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Reconstruction, construction and deconstruction of late medieval Sienese altarpieces from Ugolino di Nerio to Sassetta: a reassessment

Christa Gardner von Teuffel

Reconstruction has driven research in Italian late medieval and Renaissance painting for the last half century. Most surviving paintings of the period are fragmentary and need recontextualization. This involves structural examination, technical expertise, and liturgical knowledge. It requires collaboration between scholars, scientists and restorers. Exemplary cases are Simone Martini's Dominican high altarpiece from Santa Caterina, Pisa, and Ugolino di Nerio's Franciscan high altarpiece from Santa Croce in Florence. Subsequently dismembered their reconstruction has demanded a multiplicity of approaches. The initial deconstruction of such altarpieces could be caused by a variety of factors: change of patron, new liturgical fashions, and physical deterioration. Traditional art historical methods of attribution have proved insufficient. Lack of evidence often inhibits reconstruction, the absence of contract-drawings, knowledge of the patron and original setting, understanding of the complexities of canon law, liturgy and local custom are all contingent. Contemporary Latin terminology is often confusing and the wide-spread use of the formula »modo et forma«, the imitation of a specified earlier model, has only recently been fully appreciated. The totality of these arguments has been slow to coalesce, and much reconstructive work remains to be done.

The recent, revelatory exhibition of the major Sienese artist, Taddeo di Bartolo (c. 1362–1422) at Perugia prompts several reflections. What should be expected from a comprehensive exhibition of a late medieval artist's oeuvre, and what can and cannot be achieved in such an exhibition and its accompanying catalogue? Comparable questions were already raised by the Berlin 2005/2006 exhibition »Geschichten auf Gold«, which focussed on Ugolino di Nerio's polyptych from the Franciscan church of Santa Croce in Florence, and the *mostra* of Ambrogio Lorenzetti at Siena in 2017/2018. How can fragmentary paintings be presented and the vital historical background be suggested to the twenty-first century public? The Perugia exhibition took place in the medieval Palazzo dei Priori, where imaginative efforts were made to recreate medieval environments for the paintings; Ambrogio Lorenzetti was displayed in the Trecento Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala, whose façade once displayed an important fresco cycle by the painter and his brother Pietro. »Geschichten auf Gold« was housed in a purpose-built modern museum, with an enviable range of display possibilities. Each setting provided a different, yet relevant context for the paintings exhibited. It is in varied environments such as these that reconstruction becomes an absolutely essential heuristic tool. How then, has reconstruction itself been handled in recent years, and what are its potentialities?

Fundamentally different criteria, historical and scientific-technical, nowadays underlie almost all reconstructions of late medieval paintings. Increasing awareness of their necessarily complementary relevance has led to better understanding of the individual works and their demands on the spectator. Yet, the introduction of new methods of investigation, display, and demonstration have, inevitably, also led to mistakes and misconceptions. All reconstructions are necessarily re-interpretations. Any attempt at reconstruction therefore involves considerable responsibilities, primarily, respect is owed to the original altar-painting, and subsequently its artists, their patrons, the intended destination, church setting and its customary public. While this article concentrates on Siena as a pioneering centre of late medieval altarpiece production and export, its principal criteria for reconstruction can equally apply to many other areas of Italy.

Some years ago, I was told in an American gallery »We cannot present fragments to our public«. However, giving the object the impression of completeness and inappropriately beautifying it, can themselves fundamentally mislead the viewer and falsify the picture; a mistaken reconstruction is dangerous. Many Early Italian pictures are fragments, initially forming parts of elaborate, composite paintings, predominantly from churches. To grasp their roles, to understand the painter's intentions, the patron's wishes and the viewer's reaction, we have to envisage the fragment as part of the whole, and attempt reconstruction of the original work in its former location. In fact, reconstruction has dominated research in the last half century.

Prior to re-construction, we should consider construction and de-construction. The expectation that a picture fits any frame and any space is a modern concept established during and developed since the Renaissance.¹ It does not apply to paintings from the late thirteenth to the early fifteenth centuries. In their creative process carpentry of the wooden painting-support and its framework was firmly integrated with gilding and painting. One conditioned the other, a crucial aspect to which we shall return. Poplar, then the most common pictorial support in central Italy, as a soft wood excludes dendrochronology, ages poorly and is sensitive to humidity. In central Italy *circa* 1300 the pictorial support of large-scale altarpieces changed basic structure, shape and size,

For help I am indebted to Julian Gardner, Pierluigi Nieri, Isabella Droandi, Anne Dunlop, Gail Solberg, Neville Rowley and Svenja Lilly Kempf.

1 Christa Gardner von Teuffel, Reframing a Revolution. Filippo Brunelleschi and the Development of the Florentine Renaissance Altarpiece, in: *Predella* 47, 2020, pp. 79–93, LI–LXVI.



1 Ambrogio Lorenzetti, St Nicholas consecrated bishop of Myra, 1332, tempera and gold on poplar, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence



2 Bernardino di Betto detto Pinturicchio, Enea Silvio Piccolomini consecrated cardinal, ca. 1502–1507, fresco, Libreria Piccolomini, Cathedral, Siena

built of vertical instead of horizontal planks. This facilitated the formal development from the low rectangular dossal to the taller, multipartite polyptych (fig. 1). From the mid-fourteenth century multi-storeyed polyptychs were gradually simplified and eventually unified, so that by the mid-fifteenth century a rectangular or rounded, unified pictorial surface emerged, framed only after completion (fig. 2). Painting and framework could then be independently executed and subsequently united, as is still the case.

Many high-quality painting fragments survive from Siena. After the battle of Montaperti in 1260 when it unexpectedly triumphed over Florence and its allies, Siena enjoyed a long period of peace, successful self-government and economic wealth, which substantially encouraged craftsmen and artists.² As business extended into the Siennese hinterland, it prompted new buildings of churches and houses which required paintings.

The altarpiece, the focus of this essay, be it painted or sculpted, was never essential for celebration of mass;³ – a crucifix, candles, liturgical books, vessels, and vestments sufficed. Yet altarpieces stimulated devotion, instructed the congregation, embellished churches and permitted identification of their patron, who could be the resident religious institution or an individual donor, a family, or also a guild or confraternity (fig. 3). The altarpiece became ever more popular, the polyptych, single-

or multi-storeyed, the most favoured formal type during the Trecento; and Siena was its Italian centre.⁴

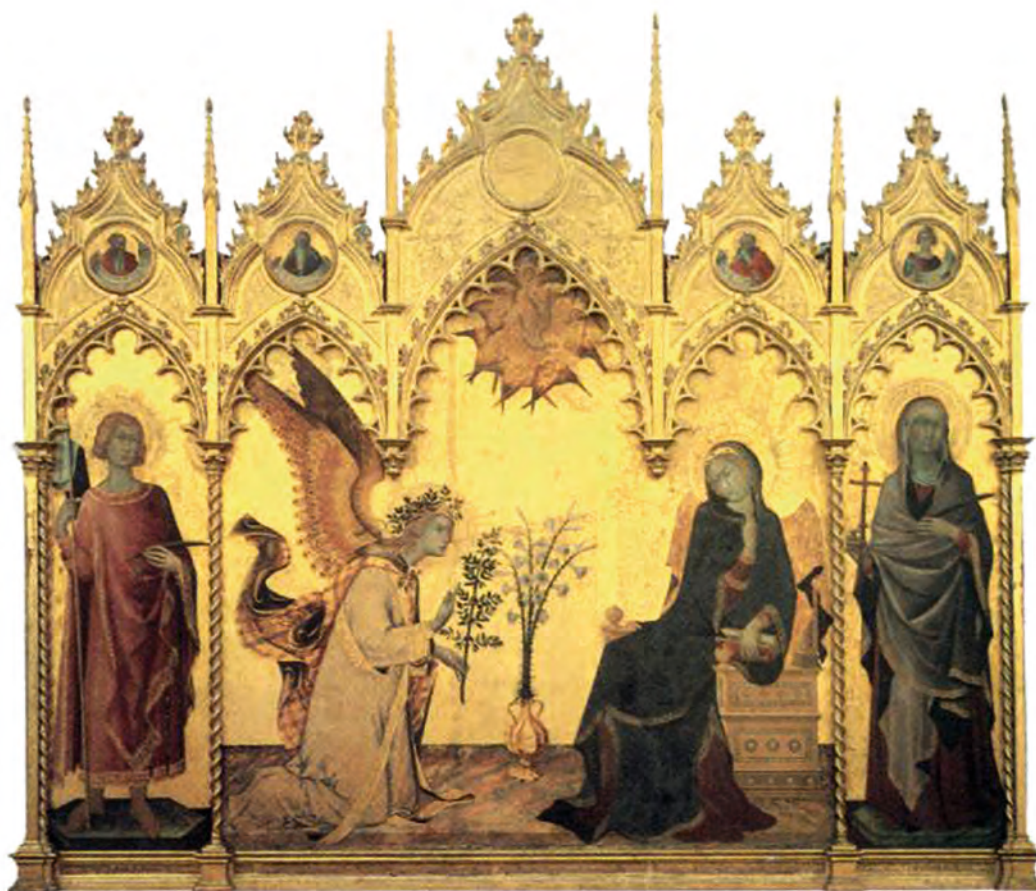
Even in Italy undisturbed altarpieces in their original framework are now rare, and those located in their original destination rarer still. The signed seven-part polyptych (heptaptych), completed by Simone Martini from Siena around 1319, for the Dominican convent of Santa Caterina in Pisa, is an almost complete example, now in the local Museum (fig. 4).⁵ Its core is constructed of seven vertical planks, which

2 Gabriella Piccinni, Siena nell'età di Duccio, in: Alessandro Bagnoli, Roberto Bartolini, Luciano Bellosi et al. (eds.), Duccio, exh. cat. [Siena, Santa Maria della Scala, 4.10.2003–11.1.2004], Milan 2003, pp. 27–35; ead., Siena negli anni di Ambrogio, in: Alessandro Bagnoli, Roberto Bartolini, Max Seidel (eds.), Ambrogio Lorenzetti, exh. cat. [Siena, Santa Maria della Scala, 22.10.2017–8.4.2018], Milan 2017, pp. 78–93.

3 Julian Gardner, Altars, Altarpieces, and Art History. Legislation and Usage, in: Eve Borsook, Fiorella Superbi Gioffredi (eds.), Italian Altarpieces 1250–1550, Oxford 1994, pp. 5–19.

4 Henk van Os, Siennese Altarpieces 1215–1460, Vol. I and Vol. II, Groningen 1984 and 1990. Joanna Cannon, The Creation, Meaning, Audience of the Early Siennese Polyptych. Evidence from the Friars, in: Borsook, Superbi Gioffredi 1994, as n. 3, pp. 41–79.

5 Joanna Cannon, Religious Poverty, Visual Riches, New Haven/London 2013, pp. 138–148, with full bibliography and reference to Pierluigi Nieri, Il restauro del polittico pisano di Simone: conferme e novità emerse dai dati diagnostici e tecnico-materici, in: Bolletino d'Arte IXL, 2022, pp. 71–88, forthcoming at time of writing.



3 Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi, *Annunciation with Saints*, 1329–1333, tempera and gold on poplar, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence



4 Simone Martini, *Polyptych of Santa Caterina*, around 1319, tempera and gold on poplar, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa



5 Simone Martini, Back of Polyptych of Santa Caterina, around 1319, tempera and gold on poplar, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa

were once secured by horizontal battens at the back (fig. 5). An inscription socle was attached to the front of the altarpiece, inserted between the main panels and the predella. The solid core presumably rested on a box-like structure, of which only the frontal, horizontal sections survived. A finely articulated framework of wood and plaster, divides the main surface and integrates the seven panels, upper gallery and crowning gables. Laminated wooden layers, decorated with *pastiglia* (a fine



6 Simone Martini, Back of Polyptych of Santa Caterina, detail of fig. 5; the original nail pattern indicates the lost interlocking battens

plaster ornament), were applied to the spandrels of the rounded, cusped arches. The elaborate frame architecture employs inner spiral columns, some of which still survive, intermediary pilasters, now almost all removed, and outer piers, now entirely lost.⁶ The latter originally stabilized the massive altar-painting on the altar block and anchored it to the floor. In taller polyptychs the uppermost pinnacles were often carpentered separately, and secured above the main components, either by vertical battens or slots, as can be observed in the polyptychs by Pietro Lorenzetti at Arezzo and Taddeo di Bartolo at Perugia and Montepulciano. Furthermore, monumental structures increasingly used interlocking horizontal battens at the rear. They radically facilitated the execution of the large components in small workshops and in addition the transport of these components to their final destinations. Simone Martini and Ugolino di Nerio both successfully employed this procedure (fig. 6).⁷

6 Christa Gardner von Teuffel, *The Buttressed Altarpiece. A Forgotten Aspect of Tuscan Fourteenth Century Altarpiece Design*, in: *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 21, 1979, pp. 21–65, reprinted and annotated in: ead., *From Duccio's Maestà to Raphael's Transfiguration. Italian Altarpieces and their Settings*, London 2005, pp. 119–182, 136–137.

7 For Simone see now Nieri's important forthcoming essay, as n. 5; David Bomford, Jill Dunkerton, Dillian Gordon et al. (eds.), *Art in the Making: Italian Painting Before 1400*, exh. cat. [London, The National Gallery, 29.11.1989–28.2.1990], London 1989, p. 106, fig. 73, and in general Ciro Castelli, *Techniques of Construction of Wooden Supports for Painting*, in: Marco Ciatti, Cecilia Frosinini (eds.), *Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings at the Opificio Delle Pietre Dure in Florence. Method, Theory, Technique, and Practice*, Florence 2016, pp. 285–349, 322–325.

The painted surface of the panel would have been prepared by layers of linen, occasionally some parchment to cover nails, poor quality wood or joins, rough and fine plaster and *imprimatura*. Framework and picture fields were covered with *bolus* and then gilded before painting began. The gilded areas, bounded by incisions, left space for the insertion of the painted figures. With the help of radiography, infrared reflectography, and ultraviolet light compositional incisions by stylus and underdrawings in carbon, strengthened by ink and pen, wash and brush can be detected; additionally the painting's general condition can be assessed and alterations observed. Furthermore pigments, binding medium and varnishes can be identified. Understanding of the pictorial process assisted by these new scientific procedures has greatly facilitated accurate reconstructions.

Simone's Pisan high altarpiece allowed the Dominican Order to display a learned programme of the *Virgin and Child among Saints* with a *Pietà* below and *God the Father* above. The saints are differentiated as Order's saints, titular saints of church and altar, popular local saints, accompanied by angels, prophets, apostles, and Church fathers. After the not unusual, radical separation of the seven individual compartments the correct reconstruction of their sequence was long disputed. Only when sufficient attention was paid to the wooden construction was certainty achieved. Following common fourteenth-century carpenters' practice the individual compartments were originally aligned by wooden pegs or dowels, regularly placed and driven horizontally into the sides of two neighbouring vertical planks.⁸ As the outermost planks were not doweled to the lateral piers, these outer planks with dowel-holes only on the inner side were easily identifiable, and the middle position of the Order's saints, Dominic and Peter Martyr, thus securely determined.

Perhaps in reaction to or even in competition with Simone Martini's high altarpiece at Pisa the Dominicans of Santa Maria Novella promptly commissioned Ugolino di Nerio, another master trained by Duccio, with the heptptych for their main altar. It was presumably financed by the family of Fra Baro Sasseti, already documented in 1304 as *Baro de parentela Sasetorum* in the convent.⁹ However, this important early Sienese polyptych in Florence appears lost.¹⁰ The polyptych



8 Ugolino di Nerio, reconstructed Saints Peter, John the Baptist and Paul, around 1325, tempera and gold on poplar, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Eigentum des Kaiser Friedrich Museumsvereins

was painted shortly afterwards by Ugolino for the Florentine Franciscans and was also early disassembled, to facilitate transport and later sale; its components are therefore scattered among several major collections.¹¹ At Santa Croce it was liturgical change which provoked the de-construction of this Sienese masterpiece, and in 1569 a monumental tabernacle for the Host replaced it. The heptptych was separated into its seven compartments, predella and outer piers, which were then shifted to the convent's upper dormitory. In 1647 precise engravings by Giovanni Antonio Baccanelli recorded its three Franciscan saints, Francis (fig. 7), Anthony of Padua and Louis of Toulouse, which Niccolò Catalano published in reverse in 1652. In 1785, the Franciscan Guglielmo Della Valle described the *tavola* still in the same location, but in poor condition, and mentioned the artist's signature, the *Passion* predella, the crowning pinnacles and the richly decorated framework. Besides liturgical and logistical reasons for de-construction we may in this case also suspect devotional ones, as the most venerated panels, the *Virgin*, *Francis* and *Anthony*, badly damaged, perhaps by abrasion or candle burns, were separated and eventually lost. The other well-preserved main saints, John the Baptist, Peter and Paul survive in Berlin (fig. 8). The beautiful



7 Giovanni Antonio Baccanelli, Saint Francis, 1647, engraving

8 Ciro Castelli, *The Construction of Wooden Supports of Late-Medieval Altarpieces*, in: Machtelt Israëls (ed.), *Sassetta. The Borgo San Sepolcro Altarpiece*, Florence/Leiden 2009, I, pp. 319–333; Castelli 2016, as n. 7, pp. 285–349.

9 Delphine Carron, Iñigo Atucha, Anna Pegoretti, *Chronologie de Santa Maria Novella (1291–1319)*, in: Iohannes Bartuschat, Elisa Brilli, Delphine Carron (eds.), *Dominicans and the Making of Florentine Cultural Identity (13th–14th centuries)*, Florence 2020, pp. 23–52, 35.

10 Christa Gardner von Teuffel, Botticelli, Ugolino di Nerio and a Sasseti Memorial Portrait, forthcoming.

11 Dillian Gordon, *The Italian Paintings before 1400. The National Gallery Catalogues*, London 2011, pp. 430–477.



9 Ugolino di Nerio, *Carrying of the Cross*, around 1325, tempera and gold on poplar, National Gallery, London



10 David Pierre Giotto Humbert de Superville, *The Santa Croce Altarpiece*, around 1800, pen, brush and ink on paper



11 Reconstruction of the Santa Croce Altarpiece

Passion scenes, once forming a continuous frontal predella plank, were cut up into small, manageable portions for sale before 1835, as Gustav Waagen, a German art historian then visiting English collections, recorded (fig. 9). By then the market steadily exploited the growing interest in »primitive« paintings by private collectors.¹² A late eighteenth-century drawing attributed to Humbert de Superville apparently copied in detail the entire framed heptptych and clearly documented the painting's uneven condition (fig. 10).¹³ This elaborate drawing obviously records the altarpiece's appearance at that time. Art historians unquestioningly accepted the drawing and its purpose, allowing themselves to be misled into believing that the drawing documented the original (fig. 11). However, the arrangement of the predella scenes and the relation between the narrative socle and the upper core are unconvincing. The panel above the Madonna, already almost totally destroyed, was probably divided into a double-arched field, attested by other examples of the same altarpiece-type.¹⁴ The uppermost pinnacle very likely contained the *Crucifix* or a *Crucifixion*, absent from the predella, but here Christ Crucified would have appropriately referred to the church's ded-

ication. Also missing in Superville's drawing are the lateral buttresses, which were in origin crucial for stabilizing the altarpiece. How otherwise would you keep a monumental, heavy altarpiece upright on a free-standing high altar? Stability became particularly pressing in the case of double-sided altar-paintings, which exclude any additional support from the back. It therefore seems most likely that Duccio invented the massive outer piers to buttress the free-standing double-sided *Maestà*

12 Giovanni Previtali, *La Fortuna Dei Primitivi: Dal Vasari ai Neoclassici*, Turin 1964.

13 Henri Loyrette, *Une source pour la reconstruction du polyptyque d'Ugolino da Siena à Santa Croce*, in: *Paragone* XXIX, 1978, 343, pp. 15–23; this drawing was further interpreted by Miklos Boskovits, *Frühe Italienische Malerei. Gemäldegalerie Berlin. Katalog der Gemälde*, trans. and ed. by Erich Schleier, Berlin 1988, pp. 162–176; Stefan Weppelmann, *Geschichten auf Gold in neuem Licht. Das Hochaltarretabel aus der Franziskanerkirche Santa Croce*, in: id., *Geschichten auf Gold. Bilderzählungen in der frühen italienischen Malerei*, exh. cat. [Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 5.11.2005–26.2.2006], Berlin 2005, pp. 26–50; Christa Gardner von Teuffel, rev. of *Geschichten auf Gold*, Berlin 2005, in: *Burlington Magazine* 148, 2006, pp. 217–220; and Gordon 2011, as n. 11, pp. 430–477, 466–467.

14 Gardner von Teuffel 2005, as n. 6, pp. 119–182, 622–628.