

Lorenzo Monaco

Also known as

Piero di Giovanni

Florentine, c. 1370 - c. 1425

BIOGRAPHY

When, in December 1391, at the end of a novitiate lasting a year, the painter Piero di Giovanni made his profession in the Camaldolese monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence, assuming the name of Don Lorenzo,[1] he must already have been a well-known and esteemed artist in the city and hence no longer very young. Presumed in the older literature to have been born in Siena,[2] he seems to have been trained as an artist in Florence, serving in the *bottega* of Agnolo Gaddi (Florentine, c. 1350 - 1396), with whom he later collaborated in the painting of the predella of the altarpiece in the Nobili Chapel in Santa Maria degli Angeli, formerly dated 1387.[3] Ordained a deacon in 1394, he dedicated himself in the following years to the painting of miniatures, particularly the illumination of the choir-books of his monastery and of other monastic communities (choir-books nos. 5, 8, and 1, dated respectively 1394, 1395, and 1396, now in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana; choir-book C 71 in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence). At the same time, he also painted a series of small devotional panels—for example, the versions of the Madonna and Child with saints in the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris, in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, and in the Haggin Museum in Stockton, California; or the processional cross in the Art Institute of Chicago. Between 1398 and 1400, Don Lorenzo is documented as engaged in painting a polyptych for the Ardinghelli Chapel in the church of the Carmine (generally identified with the panels now divided among the Toledo [Ohio] Museum of Art, the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence, and other museums). The difficulties of working as a painter within the walls of a cloistered monastery induced him to move to his own workshop in the city, while at the same time maintaining the status and lifestyle of a monk.

Having overcome his first creative phase, essentially derived from the model of Agnolo Gaddi, Don Lorenzo reduced the role of incisive contours in the overall effect of his works; he simplified their compositions and accentuated the corporeal substance of the figures, characterized by carefully chiseled forms. The monumental aspect and stylistic harmony of these works attest to the influence

now exerted on him by the neo-Giottesque revival associated with Niccolò Gerini and the painters of his circle at the turn of the century. Paintings of this phase in his development include the *Madonna and Child* dated 1400 formerly in the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum in Berlin and the other versions of the same subject in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna and in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. They prepare the path for the artist's most intensely gothicizing phase, initiated with two works dated 1404: the *Man of Sorrows* in the Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, and the triptych in the Pinacoteca of Empoli. This phase achieved its full development in such works as the large, dismantled polyptych formerly in San Benedetto fuori Porta Pinti of 1407–1409 (National Gallery, London, and other collections); the polyptych from Monteoliveto of 1410 now in the Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence; or the Santa Maria degli Angeli altarpiece in the Uffizi, Florence, of 1414.

Stimulated by innovative developments in Florentine art, and especially by those expressed by Ghiberti in the reliefs of his first bronze doors for the Florentine Baptistery and perhaps also by the linear complexities and brilliant colors that Gherardo Starnina introduced into Florence on his return from a long period of residence in Spain, Don Lorenzo experimented with the possibilities offered by exuberance of line, aristocratic refinement of gesture, and delicate and unusual color combinations culminating in the calligraphic brilliance and sweeping contours of paintings dating around the middle of the second decade. Thereafter the works of Don Lorenzo gradually recover greater formal simplicity and are distinguished by their more placid mood, softer and more fluid contours, and often a peculiar, fairy-tale atmosphere, as exemplified in such works as the second triptych in the Museo della Collegiata in Empoli, the *Adoration of the Magi* in the Uffizi in Florence, and the decoration (polyptych and frescoes) of the Bartolini Salimbeni Chapel in Santa Trinita. He was mentioned as still alive in 1422, and various considerations—such as the circumstance that, according to Giorgio Vasari (Florentine, 1511 - 1574), the artist died at the age of fifty-five—suggest placing his death a few years later, perhaps around 1425.[4]

[1] See the passage of the *registro vecchio* from the monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli testifying to Don Lorenzo's profession of vows, dated December 10, 1391, transcribed by Marvin Eisenberg in *Lorenzo Monaco* (Princeton, 1989), 209, and by Alberto Lenza in *Lorenzo Monaco: Dalla tradizione giottesca al Rinascimento*, ed. Angelo Tartuferi and Daniela Parenti (Florence, 2006), 320. In the second edition of his *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (Florence, 1568), Giorgio

Vasari titled the biography dedicated to the artist as “Vita di Don Lorenzo Monaco degli Angeli di Firenze.” *Don* (abbreviation of *dominus*) was a title originally reserved for the Benedictine monks, *Monaco* is the Italian word for monk, and *Angeli* refers to the Florentine monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli, to which he belonged. Since then, the painter usually has been termed Lorenzo Monaco.

[2] A 1415 annotation of controversial interpretation in the same *registro vecchio* of Santa Maria degli Angeli speaks of “don Lorenzo dipintore da siene del nostro ordine.” See Marvin Eisenberg, *Lorenzo Monaco* (Princeton, 1989), 212–213; and Alberto Lenza, in *Lorenzo Monaco: Dalla tradizione giottesca al Rinascimento*, ed. Angelo Tartuferi and Daniela Parenti (Florence, 2006), 322. Both Eisenberg (1989, 4–5) and Lenza (in Tartuferi and Parenti 2006, 325 n. 15), in contrast to previous scholars, doubted that the words “da siene” implied that the painter was of Sienese origin.

[3] On this predella, see Erling S. Skaug, in *Lorenzo Monaco: Dalla tradizione giottesca al Rinascimento*, ed. Angelo Tartuferi and Daniela Parenti (Florence, 2006), 106–109. Dillian Gordon noted that according to the seventeenth-century *Sepoltuario* by Stefano Rosselli, the altarpiece bore the arms of the family and was inscribed “An.D.1387....”; Dillian Gordon, *The Fifteenth Century Italian Paintings*, National Gallery Catalogues (London, 2003), 197 n. 3.

[4] Between January 1421 and August 1422, Don Lorenzo received payments for the panel (not clearly identifiable) to adorn the high altar of the church of Sant'Egidio in Florence. The Florentine house assigned to the painter by his monastery in 1415, with a clause specifying that after his death it would be restored to the ownership of the Camaldolese community, was available again in 1426 for renting; see Mirella Levi D'Ancona, *Miniatura e miniatori a Firenze dal xiv al xvi secolo: Documenti per la storia della miniatura* (Florence, 1962), 173. It seems logical to suppose that the monastic community did not intend to wait long to re-let the property and therefore that Don Lorenzo had died shortly beforehand. If Giorgio Vasari was right in asserting that the painter died at the age of fifty-five, and if his date of birth was really c. 1370, his date of death would be in or around 1425; cf. Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, 6 vols. (Florence, 1966–1987), 2(1967):305.

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