MEDIEVAL | RENAISSANCE

A Dialogue on Early Italian Painting

McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College
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Daley Family Gallery

Medieval | Renaissance: A Dialogue on Early Italian Painting

The closing centuries of the Middle Ages in Europe witnessed profound transformations in the art of painting. New materials and techniques gave way to an expanded repertoire of formats and artistic styles. Patronage and workshop practices evolved in tandem with culture-wide reassessments of the merit of authorship, while the criteria for value and authenticity in representation were redefined. These paradigm-shifting developments ramified into the academic study of art during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, creating a line of distinction between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that has proven difficult to redraw. Early Italian painting is an arena where the distinction is challenged and blurred.

This exhibition seeks to foreground this dialectic in the craft and conceptualization of painting in Italy with selected works from the more-than-century-old Frascione Collection in Florence. Curated by John Lansdowne and Stephanie C. Leone—professors of art history and specialists in the Medieval and Renaissance periods, respectively—the exhibition stages a dialogue between the two scholars, identified on object labels by their initials. Several paintings feature dual labels to highlight contrasting interpretive approaches. Overall, the exhibition encourages reflection on how the distinction between "Medieval" and "Renaissance" continues to shape our understanding of Western painting.

Organized by the McMullen Museum, *Medieval | Renaissance* has been underwritten by Boston College with major support from the Patrons of the McMullen Museum.

Nicolò di Pietro (fl. 1394–1430)
Lamentation, ca. 1420
Tempera and gold on panel
The Frascione Collection

This panel by Venetian artist Nicolò di Pietro captures the quiet agony felt in the immediate aftermath of Christ's death on the cross, prior to his entombment. A contrast to the often busy narrative-images of the Crucifixion, the Lamentation records a much more intimate and private moment—the mourning of a departed loved one by his family and friends.

Seated around Christ's horizontal body are his mother, Mary; women from Galilee; John the Apostle at center; and Mary Magdalene, dressed in red, anointing Christ's legs and feet. Set apart from the group, holding the hammer and nails, is Nicodemus, a vague figure in the Gospels who was reconceived in the Middle Ages as a sculptor. Indeed, there are many surviving sculpted crucifixes in Italy still attributed to his legendary authorship. Standing to get the best possible vantage point, Nicodemus is portrayed as the eyewitness, a role that all artists share—and a point not lost on a painter named Nicolò.

Finally, at the literal "crux" of the composition is the cross, once deep blue but now faded to black. Stark and abstract, the upright cross, contrasted with the supine Christ, foregrounds the mourners while offering the viewer an alternate devotional focus. JL

Attributed to Il Pordenone (Giovanni Antonio de' Sacchis) (ca. 1484–1539)
Verification of the True Cross, mid-16th century
Oil on panel
The Frascione Collection

The subject of this oil painting speaks to the pervasive fixation on verification into the sixteenth century and well beyond. It depicts a dramatic moment, when a recently deceased man is miraculously healed. This miracle is effected through the large wooden cross brought to the man's deathbed. For this is not just any cross, but the True Cross—and the miracle confirms the relic's veracity.

Legend attributes the discovery of the True Cross to excavations sponsored in Jerusalem by Saint Helen, the fourth-century Roman empress, depicted here wearing the orange-yellow robe. The person who actually found the cross, however, was Judas, a local Jew, depicted at the far right, set apart from the rest of the group. Marginal, non-Christian personalities like Judas frequently appear as authenticating devices in Christian legends, their testimony providing external validation. Note how the revived man reaches out to touch the cross, his notion of truth tied to physicality. In contrast, the viewer is positioned to verify by sight—to see the painting and to believe—as the cross cuts diagonally through the exact center of the composition.

The painting is recently attributed to the early career of Il Pordenone, a painter trained in Venice and active in northern Italy. JL

Umbra or Marche

Croce dipinta, late 13th century

Oil on panel

The Frascione Collection

Umbria or Marche

Croce dipinta, late 13th century
Tempera and metals on panel
The Frascione Collection

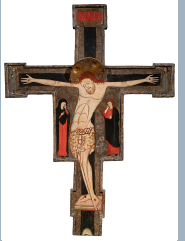
This painted crucifix, or *croce dipinta*, was originally installed atop a choir screen, or *tramezzo*, which physically walled off the sanctuary from the congregation. With viewers unable to observe the liturgy beyond the screen, the crucifix offered a visual focus. Aligned with the altar yet facing the people, the monumental image of Christ's body was a powerful stand-in for the Eucharistic host.

Overlaying the composition, his skin gleaming wafer white, Christ seems to detach from the panel. The form of his body is intentionally fragmented, as if designed to be pieced apart in the viewer's mind. This modularity is especially evident in the schematic treatment of Christ's abdomen, or "bread basket."

A *croce dipinta* seen from either side of the choir screen. Details from frescoes by Giotto di Bondone and Workshop, 1297–1300, Upper Church, Basilica di San Francesco, Assisi.

Anxiety in the later Middle Ages over the exact nature of Christ's presence in the Eucharist gave rise to graphic images of Christ's human suffering, borne from the Byzantine tradition of the *Christus patiens*. Devotion to Christ's wounds could veer toward the fetishistic, as reflected in the writings of the thirteenth-century Franciscan mystic James of Milan: "O wounds! Piercing stony hearts, setting frozen minds ablaze, willing adamantine spirits to melt—and all through love! Surely you are our life, our sweetness, and our hope!"

This crucifix is significantly altered from its original appearance. The cross has faded from blue to black and the ground has been scrubbed of its vibrant color and gilding, likely owing to changing aesthetic preferences. JL



Umbria or Marche

Croce dipinta, late 13th century
Tempera and metals on panel
The Frascione Collection

This painted crucifix represents a watershed in the history of Italian art. It is deeply rooted in the Medieval tradition of Christian images while heralding a shift to what we now call the Renaissance. The traditional typology of the crucifix—Christ on the cross, flanked by the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Evangelist—has been adapted here to include Saints Francis and Clare. In the early thirteenth century, Francis established the Order of Friars Minor. His follower, Clare, created the sister Order of Poor Ladies. Their presence indicates an original Franciscan site.

Saint Francis sought to make the mysteries of Christianity accessible to common people. Franciscan churches displayed monumental crucifixes to assist beholders in visualizing Christ's death to inspire contemplation of His sacrifice for Salvation.

Francis's emphasis on the humanity of Christ is reflected in the exploration of verisimilitude in Franciscan art. In this *croce dipinta*, the witnesses react poignantly to Christ's death. Francis raises his hands with the stigmata as he gazes at its source, Christ's wounds, expressing wonder at the resemblance. Christ's body twists in response to physical weight. The rounded fabric of his loincloth draws his torso forward toward the beholder's space. The three-dimensional halo—made of a separate piece of wood set at an angle to the cross—enhances the illusionistic pictorial effects. The physicality of Christ's body conjures His dual nature of human and divine. SCL

Perspective of a Renaissance Art Historian

For what is it that enlightens men's minds the way that an education in and knowledge of literature and the liberal arts do?
Cassandra Fedele, *Oration in Praise of Letters*, ca. 1487

Renaissance humanist, scholar, and writer Cassandra Fedele celebrates the uplifting power of the humanities. This curriculum was a defining feature of the Italian Renaissance, pursued by men and some women of diverse social status. Art theorists used ideas from humanism to raise the status of the visual arts, which had been considered manual work in the Medieval period. Leon Battista Alberti, Giorgio Vasari, and others argued that painters, sculptors, and architects were not only craftsmen but also intellectuals because their work drew upon geometry, arithmetic, rhetoric, literature, and other humanistic subjects. Renaissance artists used this knowledge to create images and buildings that could teach and inspire.

This relationship between the visual arts and human intellect raises questions for Renaissance art historians. How did artists study classical antiquity, and emulate the principles of ancient art, such as verisimilitude, the imitation of nature? How did artists assert a sense of selfhood? How did artists distinguish their art through an individual, often inimitable, style?

In the *Lives of the Artists* (1568), Vasari argued that Italian art from about 1300 to 1550 comprised a series of great artists (over two hundred men and a handful of women), building on and surpassing their predecessors through their knowledge of ancient art and their individuality. Echoing this view, art historian Bernard Berenson wrote in 1896: "Florentine painting was pre-eminently an art formed by great personalities."

This narrative of genius and invention offers a useful starting point for understanding Renaissance art. But not all artists or works of art fit into this hegemonic model. Instead, this period on the Italian peninsula encompasses diverse formats, subjects, and styles, many based on Medieval traditions and local preferences. Art was valued not only for novelty but also continuity. To interpret art as evidence of the past, we must look beyond periodization to the specific circumstances of how art was made, where it was displayed, and what purposes it fulfilled.

Stephanie C. Leone

Perspective of a Medieval Art Historian

The figures of the saints were depicted just as they originally were—in appearance, and in condition, and in style.
Giordano da Pisa, Feast of the Epiphany at Santa Maria Novella, 1305/6

These words, read from the pulpit by a prominent theologian at the Dominican church in Florence, prompt questions at the heart of art historical inquiry: *What gives art value? What is it that makes an image real?* For centuries after antiquity, authenticity or "truth" in visual representation was measured by the degree of its connection to distant prototypes. In the later Middle Ages, this age-old metric was in flux. Medieval commentators' obsessions with the origins of objects and elusive artistic sources signal a fundamental reconfiguration of the criteria for verisimilitude in art—art's perception of realness. Driving this value-shift was a culture-wide pursuit of verifiable proof.

The emergence of the artist, so essential to the story of the Renaissance, can be understood as an evolution in the meaning of authorship. In a culture that privileged tangible evidence, authorship offered testimony, and painters came to be seen as eyewitnesses. Credence in the evidentiary potential of images taken "from life" concretized in tandem with trends toward naturalism in art. This new parameter also morphed into a demand for increasingly idiosyncratic individual renditions of nature, supplied by identifiable master-painters, who, for virtually the first time in Italy in over a millennium, began attaching their names to their handiwork. "Who made it" has since become the ultimate indicator of value in works of art.

Medieval art history is mostly freed from the modern preoccupation with individual artists, encouraging scholars to focus on the theoretical underpinnings of art-making and art's anthropological function. Early Italian painting thus presents a wonderful dilemma, one complicated by later biographers and connoisseurs, whose narratives tend to overstate the cultural value afforded to early artists in their own time. Although set squarely within the age of the artist, the paintings on view reflect a moment when authorship and innovation signified not creative genius but above all a traceable *source*.

John Lansdowne

Art History and Classification

Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), in his *Lives of the Artists*, was the first to organize the history of Italian painting into successive periods. He described a golden age of classical antiquity, when art was perfected; a "dark age" where the principles of antiquity were lost; and a gradual rebirth of art beginning around 1300 and culminating in the mid-sixteenth century—when Vasari was writing.

In the nineteenth century, historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818–97) gave a name—*Renaissance*—to the period of rebirth in Vasari's framework and solidified the division between the Middle Ages and what followed. This binary periodization was adopted by foundational art historians such as Bernard Berenson—a scholar, dealer, and collector—who applied it with great influence to the study of Italian painting. Much early inquiry was grounded in connoisseurship, which prioritized attribution and the organization of artworks into periods and regional schools.

As art history has matured since the Second World War, scholars have questioned the validity of periodization and, specifically, the boundaries of the Italian Renaissance. Meanwhile, the academic fields of Medieval art and Renaissance art were swiftly developing into divergent spheres of study, with distinct cultures and interpretive approaches. By the time Boston College established its Art History Program in 1970, "Medieval" and "Renaissance" were already formalized institutional categories, each with its own journals, sponsors, and professional opportunities.

Italian painting of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries falls in a liminal space considered part of both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. As a result, works and artists from this transitional period are studied—even claimed—by both fields. Early Italian painting is the domain where the distinction between the two epochs was first articulated. Nowhere is the contrast in interpretation more pronounced.

Luca Signorelli (ca. 1450–1523), with assistance of **Francesco Signorelli?**
Holy Family with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Francis, ca. 1510
Oil on canvas
The Frascione Collection

Luca Signorelli painted mostly in small cities and towns in Tuscany and Umbria, but also received commissions from the Medici in Florence and the papacy in Rome. Signorelli is known for creatively interpreting the Medieval Madonna and Child theme and for representing the male nude, a Renaissance interest inspired by ancient art, both exemplified in the present painting.

The round format (*tondo*) and the subject signal that it probably was made for the home. Signorelli elaborates here on an iconic Madonna and Child by including Joseph, John the Baptist, and Francis. This selection of saints indicates the devotional interests of the patron even though his/her identity is unknown.

The sturdy and muscular body of John the Baptist—a characteristic of Renaissance art—raises the question of whether the patron chose Signorelli for his known exploration of anatomy, admired by the young Michelangelo, according to Vasari. The style of the Madonna's and Francis's drapery has been attributed to the hand of Luca's nephew, Francesco, who worked in his uncle's workshop. Despite new opportunities for education in the Renaissance, this Medieval apprenticeship system persisted. SCL

The Madonna and Child and the Legend of St. Luke

Devotional images of the Madonna and Child proliferate in the history of Christian art. Their ubiquity owes much to Medieval legends about portraits of the Virgin Mary and infant Christ painted "from life" by St. Luke the Evangelist.

The story of St. Luke's alleged eyewitness depictions established conventions for representing the Madonna and Child that were repeated ad infinitum. For many centuries, the credibility of a contemporary image of this subject was often measured by its supposed likeness to ancient prototypes—considered "image-relics"—made in the venerable style of icons from the Christian East.

During the Renaissance, changing views about the valence of authorship opened new possibilities for how to portray the Madonna and Child. Styles increasingly reflected the period's trends toward naturalism, though the time-honored format and composition were preserved. Authoritative representation, once reserved for sacred actors, was now ascribed to living painters, heirs to St. Luke, the patron saint of painting.

Altarpieces

An altarpiece is a work of art—typically a painting or ensemble of panels—positioned above and behind an altar. Primarily a feature of Western Christianity, image-bearing structures developed as a way to display special devotional images, many imported from the Greek East. Indeed, while altarpieces first appeared in the eleventh century, the practice accelerated after the Sack of Constantinople in 1204, which brought a surge of Byzantine icons into the West. The centuries that followed witnessed the proliferation of altarpieces, fitted with new images and commissioned on spec.

Many altarpieces took the form of polyptychs, multiple panels fused into one structure, created in collaboration between painters and carpenters. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries oversaw the production of massive altarpieces with elaborate architectural frameworks designed to hold panels of varying sizes and geometric shapes. With the Renaissance introduction of the unified rectilinear picture, artists used altarpieces as opportunities to experiment with new possibilities of representing co-extensive space, recognizable settings, figural interaction, and the simulation of natural light. But local traditions remained, with polyptychs and Medieval characteristics enduring well into the fifteenth century, as seen in the Master of the Ligurian Polyptych in this exhibition.

In today's museums, paintings designed for altarpieces often exist in fragmentary form, stripped from their original settings, and separated from other paintings with which they were once displayed. Over time, polyptychs were dismantled to accommodate changing spaces, and, in recent centuries, scavenged by dealers for a growing market in Early Italian painting. Individual panels were easier to handle and more suitable for modern interiors. Many were reframed and cut down into rectangles—the uncompromising pictorial format of postmedieval art.

Simone Martini, *Polyptych of Santa Caterina (Pisa Polyptych)*, 1319, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa

Master of Barberino

Enthroned Madonna and Child with Bishop-Saint and Saint Michael the Archangel, ca. 1365

Tempera and gold on panel

The Frascione Collection

Master of Barberino

Enthroned Madonna and Child with Bishop-Saint and Saint Michael the Archangel, ca. 1365

Tempera and gold on panel

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The Madonna and Child dominate this composition, their centrality in the devotional hierarchy demonstrated by their scale and privileged placement atop the painting's pyramidal structure. To the left stands a bishop-saint, with his mitre and crozier. The book in his hand identifies him as one of the Latin Church Fathers, whose theological writings, known collectively as Patristics, carried exceptional authority in the Middle Ages.

Opposite the bishop is Saint Michael the Archangel, who bears his spear in one hand and weighs departed souls in the other, as a demon stands in wait. Michael looks out to engage the viewer directly, his gaze a pointed reminder of the judgment that awaits all at the end of life. The scale, made of silver, now tarnished and dull, once gleamed metallic, placing further emphasis on the judgment yet to come.

The haloed figures of the infant Christ and his mother are set against the schematic representation of a richly ornamented textile, called the *cloth of honor,* suspended from the panel's triangular frame. The textile's gold floral decoration was made in sgraffito, a technique where the surface layer of colored paint is deliberately scratched away to reveal in a pattern the gilding underneath.

Scholars attribute the panel to the so-called Master of Barberino, an unnamed Florentine workshop associated with a polyptych altarpiece now divided between Florence and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The convention of *Notnamen*—German for "names of necessity"—is a way to assign authorship to anonymous or unclassified works. These provisional names, which arose within connoisseurial art history, a world of dealers and collectors, retroactively impose authorship onto works for whom that measure of artistic value was not originally present. JL

Master of Barberino

Enthroned Madonna and Child with Bishop-Saint and Saint Michael the Archangel, ca. 1365

Tempera and gold on panel

The Frascione Collection

Large-scale altarpieces of the *Maestà*—that is, the Madonna and Child seated on a throne in heaven—were encouraged by the Franciscans and other Mendicant Orders to assist worshippers in contemplating the Incarnation of God. The seated Christ Child rests in his mother's arms, supported by her weighty body. The pair's mass conveys their humanity, contrasting the delicacy of the goldfinch in Christ's hand. A symbol of the Passion, the bird foretells Christ's adulthood of suffering and death, essential to God's plan for Salvation.

The special role of the Virgin Mary in Christian theology transcends historical periods. The *Maestà* depicts her reward for enabling the Incarnation and ultimately Salvation: her eternal enthronement in heaven with her Son. Her traditional color of blue associates her with the divine world. The white ermine lining of her cloak symbolizes her royalty.

The statuesque treatment of the Virgin Mary demonstrates this master's awareness of contemporary trends in Florentine painting, influenced by Giotto (d. 1337), his student Taddeo Gaddi, and followers. Vasari called Giotto, who painted a *Maestà* around 1310, the "father" of Italian art because he was "a disciple of Nature rather than of other masters." SCL

Giotto, *Maestà (Enthroned Madonna and Child)*, ca. 1310, tempera on panel, Uffizi, Florence

Ludovico Urbani (1460–93)
Annunciation and the Adoration of the Eucharist, late 15th century
Tempera on panel
The Frascione Collection

This composition takes the form of a perspective box divided into two narrative scenes. At left, the Annunciation, in which the Angel Gabriel surprises the cloistered Virgin Mary with news she is miraculously pregnant with the Son of God. At right, a high-ranking ecclesiastical figure venerates a colossal Eucharistic host, marked by a faded cross and hovering above a chalice, on display like a target for adoration. Looming large, the outsized form lends the abstract white wafer a presence verging on the anthropomorphic, underscoring its status as the body of Christ.

The Annunciation heralds the Incarnation, the moment that the immaterial Word materialized as flesh in Mary's womb. On the other side of the divide, the consecrated host offers the ultimate material proof of this miraculous event, which became Medieval Christianity's primary theological rationale for image-making.

The panel is attributed to Ludovico Urbani, a leading painter in the region of Marche. Originally part of a predella at the base of an altarpiece, it has been cropped and separated from its larger ensemble—a common practice among early art dealers. JL

Domestic Art

During the Renaissance, the quantity and variety of domestic art increased exponentially, in part fueled by economic prosperity in Central Italy and the growth of cities. Life's significant milestones, such as marriage and childbirth, were celebrated with a flourishing material culture. Marriage was an opportunity for families to create social and economic alliances, and childbirth was essential for ensuring prosperity and lineage. Homes were filled with objects that were at once utilitarian, pleasing to the eye, and edifying. Artists responded in creative ways, inventing new forms and decorative conventions.

Childbirth carried great risks for the mother and child, including high mortality rates. To encourage an auspicious outcome, births were commemorated with various objects, most notably painted wooden birth salvers or trays (*descchi da parto*) used to carry refreshments to a mother after childbirth. Inventories and paintings of interiors reveal a white cloth placed over the decorative surface for protection. Their format and subject related to their function and intended messages.

Giovanni di ser Giovanni Guidi (called Scheggia) (1406–86)

***Birth Salver (desco da parto)*, 1486**

Tempera and gold on panel

The Frascione Collection

Brother of the famous painter Masaccio, Scheggia specialized in domestic art. Vasari celebrated Masaccio's monumental narrative paintings—a standard of achievement in the Renaissance—but ignored Scheggia's small-scale decorative arts. This tray, attributed to Scheggia on the basis of style, displays the same nuanced modeling, facial features and atmospheric perspective, as his renowned tray of *The Triumph of Fame* for the birth of Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–94).

Scheggia, *The Triumph of Fame*, ca. 1449, tempera, silver, and gold on wood, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The fronts of trays typically display narrative scenes; backs might depict a naked infant. In this case, the lively boy instead appears on the front, holding a golden crown and wearing beads and a cross of talismanic coral. These auspicious symbols may allude to the infant Moses, who is depicted on another tray, seen below.

The figural scene is mounted in a gold frame with a stand on the back. The front of the frame is decorated with roundels of an adult and elder man and the coats of arms of the Florentine Alamanni and Capponi families. The imagery and form of the frame are unusual for a birth tray, which was a movable object. An original birth tray (or a painted back of a tray) might have been repurposed for display at a later moment. SCL

The Infant Moses Tried by Fire, ca. 1490, tempera and gold on wood, Currier Art Museum, Manchester

Attributed to Bartolo di Fredi (ca. 1330–1410)

Unidentified Saint, mid- to late 14th century
Tempera on panel
The Frascione Collection

This image of a male saint once formed part of a larger polyptych altarpiece. Though formerly identified with St. James the Lesser, the book in his left hand points toward one of the four evangelists, perhaps St. John. Maintaining eye contact with the viewer, the saint is depicted thumbing the book, no doubt his eponymous Gospel, whose human authorship was directed by God. This gesture weighs the text against the depicted presence of the saint—who is both author and instrument—engaging with the constant tension in Medieval Christianity between the competing primacies of image and word.

The figure was made in tempera, pigments bound together with egg yolk, a medium prized for its durability and retention of color. The ground has not fared so well, with most of its gilding having flaked away over time. Reflective gold grounds, which by design inhibit any recession into the space of the painting, have the effect of projecting the figure forward to the panel's surface, the space of devotional encounter with the viewer.

Around the saint's head is a halo enclosed within an honorific frame. Both are meticulously crafted by metal punches in a variety of shapes and sizes—a hallmark of fourteenth-century painting, especially in the Republic of Siena. It is a paradox of Medieval art that immaterial things, such as haloes, are very often given the most material forms.

A rectangular section at the bottom of the panel is missing, perhaps lost when the painting was reframed. This loss has revealed a series of incised majuscule letters. Graffiti are common on early paintings and often carry devotional significance, recording names, dates, sketches, and short prayers. JL

Attributed to Bartolo di Fredi (ca. 1330–1410)

Unidentified Saint, mid- to late 14th century
Tempera on panel
The Frascione Collection

The history of Italian painting is, in fact, a collection of stories of regional schools with distinct characteristics, such as Florentine, Sienese, and Venetian. The somewhat ironic words of British writer and art critic Vernon Lee, in 1898, pinpoint the common perception of the Sienese school: "It was certainly mean-spirited of the Sienese to persist in being purely mediaeval right through the Renaissance….Of course, they ought to have toiled away at anatomy, perspective, movement, and the modern spirit in general, like the Florentines….But they just would not or could not."

Early art historians, who defined the Renaissance according to Florentine verisimilitude, criticized the "medieval" characteristics of fourteenth-century Sienese paintings, such as decorative and colorful surfaces, sinuous lines, and ethereal figures. At the same time, their spiritual quality attracted collectors in nineteenth-century Great Britain. Panels from dismembered altarpieces, such as the present painting, could be acquired inexpensively on the art market.

Around 1900, interest in the Sienese school spread more widely. Art historian dealer-collectors Frederick Mason Perkins and Mary and Bernard Berenson researched Sienese painters and attributed paintings to define their respective oeuvres. Isabella Stewart Gardner was among the first collectors to introduce Early Italian paintings to the US, importing the debut works by celebrated Sienese painter Simone Martini.

The present panel of a saint both confirms and belies the perception of the Sienese school as *retardataire* (outdated). The extensive use of punchwork emphasizes the two-dimensional surface over perspective. But the subtle modeling of flesh and drapery endows the saint with an insistent presence, a trait associated with the Renaissance. SCL

Martini, *Virgin and Child with Saints*, ca. 1320, gold and tempera on panel, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

Artistic Production

The guild system was fundamental to the organization of artistic labor in the urban centers of late Medieval Italy. Guilds, or *arti*, governed quality standards, regulated training practices, and certified practitioners. This structure ensured a degree of conformity and continuity with local artistic conventions, thus fostering distinctive civic styles.

Artistic training and production took place in the workshop, or *bottega*, each built around a master-artist—*maestro* or *magister*. Making paintings was collaborative, with assistants and apprentices all contributing to commissions on behalf of the workshop, under the master's name. Indeed, when names of master-painters first began appearing on works, they served to promote and validate the workshop brand.

Within this system of collective labor, master-painters eventually gained renown as standalone artists, their reputations cultivated by elite patrons and influential friends. This growing emphasis on individual artistic identity, still embedded in the cooperative structures of the guild and the *bottega*, anticipated the redefinition of the artist from a skilled craftsperson to a creative intellectual. The establishment of artist academies in the mid-sixteenth century—the time of Vasari—would formalize this shift.

Attributed to Bernardino di Bosio Zaganelli
(Bernardino da Cotignola) (ca. 1460/70–ca. 1510)
Madonna and Child with Mary Magdalene, ca. 1500
Oil on panel
The Frascione Collection

This tender composition quietly foretells the events of the Passion. Rolling off his mother's lap, the infant Christ leans forward toward the figure of Mary Magdalene. In her hand is the jar of ointments that she will use to anoint Christ's body upon his death. Everyone in the scene—even the child—knows what lies ahead. But significantly, Christ does not resist his fate. Rather, in a playful gesture, he willingly grasps the Magdalene's jar with one hand and prepares an oil-dipped blessing with the other.

The content of the vessel is a perfumed sacramental oil, called chrism. The attention afforded the chrism in the painting serves to emphasize Christ's messianic identity as "the Anointed One." This layered symbolism was highly pertinent to Renaissance painters, who first began rendering Christ's body in oil-mixed pigments.

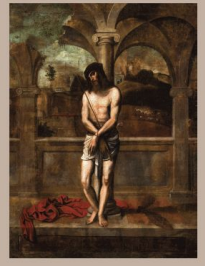
The Virgin's mournful expression, with eyes cast askance, deepens the painting's melancholy tone. Her sidelong gaze is a common feature of earlier Italian images as well as contemporary icons imported from Crete, a category of art certainly familiar to the painter. The work was attributed by Roberto Longhi to Bernardino da Cotignola, an artist active in the later fifteenth century in Parma and Ravenna. JL

Attributed to Evangelista di Pian di Meleto (1458–1549)

Saint Sebastian, ca. 1498–1502
Oil on panel
The Frascione Collection

This painting offers another instance of the body on display—spotlit, set apart, and squared up for devotion. The figure is Saint Sebastian, a former Roman soldier martyred under Emperor Diocletian. According to his *vita*, or hagiography, Sebastian survived execution by a volley of arrows, a tribute to his faithful fortitude. He was later clubbed to death and his body dumped into the Cloaca Maxima, the ancient sewer system of Rome.

Key to the composition is the single arrow, which pierces Sebastian's abdomen and interrupts the painting's vertical axis. Christian iconography is marked by its audacious habit of reclamation, wherein instruments of terrible suffering are recast as triumphant vehicles to sainthood. The arrow thus became Sebastian's defining attribute, with numerous arrow relics preserved today in church treasuries across Europe.



Workshop of Moretto da Brescia (ca. 1498–1554), *Ecce Homo*, 16th century, oil on panel, Museo Civico il Correggio

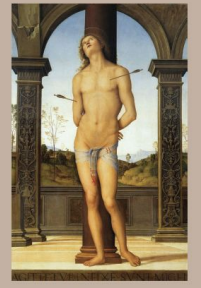
Images of the bound Saint Sebastian were modeled on the visual language of the *Ecce Homo*, the scene of Christ's presentation by Pilate before the people of Jerusalem. In both iconographies, the figures are explicitly "shown" yet with essential differences. Christ is robed, his hands crossed in front of his body, surrounded by a crowd. By contrast, Sebastian is unclothed, his hands tied behind his back, and alone. This deliberate iconographical inversion positioned Sebastian as an *alter Christus* and gave artists one of the only other sanctioned outlets to explore the nude male body in a devotional context. Over time, the iconography, with its isolated torment and eroticized form, played a central role in shaping Sebastian's status as a queer icon. JL

Attributed to Evangelista di Pian di Meleto (1458–1549)

Saint Sebastian, ca. 1498–1502
Oil on panel
The Frascione Collection

This painting of the early Christian martyr Saint Sebastian raises the issues of artistic lineage and authorship. It is one of a succession of fifteenth-century paintings of the isolated saint undergoing torture, from Andrea Mantegna, to Antonello da Messina, and Perugino.

Bernard Berenson's assertion that "[the Renaissance's] grasp of facts was far firmer than that of the Middle Ages" can be applied to these paintings. Sebastian's nude body has a human appearance but is idealized like a statue of an ancient god. Melding principles of ancient art with a Christian subject, Sebastian's heroism is communicated through physical perfection. His foreshortened head and upward glance make clear that his strength comes from God, who illuminates his body. Yet, the divine light works in naturalistic ways, warming his skin and casting smoky shadows.



Pietro Perugino, *Saint Sebastian*, ca. 1495, oil on panel, Louvre, Paris

Vasari extolled this union of ideal and real, tracking its development through individuals who often sought to outdo other artists. Art historian Roberto Longhi (1890–1970), attributed this Sebastian to the young Raphael while closely associated with Perugino. The relationship to Perugino's *Sebastian* is evident in the graceful pose, squarish jaw and delicate features. But the tendency to linear description sets this painter apart from Perugino and Raphael.

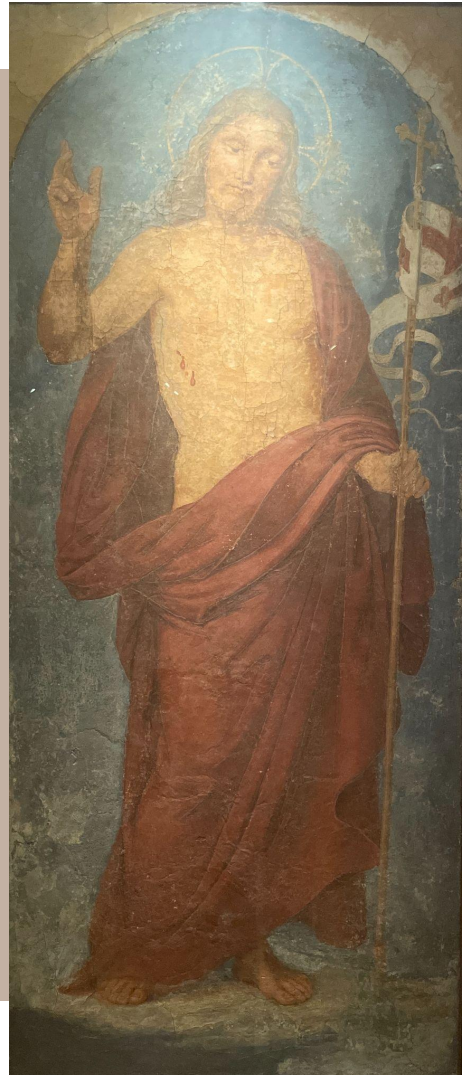
The lesser-known Evangelista di Pian di Meleto—a pupil of Raphael's painter-father Giovanni Santi and assistant to Raphael—has been suggested. Cultured viewers might have recognized Evangelista's artistic lineage, but it is unlikely that competition was his main objective. Instead, fifteenth-century painters sought to create effective devotional images. Evangelista's *Saint Sebastian* inspires the beholder to contemplate this exemplar of Christian faith. SCL

Circle of Perugino (ca. 1450–?1523)
Risen Christ, ca. 1500
Fresco
The Frascione Collection

Nothing is known about the original location and use of this detached fresco, which presumably was part of a larger image painted directly on a wall, probably in a sacred setting.

The fragment raises the question of the education of the artist in the Renaissance. Recent scholarship shows that many artists were better educated than previously thought. The present painter—a follower of Perugino and Raphael, like Evangelista di Pian di Meleto and the Master of the Scandicci Lamentation in the present exhibition—demonstrates knowledge of human anatomy and ancient sculpture, which were studied in the Renaissance.

The resurrected Christ supports his weight in a contrapposto stance with foreshortened feet firmly planted on the ground. His rotating torso and the modulation of light express a solid presence. The perfection of his body derives from the ancient ideal of improving upon nature, seen in statues of Apollo and other pagan gods. This combination of verisimilitude and artifice in depicting Christ expresses his dual nature of human and divine. SCL



Attributed to Lazzaro Bastiani (1429–1512)
Madonna and Child, late 15th century
Oil on panel
The Frascione Collection

This devotional panel of the Madonna and Child is a study of types and antitypes, Old Testament prefigurations and New Testament fulfillments. Depicted hesitantly holding an apple in her left hand, the Virgin Mary is reconceived as the New Eve. Eve, the first woman, disobeyed God by taking fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and giving it to Adam, the first man, to eat. This act of transgression expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden, an event that marked humankind's first fall from grace. Mary, by contrast, embodies Christianity's feminine ideal. By bearing the Son of God—the fruit of her womb—she enables and inaugurates the redemption from Adam and Eve's original sin.

Continuing along the prefiguration theme, the Christ Child can be understood as the New Adam. His redemptive sacrifice is subtly prefigured by the stone slab beneath his feet, calling to mind a sacrificial altar and the Stone of Lamentation, on which Christ's lifeless body was laid. According to Patristic tradition, Christ was crucified on the same spot where Adam was buried, with the foundations of the Son of Man's cross—often called the Tree of Life—rooted and rising vertically from the first man's grave.

The painting is attributed to the Venetian artist Lazzaro Bastiani. The landscape receding in the background evokes the architecture and terrain of the *stato da terraferma*, the Republic of Venice's mainland colonial dominion. JL

Master of the Ligurian Polyptych

Virgo lactans, 15th century
Tempera and gold on panel
The Frascione Collection

This image is a variation of the *Virgo lactans*, a popular theme in Medieval art since the twelfth century that depicts the Madonna enthroned and nursing the infant Christ. Discouraged in later centuries on grounds of propriety, the exposed breast was intended to illustrate physically and symbolically the linear bond between Christ and Mary, reflecting the rise in Marian devotion in the later Middle Ages.

Attributed to a workshop active in the early fifteenth century in Liguria, the painting retains the rigid style found in earlier examples of its image-type. This archaism is deliberate, raising the possibility that it was made to reference a specific prototype, likely a celebrated local cult-image.

A delicate pattern of diapered punchwork adorns the panel's worn gold ground. Textured ornamentation such as this was designed to shimmer under candlelight, animating the space occupied by the figures and elevating the panel's visual splendor. The raised majuscule inscription SANCTA MARIA VIRGINE in the Virgin's halo has a parallel aim, it was formed in *pastiglia*, a gesso technique that adds sculptural dimension.

The panel, which probably originally belonged to a triangular gabled altarpiece, was rounded off at the top and fitted within a rectangular frame, the favored format of modern collectors. JL

Religious Pictures in the Home

In the fifteenth century, the production of domestic art was the bread and butter of many workshops. Clergy encouraged families to have pictures of the Virgin Mary, Christ Child, and saints for use in religious instruction and moral guidance. Artists varied the format, from the typical rectangle to round (*tondo*), especially for the Madonna and Child and the Holy Family. The media ranged from tempera paint to sculptures of marble, terracotta, or stucco. In the sixteenth century, oil became the preferred painting technique. Italian families also collected more ephemeral religious images, like drawings and prints, as well as icons imported from the colonies of Italian maritime republics in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Master of the Scandicci Lamentation

Madonna and Child, ca. 1510–20
Tempera on panel
The Frascione Collection

This beautifully painted Madonna and Child raises questions about artistic lineage and selfhood. Documented in the renowned Barberini collections in Rome in the seventeenth century, the painting retains its original frame.

The artist demonstrates knowledge of Raphael's famous composition, the *Madonna del Granduca*, painted in Florence around 1506–07. In the early sixteenth century, referred to as the High Renaissance, Raphael set a new standard for this devotional subject, popular since Medieval times. His veristic, yet idealized style compellingly melds the human and divine natures of Mary and Christ. Raphael's achievement posed a challenge for other artists—to create a distinctive style that would surpass this level of perfection.

Probably working in Florence in the 1510s, the present painter places himself in the lineage of Raphael. But he amplifies the master's characteristics, evident here in the perfectly smooth skin, preciosity of facial features, and complexity of the figures' intertwined poses, perhaps seeking to establish his individual style.

Raphael, *Madonna del Granduca*, ca. 1506–07, oil on panel, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence

The painter's identity remains uncertain. The Barberini inventories name him as Innocenzo Francucci da Imola (ca. 1490–ca. 1545), but modern art historians attribute the painting to the Master of the Scandicci Lamentation (a means to impose authorship on an anonymous master). What is certain is that the present painter was influenced by the art of Perugino (ca. 1450–?1523) and his pupil or associate, Raphael. SCL

Piero di Cosimo (1461/62–1521)
Madonna and Child with Infant John the Baptist, ca. 1500
Oil on panel
The Frascione Collection

Vasari cemented the posthumous reputation of Florentine Piero di Cosimo by portraying him as a solitary genius, which led to disregard for his oeuvre until recently. Yet this painting of the Virgin Mary, Christ Child, and John the Baptist—attributed to Piero by art historian Carlo Volpe (1926–84)—reveals his engagement with major developments in Florentine Renaissance painting.

The small size and intimate treatment of the subject argue for its intended use to inspire personal devotion, likely in a *camera* (chamber) of a Florentine palace. Piero personalized the imagery through the tender embrace between the children, alluding to John's prescient recognition of his cousin's divinity, also symbolized by the reed cross. As the patron saint of Florence, John the Baptist offered a spiritual role model for the city's children.

Piero's painting exemplifies the search for a style that emulated Renaissance trends, yet is inimitable. He created unique facial features, while drawing upon the respective styles of the multi-generational Ghirlandaio workshop and Luca Signorelli, examples of whose works hang nearby. Similarities are seen in the complexity and mass of the heavily draped figural group, the saturated and glowing colors, and the Netherlandish landscape. SCL

Workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio (1448–94)
Madonna and Child, late 15th century
Tempera on panel
The Frascione Collection

Workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio (1448–94)

Madonna and Child, late 15th century

Tempera on panel

The Frascione Collection

This painting presents a standard grouping prized in smaller private devotional panels: the Madonna, the infant Christ, and the infant John the Baptist, Christ's older cousin. John is identified by his cruciform staff and hair-shirt, emblems of his ascetic life. The forerunner, John gestures toward Christ, with his famous quote—"Behold the Lamb of God"—ready on his lips. This composition was popular in Renaissance Florence, where John the Baptist was patron saint.

The Christ Child is depicted nude, his exposed genitalia attesting to his full humanity. He makes a blessing with one hand and grasps the parchment leaves of his mother's book with the other, a gesture that underscores his identity as the Incarnate Word.

Meanwhile, a more abstract conceptualization of the Word is signified in the radiant gold shoulder brooch on the Virgin's mantle, which bears the three letters *YHS*, with a small cross rising from the central *H*. Formed from a Latinized transliteration of the first three letters of *ΙΗΣΟΥΣ*, the name *JESUS* in Greek, this simple Christogram, with origins in the Early Middle Ages, reemerged in the fifteenth century as an inescapable element of Western Christian visual culture. It was adopted into the arms of the Society of Jesus in 1541 and appears today on the Boston College seal.

The painting is attributed to the workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio, the most prolific workshop in Florence in the latter half of the fifteenth century. The gilt frame is likely a nineteenth-century addition, crafted in imitation of originals from the fifteenth century. JL

Workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio (1448–94)

Madonna and Child, late 15th century

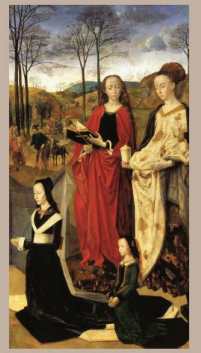
Tempera on panel

The Frascione Collection

Vasari praised Domenico Ghirlandaio's figures and settings for their verisimilitude, a key measure of value in his conception of the Renaissance. In this devotional painting of the Madonna and Child with the infant John the Baptist—surely made for a home in late fifteenth-century Florence—the painter created a convincing vision of the holy figures as though seen through a window.

The painter established a series of spatial planes to simulate the three-dimensional world. In the foreground, Christ stands on a parapet, with John the Baptist to the right. Mary is positioned slightly behind them, forming a stable triangle that visually supports and unites the figures. A verdant landscape, echoing Flemish examples, recedes through atmospheric perspective: forms in the distance are progressively less distinct. The complex positions of the figures and careful modulations of light and shadow simulate weight and the potential for movement. Maintaining a contemplative demeanor, Mary interacts with her Son, as he acknowledges his reverent cousin. The spiritual mood reminds us that this youthful mother and her child are not contemporary figures but rather part of God's plan for Salvation.

Domenico Ghirlandaio operated an active workshop in Florence, whose assistants and pupils worked collectively on the master's designs. Among them was the young Michelangelo (1475–1564). After Domenico's death in 1494, the workshop continued into the mid-sixteenth century under the supervision of his brother Davide and son Ridolfo. The McMullen Museum has on display on the first floor a painting of the Madonna and Child by Michele Tosini, a member of the Ghirlandaio workshop in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. A painter's training in the Ghirlandaio workshop continued the Medieval craft system, while producing innovations in concept and style. SCL



Hugo van der Goes, *Portinari Altarpiece* (detail of right panel), 1477–78, oil on wood, Uffizi, Florence

Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1431–1516)
Portrait of Gabriele Veneto (Gabriele della Volta), ca. 1498–99
Oil on panel
The Frascione Collection

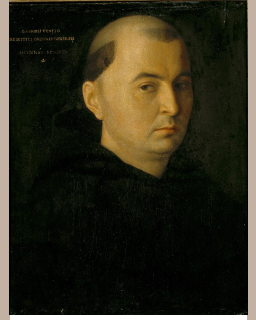
Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1431–1516)
Portrait of Gabriele Veneto (Gabriele della Volta), ca. 1498–99
Oil on panel
The Frascione Collection

This portrait employs the three-quarter pose that became the dominant format in sixteenth-century Italian portraiture after its emergence a century earlier in Netherlandish art. Depicting the sitter turned partially toward the viewer, the pose allows for a heightened sense of spatial presence and engagement. This format came to be the new standard for verisimilitude in portraiture in Italy, eclipsing the strict profile favored in the fourteenth century.

A grand purveyor of this new style was Giovanni Bellini, scion of Renaissance Venice's most important artistic dynasty. Scores of Giovanni's portraits and portrait-like devotional panels survive, many sharing the compositional qualities of Greek icons, a hallmark of Venetian visual culture.

The iconic quality of this portrait is enhanced by an inscription, written in gold, which names the sitter, stresses his Venetian identity, and specifies his monastic affiliation. Below this information appears Giovanni Bellini's name. Executed in *capitalis quadrata*, a prestigious display-script derived from ancient Roman monuments, the inscription is a visual marker of authority from a moment when the identity of the artist had fully emerged as a central concern.

The widespread inclusion of textual information in painted portraits has its roots in late Medieval practices of authentication. Beginning in the twelfth century, small labels called *authentica* were commonly affixed to religious objects like relics and sacred images. To name an object thus became akin to verifying its content. The documentary function of the inscription in the Bellini painting is made fully apparent upon realization it was probably added after the fact. JL



Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1431–1516)
Portrait of Gabriele Veneto (Gabriele della Volta), ca. 1498–99
Oil on panel
The Frascione Collection

The artist, style, and sitter of this rarely displayed portrait highlight the centrality of humanism in the Renaissance. The subject, Gabriele Veneto (1468–1537), was an Augustinian friar and General of the Order of Hermits, distinguished intellectual and theologian, and patron of the arts. Gabriele was deeply ensconced in humanist circles in Venice. His close friend was the celebrated scholar-poet, Pietro Bembo, who might have introduced him to Giovanni Bellini.

Giovanni hailed from the collective guild system and the family *bottega* (workshop), but he distinguished himself through a distinctive approach to painting. Giovanni revolutionized Venetian painting. Inspired by principles of ancient art, he carefully studied the natural world and employed the new technique of oil painting to simulate the effects of light and shadow as well as mass and weight. Humanists and art collectors eagerly sought his paintings.

In this portrait, Bellini fully exploits the medium of oil paint to simulate the carnality of the sitter. Subtle shadows convey the rotundity of his head and pensiveness of his gaze. Physically and psychologically present, the painting achieves the aim of portraiture as defined by art theorist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72): to make the absent present. As Berenson wrote of Venetian Renaissance painting, "now the arts tend to address themselves more and more to the actual needs of men, while in olden times they were supposed to serve some more than human purpose." SCL

Circle of Gentile Bellini

Portrait of a Monk or Prelate, second half of the 15th century
Tempera and oil on panel
The Frascione Collection

The costume of this middle-aged male figure indicates his ecclesiastical position, likely as a canon or prelate, though his rank and identity remain unknown. The sitter is rendered chest-high in strict profile. Luminous blue foregrounds the figure for close inspection.

Portraits in profile derive from a prestigious tradition of official state or institutional portraiture dating to classical antiquity and long associated with seals, medallions, and coins. Adopted by painters, profile-images conveyed the authority of currency, delivering a credible, seemingly sanctioned likeness—as if the sitter had been minted from life. The sober and unembellished mode of depiction in this portrait reinforces its documentary aura. At the same time, the lack of an identifiable setting serves to remove the figure from worldly lived space and places him into the realm of the timeless and iconic.

Unsigned, the painting bears a style closely matched to the workshop of Gentile Bellini, among the most prominent painters in the Republic of Venice in the second half of the fifteenth century. JL

Circle of Andrea del Verrocchio (ca. 1435–88)

Hannibal Carthaginiensis, late 15th century

Marble

The Frascione Collection

This marble bas-relief (originally rectangular in shape), made in the circle of Andrea del Verrocchio, reveals the creation of new subjects and formats in Renaissance art. Students in Verrocchio's workshop in Florence, including Leonardo da Vinci, learned a range of media and inventive practices.

This portrait represents Hannibal of Carthage, the opponent of Roman General Scipio Africanus in the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE). Inspired by the ancient Greek biographer Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, which juxtaposed the moral virtues of famous Greek and Roman men, humanists fueled the interest in antiquity and disseminated ancient history to people of various socio-economic means, including artists.

Verrocchio transformed his literary models into visual form. This relief might have hung facing that of Scipio Africanus now in the Louvre. Vasari tells us that the great art patron Lorenzo de' Medici, commissioned from Verrocchio bronze relief portraits of Alexander the Great and Darius III. These now lost bronzes inspired portraits of this pair and other famous men. Art historians have studied the attribution of the surviving reliefs, underscoring the significance given to authorship in the field of Renaissance art.

Andrea del Verrocchio or Workshop, *Scipio Africanus*, ca. 1465–68, marble, Louvre, Paris

Other factors also gave value to art. The profile of Hannibal emulates ancient coins of emperors; the relief's possible display in a *studiolo* (study) would associate its owner with the contempoary fashion for ancient culture. This new art form appreciated for intellectual stimulus and aesthetic pleasure. SCL