Excerpts from *Snyder’s Medieval Art* by Henry Luttikhuizen and Dorothy Verkerk

**Late Medieval Italy and Urban Monasticism**

**Introduction and Painting**

In the Late Middle Ages, the Italian peninsula was divided into numerous city-states. Some, such as Florence and Siena, were republics governed by civic councils, whereas others were led by secular rulers (such as kings and dukes) or fell under the jurisdiction of the pope. Within this setting, urban monasticism flourished. Two new religious orders were established in the early thirteenth century: the Franciscans and the Dominicans. They are known as mendicant orders, because their members beg for alms rather than rely on funding from their own order. Instead of retreating into cloisters far removed from the hustle and bustle of city life, Franciscans and Dominicans worked within cities, preaching sermons and advocating charity. Although the two orders shared much in common, they were often rivals and frequently established monasteries on opposite sides of communities.

Due in large part to the charisma of its founder, the Franciscan order become quite prominent soon after it was established. Saint Francis (c. 1181-1226) was born in Assisi to wealthy parents. At the age of twenty-one, Francis had an intense religious experience that radically changed his life. According to his biographer, Thomas of Celano, Francis entered a small church in ruins, San Damiano near Assisi, and prayed. While contemplating a painted Crucifix on the altar, "a thing unheard-of happened:" the painted image called out to him by name and asked Francis to repair his house, and "from that moment on, compassion for the crucified Christ was fixed in his soul." Francis abandoned his opulent life-style as a rich courtier for one of extreme poverty. He dedicated himself to the imitation of the humble and charitable ways of life that Christ had advocated.

Francis gathered twelve disciples and began preaching in the countryside. His message was simple and direct. Read the Gospels and dedicate your life to fellowship and love of all of God's creatures. Saint Francis experienced astonishing visions. In 1224, while in prayer on Mount Alvera, a mountain retreat bequeathed to his newly founded order of the Friars Minor (*Frates Minore*, approved by Pope Innocent III in 1210), Francis had a vision of the crucified Christ, and shortly thereafter his body was marked by the stigmata of Christ—the wounds in his side, feet, and hands. After he had received the stigmata, some of his followers began to call Francis a second Christ (*alter Christus*). Francis died two years later and the Church quickly canonized him Saint Francis in 1228.

Saint Francis was the most inspiring force in Italian art and literature during the thirteenth century. Bonaventura Berlinghieri produced the earliest known representation of the saint (fig. 1), completed less than a decade after Francis's death. The painted panel served as an altarpiece in the church of San Francesco in Pescia. Similar to a Byzantine vita icon, the painting shows the saint in a frontal pose surrounded by events from his life. The elongated saint exposes his wounds, while three knots in the rope of his robe signify three vows characteristic of his order: poverty, chastity, and obedience. A narrative scene of his stigmatization can also be seen on the upper left.

Large painted crosses often hung above choir screens and altars in Late Medieval Tuscan churches. A fine example of the early Crucifixion types is that known by scholars as Pisa No.
15 (fig. 2). The cross is huge (over nine feet high and over seven feet wide), and the life-size corpus of Christ, posed in a strictly frontal position with eyes open, fills the cross. Only a slight tilt of the head animates the flat body; anatomical details are reduced to linear arcs. At the four extremities of the cross are projecting boxes with episodes from the Life of Christ. This type of historiated cross is known as a *Christus triumphans* (Triumphant Christ) since the bold presentation of the live Savior reduces any emotional or humanizing effects. He stands before us and regards us directly, announcing that his crucifixion is a matter of doctrine, a symbol of salvation.

Numerous panels of the *Christus triumphans* are found in Lucca and Florence as well. However, a second kind of historiated cross, known as the *Christus patiens*, or "suffering Christ" (fig. 3), gained popularity in the later half of the thirteenth century. In these works, a pronounced sway to the body is introduced. The hips swell outward and the legs taper downward and slightly overlap. The head falls to the shoulder, and the eyes are closed in death, with bold shading lines about the sockets. According to hagiographic sources, the crucifix the young Saint Francis was contemplating when he had his vision in the Church of Saint Damiano near Assisi was of this type (fig. 30).

The Crucifix has been attributed to Coppo di Marcovaldo, a Florentine painter active in the 1260s and 1270s. He is also sometimes credited with designing the ceiling mosaic for the interior of Florence's Baptistry. Among other works attributed to Coppo are monumental images of the Virgin and Child that served as altarpieces for churches in Siena and Orvieto. His style is easily recognized as Italo-Byzantine. The *Madonna and Child* in the Church of San Martino ai Servi in Orvieto (fig. 4) resembles Late Byzantine icons of the Virgin, with the Queen of Heaven seated in a frontal position on an elaborate throne holding her infant rigidly on her right knee. Behind the lyre-backed throne, against a gold background, two diminutive angels serve as the Virgin's attendants. Byzantine conventions for the facial features and the draperies are followed, but a few peculiarly Italian elements can be noted. The golden striations in the Virgin's mantle are bold and crisp; the almond eyes, elongated nose, and pinched mouth are strained and slightly modeled, adding a more impassioned expression to her countenance.

**Sculpture**

From 1265 through to 1268, "Nichola de Apulia" is recorded in the archives of Siena, where he was commissioned to execute the sculptured pulpit for the cathedral. He apparently had worked in Pisa five years earlier (where he was known as Nicola Pisano). In 1260, Nicola produced a pulpit for the Pisa baptistery (figs. 5-7). The idea of placing a pulpit in a baptistery is not unusual in Tuscany. Such furnishings were commonplace due to the fact that the baptistery, usually a freestanding structure in North Italy, could also function as a civic meeting place. Columns of variegated red marble and granite that alternatingly rest on the backs of lions support the hexagonal structure. Five sides of the pulpit have huge marble slabs, quarried in nearby Carrara, that are carved in deep relief with stories from the life of Christ. The sixth side is open for the staircase leading to the platform. An eagle, the symbol of Saint John the Evangelist, serves as a lectern. Episodes from the Infancy of Christ (Annunciation, Nativity, Adoration of the Magi, and Presentation), the Crucifixion, and the Last Judgment appear on the marble plaques. The ambitious relief that initiates the cycle (fig.
6), with the Annunciation to Mary, the Nativity, and the Annunciation to the Shepherds conflated into one cramped field, is instructive for our study.

Mary resembles a Roman matron clad in heavy garments, and the casualness of her pose brings to mind the beauty in repose of ancient deities. Her face and hair are particularly Classical in appearance; note the straight line of her nose, the fleshy modeling of her features with deep eyes sockets and her cupped chin, and the distinctive coiffure with wavy tresses issuing from a central parting. Nicola may have copied Mary and other figures from ancient Roman sarcophagi preserved in Pisa. Yet the field is packed with figures and a hieratic scale is employed (the larger Virgin commands the central axis). The iconography is Byzantine, with the grotto serving as a shelter and the Child repeated in the bathing scene. Gothic trilobed arches also support the sculpted panels. While Nicola may have looked at ancient remains, his vision did not neglect other artistic models.

Nonetheless, Nicola's work is quite striking in its classicism. The heroic male nude that stands on top of one of the columns supporting the relief panels (fig. 7), usually identified as a personification of one of the Virtues or as the prophet Daniel, is likely modeled after an ancient statue or relief sculpture of Hercules. While the head is oversized, the finely detailed anatomy and the polished texture seem quite naturalistic.

For the altar in the Arena Chapel, Enrico Scrovegni commissioned Giovanni Pisano, the son of Nicola, to execute a marble statue of the Virgin and Child (fig. 8). The exaggerated sway in the upper torso and the rich cascades of drapery that fall from the Virgin's right hand bring to mind the features of ivory statuettes, and, indeed, it is very possible that Giovanni was directly indebted to such models. The intensity of the gaze between Mother and Child, on the other hand, suggests that Giovanni may have been influenced by the art of Giotto.

Between 1302 and 1310, Giovanni Pisano executed marble reliefs for the pulpit in the Cathedral at Pisa (fig. 9). A comparison of these reliefs with those of his father for the Pisa Baptistery pulpit demonstrates Giovanni's preference for the Gothic over the Romanized style of his father. The blocky, compact figures with their Late Antique features and the broad planes of creased drapery in Nicola's Nativity were rejected for a new pictorial vocabulary in Giovanni's version. The same iconographic scheme is followed, but now the figures are slender, and they sway beneath flowing draperies. The projection of the relief varies widely. Many of the heads are turned outward on long necks, arms are attenuated, and gestures curve gracefully inward so that a flickering pattern of light and dark accents sweeps across the composition like a shimmering arabesque.

Giovanni's interests in pictorial effects led him to exploit the charm of the landscape setting. Compared to the cramped surface of Nicola's relief, where all figures are squeezed into a single plane, Giovanni's work is open and interlaced like a giant vine or scroll issuing from a single source—the curved back of the maiden pouring water. Graceful tendrils of landscape tie the Virgin to the grotto, the grotto to the hills with the shepherds, and the meadows with the grazing flocks to the maiden once more.

Giovanni's talents ranged widely. He worked as an assistant to his father when the shop was called to Siena to execute the pulpit for the Duomo there between 1265 and 1268. He apparently settled in Siena and eventually worked on the facade of the Duomo (fig. 10) after the main building was completed. In a document of 1290, he is referred to as the caput magistrorum, or "man in charge," of the cathedral works. Giovanni designed the resplendent
facade with its zebra banding of dark green and white marble. His shop completed the lower half of the front—up to the pinnacles of the side portals. The upper parts of the facade, including the rose window, were added later in the 1370s.

Some elements of French Gothic architecture are present in the bottom half of the facade, but the richly textured surface is little more than an elaborate screen. The portals do not correspond exactly to the disposition of the nave and side aisles, nor are they decorated in the French fashion. Giant marble statues stand between and atop the pinnacles, but they are independent creations simply laced there and not actually coordinated within the fabric of the structure. A strong cornice divides the facade into two parts. The central block is raised as a square penetrated by a huge round window with stained glass. The towers shrink to ornate turrets framing the central block.

In 1316, new additions were planned for the Duomo. These included a baptistery at the foot of the hill that provided the substructure for two bays added to the choir. Structural problems were immediately encountered, and a special commission was appointed to advise the architects concerning the additions. Among the new advisors was Lorenzo Maitani, a Sienese architect who had served since 1310 as the capo maestro at Orvieto, where he completed work on the interior and erected the facade of the huge church (fig. 11). The Sienese council rejected his advice.

Maitani's design for the facade of the Duomo in Orvieto resembles that of the Duomo in Siena, but it displays more regularity and order, with the three portals clearly marked off to conform to the interior divisions. Of special interest is the sculpture decoration designed by Maitani for the facade (fig. 12). Four high marble reliefs adorn the pilasters that flank and separate the three portals. These depict, from left to right, stories from Genesis, the Tree of Jesse, the Life of Christ, and the Last Judgment.

Maitani's reliefs are delicate and refined in detail, and the tiers of figures are gracefully unified by means of meandering vines (ivy, acanthus, and grape) that grow up the central axis of each pilaster and sprout tendrils that frame the individual scenes. However poetic these sculptures may seem, certain details, especially in the Last Judgment, convey a startling pathos. The horror of a poor soul (fig. 13) in the grip of a menacing hybrid monster, placed slightly above eye level, is quite compelling and cannot be easily overlooked.

**Duccio**

In September of 1260, the Florentine army surrounded the city of Siena. Concerned for the safety of his city, a man named Buonaguida disrobed and entered the cathedral, imploring the Virgin Mary for mercy. Upon hearing Buonaguida's prayers, delivered before an image of the Virgin Hodegetria represented on an altar front, the Sienese bishop organized clerics for a pious processation around the city. The priestly entourage carried relics and banners throughout Siena in hopes of divine intervention. The next day, the Sienese defeated the Florentines at the Battle of Montaperti. The Virgin Mary was credited for protecting the city and made Siena's patron saint. Not surprisingly, numerous icons of the Virgin were commissioned for Sienese churches, including one by Coppo in Santa Maria dei Servi, dated 1261.

In 1285, Duccio di Buoninsegna (active 1278-1318) painted an altarpiece (fig. 14) for the lay confraternity of the Laudesi, a religious organization dedicated to the Virgin Mary and associated with the Dominicans. The painting was placed in the Dominican church of Santa
Maria Novella. Later, it was sold to the Rucellai family, who moved it to the family chapel in the same church.

The *Rucellai Madonna*, as it is often called, is an early work by Duccio. While a hieratic formula is followed (a modification of the *Hodegetria* type), the viewer is immediately attracted to the more natural characterization of Mary and her child, achieved by subtle stylistic adjustments. Mary is not rigidly posed. She turns slightly on the throne and her right hand relaxes as she more easily carries her son on her left knee. Through subtle shading of the flesh, Duccio presents Mary as an approachable woman.

The gold striations that dominate the draperies in the Byzantine icons are abandoned for subtle highlights. A border of gold meanders gracefully along the hem of her mantle. The deep blue of the costume has darkened over the years, but the delicacy of Duccio's drapery patterns can still be discerned in the softly modeled gowns of the angels that attend her. Furthermore, the angels are no longer presented as symbolic attributes but as full-bodied attendants placed in vertical rows about the elegant throne, a complex structure of diminutive spools and spindles that is tilted in space.

For the Duomo in Siena, Duccio produced a large polyptych (a many-paneled altarpiece) known as the *Maesta*, or Majesty of the Virgin (figs. 15-18). Although Duccio employed numerous assistants in this ambitious project, the style is astonishingly uniform throughout the work. After its completion in 1311, the polyptych was carried in a grand procession through the city streets to its installation in the Duomo. In its original state, the Maesta formed a complex assembly of panels around a monumental centerpiece (seven feet by thirteen feet) where the Virgin appears enthroned amid rows of saints and angels. Duccio's *Maesta* was placed above the high altar under the church's crossing dome. Consequently, it is elaborately painted on both sides.

On the front, the Madonna, over twice the size of the figures around her, fills the central axis. The charming blond-headed child playfully tugs at his mantle rather than extending his fingers in benediction. The Virgin's blue mantle is modeled with graceful arcs and overlaps. From the right knee, soft highlights fall naturally along the ridges of her mantle. The familiar gold spray is limited to a few touches at the feet, where her red dress is visible. As in the *Rucellai Madonna*, an elegant line of gold traces the hem of her mantle as it delicately falls across the expanse of blue.

Angels gather comfortably around the huge stone throne. They rest on its arms as they glance lovingly at the Virgin and Child. Two lower angels on each side of the throne turn and regard the beholder. Three rows of figures flank the Virgin. In the lowest, two local saints (identifiable only by the inscriptions beneath them) kneel on either side. In the second row, Saints John the Baptist, Peter, and Agnes stand on the right, John the Evangelist, Paul, and Catherine on the left. The uppermost tier is filled with more angels who quietly attend the community of holy people. While some Byzantine conventions are followed, the assembly of saints and angels appears intimate and approachable.

From this central core the *Maesta* expands into a complex ensemble of pinnacles and tiered panels. The central composition rests on a low horizontal predella, or pedestal, made up of small narrative panels illustrating the story of Christ's Infancy. The altarpiece was dismantled in the sixteenth century, and there is some controversy as to the exact arrangement of the original ensemble. Scenes from the final days of the Virgin—from her death to her
coronation—were lined up in the upper pinnacles. Exceptional is the episode of the
Annunciation of the Death of the Virgin (fig. 16), a rare event derived from apocryphal
accounts of Mary's life. The palm branch in Gabriel's hand is the only clue in distinguishing
the story from that of the familiar Annunciation of the Incarnation that begins the Infancy
cycle.
An important feature of this engaging scene is the dollhouse treatment of the chamber, with
the projection of the walls and ceiling beams that move diagonally to a vanishing axis on the
back wall. Gabriel approaches from an antechamber that also projects illusionistically. Within
a decade, Duccio's innovations in articulating naturalistic spatial relations had important
repercussions north of the Alps.

Forty-three narrative panels arranged in six tiers that illustrate stories of Christ's Ministry,
Passion, and post-Passion covered the backside of the Maesta. The Entry into Jerusalem (fig.
17), introducing the Passion sequence, is a tour de force in narrative detail. Jerusalem is
envisioned as a Tuscan hilltop village. A grand Palm Sunday procession along a diagonal road
leads past a walled precinct complete with gateway and orchard. Throngs of citizens gather
around the city gate to greet Christ. Some peer down from the crenellations in the wall or
from balconies. Youngsters clamber up trees fetching branches to place along Christ's way
into the city.

Similar pictorial devices appear in Duccio's large panel of the Crucifixion (fig. 18). The
bent body of the dead Christ hangs high over a throng of people around the cross. The faithful
have gathered on the left, the tormentors on the right. The two crucified thieves flank the
central cross, while weeping angels fly in clouds above the cross arms. Notable, too, is the
Virgin, who falls back into the arms of a female mourner, while John the Evangelist turns to
comfort her. Duccio skillfully conveys the emotional impact of Christ's brutal death.

Fig. 1: Bonaventura Berlinghiere, Altarpiece of St. Francis, 1235, tempera on panel, 60 X 46 inches

Fig. 2: School of Pisa, Crucifix No. 15, Late 12th century, Tempera on panel, 9' 3" X 7' 10"
Fig. 3: Coppo di Marcovaldo, *Crucifix*, 2nd half of 13th century, Tempera on pane, 9' 3"X 7' 10"

Fig. 4: Coppo di Marcovaldo, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1265, Tempera on pane, 7' 10"X 4' 6"

Fig. 5: Nicola Pisano, Marble pulpit, 1260, Bapistery, Pisa

Fig. 6: Nicola Pisano, *Annunciation, Nativity, Annunciation to Shepherds*, 1260, Bapistery, Pisa
Fig. 7: Nicola Pisano, *Personification of Virtue or Prophet Daniel*, 1260, Bapistry, Pisa

Fig. 8: Giovanni Pisano, *Virgin and Child*, c. 1305, Marble, 43 inches

Fig. 9: Giovanni Pisano, *Nativity and Annunciation to Shepherds*, c. 1305, Marble, 35 X 43 inches
Fig. 10: Giovanni Pisano and others, Siena Cathedral, 1284-1299

Fig. 11: Lorenzo Maitani and others, Orvieto Cathedral, Begun 1310

Fig. 12: Lorenzo Maitani, Scenes from Genesis, Orvieto Cathedral, 1310-15

Fig. 13: Lorenzo Maitani, Hell, from Last Judgment, Orvieto Cathedral, 1310-30
Fig 14: Duccio, Rucellai Madonna, 1285, panel, 14' 10" X 9' 7"

Fig 15: Duccio, Maesta, Central panel, 1308-1311, panel, 7 X 13 feet
Fig 16: Duccio, *Maesta, Annunciation of the Death of the Virgin*, 1308-1311, panel, 22 X 23 inches

Fig 17: Duccio, *Maesta, Entry into Jerusalem*, 1308-1311, panel, 41 X 30 inches

Fig 18: Duccio, *Maesta, Crucifixion* 1308-1311, panel, 41 X 22 inches