

# HONOLULU ACADEMY OF ARTS

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Bulletin Four



Central Panel (Detail)

Trecento Triptych



Altar Painting

Attributed to Cione Workshop

### A TRECENTO ALTAR PAINTING

We do not know with any degree of certainty the name of the artist who painted the Italian triptych now owned by the Honolulu Academy of Arts. It is a monumental painting slightly over six feet wide; the tall central panel is four and one-half feet high. "Anno Domini 1391" is written in bold clear letters across the bottom of the central panel. This helps to place it historically, but even so important a work of art as an altar painting may have many adventures in the course of five hundred and forty-six years. We could not depend upon the authenticity of this date if it were not for the fact that scholarship in the field of Italian Trecento

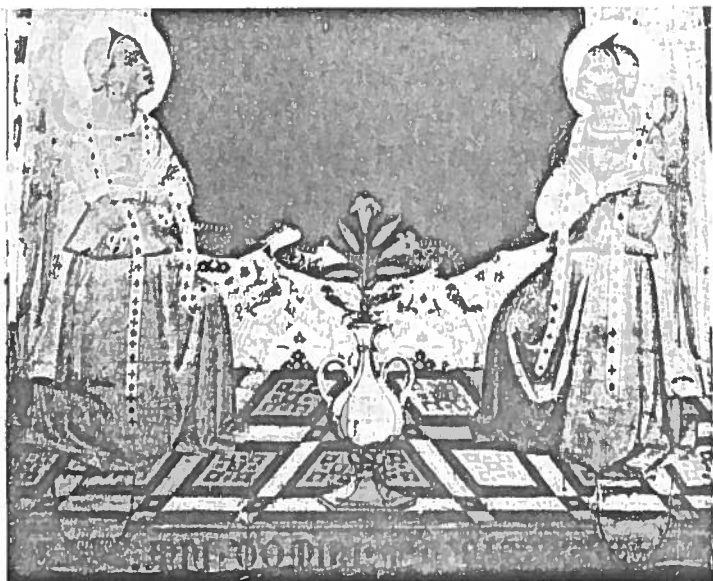
painting has been so thorough that there are certain clearly established style relationships of well-known masters which throw light upon the date of our painting.

It has been attributed to several men who were working in Florence at the close of the fourteenth century — to Lorenzo di Bicci and to the brothers of Andrea Orcagna, Nardo and Jacopo Cione. The latter has held the center of the stage in the controversy for some time. That stage itself is so colorful that although we may never know its authorship we shall be richer for having tried to see the setting in which this painting was made.

The Trecento was a richly creative period in Italy. Trade guilds and princes were making art a paying concern to the men who engaged in it. It was a time of acceleration in all kinds of building, but especially in churches and the chapels of monasteries. These required the richness of decorative painting to complete them, and there were donors who proudly and piously bore this responsibility.

At the beginning of the century Giotto and his followers were busy painting their frescoes on the walls of the new churches, and for the altars they were accustomed to make single panel paintings—such as the great Giotto Madonna in the Accademia in Florence. Many crucifixes were also designed for this purpose, but the distinctive altar decoration of the period—the triptych—came as a new style and with a great popularity before the century was half over. Taddeo Gaddi, Bernardo Daddi, Lorenzo di Bicci, Andrea Orcagna and his brothers, and countless other painters adopted this grand type of composition and gave it the prestige of their workshops.

The Trecento triptych was painted in tempera on three wooden panels. It repeated in its Gothic framework the design of the three portals of the church which gave to its outward shape the symbolism of entrance into the Heavenly Presence. It was a splendid decoration for the most dra-



Detail of Central Panel

matic place in the church—the altar. The lighted candles, the solemn and mysterious movements of the celebrants, the music—all the emotional aids to worship were centered at that spot. The importance of this laid a grave responsibility upon the artist who was to design the painting for such a focus of worship.

The theme of the work was always the love of God. Usually it was expressed in the central panel, through the mother and child motif with its accompaniment of worshipping angels. This was flanked by the side panels in which was a hieratic composition of standing or kneeling figures. Sometimes the Trinity was the central theme—and often the Crucifixion—but the Italians loved best the Madonna. Action was seldom depicted, rather a state of exalted worship into which the assembled people were inevitably drawn. There were, of course, variations of this composition, but it is safe to say that this was the accepted



Left Panel

Right Panel

type; and both aesthetically and emotionally it was highly successful.

This is the composition of our triptych. Hundreds of them must have been painted in the space of a few years, so great was their vogue. Painters from Florence and Siena travelled from city to city executing commissions for the churches. Such distinguished scholars of the Trecento as Toesca, Offner, Van Marle, Crowe and Cavalcaselle, Venturi, Berenson, Sirén and many others in briefer studies have given us documented accounts of these painters—along with a wealth of authenticated reproductions of their works.

From the study of these, it would seem that the Honolulu triptych had its origin in the workshop of Andrea Cione, called Orcagna. Lorenzo Ghiberti describes him as "nobilissimo maestro." Andrea with his two brothers, Nardo and Jacopo Cione, carried out many important commissions for their patrons. Their workshop must have been somewhat of a family affair—and a very busy place—with drawings to be made and approved by visiting committees, with color grinders at work, with painting going on at a tremendous pace. Scholars are convinced that Andrea's was the guiding mind and that his two brothers as well as many apprentices faithfully worked out his ideas, trying to copy his technique and effects as closely as possible.

Orcagna was one of the truly great men of his century. He was an architect and sculptor as well as a painter. It was he who made the elaborate marble tabernacle for the protection of an old and venerated Madonna in the church of Or San Michele. From records of his activities he seems also to have been an arbiter of taste. The Ciones were from a family of goldsmiths, which means that they would all be skilled in designing for a given space and that their instinctive concern in painting would be to produce a decorative effect. When an important commission was to be given for the altar-piece of Pistoja, Andrea Orcagna and his brother Nardo Cione were named in a select list as among the few most capable. This is an important contemporary estimate of the standing of the Ciones as artists.

Jacopo was much younger than the other two. Probably when Ghiberti made his slighting comment upon him—"as a painter of no prominence"—he was scarcely more than a youth.

Paintings were not signed in those great days of Art. Orders were taken and executed by the master of the *bottega* who was responsible for the completion of the painting according to the contract. In some cases the document stipulated that the master should paint the central panel (or



Head of St. Anthony

Detail of Left Panel

the figures of the holy personages) while other figures and accessories might be painted in by assistants. Actually the work was a collaboration under his direction. It is no wonder that under such conditions it is so difficult to search out the author of a work of art, but a careful study of certain

characteristics in the paintings from this shop is revealing.

The saints who appear in so many of the side panels of the Cione paintings have varying names and attributes, but so persistent is the facial character that they seem like vigorous portraits of well-known men rather than studio types. There is no doubt, also, of the relationship of the angelic figures nor of their characteristic gestures. The treatment of drapery varies, but there is a similarity in the heavy, strong folds that are used by them all; the same embroidery designs appear; the same beautiful books in the hands of the attendant saints, the pavement design and the peculiar pattern for the gold design in the halos, which would be due to their own workshop tool used as a stamp upon the wooden panel.

Conspicuous among the distinguishing features of their workshop was a textile, a richly brocaded pattern of birds and pomegranates, which also appears in the Honolulu triptych. In the words of Sirén, "This was apparently the show-piece of the workshop, for which the place of honor in the middle picture was regularly reserved."<sup>1</sup> It must have been a costly piece of studio property, treasured and cared for over a long period of years, for it appears again and again to add glory to a heavenly scene.

Our triptych, then, has very strong stylistic claims upon the Cione workshop as its origin. The date, 1391, would eliminate Andrea, the master, and Nardo, for their deaths had occurred a quarter of a century before, but it may have been painted by Jacopo, less gifted than his brilliant brothers, but trained by them in his art and considered capable of finishing his brothers' pictures.

The first mention of Jacopo as an independent artist occurs in his commission in 1368 to finish his brothers' work. Then there are records that tell of his employment

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<sup>1</sup> Osvald Sirén, *Giotto and Some of His Followers*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1917, vol. 1, p. 253.



to color some of the statues of the cathedral. In 1373 we know that he was working for Niccolò di Pietro Gerini who was almost a manufacturer of art, his establishment turned out such vast quantities of work. There is nothing recorded of Jacopo later than 1394, three years after the date on our painting.

If Jacopo is the artist of our triptych, in whole or in part, it was done in his old age. It is not so brilliant as the paintings of his brothers, or of his own done in his earlier years. In his compositions with groups in attendance—as in his great Crucifixion in London and the two Coronations of the Virgin—it is arresting to study the groups and find the same men who appear as attendants in our painting. The brocade becomes almost a point of attribution it appears so consistently.

In the central panel of the Honolulu triptych, the Madonna sits enthroned with the child upon her knee, one hand of the *bambino* raised in benediction and the other grasping the soft little bird. It is a very sweet Virgin, with little tendrils of fair hair about her gentle face. Her mantle is the azure required by ecclesiastic tradition, richly embroidered with the gold design of the Cione workshop; her robe is crimson, symbolic of the love of God. The background is of gold laid upon a foundation of crimson which shows plainly in places where the gold is worn away.

It was the custom to paint the angels who surround the throne in attitudes of worship, and in all the Cione paintings we see the same type of delicate fair-haired angels, exquisite in their postures of worship. There are none lovelier in any painting than those in ours, particularly the two who are looking down upon the child and who hold the glowing textile with a gesture so enfolding in its tenderness. In their faces and in the face of the Madonna is that spiritualized beauty which the Florentine painter caught from Siena. The six angels who surround the Madonna create the semblance of a setting for a jewel. This is fur-



Head of St. Gregory

Detail of Right Panel

ther heightened by the golden jar of lilies at her feet. What pleasure this must have given to a painter from a goldsmith's family!

It was certainly a Florentine painter who would try—and not too feebly—to cope with the structural problem of the

space relations. He seems to have given a suggestion of divine remoteness by the small scale of the figures in the central panel and the effect of distance is further suggested by the position of the throne, high in the allotted space. Could it be possible that he is consciously going in the direction in which Masaccio was to make his momentous discovery—that distance can be achieved through diminishing values?

Paolo Uccello, who was to lie awake at night brooding over the beauties of "Divine Perspective," was only five years old when our painting was made in 1391; but the beginning of that great movement toward realism, which in a few years he was to push so far, is plainly evident in the painting of the pavement in the Honolulu triptych. Would that our painter had given more study to the anatomy of the left hand of St. Gregory — or could the wrongly painted member have been done hurriedly by an apprentice? Surely the limit of allotted time had been reached or so obvious an error would have been corrected before the painting left the workshop.

The commanding figures in the side panels are personages venerated by the monastic orders. St. Anthony of Egypt with his Tau staff and St. Catherine of Siena with her book and palm occupy the left panel, and in the other are St. John the Evangelist who so richly endowed the church with The Book, and St. Gregory the patron of church music. These figures would seem to imply that the triptych was painted for a monastic altar.

There are surprisingly few colors used. Was the donor not too generous in his allowance for pigments? They were expensive if they were "good and choice colors" and must be ground to a fine powder, mixed with the white of egg and then applied to the panel smoothed and prepared with meticulous care for them. Few as they are, they are used harmoniously.

The solemn figures in the side panels add materially to

the hieratic quality of the painting. They are composed on a large scale, their dark, rich verticals giving strength to the design and contrast to the delicacy of the central panel. They stand looking down from their state of glory upon the assembled worshippers, assured with solemn joy of their places near the throne of God.

The Honolulu triptych, on the basis of its stylistic qualities—the brocade, the halo tooling, the pavement design, the angel and personage types—seems to have come from the Cione workshop. But whether it was made by Jacopo or how much of it was from his own hand, we cannot know until scholarship has brought further evidences as proof.

It is our hope that the photographs of details published in this bulletin may add something to the body of visual data which will advance further research. —D. R. S.

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