

Paolo da Visso (active 1431-1482)
The Crucifixion
Italy, Le Marche
Mid-15th century



42 x 30.2 x 3 cm; tempera and gold on panel

Provenance

Sterbini Collection, Rome
Private collection, Switzerland

Published

Venturi, Adolfo. *La galleria Sterbini in Roma: saggio illustrativo* (Roma: Casa editrice de L'Arte. 1906), pp.86-89.

Zeri, Federico. *Diari di lavoro 2* (Torino 1976, ried. in *Diario marchigiano*, 1948-1988), pp.51-54.

This intimate panel painting of the Crucifixion, with its unusual iconography, has been at the centre of scholarly debate since its first appearance in an early 20th century publication. It has since been attributed to Paolo da Visso, a 15th century painter from the Central Italian region of Le Marche.¹

Silhouetted against an ornate golden background, the crucified Christ bows his head down to the scene below. The text on the scroll above Christ, “INRI” (*Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum*), visualises the sign placed on top of the Cross which reads: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”.² The agony of Christ’s crucifixion is intensified through the intense red blood that pours from his

¹ We would like to thank Dr Mauro Minardi for his help and guidance on this painting.

² John 19:19

wounds. Located below the Cross is an intimate scene between the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Evangelist. Kneeling at the foot of the Cross, Saint John is portrayed a beardless and graceful young man with tears elegantly rolling down his cheek, and delicate hands in prayer. In this profound scene, as John weeps, Mary reaches to hold the Saint's hand and brings her coat protectively around him. Behind this central image, kneeling and embracing the foot of the Cross is Saint Francis (c.1182-1226) dressed in the traditional Franciscan brown habit fastened with a white rope, looking upwards to Christ. The golden background includes intricate punchwork forming foliage and vegetal patterns, which glimmer and change under the reflection of light upon the surface. Encircling the outline of the painted of the Crucifixion and the landscape, the artist has created a punchwork border of cusped arches to provide a sense of separation between the two mediums. This detailed technique is also found in the halos of the saints. The juxtaposition of the painted surface and gold with its intricate details provides a dazzling effect for the viewer. Rather than form part of a public altarpiece, this painting was meant to be handled as a devotional object. This is suggested by its small scale and its reverse painted in imitation of porphyry. The unique presence of the inscription above the Virgin's head further emphasises that it was designed to be viewed up close.



Fig. 1
Ugolino di Nerio
Crucifixion with St Francis of Assisi
14th century
Sienna, Pinacoteca Nazionale

A tool for contemplation, the iconography of this panel adds complexity to the otherwise straightforward scene, which depicts the final moment before the death of Christ. Kneeling and embracing the foot of the Cross is Saint Francis of Assisi dressed in the traditional Franciscan brown habit fastened with a white rope, looking towards Christ. Although out of place, the presence of Francis at the foot of the cross is not unusual in Italian art of this period, which often merges the story of the saint's life with the story of Christ's passion in order to emphasise his direct spiritual authority. This combination can also be seen in a painting by Ugolino di Nerio now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale, suggesting a Franciscan context for this panel and ours (fig.1). The viewers of this moment are invited to witness this special union, which was given a special role in Dominican and Franciscan mysticism in the 14th and 15th centuries.

The most unusual aspects of the iconography here, however, is an intimate scene located in the foreground. The Virgin Mary stands in front of Saint John the Evangelist who is portrayed with tears rolling down his cheek, as he kneels in prayer. In this profound scene, the Virgin reaches

to hold the Saint's hand as he weeps, while she brings her coat protectively around him. The agony of the moment is intensified by the blood that pours from Christ's side and stops as it reaches two lines of text in red script, suggesting that the blood created these words. The Gothic text echoes Christ's last words on the Cross: *Mulier ecce filius tuus*, translated: 'Woman, behold your son'. In the most innovative way, the artist here visualises the moment when shortly before his last breath, Christ opened his eyes and sanctioned his favourite disciple, John, to his mother as a son, and accepted him into the divine family.



Fig. 2
Stefano da Verona (Stefano di Giovanni d'Arbosio di Francia)
The Crucifixion
c.1400
Italy
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018.87

The style of our painting of the Crucifixion brings together characteristics of the 15th century high Gothic pictorial world from different Italian regions. The artist of this scene combined the most diverse trends in northern Italian painting at this time with traditional elements of central Italian art. The painting demonstrates stylistic connections to the Marche region in Italy, more specifically perhaps to the towns of Fabriano or San Severino. The style of artwork from the Marche region in the 15th century combined the playful high Gothic style of Lombardy, Visconti and Veneto with the elegance of the classical world of forms. The artist utilises decorative elements found within Lombard painting such as the vegetal punchwork motifs on the gilded background. Such

decorative elements were learned by 15th-century artists whilst training in Veneto under masters such as Stefano da Verona (1374–1450) and Gentile da Fabriano (c.1370/85–1427). In fact, the golden background of our panel closely resembles the work of Stefano da Verona, specifically his Crucifixion (c.1400) currently at the MET (fig. 2). Here, Stefano da Verona similarly includes an exquisitely tooled repetition of thornless roses.



Fig. 3
Jacobello del Fiore
Detail from St. Lucy burned at the stake
c.1410
Pinacoteca Comunale, Fermo, Italy

The atmospheric nature of the painting, with its contrasting mountainous landscape, dark foreground and bright golden background is also reminiscent of the milieu of the Gentile da Fabriano, who vividly painted such contrasting atmospheric lighting. There are also similarities in the design of the rocky landscape and the rich *millefleur* meadows, whose individual plants shine like golden wispy lights due to the incidence of light. This can also be seen in the work of Jacobello del Fiore (*fl.* c. 1400–1439), especially in his altarpiece depicting the life of Saint Lucy commissioned for Saint Lucy’s Church in Fermo, a town in the region of Marche. In several of the scenes of Saint Lucy’s life, including the depiction of Lucy burned at the stake, similarities can be observed in the plants which glimmer under the golden light (fig. 3).

The attribution of this painting to Paolo da Visso was first suggested by Federico Zeri in the 1970s. Although the painting had first been attributed to Giovanni di Paolo in 1906 by Adolfo Venturi in *La galleria Sterbini in Roma*,³ Federico Zeri disputed this, proposing that the artist was Paolo da Visso (active. 1431-1482).⁴ Paolo da Visso was originally from the small town of Aschio in the province of Macerata. Working during the last two quarters of the fifteenth century, Paolo’s artworks were distributed between Le Marche and Umbria. He was a pupil of Bartolomeo di Tommaso da Foligno (c.1400-1453/54), who was a painter of the Umbrian School. Influences of Bartolomeo di Tommaso’s work can be noted in our painting of the Crucifixion. For example, in *The Lamentation and Entombment* (fig. 4), we see a similar use of skin colour tones and hilly landscape.



Fig. 4
Bartolomeo di Tommaso
The Lamentation and the Entombment
c. 1445–50
MET 58.87.2

³ Adolfo Venturi, *La galleria Sterbini in Roma: saggio illustrativo* (Roma: Casa editrice de L'Arte. 1906), pp.86-89

⁴ Federico Zeri, *Diari di lavoro 2* (Torino 1976, ried. in *Diario marchigiano*, 1948-1988), pp.51-54

Although Paolo da Visso's artworks are largely lost, we can illustrate two examples that share numerous characteristics with our Crucifixion painting. The first is a panel painting of the funeral of the Virgin (fig. 5) and the second an altarpiece of the Virgin and Child (fig. 6). Both works exhibit the same *millefleur* setting at the foreground of the image that is evident in the Crucifixion painting. When comparing the depiction of the Virgin's funeral with the Crucifixion scene, other similarities include the same rough setting with hills and patterned golden background, as well as comparable use of drapery which folds gently across the limbs of the figures. The likenesses between these paintings confirms that this Crucifixion painting is the work of Paolo da Visso during the mid-fifteenth century.

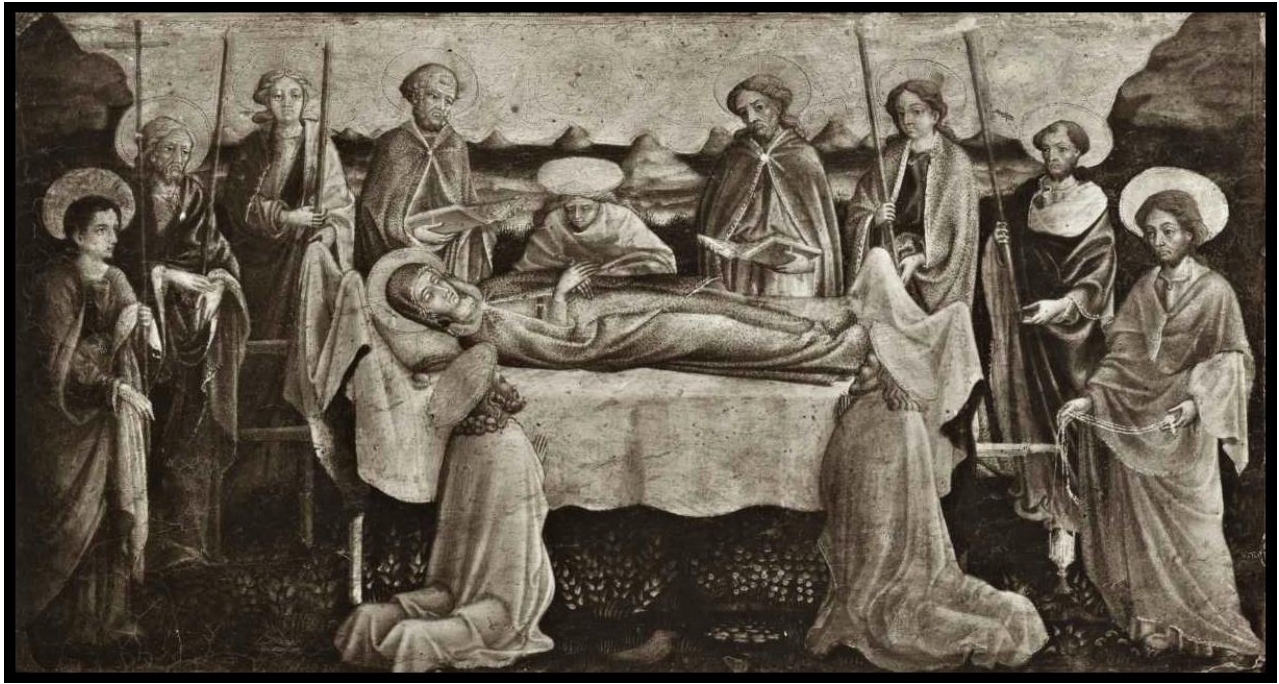


Fig. 5 Paolo da Visso, *Funeral scene of the Virgin Mary*, mid-15th century, Last known location: Trinity Fine Art, London 2009

A rare example of a work by the Marchigian-Umbrian painter Paolo da Visso, this impressive panel painting depicting Christ's suffering on the Cross eloquently expresses the grief of the Virgin and Saint John in a most unusual iconography. Set against an ornately punched golden background, the scene takes place in an other-worldly setting and together with the presence of St Francis, the iconography traverses geographic and historic boundaries in order to deliver its message of hope for a continued spiritual following. The intimate nature of both the scene depicted and the size of the panel painting demonstrates its function as a tool for private devotion and contemplation.



Fig. 6
Paolo da Visso
The Virgin and Child
mid-15th century
Last known location, Christie's New York (11
January 1989, lot.130)

Related literature

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