

Authors: Laura Richter Le and Noah Margulis

Current Attribution: Lippo di Benivieni

Artist bio from Getty ULAN: Italian painter, active 1296-1320

Previous Attributions:

Lippo Vanni

Lippo Memmi

Title, date: Madonna and Child with Saints Peter and Paul, fourteenth century (Madonna col Bambino e i Santi Pietro e Paolo, XIV secolo)

Materials and manufacture technique: tempera on panel

Measurements: 40 x 50 ¾ in. (102 x 129 cm.)

CONTI LXV.A.11

Location: Villa la Pietra, Primo Piano, Camera Blu 115

Exhibition history: Florence, Circolo Borghese e della Stampa “Mostra dei Tesori segreti delle case fiorentine (ex. cat., 1960)

Marks, inscriptions, stamps: (recto) signed “LIPPUS MEFECIT”(verso) white square sticker reading “Mostra dei tesori/ segreti delle /case fiorentine/ circolo borghese e della stampa / No. 00106 Acton” in red and black ink

Description, by Noah Margulis:

This large triptych was painted by the Tuscan artist Lippo di Benivieni and must have formed part of a valuable and refined altarpiece. The three gabled panels have been reconfigured as a triptych after being separated from two other panels depicting Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, now in the National Gallery of Canada and the Martello Collection. All five panels depict half-length figures set on a gold ground with detailed punch work. The central panel depicts an elegant and demure Madonna. She inclines her head and gazes outward to the viewer as she gently supports and presents the Christ Child. She wears a pale blue tunic and white veil under an icy blue mantle. Her cool composure harmonizes with the Christ Child, who wears a dusty pink robe, draped to follow his energetic pose. Seated in his mother’s left arm, Christ braces himself to turn his head and gaze to the right. In this twisted position, his legs are supported by the Virgin’s left hand. He simultaneously clutches the Virgin’s mantle with his right hand and his own pink robe, slung over his left shoulder. Christ manages this twist with great self-assurance and stability, and his unconventional pose allows the artist to follow its effects in a virtuosic depiction of drapery. The most extensive underdrawing is found almost exclusively on the Christ child, outlining creases of his garments.

The left panel depicts Saint Peter holding a pair of keys in his right hand and a scroll in his left. He wears a greenish blue tunic with an orange robe crossed over his left shoulder. He is centrally positioned in his punched frame and halo. Like the central panel, the composed stability of the figure is balanced or offset by a high-level of intricacy in the heavily ornamented set of gilt keys and finely painted layers and curls of Peter’s hair and beard.

The right panel shows Saint Paul hold a book and a sword, the attribute of his martyrdom. He wears a cadmium red tunic and a greenish blue robe, elegantly folded over at his shoulder to expose a black

lining. The same tension between the compact, monumental figure and a miniaturist's attention to detail is present here as in the other panels.

The polyptych has come down to us in a fragmentary state—most polyptychs of the early Trecento have lost their outermost frame or piers, and their interstitial colonnettes, pinnacles and finials. The polyptych format of Lippo's altarpiece followed a convention established in the first decade of the fourteenth-century. A row of half-length icon panels set within an architectural framework became a conventional format for altarpieces after the landmark polyptychs of Giotto and Duccio. Derived from the thirteenth-century dossal, Giotto's Badia Polyptych and Duccio's Polyptych No. 28 consist of a half-length Virgin and Child image flanked by images of four saints, two on each side.¹ Although other examples of this polyptych format often feature a second story with smaller images of angels and saints set within the spandrels or underneath the upper edge of a gabled or arched frame, the extant panels of Lippo's altarpiece suggest a modest, simplified version of the form. (Joanna Cannon, 99-100)

Each of the figures is conceived and enclosed in their individual panels, but their grouping, positioning, sequence, and degree of interaction would have been significant considerations for the artists, patrons, and viewers of these polyptychs (Cannon, 109) In the absence of any references to particular families or saint's names, surnames, or specific orders, there is no indication of the original patron or location of this altarpiece. One might surmise the corporate or private patronage based on provenance, as Offner has?

The painting contains figural poses, chromatic scales, and compositional arrangements that align with both the Sieneese and Florentine schools of early trecento painting. The work is aligned with both traditions, and seemingly eclectic in its response to and reliance upon previous models. The basic typology of the Christ Child pulling the Virgin's cloak was first established by Duccio in works such as the Perugia Madonna, the Madonna della Grazie (Duomo di San Cerbone, Massa Marittima), and Polyptych No. 47. Small scale variants of this motif can be found in the Stoclet Madonna and the London Triptych. The self-composed, heroic Christ Child also has its roots in the Ducciesque tradition. Duccio's Maesta depicts the Christ Child grasping his own drapery, as does a Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints by the Master of Città di Castello (Pinacoteca Comunale, Citta di Castello), probably the closest relative of Lippo's figural arrangement with the Christ Child simultaneously pulling his mother's mantle and looking to the right.

Part of the altarpiece's function was to impress members of the clergy and lay viewers. The polyptych might have served as a stimulus for private prayer and meditation in a side chapel, as the central focus of silent prayers during daily Mass or other communal rituals. [Scratches, Bartolini Salimbeni Vivai and provenance]

The gold grounds of Trecento panel paintings were treated by specialist goldbeaters. Their materials most likely came in the form of a Florentine florin, a solid gold coin, or as gold dust that could be melted and molded. The Florentine florin was first minted in 1252 when gold currency began to be used in Genoa. Florence, Siena, Genoa, and other Italian republics would have used these gold coins to facilitate trade

¹ The main difference between dossals and altarpieces is structural. Dossals were painted on wooden planks set horizontally and forming a continuous surface. Polyptychs were painted on separate vertical panels, one panel per principal figure.

throughout the Mediterranean. Small amounts of gold could be mined and extracted throughout Europe, but an increasing amount of gold came from the Bure and Bambouk gold fields of sub-Saharan West Africa, panned from the Niger and Senegal riverbeds. Tuscan merchants traded in Arab gold currencies (the Muslim gold dinar used in Spain, the Levant, and North Africa), but gold could also arrive in the form of ingots, jewelry, and bags of gold dust. (42-43, Wright) Spufford, Lopez 1958, Bovill 1968

Trecento artists embedded the scintillating surfaces of figured gold silks and metalwork into the reflective surfaces of their panel paintings. (schulz 2016, 75-76) Norman Muller has identified the Simone Martini's polyptych for San Domenico in Orvieto/Lippo Memmi and Martini's polyptych for Sant'Agostino in san Gimignano as a major source of inspiration for Siennese working practices. The innovative use of gold tooling and punch work of altarpieces from Simone Martini's workshop led to other artist's use of gold tooling, punch marks (made with tools appropriated from the goldsmiths) from 1315 onward.

Material Analysis, by Laura Richter Le:

Each of the panels are composed of a single wood board, arranged with a vertical grain, as was the general trend among trecento altarpieces. Panels such as these were commonly joined together with glue, and for larger structures, wood splines were added into mortises bored into the board edges. Additionally, horizontal battens run along the entire width of the altarpiece, secured to the verso of the polyptych either with dowels, pins, or interlocking systems. The original cross-battens do not survive.

All panels are around three centimeters deep with large, exposed woodworm channels on the verso, indicating that they have been thinned during a past intervention. There are presently two horizontal battens (nineteenth century?), but there remains evidence of past hardware and structural elements. Small circular distortions on the faces of each of the figures likely originate from a nail at the center of each panel, likely one passing through a past batten. There are hardware holes in the top corners of the verso, potentially original. Evidence of lower, original batten could be covered by the present one or might have been trimmed off entirely when the altarpiece was reconfigured. If this were the case, the entire painted surface would have originally extended a few inches longer. Further evidence would require an X-ray scan.

The engaged frame has fills, cracking, and retouching throughout. Portions of the top and central borders are original. Within these sections, the craquelure pattern from the panel surface corresponds with the cracks on the frame, indicating that they aged simultaneously. Even these original sections, however, appear to have been detached and rejoined with a fill material during its reconfiguration. All elements of the bottom and portions of the edge molding are modern, and a modern element has been added around the entire structure. Additionally, the central panel of the Madonna is slightly asymmetrical, with the apex of the panel closer to the proper right side. On the right edge, there is a tighter border between the gold punchwork and frame, suggesting that around 1.5 cm was trimmed from this side.

The stratigraphy of the panel is typical of Trecento panel paintings; seasoned wood panels support layers of glue, cloth, and gypsum plaster, applied over the entire surface of the panels and engaged frame. Areas intended for painted figures were outlined and held in reserve. The surrounding areas were coated in

layers of red bole, an iron oxide clay, upon which gold leaf could be laid down and burnished with a smooth stone or an animal tooth to achieve a high polish. It was then tooled with punched designs, which in this case, are elaborate and varied.

The paint layer is estimated to be tempera, presenting varied degrees of preservation. Past art historians and conservators alike have proposed that the Virgin's mantle was entirely overpainted, due to its flat and uniform appearance. However, imaging under ultraviolet light (UV), instead revealed localized, targeted areas of inpainting. Under magnification, there appears to be a glaze of lapis lazuli paint, identified through the large pigment particles. This layer would have provided shading and shape to the garment, now only remaining intact towards the edges, and might have worn away in past cleaning interventions. The underside of the mantle is composed of a bright red underlayer with a darkened layer above.

Christ's robe appears to be a faded red lake, likely a scale insect pigment due to its purplish crimson color and expensive in comparison to other lake pigments. There is a thin line of mordant gilding along the border of his garment, a remnant of the elegant gold detailing originally present around the edge of his robe.

St Peter's robe has a mottled surface. The red base color, likely a red lead, is covered with a crusty gray layer. Under the microscope, a few remaining lines of yellow pigment remain, suggesting that the red underlayer originally contained brilliant yellow highlights. As one potential cause for its current condition, orpiment (an arsenic sulfide) might have reacted with the red lead pigment below to form metallic iron sulfides. This could be confirmed using X-ray fluorescence. [Insert art historical precedent for St. Peter in yellow?] Both St. Peter's tunic and St. Paul's robe appear to be composed of azurite blue with copper green shading. St. Paul's red tunic is generally well preserved, with white highlights concentrated around his proper right shoulder that do not appear to be original.

Although traditionally unvarnished, a natural resin varnish is visible under ultraviolet examination. Subsequently, this layer was partially removed, likely in an attempt to return it to its original appearance, but discolored patches remain, most noticeably across the gold background, where it is embedded in the punchwork. Attempts to remove the varnish might also have contributed to losses to the glaze layers as described above.

Over the course of the 14th through 19th centuries, there have been multiple conservation treatments carried out on the altarpiece. The most recent intervention, in 1997, targeted blistering, flaking, and losses. The largest crack in the central panel was filled and inpainted. Additionally, this treatment addressed past retouching that had darkened and blanched, correcting their appearance another layer of retouching. These newer additions appear darker than previous points of inpainting under UV light. Finally, the modern frame and battens constricted movement within the panels, creating vertical cracks down the center and proper right panel, which were filled and inpainted during the 1997 treatment.

Attribution:

The attribution to Lippo di Benivieni is based upon the inscription "LIPPVS ME FECIT" on the sword of St. Paul. Because of this inscription, scholars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (see Offner, Corpus

1956 Sec. III Vol. VI. p. 41) attributed the Acton panels variously to the Sieneese artists Lippo Memmi and Lippo Vanni. In his 1956 discussion of Lippo di Benivieni in the Corpus (see Sec. III/Vol. VI, pp. IV-VIII especially). Offner notes that before him only Gaetano Milanese, in his 1878 edition of Vasari's Lives. had suggested an attribution to Lopo di Benivieni for the panels in question "Lippus Benivieni" was a Florentine painter documented as taking an apprenticeship in 1296, a date which accords with the presumed period of the paintings grouped together under his name. Offner aptly notes the master's stylistic links to Siena. citing various elements from the Acton panels: the iconography of the Virgin and child. the frontal Peter with his hair set in the semblance of a helmet upon his head and Paul's sword held upright (known to occur but rarely outside Trecento Siena) as well as the signature with a Sieneese name ('Lippo' is a name practically exclusive to Siena among Trecento painters) and format (the Sieneese tended to sign their works "ME FECIT" while the Florentines preferred ME PINXIT'). Stylistic links to Ugolino and Duccio have also been noted by numerous scholars - in sum, the Sieneese vein of the works associated with "Lippo di Benivieni" has been well-noted.

However, Offner insists that the master's true roots lie in the school of the Florentine "Master of St. Cecilia" - indeed, one of the dismembered portions of the Acton polyptych is catalogued in Offner's 1931 Corpus volume dedicated to the followers of the St. Cecilia Master - and suggests that Lippo di Benivieni may have worked in the older master's studio. Stylistically, Offner notes "the narrow, heavily marked eyes, fine, at times pinched noses, and long, slender figures... the chiaroscuro...conspicuously in that of the Acton St. Peter..." as links to the Master of St. Cecilia. If Offner's conclusion that the master responsible for the Acton polyptych was indeed a Florentine, then given the signature on St. Paul's sword and the period to which the panels have been dated, the Florentine "Lippo di Benivieni" is a good candidate for the attribution. Strengthening this theory is the fact that a polyptych in Florence formerly in the Alessandri collection, whose signature mimics that on the Acton St. Paul and around which, along with the Acton panels, Lippo di Benivieni's oeuvre has been reconstructed, comes originally from the Florentine church of San Pier Maggiore, and is therefore likely (but not certain) to have been made by a Florentine artist.

In 1956 Offner proposed that the Acton polyptych preceded the Alessandri polyptych chronologically, and noted that the iconography of the Virgin and Child corresponds to the type of the "Orvieto Simone of 1320", which in turn derives from Duccio's work (Corpus, 1956, Sec. III/VI, p. 39). In the 1985 catalogue of the Martello collection, Boskovits notes Vole's 1971/1972 dating of the Acton polyptych to "shortly before 1320, when Lippo's style had reached full maturity." He goes on to note, however, that "certain stylistic peculiarities, such as the elongated proportions and light build of the figures, the shapes of the panels and the use of punches and elaborately decorated haloes, could point to a slightly later date." (Boskovits, Martello collection, p. 66) Punch tools increased greatly in popularity after the completion in 1320 of Simone Martini's great Maestà in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena. It should be noted, though, that while the gold in the Acton panels is certainly elaborately decorated. Close inspection reveals that much of this work is done with a stylus tool and that only a few small, relatively simple punch tools are used [a limited range of tools, Skaug]. This might reinforce a date around or before 1320. The interpretation of such evidence and its implications for the dating of the panel are important considerations in the question of attribution

The signature 'LIPPUS ME FECIT' on the sword of St. Paul is a complicated matter. Although Offner and other writers have questioned the authenticity of the signature, they have not questioned the attribution to Lippo di Benivieni. Offner's argument that neither the Alessandri nor Acton signatures were conceived of by the artist of the panels (Corpus, Sec. III/VI, pp. VII, VII, and furthermore that the Alessandri signature may have been copied after the Acton one is compelling, though it has been challenged by some later writers. It is Offner's suggestion that a 19th-century forger, who was unable to see past the Sieneese character of the works to understand their true Florentine origin, signed the two panels in a way that would be compatible with a Sieneese provenance. Regardless of this fact, Offner does not suggest a different attribution for either work, and continues to refer to their painter in quotations as "Lippus Benivieni", an attribution which, we remember, is based on a link between the name in the signature and the documented painter. Later scholars have all absorbed this name and the core oeuvre proposed by Offner. In 2009, Boskovits remarked that the oeuvre built around Lippo di Benivieni is "characterized by the fluency of design, a predilection for vibrant modulation of the painted surfaces and by lively narrative permeated with subtle lyricism, although occasionally his scenes are animated by strong dramatic feeling." (Boskovits, Alana Collection, p. 82) It remains to be further explored whether all of the works currently associated with "Lippo di Benivieni" were in fact all painted by a single hand and, furthermore, whether it makes sense to associate the name of a documented artist with a group of stylistically related works if their only connection to him comes in the form of a signature whose authenticity has been strongly doubted.

Layout:

The Acton panels once belonged to a five-paneled polyptych, first reconstructed by Offner in his 1956 Corpus at the suggestion of Mr. Philip Pouncey of the British Museum, who noticed that a panel depicting St. John the Evangelist in Ottawa in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada matched the style of the Acton panels and had gold tooling identical to that in the Acton St. Paul. A second panel, now in the Martello collection, depicts St. John the Baptist and matches the tooling in the gold ground of the Acton St. Peter. On the basis of these observations, Offner published a reconstruction of the five panels, with the Acton St. Paul at the extreme left, followed by the Acton St. Peter and the Acton Virgin and Child in the center, and accompanied on the right first by the Martello St. John the Baptist and then the Ottawa St. John the Evangelist at the extreme right. The gazes of the saints, tooling in the gold, and gesture of St. John the Baptist, who points at the Christ child all reinforce this arrangement, regardless of the somewhat unusual placement of both Peter and Paul on one side and both Saint John the Baptist and John the Evangelist on the other. According to information communicated to Offner by Arthur Acton, Mr. Acton purchased the panels in Florence before 1920 from the Bartolini-Salimbeni-Vivai collection. They are never known to have been outside of Florence.

Images:



Image 1: Recto



Image 2: Verso



Image 3: Ultraviolet (UV) exposure: The patchy, fluorescing varnish suggests a natural resin coating that has been partially cleaned.



Image 4: Detail of underdrawing in the Christ Child's robe, suggesting the careful planning and execution of a complex pose (left: infrared reflectogram, right: visible light photograph).

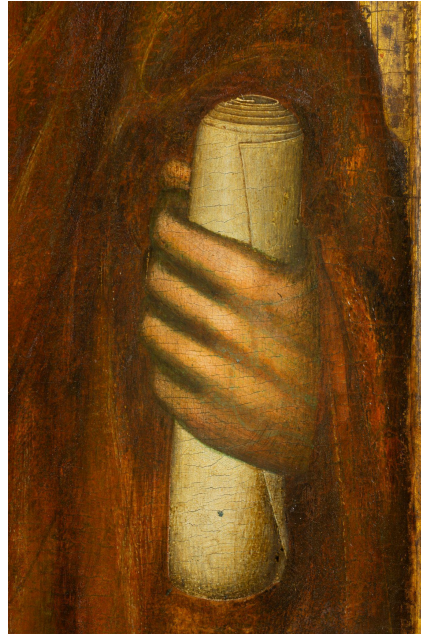
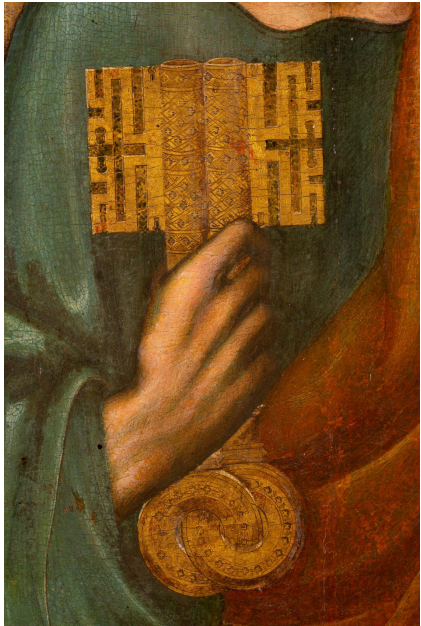
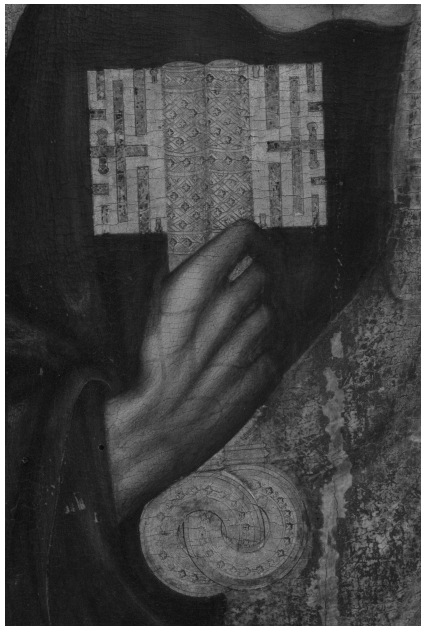


Image 5: Detail of underdrawing in St. Peter's right hand, the network of veins and attention to anatomy would have been used as a guide by the painter at a later stage

Image 6: Detail of underdrawing in St. Peter's left hand suggesting the compositional process and the importance of layer paints and anatomical modeling in this significant figure, originally situated to the right of the Virgin and Child.

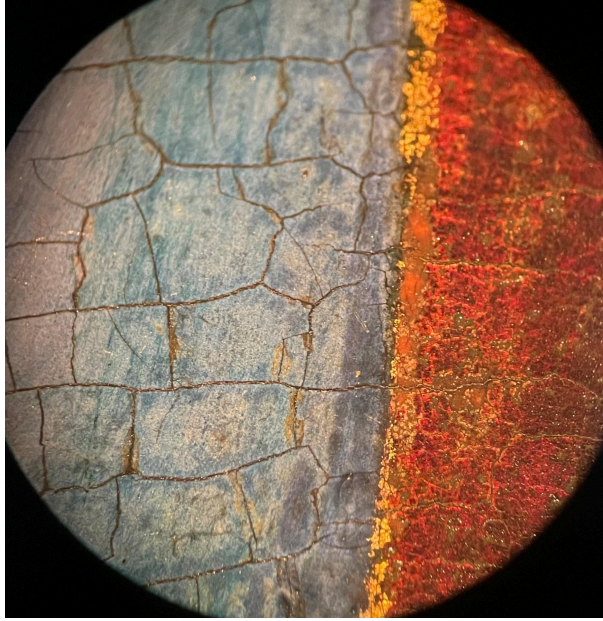


Image 7: Microscope image with traces of a lapis glaze on the Virgin's mantle.

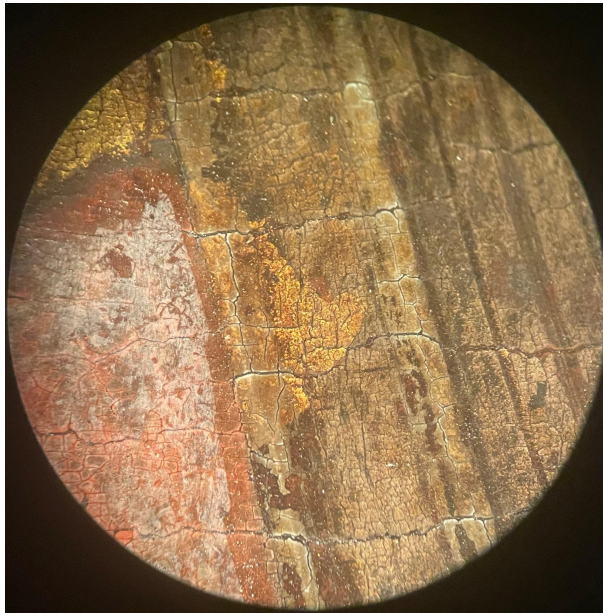


Image 8: Microscope image of St. Paul's sword, showing the corner of a gold leaf square from the surrounding gilding.



Image 9: Macro image of distortion in St. Paul's forehead (likely from nail through the verso).



Image 10: Proposed original layout. Apart from a few fragments of the original molding, the frame and decorative spandrels are lost.