mason Perkins attempted to identify him. F. Mason Perkins, "Su alcune pitture di Martino di Bartolomeo," *Rassegna d'arte senese* 18 (1924): 12.

[4] See Provenance note 1.

[5] See National Gallery of Art, *Summary Catalogue of European Paintings and Sculpture* (Washington, DC, 1965), 83; National Gallery of Art, *European Paintings and Sculpture: Illustrations* (Washington, DC, 1968), 74, 158; National Gallery of Art, *European Paintings: An Illustrated Summary Catalogue* (Washington, DC, 1975), 216–217; Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:302–303. All cited the painting as "attributed to Martino di Bartolomeo." Fern Rusk Shapley added, "If by him, the date is probably earlier than his polyptych in the Museo Civico, Pisa, signed and dated 1403," since, she explained, "the latter is somewhat more lively in expression." See also Carol Montfort Molten, *The Sienese Painter Martino di Bartolomeo* (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1992), 89–90.

[6] F. Mason Perkins, "Su alcune pitture di Martino di Bartolomeo," *Rassegna d'arte senese* 18 (1924): 12; Raimond van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting*, vol. 2, *The Sienese School of the 14th Century* (The Hague, 1924), 590; Raimond van Marle, *Le scuole della pittura italiana*, vol. 2, *La scuola senese del XIV secolo* (The Hague, 1934), 646, 648 n; Burton B. Fredericksen and Federico Zeri, *Census of Pre-Nineteenth-Century Italian Paintings in North American Public Collections* (Cambridge, MA, 1972), 122; Mojmir Svatopluk Frinta, *Punched Decoration on Late Medieval Panel and Miniature Painting* (Prague, 1998) 326, 408; Silvia Colucci, "L'iconografia del crocifisso con i dolenti in umiltà: Una questione aperta," in *Il Crocifisso con i dolenti in umiltà di Paolo di Giovanni Fei: Un capolavoro riscoperto*, ed. Alessandro Bagnoli, Silvia Colucci, and Veronica Randon (Siena, 2005), 48.

[7] Raimond van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting*,

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vol. 2, *The Sienese School of the 14th Century* (The Hague, 1924), 590.

[8] Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:302–303.

[9] Carol Montfort Molten, *The Sienese Painter Martino di Bartolomeo* (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1992), 89.

[10] The altarpiece in question consists of the *Madonna and Child with Saints Lawrence, Barnabas, Augustine, and Ansano*, now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena (no. 160); a Crucifixion, now in the El Paso Museum of Art (no. 61.1.7, Samuel H. Kress Collection); and four stories of Saint Barnabas in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (no. 1945–25–120). See Carl Brandon Strehlke, *Italian Paintings, 1250–1450, in the John G. Johnson Collection and the Philadelphia Museum of Art* (Philadelphia, 2004), 242–247.

[11] The three panels in question (Saints Stephen, Mary Magdalene, and Anthony Abbot) come from a dispersed polyptych reframed to form an ensemble and hence cited as a triptych. Cf. Bernard Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: Central Italian and North Italian Schools*, 3 vols. (London, 1968), 2: fig. 433; Fabio Bisogni, Marco Ciampolini, and Elisabetta Avanzati, *Guide to the Civic Museum of Siena* (Siena, 1986), 119. The date 1408 attributed to these paintings seems devoid of foundation; see Carol Montfort Molten, *The Sienese Painter Martino di Bartolomeo* (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1992), 254–255.

[12] Carol Montfort Molten, *The Sienese Painter Martino di Bartolomeo* (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1992), 90.

[13] See Maria Laura Cristiani Testi, *Affreschi biblici di Martino di Bartolomeo in San Giovanni Battista di Cascina* (Pisa, 1978).

[14] See Enzo Carli, *Il Museo di Pisa* (Pisa, 1974), 63–64.

[15] Gabriele Borghini, “La decorazione,” in *Palazzo pubblico di Siena: Vicende costruttive e decorazione*, ed. Cesare Brandi (Siena, 1983), 226, figs. 270–273.

[16] The four panels of no. 120 in the Pinacoteca Nazionale of Siena, respectively representing Saints James, Catherine of Alexandria, Mary Magdalene, and Ansano, have been convincingly linked with a Madonna and Child formerly in the Bonichi collection at Asciano and later in the Fossati Bellani collection in Milan, which bears the date 1408. For these paintings see, respectively, Piero Torriti, *La Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena*, vol. 1, *I dipinti dal XII al XV secolo* (Genoa, 1977), 217; and Luciano Berti, “Note brevi su inediti toscani,” *Bollettino d’arte* 37 (1952): 256–258.

[17] In August 1412, Martino was forced to pay a fine for “cierte parole che il detto maestro Martino disse ingiuriose a maestro Taddeo di Bartolo” (certain derogatory words that the said master Martino addressed to master

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Taddeo di Bartolo). See Scipione Borghesi Bichi and Luciano Banchi, *Nuovi documenti per la storia dell'arte senese* (Siena, 1898), 112; Carol Montfort Molten, *The Sienese Painter Martino di Bartolomeo* (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1992), 290.

[18] See Ada Labriola, in *Maestri senesi e toscani nel Lindenau-Museum di Altenburg*, ed. Miklós Boskovits and Johannes Tripps (Siena, 2008), 98–100. The paintings in question, formerly belonging to the Society of the Cincinnati, Anderson House, Washington DC, were sold at auction at Christie's, London, July 11, 2001, lot 72.

[19] For Benedetto and his frescoes painted in San Domenico in Perugia between 1415 and 1417, cf. Giordana Benazzi, "Le opere d'arte del Medioevo," in *La Basilica di San Domenico di Perugia*, ed. Giuseppe Rocchi Coopmans De Yoldi and Giulio Ser-Giacomi (Perugia, 2006), 333–334; for Gregorio, the perceptive essay by Luciano Bellosi ("Gregorio di Cecco di Luca") in *Il gotico a Siena: Miniature, pitture, oreficerie, oggetti d'arte* (Florence, 1982), 346–348.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

This panel and its companions Saint Peter, with Saint James Major [left panel] and Deacon Saint, with Saint Anthony Abbot [right panel], now separated, originally formed a triptych, each element of which was painted on a single wooden plank with vertical grain. Though severely warped, the panels still maintain their original thicknesses of 3.2–3.4 cm. Margins of bare wood beyond the painted surface indicate that each panel once had an engaged frame. The three panels retain wide margins along the bottom and pointed top. On the two saints the vertical margins were completely removed, while on the Madonna the vertical margins are very narrow. At some point after the panels were cropped, modern pieces of wood were added along the pointed top and the sides of the three panels.

Fabric patches were applied to the knotholes of the wood before the application of the gesso ground. The pointed arched top of the painted area is decorated on the inside with gilt *pastiglia* cusps. Half-length figures, framed below by *pastiglia* arcs, are painted in the spandrels at the top of each panel. The ground and halos were originally silver gilt, [1] though hardly any of the original silver leaf remains, and much of it has been replaced with gold. [2] The gilded areas were prepared with red bole; the gables of the panels, halos, and borders of the garments have punched decoration. The punch marks of the gables are now largely modern

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restoration. The paint was applied smoothly and thinly. Green underpainting is visible underneath the flesh. [3]

The painted surface is in a fair state of preservation, whereas the wooden support has suffered extensive worm tunneling in the past. The three panels were treated between 1984 and 1989. The treatment revealed a diagonal scratch in the face of the deacon saint and numerous scattered small losses in the painted surface of all panels. [4] Particularly disturbing are the small, now inpainted lacunae around the lips of the Madonna and of the child. The bust of Saint James in the upper part of panel A is very much abraded. In 1993 the frames were replaced. The new frames cover the outer, unpainted edges of the panels and enlarge their dimensions on all sides.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The NGA scientific research department analyzed the remnants of the original gilding using x-ray fluorescence spectrometry (XRF), and they were found to be silver (see report dated July 24, 1984, in NGA conservation files).

[2] It is unclear at what point the silver leaf was replaced with gold. However, the significant craquelure pattern in the gold leaf indicates that it is rather old.

[3] The NGA scientific research department analyzed the pigments using x-ray fluorescence spectrometry (XRF) (see report dated July 26, 1984, in NGA conservation files).

[4] Photographs in the curatorial files of the NGA Italian Renaissance painting department, dated May and July 1984, respectively, show the panels after having the varnish and inpaint removed and before the losses were inpainted again.

PROVENANCE

Private collection, London, by 1924.[1] Samuel L. Fuller [1875-1963], New York;[2] gift 1950 to NGA.

[1] See F. Mason Perkins, “Su alcune pitture di Martino di Bartolomeo,” *Rassegna*

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d'Arte Senese 18 (1924): 5-12. The author does not divulge the name of the collector, but since he mentions that it was the collector himself who had suggested the attribution to Martino di Bartolomeo, the owner was undoubtedly a connoisseur and probably an amateur dealer such as Robert Langton Douglas or Edward Hutton, both active in London. A note from Ellis Waterhouse, written 22 July 1980, and recorded in NGA curatorial files, says, "I have old Langton Douglas photographs of these."

[2] See Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings*, 2 vols., Washington, D.C., 1979: 1:303.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1968 Loan to display with permanent collection, Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1968-1976 (middle panel of the triptych only).

INSCRIPTION FOOTNOTES

[1] See John 8:12: "Ego sum lux mundi: qui sequitur me non ambulat in tenebris," and 14:6: "Ego sum via, et veritas, et vita: nemo venit ad patrem, nisi per me." The grammatical errors of the inscription very likely are the result of retouching in that area, which has been heavily abraded in the past.

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