



THE
ITALIAN RENAISSANCE ALTARPIECE

Between Icon and Narrative

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INTRODUCTION

READING THE ALTARPIECE

Pour bien savoir les choses, il en faut savoir le détail; et comme il est presque infini, nos connaissances sont toujours superficielles et imparfaites.

(‘To know things well, one has to know them in detail, and as there is a near-infinity of detail, our understanding is always superficial and imperfect.’)

La Rochefoucauld, *Maxime* no. 106*

The altarpiece is one of the most distinctive and remarkable art forms of the Italian Renaissance. There can have been almost no artists – whether painters or sculptors, whether major or minor – who did not produce a single altarpiece during what might be termed the ‘long’ Renaissance, which in this context will be understood as meaning from the birth of the type in the early thirteenth century until around 1600. A substantial proportion of these works still exist, often displaced or dismembered, but nevertheless to be numbered in their thousands. Contemporary documents, preparatory drawings, and the writings of commentators of a whole variety of kinds from the fifteenth century onwards demonstrate that what has survived is far from the entirety of what once existed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the sheer volume of primary – and indeed secondary – material available, no serious attempt has ever been made to examine the whole subject in real depth.

Jacob Burckhardt’s ‘Das Altarbild’, an extended essay that was originally published as one of the three elements of his

Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte von Italien in 1898, was edited and translated into English by Peter Humfrey in 1988 as *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Italy*. Humfrey concluded his introduction as follows:

A final justification for the present attempt to bring Burckhardt’s essay to a wider public is quite simply that even after a century it remains the best and most stimulating introduction to a subject of paramount art-historical importance. In recent years a number of interesting and important studies based on individual altarpieces, or groups of altarpieces, have appeared, and also a number of studies dealing with particular aspects of the altarpiece as a type. No one, however, since Burckhardt has attempted to cover the entire field of the Italian Renaissance.¹

Over thirty years have passed since then, but it remains the case that there has not yet been any such overarching attempt. Both Peter Humfrey’s own *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice* (1993) and Henk van Os’s *Sieneese Altarpieces 1215–1460: Form, Content, Function* (1990) adopt a wide-ranging approach to the material, but confine themselves to particular cities.² Similarly, two books deriving from conferences – Peter Humfrey and Martin Kemp’s *The Altarpiece in the Renaissance* (1990) and Eve Borsook and Fiorella Superbi Gioffredi’s *Italian Altarpieces 1250–1550: Function and Design* (1994) – include numerous important individual contributions, but inevitably do not aspire to encompass the broader picture.³

The same goes for all manner of detailed studies, many of them of the greatest value, in the specialist literature. Exhibition

(Facing page) Detail of fig. 15.

standard way of referring to the parable).²⁵⁸ Even more bizarre is the fully narrative representation of another parable in Giovan Vincenzo Forli's altarpiece of the *Good Samaritan* in the Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples.²⁵⁹

Alongside the saints, the beatified are not infrequently also represented. It would seem logical that they should not both be treated in the same fashion, since while beatification is indeed a step on the way towards canonisation, centuries can intervene between the two processes, and there are of course countless *Beati* – to use the Italian term – who are still waiting. In many cases, artists exploited a simple expedient in order to distinguish between the two, which involved giving them different kinds of haloes.²⁶⁰ A typical instance is Piero di Cosimo's *Incarnation of* around 1504 from Santissima Annunziata, Florence, now in the Uffizi, where the four attendant saints are represented with plain annular haloes, whereas Philip Benizzi (1233–1285), the founder of the Servite order, and Antoninus, the late archbishop of Florence, who had died less than half a century before, in 1459, are instead both shown with rays emanating from their heads, when neither had actually even been beatified. The former was not beatified until 1516, whereas the latter was never beatified but was canonised in 1523.²⁶¹ When Vasari came to describe the picture, which he did in some detail, he referred to both Philip and Antoninus as saints, which was by then true of the latter, while the former would have to wait until 1671.²⁶² More generally, while Vasari on occasion fails to differentiate between saints and *Beati*, he frequently employs the terms *Beato* and *Beata*.²⁶³ In Piero di Cosimo's altarpiece, the two *Beati* are not the main focus of attention, but it would be a mistake to assume that they were never shown thus. A counter-example, again featuring Antoninus, which may well pre-date his canonisation, is represented by an altarpiece by Pier Francesco Sacchi in the church of Santa Maria di Castello in Genoa. It is true that the celestial zone contains the Madonna Odigitria, but Antoninus is the central figure between Saints John the Baptist and Dominic at the base of the composition.²⁶⁴ In the case of Francesco Vanni's *Blessed Ambrogio Sansedoni Invoking the Protection of the Virgin for the City of Siena*, the celestial zone is inhabited by Christ flanked by the Madonna and Saint Bartholomew, but Sansedoni is clearly the protagonist.²⁶⁵

Often the hope that a *Beato* or *Beata* would soon be elevated must have been widespread, and was commonly motivated by local patriotism or inspired by the members of a particular religious order which they may have founded or belonged to, and in either context the images may in all probability have been part of a propaganda exercise. In Florence and its environs, for instance, the Blessed Andrea Corsini, who had been bishop of Fiesole, was particularly revered, above all by the Carmelites. Nevertheless, he was not canonised until 1629, but this did not deter an any-

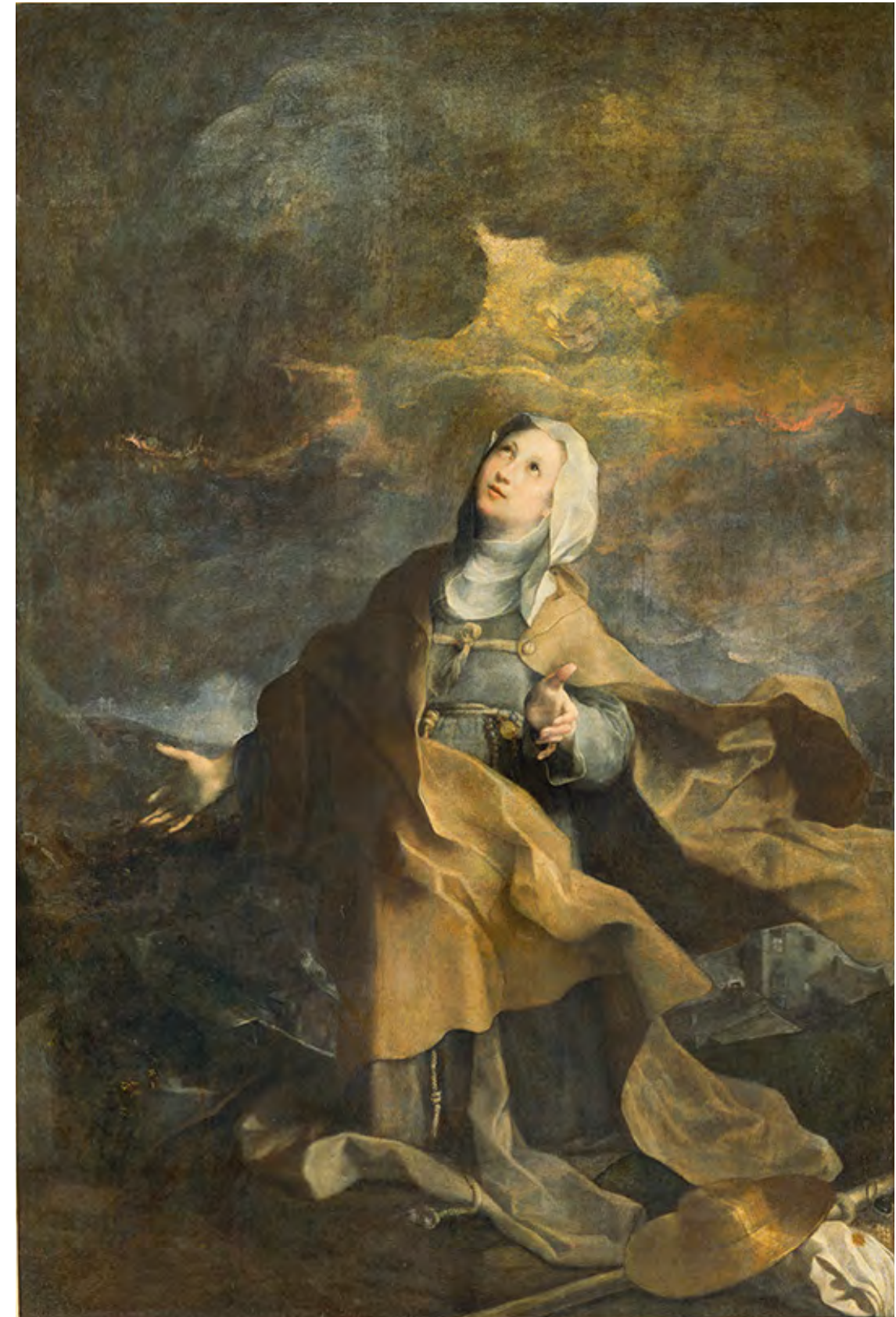
mous sixteenth-century painter from executing an entire predella devoted to episodes from his life for a now lost altarpiece in Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence.²⁶⁶ In the same way, although the Venetian Lorenzo Giustiniani, who was beatified in 1524, had to wait until almost the end of the seventeenth century to become a saint, he is nevertheless the protagonist of an altarpiece executed in the decade following his beatification by Pordenone for the church of the Madonna dell'Orto in Venice, which is now in the Accademia there.²⁶⁷ In the case of the ten scenes from the life of Catherine of Siena, showing her as a saint, in the predella for an altarpiece commissioned from Giovanni di Paolo in 1447, the fact that she was canonised in 1461 is no proof that the work was not completed earlier.²⁶⁸

The inclusion by Piero di Cosimo of Philip Benizzi in an altarpiece for a chapel in Santissima Annunziata, which was a Servite foundation, is a typical case of a monastic motivation, and Vasari further records that his 'veste' ('habit') and 'guanciaie' ('pillow') were housed in the chapel in question. There is another, only subsequently canonised, saint who is perhaps even more prolifically represented. This is Romuald, the founder of the Camaldolensians, who died in 1027, was almost immediately beatified – in 1032 – but canonised only in 1595. He features prominently in two altarpieces of the *Coronation of the Virgin* executed for his own order by the most celebrated Camaldolensian artist, Don Lorenzo Monaco, and indeed in various works by other artists destined for the order. He is never shown with what might be described as a qualified halo, and is almost invariably paired with Saint Benedict (the Camaldolensians were reformed Benedictines).²⁶⁹

In all the examples considered up to this point, the *Beato* or *Beata* may have been the most prominent holy personage among a number, but there have been others. Yet there are also altarpieces from close to both ends of the chronological range covered by this book which prove – perhaps rather unexpectedly – that the presence of actual saints in altarpieces was not deemed essential. In all these instances, the protagonists are all but forgotten figures beyond the world of art history, and it is above all these works that keep their memory alive.

Simone Martini's *Beato Agostino Novello* of around 1324, for the church of Sant'Agostino in Siena, is unrecorded before the seventeenth century, at which time it was over the saint's tomb; it used to be believed that it was originally an altarpiece, admittedly of a particular kind, but recent scholarship argues that it was always connected with his tomb.²⁷⁰ Even if this example is disqualified, there remains the virtually contemporary example of Pietro Lorenzetti's long ago dismembered altarpiece of the *Beata Umiltà* of after 1330.²⁷¹

Not far off three centuries later, in 1606, Barocci painted an altarpiece of the *Beata Michelina*, now in the Pinacoteca Vaticana (fig. 32), which is recorded as having been commissioned by



32. Federico Barocci, *Beata Michelina*, 1606, oil on canvas, 252 × 171 cm. Vatican City, Pinacoteca Vaticana.

del precio. In meggio li va santo Eleutropio Episcopo da mam dritta sam giouane euangelista da mam mancha Sam Petronio alle imagine de uno huomo humano depinti de optimi e boni colori de oro e agiuro e lacho finissimi finiti ditti laurieri de tutto punto arbitrio de bom maestro e huomo da bene.

(‘Our Lady with the Child suckling at her left breast, and with the Madonna represented the size of a living lady counterfeited or placed in the sky or in a cloud or heaven to good effect. The said Madonna should be surrounded by many angels playing a variety of instruments and all turning their faces towards the spectator with both eyes visible, and a host of little spirits [cherubim] and most importantly the counterfeit reliefs that go all around, of fine gold and blue and fine lake within the price. In the middle [below] goes San Eleutropio the bishop with Saint John the Evangelist on his right hand and Saint Petronius on his left hand painted life-size, all painted with the best and good colours of gold and blue and the finest lake, and the said labours will be deemed to be completely finished according to the judgement of a good master or a trustworthy man.’)

Just in case this was not controlling enough, it was also contemplated that Niccolò might furnish the patrons with ‘uno modello in disegno de sua propria mano de buon colori’ (‘a drawn model in good colours by his own hand’), but one might equally wonder whether an existing drawing was not the basis for the written specifications.³⁴

Be that as it may, for all its seemingly exhaustive detail, even this plan of campaign does not exclude all room for manoeuvre. When it comes to the upper zone, the contract specifies that the Christ Child should be suckling the Virgin’s left breast – as he seemingly invariably does – as opposed to her right one, and also determines her scale. Similarly, it outlines her setting, and in this connection the terms ‘area’ (‘sky’), ‘Nuvola’ (‘cloud’), and ‘cielo’ (‘heaven’) are probably best understood as synonyms, as opposed to alternatives. However, with regard to the supporting cast of figures around her, the precise number and disposition of the ‘angiolii’, ‘spiritelli’ and ‘altri ornamenti’ are not delimited. Down below, the scale of the three saints and their respective positions are outlined, but nothing is said about their attributes or appearance, even in connection with the distinctly obscure Saint Eleutropius.³⁵ Since once again the altarpiece in question has survived, it is possible to compare it with the contract and judge how faithfully Niccolò followed his brief. It transpires that the only major divergences concern the fact that the Christ Child is not actually suckling, that not all the members of the quartet of angel musicians are shown full face (‘tutti voltano el viso in verso le persone a dui ochii’ [‘all turning their faces towards the spectator with both eyes visible’] is the phrase used in the contract), and that



39. Niccolò Pisano, *Virgin and Child with Saints John the Evangelist, Petronius, and Eleutropius*, 1534, oil on panel, 290 × 185 cm. Private collection.

the wished-for ‘copia di spiritelli’ (‘host of little spirits [cherubim]’) amount to a modest pair of them at the top of the composition and a pair of wreath-bearing putti flanking the Virgin and Child.

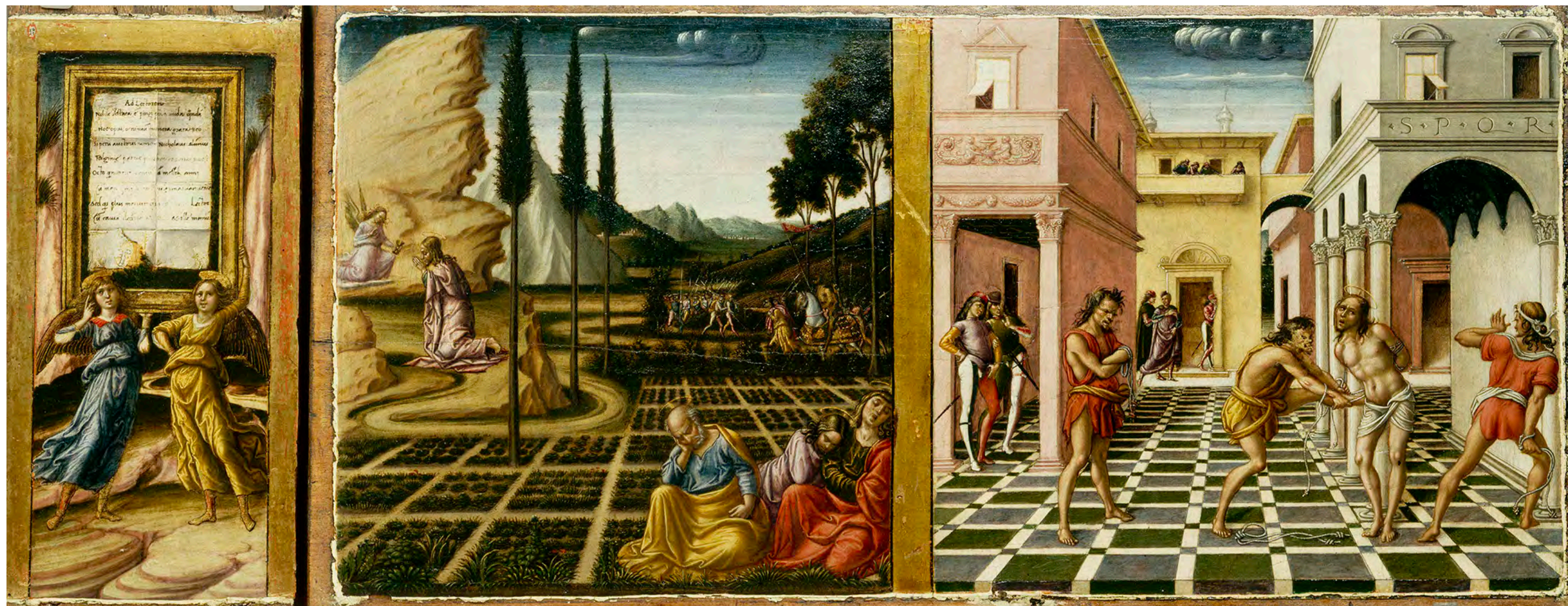
What is arguably most extraordinary about the obsessive nature of this particular contract is that the basic template for the work was furnished by an earlier altarpiece by Niccolò Pisano himself, commissioned by none other than Annibale Gozzadini in October 1526, and still *in situ* in the church of San Donnino in Bologna. There are five saints instead of three in the previous work, and no angel musicians, but the general arrangement is the same, and the respective groups of the Virgin and Child give every impression of having been derived from a single cartoon, all of which would seem to have made this level of precision wholly superfluous.³⁶

In all these examples, it is principally the *dramatis personae* and their respective positions that count. Conversely, contracts seldom concern themselves with what might be described as iconographic or artistic details, although there are rare exceptions. On 24 February 1578, Boniforte Oldoni engaged to paint an altarpiece representing the *Coronation of the Virgin* for the Compagnia di San Pietro Martire at Trino, now in the church of San Bartolomeo there; most unusually, an Old Testament source for the mode of representation of the seraphim and the fact that their music-making should be joyful were both specified: ‘in li triangoli apreso i capitelli sieno dipinti p[er] sciascaduno triangollo un angello con sei alle cioe veleno il capo, due veleno i piedi et due voleno quali sonano una tro[m]ba p[er] alegressa de la incoronazione di la madona simili angelli si troveno in Jsaiia profetta a capitoli sei’ (‘in the triangles next to the capitals there should be painted in each triangle an angel with six wings, with two covering the head, two covering the feet, and two flying, and playing trumpets for joy at the coronation of the Madonna, and similar angels are found in chapter 6 of the book of the prophet Isaiah’).³⁷ In a contract of 26 February 1459 for a triptych for Voltri, for all that it might seem unnecessary to say so, it is specified that Bernardo Re should paint ‘Sancte Marie Madalene cum capillis pendentibus’ (‘Saint Mary Magdalen with her hair hanging down’).³⁸

In somewhat the same vein, on 30 April 1491 Niccolò di Mariano agreed to paint a *Virgin and Child with Saints Peter and Sebastian* for the church of San Pietro di Vicopetoso at Vinci, and the contract required that ‘in dicta tabula esset figura Virginis Marie sedentis cum eius filio in gremio cum rundinino in manu tenente’ (‘in the said painting there should be the figure of the Virgin Mary seated, with her Son in her lap holding a swallow in his hand’). As a rule, the Infant Christ is shown playing with a goldfinch as opposed to a swallow, so it might seem that the various parties lacked ornithological expertise, but the two may in fact have been viable alternatives.³⁹ Elsewhere, while hardly tying his hands, on 15 June 1524 the patrons of Giovanni

Girolamo Savoldo’s altarpiece for San Domenico, Pesaro, referred to the depiction of ‘li aeri, paesi et perspectivivi secondo accadera farse, et come ad luy parera’ (‘the skies, landscapes, and perspectives as he shall see fit to do them, and as seems best to him’), while on 2 June 1537 their Brescian counterparts required of him that in his altarpiece for the church of Santa Croce ‘nel campo di ditti figuri gli debba fare qualche laudabile [payse et citade] cose’ (‘in the field of the said figures he should make some suitable [landscape and city] things’).⁴⁰ Last, but by no means least, in the contract for his high altarpiece of the *Baptism of Christ with Saints Francis and Anthony of Padua* for San Giovanni Battista at Serravalle (Vittorio Veneto), Francesco da Milano was called upon to paint in the upper zone ‘una nebula circondante dicta palla in la quale sia uno Dio Pare mezo overo in scurzo et tra la nebulla predicta et la testa de Christo sia depento uno Spirito sancto in forma de columba pur in scurzo cum uno paiese conviniente a essa palla’ (‘a cloud surrounding the said altarpiece in which there should be God the Father, in half length and foreshortened, and between the aforesaid cloud and the head of Christ should be painted the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove likewise foreshortened, with a landscape appropriate to the said altarpiece’).⁴¹ In the event, the figure of God the Father is unquestionably foreshortened, but the same cannot be said for the dove.

It is by no means uncommon for contracts to specify prototypes both for whole compositions and elements of them. Two examples of the first kind are the contract of 30 May 1447 for Michele Giambono’s *Coronation of the Virgin* for Ognissanti in Venice, which specifies the altarpiece of the same subject in San Pantaleone by ‘ser Iohannis Theotonici pictoris’ (Giovanni d’Alemagna) as the prototype, and the contract of 12 December 1505 for Raphael’s Monteluce *Coronation of the Virgin*, which requires that it should be ‘de quella perfectione, proportione, qualità et conditione de la tavola sive cona existente in Nargne nella chiesa de San Girolamo del luoco minore, et etiam de colore et figure, numero et più ornamente commo in dicta tavola se contiene, et de migliore perfectione si è possibile’ (‘of the same perfection, proportion, quality, and condition as the painting or altarpiece existing in Narni in the church of San Girolamo Minor, and equally with the colours and figures, their number and many ornaments like those contained in the said picture, and of greater perfection if that is possible’).⁴² An example of the second is the contract of 23 October 1461 for an altarpiece by Benozzo Gozzoli in Lucca, which stipulates that he must paint ‘nel mezzo di detta tavola la figura di nostra Donna chon la sedia nel modo et forma et chon ornamenti chome et in similitudine della tavola dello altare maggiore di sancto Marcho di Firenze’ (‘in the middle of the said painting, the figure of Our Lady, with the chair in the manner and form and with the ornaments like and similar to the painting of the high altar of San Marco in Florence’).⁴³



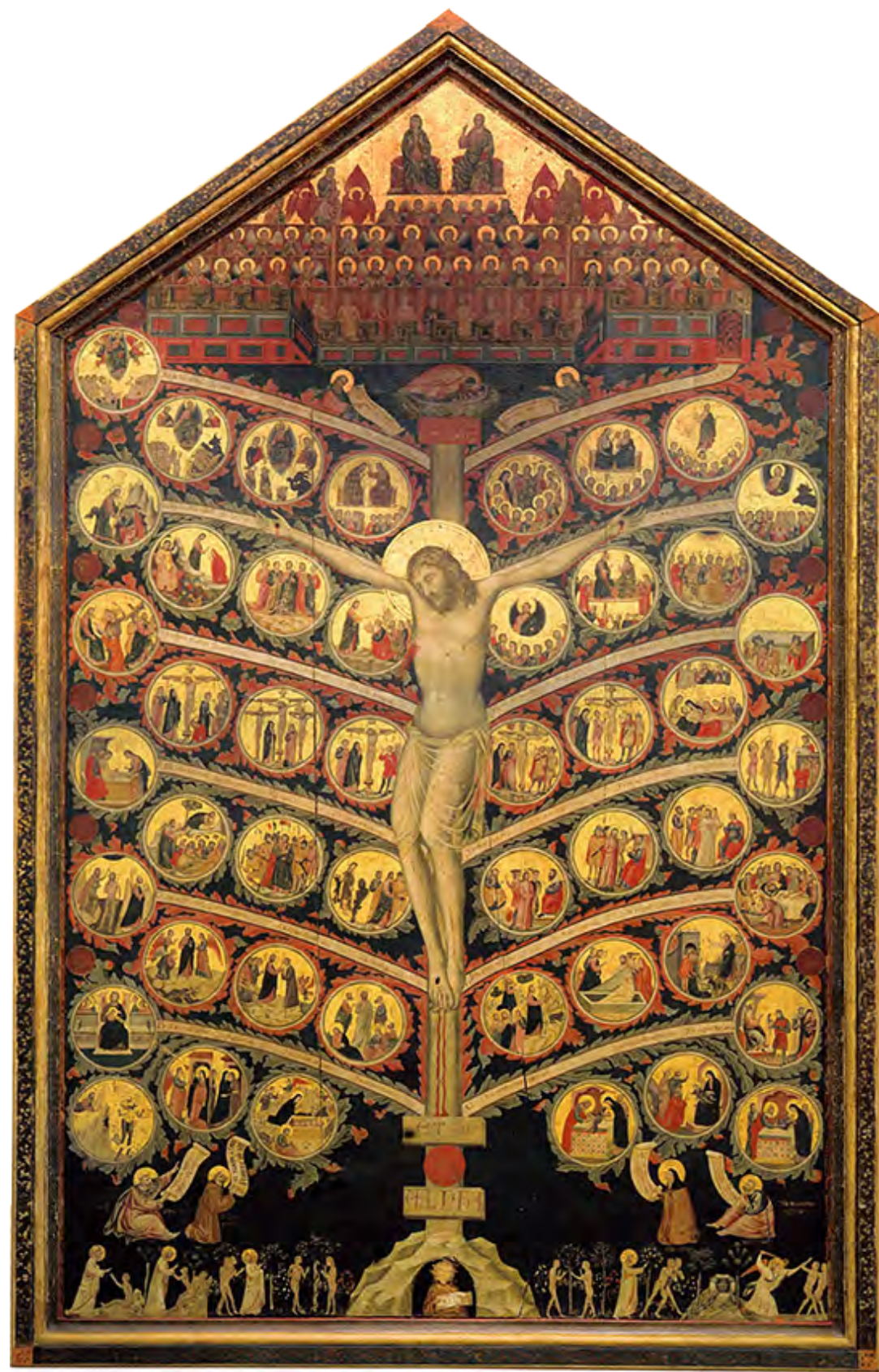
59. Niccolò Alunno, *Angels with Inscription, Agony in the Garden, and Flagellation of Christ*, from the predella of the *San Niccolò Altarpiece*, 1492, tempera on panel, 39 × 99 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

painter Niccolò Alunno, known as Niccolò da Foligno, boldly stated his claim to be taken seriously in an extraordinary and – as far as I can see – almost totally ignored Latin inscription in elegiac couplets on a predella dated 1492. The predella in question is now in the Louvre (fig. 59), while the main part of the altarpiece to which it originally belonged remains in the church of San Niccolò at Foligno for which it was made. The inscription reads as follows:

Ad lectorem
nobile testata est pingi pia Brisida quondam
hoc opus. O! nimium munera grata deo.
Si petis auctoris nomen, Nicolaus Alumnus
Fulginae patriae pulchra corona suae.

Octo quincties centum de milibus anni,
Cum manus imposita est ultima, vanuerant.
Sed quis plus meruit, quaeso, te iudice, lector
Cum causam dederit Brisida et ille manum?

(‘To the reader
The late Brisida, a pious lady, has left in her will that this noble
work should be painted. O gift too pleasing to God!
If you seek the name of its artist, it is Niccolò Alunno, the fine
crown of his native city of Foligno.
Eight years had vanished from a thousand and five times a
hundred when the last touch was given to it.
But who, o reader, deserved more in your judgment, I ask,
When Brisida gave the reason, he the hand?’)²⁵¹



155. Pacino di Bonaguida, *Tree of Life*, c.1305–10, tempera on panel, 248 × 151 cm. Florence, Galleria dell'Accademia.

come to be known as the Instruments of the Passion (or *Arma Christi*), such as the spear which pierced Christ's side or the column to which he was bound, but others – such as the pelican in its piety, and even the sun and moon – have a symbolic meaning in this context. Most interesting of all, however, are the various metonymic compressions of specific narrative episodes, such as the disembodied elements that encapsulate Pilate washing his hands, Judas receiving the thirty pieces of silver, and Saint Peter cutting off Malchus's ear. It is worth underlining the fact that this iconographic type is by no means unique to Lorenzo Monaco, but he does seem to have extended the range of subsidiary elements to an almost unparalleled extent.¹⁹⁹

The Instruments of the Passion – which are referred to as the 'PASSIONIS MISTERIA' ('Mysteries of the Passion') in an inscription on a painting by Marco d'Oggiono – are often included in representations of the subject that is usually called the Blood of the Redeemer.²⁰⁰ This type does not simply show Christ risen, but instead explicitly stresses both the fact that he is alive and the physical suffering he submitted to during the Passion. In an early treatment of the theme by Mariotto di Cristofano, the husband of Masaccio's half-sister, for Santa Maria delle Grazie in his native San Giovanni Valdarno, Christ is shown – with his cross and no other attribute – between the Virgin and Saint Lucy.²⁰¹ He gesticulates with his open-palmed right hand, while streams of blood pour from the wound in his right side and are collected in a chalice, above which there floats a host. Both the associations between Christ's blood and the Eucharist, and between the altar and the Mass, discussed more fully in the Introduction, could hardly be more explicit. Other altarpieces follow this basic model, and in the same way include additional saints.²⁰² However, it was also possible to show Christ in splendid isolation, as in a signed and dated altarpiece of 1575 by Bernardino Campi for Isola Dovarese (Cremona).²⁰³

Conversely, in Carpaccio's version of the subject, which was painted for the church of San Pietro Martire at Udine, and is now in the Museo Civico there, Christ is once again holding his cross, but the crown of thorns hangs below the superscription. More importantly, he is surrounded by four angels with the spear, the nails, the scourges and the sponge. Here, too, the blood is collected in a chalice with a host, but it streams towards its destination from all five wounds, and consequently upwards from his feet. There are no supplementary saints.²⁰⁴

In a compelling sculptural variation on the theme for the altar of the Sacrament in the church of Santi Jacopo e Maria at Lammari, Matteo Civitali represents a half-length Christ pressing the wound in his own side and himself holding the chalice into which his blood flows over the host. He is encircled by symbols of the Eucharist, while in the lunette above, a number of the *Arma Christi*, including a disembodied hand, form a strange species of



156. Lorenzo Monaco, *Arma Christi*, 1404, tempera on panel, 268 × 170 cm. Florence, Galleria dell'Accademia.



184. (left) Domenico Beccafumi, *Descent into Limbo*, c.1536, oil on panel, 395 × 225 cm. Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale.

185. (facing page) Bartolomeo Passerotti, *Ecce homo*, c.1575–80, oil on panel, 260 × 168 cm. Bologna, Santa Maria del Borgo.

