Paolo di Giovanni Fei
Sienese, c. 1335/1345 - 1411

The Assumption of the Virgin with Busts of the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin of the Annunciation

c. 1400/1405

tempera on panel
painted surface: 66.5 × 38.1 cm (26 3/16 × 15 in.)
overall: 79.8 × 51 cm (31 7/16 × 20 1/16 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.71

ENTRY

Although the bodily Assumption of the Virgin did not officially become the dogma of the Catholic Church until 1950,[1] it began to be represented in art in the eleventh century (with some isolated examples even earlier than that).[2] In Italy, one of the first large-scale images of the Assumption is found in Siena, in the great rose window of the cathedral, based on a cartoon by Duccio di Buoninsegna (Sienese, c. 1250/1255 - 1318/1319) and dating to c. 1288. Here Mary is sitting in a mandorla of light, supported by angels in flight, with her hands joined in prayer, in the pose in which she would be frequently portrayed in the following centuries.[3] The image of Mary borne up to heaven by angels would then be enriched with further details in the course of the fourteenth century. In particular, it would be accompanied (as in the present panel) with a scene of the apostles with expressions of wonder and awe gathered around the Virgin's tomb, which is filled with flowers only,[4] and with the figure of Saint Thomas, who is shown kneeling on the Mount of Olives, separated from his companions and praying to Mary. He was asking for a sign of her bodily Assumption, and the Virgin answered his prayer by throwing down her girdle,[5] a relic that is now venerated in Prato Cathedral.

The panel in the National Gallery of Art might originally have been a self-sufficient devotional image and not part of a larger complex. This is suggested by the two medallions with the Angel of the Annunciation and the Virgin Annunciate in its

upper spandrels; in polyptychs and portable triptychs, this extremely concise narrative of the Annunciation usually appears on the two outer sides in the upper tier [fig. 1].[6]

The attribution of the painting has never been in doubt: ever since Robert Langton Douglas (1904) introduced it to the art historical literature, its ascription to the Sienese master Paolo di Giovanni Fei has been unanimously accepted.[7] Greater uncertainties surround its date, even though most art historians agree that it should be ascribed to a relatively advanced phase in Paolo's career. There is also widespread recognition of its high artistic qualities.[8] Both opinions can be confirmed, though it should be premised that the earliest of Paolo's securely datable paintings dates to 1387, and hence the first two decades of his career still remain obscure. Nevertheless, research over the last half century, and in particular the studies of Michael Mallory, have helped to establish the sequence of the paintings dating to the painter's maturity and offer sufficient evidence to confirm that the present panel was painted within the first decade of the fifteenth century.

Paolo di Giovanni Fei's stylistic development can be briefly summed up as follows. In works presumably dating to the 1370s, the artist proposed solemn and static compositions. The figures are virtually immobile and symmetrically distributed. Reserved, even impassive, in expression, they are enveloped in thick starched draperies with the consistency of leather, barely ruffled by a few broad folds. After this phase, exemplified by such paintings as the versions of the Madonna in the Atlanta Art Association and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, or the Saint Lawrence formerly in the Matthiesen Gallery in London,[9] Paolo modified his style, while largely maintaining his spacious and symmetrical compositions. In such paintings as the fragmentary polyptych in the Museo d'Arte Sacra in Asciano and the portable triptych no. 137 and the diptych no. 146 in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena, all dating to around 1380, the characterization of the protagonists becomes more animated and the description of their gestures and reactions to the events taking place more circumspect.[10] The paintings of this period are distinguished by their very detailed narratives, and the scenes are more complex and crowded. Although the faces remain almost impenetrable to human emotions, the expressiveness of the gestures seems ever more meticulously observed and effective. The artist also reveals a growing interest in the spatial setting of his figures. Results of these developments, dating to the mid-1380s, can be seen in such paintings as the altarpiece of the Birth of the Virgin in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena and various other large-format works including a polyptych and

a painted crucifix executed for the hospital complex of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena, the latter unfortunately the victim of a restorer's excessive zeal.[11] The painting discussed here can no doubt be placed in the last decades of Paolo's career, presumably in the intermediate years between *The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* painted for Siena Cathedral (1398–1399) and now in the Gallery and the triptych [fig. 2] in the Cathedral of Naples (1407–1408).[12]

As in other paintings dating to the first years of the fifteenth century, the artist skillfully exploits the background of his compositions to enlarge the space of the action and tries in various ways to give a realistic character to the episodes. In the panel now in Washington, each of the figures reacts in his own personal way to the miracle of the flowers that bloom in profusion in the sarcophagus in place of the body of Mary [fig. 3]. In contrast to the version proposed by Taddeo di Bartolo in his Montepulciano Cathedral polyptych (1401), which also shows the Assumption at the center,[13] Paolo does not try to reunite the apostles in a compact group but distributes them freely around the sarcophagus. His scene is striking both for its spaciousness and for the realistic effects in characterizing the apostles' reactions: their gestures are spontaneous, not over-dramatic in expressing surprise. An example of the artist's pursuit of verisimilitude is the conduct of the youth at the center, who thrusts himself forward between two companions. Supporting himself with one hand on the shoulder of Saint Bartholomew [14] and with the other on the edge of the sarcophagus, he leans forward eagerly, with head bowed, to see better what is happening. His sharply foreshortened face is also typical of the innovations associated with this phase in the painter's career. An even bolder effect of foreshortening is achieved in the backwards-bent head of Saint Thomas, casting his gaze up to the Virgin. In contrast to other contemporary representations of the theme, Saint Thomas is seen at some distance from the rest of the apostles (his figure, indeed, is smaller); he kneels on a rock outcropping, evidently intended to represent the Mount of Olives. The foreshortened sides of the sarcophagus also help to accentuate his distance; not only do they "measure" the depth of the space in which the action is taking place, but they lead the observer's gaze backwards to the apostle invoking the gift of the girdle. Also worth pointing out is the *trouvaille* of depicting the Madonna of the Assumption not, as usual, in a mandorla of light or in a similar oval form of seraphim, but surrounded only by the rays of light incised in the gold ground and seated on a throne of clouds, whose step has the consistency of cotton-wool and is supported with great delicacy by two fluttering angels. These details suggest for the Gallery's Assumption, as Mallory already pointed out, a date more advanced than *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*,

datable to 1398–1399. On the other hand, Mallory's proposal that the date be deferred to the last years in the artist's life seems questionable.[15] The very elongated proportions of the figures in the Neapolitan triptych, the accentuated hanchement of their poses and the multiplication of the folds in their draperies that introduce a more restless movement into these latter paintings, together with the exaggerated pathos of their facial expressions, seem to me to indicate a further development, a step in the direction of the artistic ideals of the International Gothic. These developments had evidently not yet been made at the time of the painting of our Assumption.

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Paolo di Giovanni Fei, triptych, location unknown

fig. 2 Paolo di Giovanni Fei, Triptych from the Minutolo Chapel, 1407–1408, tempera on panel, Naples Cathedral. Image: Scala/Art Resource, NY

fig. 3 Detail of figures reacting to the miracle of the flowers in place of Mary's body, Paolo di Giovanni Fei, *The Assumption of the Virgin with Busts of the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin of the Annunciation*, c. 1400/1405, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

NOTES

[1]   Anton Ziegenaus, "Aufnahme: Leibliche Aufnahme Mariens in den Himmel," in *Marienlexikon*, ed. Remigius Bäumer and Leo Scheffczyk, 6 vols. (St. Ottilien, 1988), 1:276–286.

[2]   See Else Staedel, *Ikonographie der Himmelfahrt Mariens* (Strasbourg, 1935); Ulriche Liebl, "Himmelfahrt Mariae: Kunstgeschichte," in *Marienlexikon*, ed. Remigius Bäumer and Leo Scheffczyk, 6 vols. (St. Ottilien, 1991), 3:205–208. The Assumption (*Koimesis*) was celebrated in the Orthodox Church from a very early date, but until the thirteenth century only the *assumptio animae* and not the physical assumption of the body of Mary was represented in art. See Klaus Wessel, "Himmelfahrt Mariae," in *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst*, ed. Klaus Wessel, 7 vols. (Stuttgart, 1971), 2:1256–1262.

[3]   For a useful summary of the iconographic development of the Assumption in Tuscany in the fourteenth century, see Richard Offner, *A Critical and Historical Corpus of Florentine Painting: The Fourteenth Century*, sec. 3, vol. 7, *The Biadaiolo Illuminator, Master of the Dominican Effigies* (New York, 1957), 48–49 n. 2.

[4]   In Sienese representations of the early Trecento, the sarcophagus of Mary either does not appear at all or is shown empty. The sarcophagus full of flowers would only begin to appear towards the end of the fourteenth century in works by Francesco di Vannuccio, Bartolo di Fredi, and Taddeo di Bartolo. See Hendrik W. van Os, *Marias Demut und Verherrlichung in der sienesischen Malerei: 1300–1450* (The Hague, 1969), pl. 14, fig. 127, pl. 19. It is in this last painting, belonging to the cathedral in Montepulciano and dated 1401, that we see not only the flowers in the sarcophagus but also the apostles gathered around the tomb with expressions of astonishment. Cf. Os, *Marias Demut*, 157–176.

[5]   The legend of the girdle given to Saint Thomas appears for the first time in the *Liber de transitu Virginis Mariae*, probably dating to the sixth century, but its earliest representations in art are not found before the thirteenth century; see Klaus Wessel, "Himmelfahrt Mariae," in *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst*, ed. Klaus Wessel, 7 vols. (Stuttgart, 1971), 2:1259–1261; and Gertrud Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, 6 vols. (Gütersloh, 1966–1990), 4, pt. 2: 87, 129–131.

[6]   Examples of triptychs or polyptychs in which the Annunciation appears at the two outer sides of the gable zone—the Archangel on one side, the Virgin on the other—are legion. In diptychs, the busts of the Angel and the Virgin Annunciate usually appear respectively in the left and right leaf. It is therefore unlikely that the National Gallery of Art panel originally belonged to such a multipart altarpiece. In some cases, however, the Annunciation is represented in the upper spandrels of the central panel of a portable triptych, such as that by Duccio di Buoninsegna (Sienese, c. 1250/1255 - 1318/1319) in the Pinacoteca Nazionale of Siena (no. 35). That this was not the case here is argued by the treatment of the frame: not only is there no evidence of hinges anywhere along the sides, but also the broad, decorated frieze that encircles the composition precludes the existence of movable shutters that might have closed over it. The presence of the Annunciation roundels in our painting also argues against its being one of a class of object not uncommonly found in Trecento Siena: independently framed panels meant to be viewed as parts of a narrative complex but not physically attached to one another. Examples by Pietro Lorenzetti (Sienese, active 1306 - 1345) (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; National Gallery, London), Niccolo di Buonaccorso (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; National Gallery, London; Uffizi, Florence), and others are known.

[7]   Robert Langton Douglas, "The Exhibition of Early Art in Siena," *The Nineteenth Century and After* 57 (1904): 763. Apart from the publications cited in the Bibliography, it may be recalled that Alberto Riccoboni (1947), in support of the attribution of the painting to Paolo, also cited expertises conducted by himself and by Gino Calore, as well as a "parere concorde" (corroborating opinion) by Roberto Longhi. Alberto Riccoboni, ed., *Prima*

Mostra Nazionale Antiquaria: Quattrocento pitture inedite (Venice, 1947), x, xxi, 5 repro.

[8]   Robert Langton Douglas (1904, 1908) called the Washington Assumption "beautiful"; he compared it with the panels by Paolo di Giovanni Fei now in the Lehman Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and in the Lindenau-Museum in Altenburg; the latter he believed to be a youthful work. See Robert Langton Douglas, "The Exhibition of Early Art in Siena," *The Nineteenth Century and After* 57 (1904): 763; Robert Langton Douglas, in Joseph Archer Crowe and Giovan Battista Cavalcaselle, *A History of Painting in Italy from the Second to the Sixteenth Century*, vol. 3, *The Sienese, Umbrian, and North Italian Schools*, ed. Robert Langton Douglas (London, 1908), 131 n. 3. Raimond van Marle (1924) termed it "charming," though erroneously describing it as a "triptych"; he too placed it in the earliest phase of the painter's career; Raimond van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting*, vol. 2, *The Sienese School of the 14th Century* (The Hague, 1924), 529. Michael Mallory (1964, 1973), by contrast, placed it at the end of Paolo's career; indeed, he assigned it the very last place in his catalog of the master, observing that "the figure's crescendo of emotions in this painting climaxes the trend toward expressionism that we have traced in the latter stages of the master's development." Michael Mallory, "Towards a Chronology for Paolo di Giovanni Fei," *The Art Bulletin* 46 (1964): 530; Michael Mallory, *Paolo di Giovanni Fei* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1965), 177–191, 241. Fern Rusk Shapley (1966) said that "the superior technique and the serious facial expressions" present in the painting recall Simone Martini (Sienese, active from 1315; died 1344) and conjectured a dating "about 1385." Fern Rusk Shapley, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: Italian Schools, XIII–XV Century* (London, 1966), 61. Bruce Cole (1980) confirmed a dating around 1400 and called the painting "one of Fei's most genial altarpiece" (*sic*); later publications generally accepted this dating and placed the work in the first decade of the fifteenth century. Bruce Cole, *Sienese Painting from Its Origins to the Fifteenth Century* (New York, 1980), 194. Art historians of more recent years have also rated the Washington Assumption highly: "tra le espressioni più alte della sua arte" (among the highest expressions of his art); Elizabetta Campolongo, "Fei, Paolo di Giovanni," in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 82 vols. (Rome, 1996), 46:17.

[9]   For the panel in Atlanta, see Fern Rusk Shapley, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: Italian Schools, XIII–XV Century* (London, 1966), 62. The date MCCCXXXIII inscribed at the foot of the painting seems to be at least partially original, but the figure now legible (1333) cannot be right and is presumably the result of a mistaken restoration of an illegible letter. It might be conjectured that the original date was MCCCLXXIII. For the New York Madonna, see Federico Zeri and Elizabeth E. Gardner, *Italian Paintings:*

Sienese and Central Italian Schools: A Catalogue of the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 1980), 58–59. The formerly Matthiesen Gallery Saint Lawrence is illustrated in *Early Italian Paintings and Works of Art 1300–1480 in Aid of the Friends of the Fitzwilliam Museum* (London, 1983), 34, no. 17.

[10] For the polyptych in the Museo d'Arte Sacra in Asciano, now deprived of its central panel, see Cecilia Alessi, ed., *Palazzo Corboli, Museo d'arte sacra, Musei senesi* (Siena, 2002), 120–121; for the panels in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena, see Piero Torriti, *La Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena*, vol. 1, *I dipinti dal XII al XV secolo* (Genoa, 1977), 181, 184.

[11] Apart from *Birth of the Virgin* (no. 117), two versions of the Crucifixion probably belong to this phase as well: the frescoed version in Santa Maria della Scala and the version on panel in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena. See Piero Torriti, *La Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena*, vol. 1, *I dipinti dal XII al XV secolo* (Genoa, 1977), 179–180; Alessandro Bagnoli, Silvia Colucci, and Veronica Randon, eds., *Il Crocifisso con i dolenti in umiltà di Paolo di Giovanni Fei: Un capolavoro riscoperto* (Siena, 2005), 13–14. Of the polyptych of Santa Maria della Scala only the central panel of the Madonna and Child with Angels now remains; see Bernard Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: Central Italian and North Italian Schools*, 3 vols. (London, 1968), 2: fig. 419. The early fourteenth-century crucifix in Santa Maria della Scala was entirely repainted by Paolo di Giovanni Fei, but his version of the painting was canceled by a drastic restoration after the Second World War, on which see Miklós Boskovits, "Il gotico senese rivisitato: Proposte e commenti su una mostra," *Arte cristiana* 71 (1983): 265, fig. 19.

[12] See *The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* in this catalog; for the Neapolitan triptych, commissioned by Cardinal Enrico Minutolo, see Michael Mallory, "An Early Quattrocento Trinity," *The Art Bulletin* 48 (1966): 85–89. Mallory rightly linked the altarpiece to the period that the cardinal spent in Siena between September 1407 and January 1408; it cannot be excluded, however, that the painting, commissioned during Minutolo's residence in Siena, was executed and delivered to him some time later. Other paintings that, in my view, should be placed in the period around 1400 include the polytych no. 300 in the Pinacoteca of Siena and the polyptych in the Oratory of San Bernardino al Prato, for which see Alessandro Bagnoli, Silvia Colucci, and Veronica Randon, eds., *Il Crocifisso con i dolenti in umiltà di Paolo di Giovanni Fei: Un capolavoro riscoperto* (Siena, 2005), 58–59.

[13] See Hendrik W. van Os, *Marias Demut und Verherrlichung in der sienesischen Malerei: 1300–1450* (The Hague, 1969), 172–173, figs. 19, 113, and the catalog entry in Gail E. Solberg, *Taddeo di Bartolo: His Life and Work* (PhD diss., New York University, 1991), 477–547.

[14] Bartholomew is identifiable by his light-blue mantle and conspicuously brocaded garment and by his facial type, characterized by curly hair and long dark beard: George Kaftal, *Saints in Italian Art*, vol. 1, *Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting* (Florence, 1952), 137; Gregor Martin Lechner, "Bartolomäus Ap. u. Mart," in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. Engelbert Kirschbaum and Günter Bandmann, 8 vols. (Rome, 1973), 5:320–334.

[15] Michael Mallory wrote, "The Assumption of the Virgin...appears to be the latest of his works to have survived," in Michael Mallory, *Paolo di Giovanni Fei* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1965), 177–178. This opinion was shared by Enzo Carli, *La pittura senese del Trecento* (Milan, 1981), 244; Anna Maria Guiducci, in *Il gotico a Siena: Miniature, pitture, oreficerie, oggetti d'arte* (Florence, 1982), 296; Giovanni Leoncini, "Fei, Paolo di Giovanni," in *La Pittura in Italia: Il Duecento e il Trecento*, ed. Enrico Castelnuovo, 2 vols. (Milan, 1986), 2:570; Simona Manacorda, "Fei, Paolo di Giovanni," in *Enciclopedia dell'arte medievale*, 12 vols. (Rome, 1995), 6:133; Veronica Randon, "Paolo di Giovanni Fei 'dipintore del Terzo di città,'" 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), 51.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a single piece of wood with vertical grain, to which the engaged frame is affixed.[1] The round arch springing from corbels by which the composition is enclosed is enlivened on its inner side by a small *pastiglia* arcade. Further *pastiglia* decoration surrounds the painted medallions in the spandrels between the arch and the engaged frame. The painting was executed, as usual, on a white gesso ground, and the areas to be gilded were prepared by a layer of red bole. The outlines of some of the figures and all of the architecture were incised into the wet gesso for preliminary placement on the panel. The paint was applied very thinly, in minute striations. The frame, the border of the gold ground, and the halos are decorated with punch marks, and incised lines simulate rays of light surrounding the Virgin. The brocade fabrics were created using sgraffito.

The panel, which is now 2.5 cm thick, was cradled and probably thinned slightly by Stephen Pichetto in 1948. As the x-radiographs show, it has suffered from worm tunneling in the past. The painted surface is well preserved, apart from some scratches in the lower figure group. In 1949, Mario Modestini removed a discolored

varnish, inpainted the scattered small paint losses, and applied a coating of varnish, now somewhat discolored.[2]

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1]   On the typology of the important, original frame, see Timothy J. Newbery, George Bisacca, and Laurence B. Kanter, *Italian Renaissance Frames* (New York, 1990), 34–35.

[2]   For essential information about the 1948–1949 treatment, see Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:177. A Reali photograph, probably made for Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi shortly after he acquired the painting (copy in the photo archive of the Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence), shows the painted surface somewhat darkened, with small paint losses in the group of the apostles as well as some scratches, one crossing the face of the third apostle from the left and others around the chest of the third apostle from the right. The gold of the engaged frame appears damaged by various checks, small losses, and tenting here and there. These damages no longer appear on the photo taken after the treatments by Pichetto and Modestini.

PROVENANCE

Marchese Bonaventura Chigi Zondadari [1841-1908], Siena, by 1904;[1] his heirs; (Alberto Riccoboni, Italy), by 1947 or 1948;[2] (Count Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi, Florence); sold 1948 to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York;[3] gift 1961 to NGA. [1] Robert Langton Douglas ("The Exhibition of Early Art in Siena," *The Nineteenth Century and After* 57 [1904]: 763; James Archer Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle, *A History of Painting in Italy*, ed. Robert Langton Douglas, 6 vols., London, 1903-1914: 3(1908): 131 n. 3) and F. Mason Perkins ("Dipinti senesi sconosciuti o inediti," *Rassegna d'Arte antica e moderna* 1 (1914): 99) confirm his ownership. Various authors, through Bernard Berenson (*Pitture italiane del Rinascimento*, Milan, 1936: 159), continued to mention that the painting belonged to the Chigi Zondadari family. [2] The dealer Alberto Riccoboni (*Quattrocento Pitture Inedite*, exh. cat., Venice, 1947: 5) gives no ownership; presumably the painting still belonged to the Chigi Zondadari family at the time and was only entrusted to Riccoboni for sale in the following year. [3] The Kress Foundation made an offer to Contini-Bonacossi on 7 June 1948 for a group of twenty-eight

paintings, including this one; the offer was accepted on 11 July 1948 (see copies of correspondence in NGA curatorial files).

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1947 Prima mostra Nazionale Antiquaria. Quattrocento Pitturi inedite, Organizzazione Manifestazioni Artistiche, Venice, 1947, no. 23, fig. 12.

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1965   *Summary Catalogue of European Paintings and Sculpture*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1965: 49.

1966   Mallory, Michael. "An Early Quattrocento Trinity." *The Art Bulletin* 48 (1966): 86, fig. 1.

1966   Shapley, Fern Rusk. *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: Italian Schools, XIII-XV Century*. London, 1966: 61, fig. 160.

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