

Paolo Veneziano: Art and Devotion in 14th-Century Venice

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by ANDREA DE MARCHI

The *Coronation of the Virgin* by Paolo and Giovanni Veneziano (cat. no.2; Fig.4) is one of the treasures of the Frick Collection, New York. A Latin inscription at the bottom of the panel reads 'Paolo with Giovannino his son painted this work' and gives the date 1358. Acquired in 1930 from M. Knoedler and Co., it is the last securely attributed work known by the Venetian master, who died before 1362. This catalogue accompanied an exhibition that should have been held at the Frick Collection, New York, and at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, but, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, was shown only at the Getty (closed 3rd October 2021).

In 1977 Hanna Kiel suggested that the Frick painting was once the central panel of a polyptych.¹ Based on style and the types of ornament used, she argued that its side panels should be identified as the panels depicting fourteen saints, now in the Pinacoteca Comunale, San Severino Marche (no.1). These panels are generally thought to have been part of the high altar of the Dominican church S. Maria del Mercato, San Severino Marche. Although convincing, Kiel's theory has never been definitively confirmed by a systematic analysis of the supports. Unfortunately, the opportunity for bringing the panels together for the exhibition was lost, since the *Fourteen saints* could not travel to the United States.

A recompense is this comprehensive and well-illustrated catalogue, the first on a Venetian trecento painter to appear outside Italy since the publication that accompanied an exhibition on Lorenzo Veneziano in Tours in 2005.² It is a sign of growing interest in a school of painting that, thanks to the technical quality and decorative richness of the works produced,

was seen as second only to the Tuscan school in its time but, by the twentieth century, came to be regarded as less important by art historians. Full-page enlarged details allow readers to appreciate the subtlety of the gilded foliate work on the fabrics, the lacquer that fills the punch marks and the stamps on the haloes, demonstrating a high level of technical skill. The curators and catalogue editors, Laura Llewellyn and John Witty, have provided a lively picture of Venetian trecento painting and take full account of recent research by adopting a two-fold approach: firstly, they trace the growing variety in the types of altarpieces and devotional works; secondly, they pay attention to the parallels with other art forms, in particular goldsmiths' work, but also architecture (which can be compared to the framing structures of altarpieces) and miniature painting and textiles, which can be related

4. *Coronation of the Virgin*, by Paolo and Giovanni Veneziano. 1358. Tempera and gold on panel, 109.9 by 68.6 cm. (Frick Collection, New York; exh. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles).

Opposite
5. *Elevation of the Magdalene*, by Paolo Veneziano. c.1340-45. Tempera and gold leaf on panel, 27.6 by 18 cm. (Worcester Art Museum; exh. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles).



to decorative ornamental patterns in the paintings. The common assumption that Venetian trecento painting was conservative and rather standardised can thus be demonstrated to be a misconception.

Another key work in the catalogue is a dismembered devotional triptych; seven surviving panels are in the Worcester Art Museum (no.4) and two pinnacles in the Getty Museum (no.6). In 1956 Michel Laclotte proposed that the central panel was a *Virgin and Child* from the Campana collection (Musée du Petit Palais, Avignon; no.7) and its crowning element a *Crucifixion* in the National Gallery of Art, Washington (no.5).³ Although complicated by the thinning and cradling of the Washington and Avignon panels, careful measurements and technical examinations have confirmed that the *Virgin and Child* did not form part of the triptych. It is not only wider than the *Crucifixion* but also taller than the triptych's reconstructed wings. The panels that composed the wings have retained neither their original frames nor the attached framing elements that separated the figures, but X-radiographs have shown traces of gesso barbes indicating the outlines of these elements. They demonstrate that when the wing panels were separated by sawing apart the individual saints very little wood was lost. Moreover, on the exterior wings, the gesso barbes show straight borders, whereas on the inside they reveal scallop-shape borders, the clear imprint of a twisted colonnette. The use of twisted colonnettes as horizontal framing elements is previously unknown. This could have been rendered more clearly in the computer-generated reconstruction (cat. fig.58). The work must have been almost identical with the surviving complete ensemble of a small triptych in the Galleria Nazionale, Parma (no.3), which shows the same saints and a similar type of *Crucifixion*. The *Virgin and Child* that is part of the Parma triptych is quite different in terms of composition from the painting in Avignon, confirming that the latter did not form part of the dismembered triptych.

The Parma triptych is older than the dismembered one; the catalogue





suggests c.1340 for the Parma painting and c.1340–45 for the dismembered triptych, but the gap might be greater, with the work from Parma dating from c.1330–35. A series of comparisons between the two, illustrated in the catalogue, is instructive and demonstrates the extent to which Paolo Veneziano, like Duccio before him, was a master of variations upon a theme. The dismembered triptych is a sensitive rereading of the earlier work; the figures are elongated and more strongly defined, the palette enriched with an abundance of ultramarine blue and new technical solutions are sought, for example for the angels who support the elevation of the Magdalene (no.4; Fig.5). On the Parma triptych, the feathers of the wings are individually painted and outlined in white, in a way typical of late thirteenth-century painting, whereas on the Worcester panel the wings were first uniformly painted in blue and green, then a

6. Triptych with the Coronation of the Virgin. 1360–70. Elephant ivory, polychromy and gilding, 26.8 by 16 by cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London; exh. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles).

scale pattern to suggest feathers was scratched into the colour, revealing the underlying layer of gold.

The Parma triptych seems to be one of the earliest surviving examples of a type of Venetian devotional painting that developed exponentially during the second half of the fourteenth century into ever more complex forms. The authors point to the close parallels with ivory triptychs produced in Venice during the same period. Although ivory was traded through Venice, the city's ivory carving production was minor. There are also differences between the two media: in contrast to the painted works, the ivory triptychs are more vertical, inspired by French ivories, and their pinnacles resemble stone tabernacles. The comparison is nevertheless significant. The teeming mass of angels behind the Coronation scene on a triptych in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (no.12; Fig.6), for which the authors suggest a date in 1360–70, compares closely to the angels in Paolo and Giovanni's *Coronation of the Virgin*, even though the angels on the triptych are arranged less symmetrically. However, the connections between Paolo's works and the ivory triptychs are even more relevant if it could be admitted that some of the ivories pre-date the second half of the fourteenth century, for example a triptych depicting the *Passion of Christ and saints* (Walters Art Museum, Baltimore; fig.37) and one in the Wernher Collection (Ranger's House, London; cat. fig.38) with the *Deposition of Christ and saints*. St Margaret on the Wernher triptych wears a tunic with short sleeves, a detail that can be dated to around 1330, predating the depiction of Salome on the mosaic in the baptistry of S. Marco, Venice (c.1345), and St Ursula on the San Severino panels (1358), who both wear longer sleeves. The comparison with ivories, as well as goldsmiths' work, textiles and miniature paintings, is crucial in enabling a broader understanding of the unique nature of the language employed by Paolo in his work, which should not be seen as retrospective or harking back to Byzantine forms.

The challenges in studying the works of Paolo result partly from

the fact that he employed numerous assistants in his workshop and the quality of its output was uneven, and partly from the artist's technical and stylistic evolutions, which are not necessarily immediately apparent but are no less significant. The Frick *Coronation* represents a high point in his constant experimentation, for instance in its use – almost unique in Venice – of decorative details scratched into the gold or the fine lines made from mission-gilded threads that outline the main features of the capitals of the throne, a laborious procedure that added to the preciousness of the details.

The exhibition and catalogue have succeeded in taken Paolo out of his isolation and placing him within the context of a succession of artists over several generations, from the late duecento to International Gothic. However, one of the objectives of the exhibition and catalogue was to draw attention to works by Paolo in American collections. It is regrettable, therefore, that the panel of the *Capture of Christ* (Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive) was absent. First identified by Christopher Platts and presented in the exhibition *Old Masters in a New Light: Rediscovering the European Collection* at the museum in 2018,⁴ this is a superb autograph work by the painter, probably from a narrative polyptych similar to that from S. Chiara (c.1330; Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice), but painted later, c.1345.

¹ See H. Kiel: 'Das Polyptychon von Paolo und Giovanni Veneziano in Sanseverino Marche: Versuch einer Rekonstruktion', *Pantheon* 35 (1977), pp.105–08. The reconstruction has been challenged by Raoul Paciaroni, in his *Il politico sanseverinate di Paolo Veneziano*, San Severino Marche 2018. Paciaroni argued that the panels from San Severino Marche would have flanked a reliquary shrine, comparable to Paolo's polyptych altarpiece at S. Giacomo Maggiore, Bologna. For Paciaroni, the panels came from a secondary altar, since later documents record relics that match the saints depicted in the panels.

² See A. De Marchi and C. Guarnieri, eds: exh. cat. *Autour de Lorenzo Veneziano: Fragments de Polyptyques Vénitiens du XIVe Siècle*, Tours (Musée des Beaux-Arts) 2005; reviewed by Carl Strehlke in this Magazine, 148 (2006), pp.54–55.

³ M. Laclotte, ed.: exh. cat. *De Giotto à Bellini: Les Primitifs Italiens dans les Musées de France*, Paris (Musée de l'Orangerie) 1956, p.19.

⁴ See C. Desmarais: 'Rediscovered work by medieval master anchors UC Berkeley exhibition', in *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20th September 2018.