A NEW PANEL IN GIOVANNI DI PAOLO'S SAINT CATHERINE SERIES

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Most small painted panels of the Italian Renaissance in museums and private collections all over the world, framed and hung among easel pictures, give little or no impression today of the use they were originally put to as part of elaborate ensembles. Fire from overturned candelabra, dampness, and mold are some of the physical hazards which led to the dismembering of altarpieces or painted shrines; when such damage occurred, the panels left intact were salvaged and either rearranged or sold separately. Lean times, too, which often came to religious establishments when wealthy patrons felt an economic pinch or were momentarily disinclined to benefaction, prompted the superiors of convents to part with the predelle of their altarpieces and, when very hard pressed, to sell even the main panels. The documents relating to the convent of Sant' Antonio da Padova in Perugia make sad reading with their account of how in 1633 the sisters, owing money to the butcher and in debt for grain, wine, and oil, besought the Bishop's permission to sell the predella of Raphael's great Colonna Madonna, which, considering the painter's early and continued popularity, must have been one of their chiefest treasures as well as the most intrinsically valuable. A few years later the unlucky (or improvident) ladies, still deeply in debt, parted with the large main panel, which, after much travel and many vicissitudes, came as a gift from J. P. Morgan to this Museum. In similar ways many of the great Renaissance altarpieces were broken up and scattered, so that it is fairly unusual to find a large central panel with its predella preserved intact.

The reconstruction of an original arrangement from accurate measurement and careful study of its scattered parts is one of the diverting pastimes of the student of the history of art. It has more affinity with games than with serious labor, not only in the great satisfaction that rewards success but in the element of pure chance that determines the result. No amount of purposeful thinking will achieve a solution unless several factors combine to indicate that certain pictures originally belonged together—similarities of style, of dimensions, and of subject matter. There may, however, be a good deal of variety between the style of the main panel and that of the predella, since assistants in an artist's shop were often entrusted with the actual painting of the predella. Dimensions are not a sure check either, since two pictures demonstrably of the same series may not be of the same size because one of them has perhaps been cut down or added to. The subject matter, though often dictated by the wish of the donor, usually does follow a consistent plan through the various parts of an altarpiece. It is often the most significant clue, as in the case of the three predella panels by Domenico Ghirlandaio in this Museum since 1913, which, because of the correspondence between their subjects and the saints shown in the main panel, were identified by Gronau in 1927 as belonging to a large altarpiece in the Uffizi. Even when style, size, and subject matter agree, there are sometimes missing parts of the puzzle which the most painstaking search will not necessarily discover. Pictures are often buried away in some tiny chapel or pass from one private collection to another without public sale or exhibition, giving scholars no chance to relate them to their old companions.

In 1932 there came to this Museum with the bequest of Michael Friedsam an exquisite small panel by the Sienese painter Giovanni di Paolo, the Miraculous Communion of Saint Catherine of Siena, which is a part of one of these complicated puzzles—one that is as yet unsolved, although nine panels with scenes from

1 H. B. Wehle, Catalogue of Italian, Spanish, and Byzantine Paintings (New York, 1940), pp. 52 ff., ill.
2 Ibid., pp. 88 f.
the life and legend of Saint Catherine were listed by Bernhard Berenson in 1932 and published together by John Pope-Hennessy in his monograph on Giovanni di Paolo in 1937. A few years after our acquisition of the Friedsam panel, on one of the afternoons dedicated by the Museum staff to the examination of works of art, a picture turned up in the Department of Paintings that was plainly another member of the series but one that had never been published as a part of it by the scholars who have worked with the problem. It was acquired, probably in Rome, sometime after 1847 by the poet and sculptor William Wetmore Story, who lived in an apartment in the Barberini palace for many years before his death in 1894. Together with other pictures bought by Mr. Story it descended to his son Waldo Story, from whose widow it came to the present owners, Dr. and Mrs. H. H. M. Lyle of New York City. The lovely little painting shows Saint Catherine of Siena receiving the stigmata and, entirely aside from its significance in relation to the nine others of the series, deserves publication for its own sake.

Fra Raimondo de Vinea of Capua, who was Saint Catherine's confessor and devoted follower, began in 1384, four years after her death, the long biography given in full in the Acta Sanctorum, which, with the historical data about the earthly life of the saint, is the basis for all subsequent accounts. Caterina Benincasa, who was canonized in 1461 by Pope Pius II as Saint Catherine of Siena, was one of the twenty-five children of Jacopo Benincasa, a dyer. At the age of seven, looking up the steep hill toward the church of San Domenico, she had a vision of Christ seated on his throne; and from this time on, to the consternation of her worldly and fairly well-to-do family, she entertained a determination to devote her life to virgin sanctity. She was received into the third order of Saint Dominic and in 1374, during the outbreak of the plague in Siena, worked ceaselessly to help the afflicted. The life of Saint Catherine is distinguished from that of most female saints by its combination of the most ardent and ascetic personal mysticism with great activity in the world. We have evidence of her influence in her many letters to political leaders of the day, especially the important part she played in inducing Pope Gregory XI to return from Avignon to Rome, traveling to France to add her personal supplication to that of the harassed Florentines for whom she mediated.

It was while she was in Pisa that the proofs of divine favor in the form of the stigmata, which Saint Francis had received fifty years before, were imprinted on the hands and feet and over the heart of Saint Catherine. Early in the year 1375 she had gone to Pisa at the urgent request of many of its citizens. A considerable retinue went with her, including her mother, Monna Lapa, and three friars, who were to hear the confessions of the Pisans she hoped to convert. Catherine was lodged in the house of one of the prominent citizens and received a rich welcome in the city. In fact, she was so feted that Bianco di Siena, a poet of the order of the Gesuati, sent her a long warning, part of it couched in verse, cautioning her against the temptations of public acclaim and the role the devil might play in assailing and deluding her. Fra Raimondo and Fra Bartolomeo tried in vain to keep the ill-tempered and perhaps jealous message from her, but the saint insisted upon seeing it and, always a ready letter-writer, upon answering it. Her reply demonstrates admirably the kind of logic with which she was accustomed, intellectually and spiritually, to combat evil, and it suggests that she had already in her imagination courted the possibility of being honored with stigmatization.

"I myself tremble for fear of deception by the devil. . . . Not only in this, but in all I do, I always fear because of my own frailty and because of the astuteness of the devil, thinking that I may be deceived; for I know and see
SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA RECEIVING THE STIGMATA, BY GIOVANNI DI PAOLO. IN THE COLLECTION OF DR. AND MRS. H. H. M. LYLE, NEW YORK
that the devil lost blessedness, but not wisdom, and with that wisdom, or rather astuteness, he could deceive me. But I turn then and cling to the tree of the most holy Cross of Christ crucified, and thereto I would be fastened; and I doubt not that, if I be fastened and nailed to it with Him, through love and with deep humility, the devils will have no power against me, not because of my virtue, but by the virtue of Christ crucified."

The house of Catherine's Pisan host was very near the little church of Santa Cristina on the Lung'Arno. The church is still standing, and, though most of the present edifice is of the nineteenth century, near the entry on the right there is a fragment of one of the pillars of the earlier church with an inscription in Latin saying: "Here the Lord signed His servant Catherine with the signs of our redemption." The miracle is supposed to have occurred on the fourth Sunday in Lent of the year 1375. According to Fra Raimondo, Catherine had received communion and during the period of intense devotion that customarily followed the experience for her, when she was as far removed as possible from bodily sensation, she was seen to rise from her prostrate position and to kneel with arms and hands extended, her face glowing. This is the moment depicted in Dr. Lyle's little Giovanni di Paolo panel. She remained for a long time absolutely rigid, with her eyes closed, and then suddenly fell to the ground. After a short interval her spirit returned to the physical world. She called her confessor and informed him that she now bore in her own body the marks of the Lord Jesus, and when he asked her how God had effected this she described in detail how she saw the Lord fixed upon the cross and coming down with a great light. At the moment when she saw the bleeding rays descending from the five wounds of Christ toward her, she besought God most earnestly not to let them be externally visible, and, even while she was asking, the red, bloodlike color of the rays was changed to shining light, before they reached her.5

In our picture Saint Catherine kneels upon one knee, her gaze fastened on the crucified figure of Christ which is suspended in the air above the altar before which she prays. Here no rays connect the kneeling figure of the saint with the flying, seraphic form of Christ as they do in representations of Saint Francis at the moment of receiving the stigmata, nor does the saint display here, or in the other panels of the series, the wounds upon her hands and feet and side that are the distinguishing marks by which we may always recognize Saint Francis. Instead, everything is quiet; the pale, simple habit of Saint Catherine falls to the floor in straight unbroken folds, covering her feet completely and shrouding her head and throat, so that one may see only the small-featured face, eyes fixed on the Crucified, and the nervous, pointed fingers and slender wrists, which are bared and thrown upward and outward in adoration.

Saint Catherine of Siena was by no means the first devotee after Saint Francis who had received the stigmata. Within seventy-five years after his death in 1224 there were already some thirty cases, most of them women and especially women of the Dominican order. In the centuries since there have been nearly three hundred more, one of them the Bavarian farm laborer, Teresa Neumann, who was still living at Konnersreuth in 1932.7

It has been accepted as a scientific fact that thoughts and emotions can produce physical effects. Psychological literature of the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of this century, especially in France, abounds with studies of stigmatization. Psychologists find that this psychophysical phenomenon occurs occasionally in connection with suggestible natures. In the series of tableaux painted by Giovanni di Paolo, Saint Catherine is never shown in a state of agitation. Mr. Pope-Hennessy, in discussing the series, observes that the

THE MIRACULOUS COMMUNION OF SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA, BY GIOVANNI DI PAOLO. IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
pictures ignore "the element of hysteria in Saint Catherine's make-up," and "endow the legend instead with a kind of feminine serenity, which gives it a peculiar if not an altogether authentic appeal." 8

This appeal, present in so marked a degree in Dr. Lyle's panel, rendering the solemn subject touching rather than moving to the observer, is not lacking in the other nine paintings of the group. These other nine were all together in the Ramboux collection, and appear as numbers 113 to 121 in the catalogue of the sale of that collection in Cologne in 1862. 9 Dr. Lyle's panel had evidently left whatever ensemble they all composed long before, remaining in Italy where it was purchased by Mr. Story. As far as one knows at present, then, the group includes:


4. Saint Catherine Exchanging Her Heart with Christ, Stoclet Collection, Brussels. H. 11, w. 8 3/8 inches.

5. Saint Catherine Receiving Her Habit, Stoclet Collection, Brussels. H. 11, w. 8 3/4 inches.

6. Saint Catherine and Fra Raimondo, Stoclet Collection, Brussels. H. 11, w. 11 inches.

7. Saint Catherine before Pope Gregory XI at Avignon, Stoclet Collection, Brussels. H. 11, w. 11 inches.

8. The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine, Stoclet Collection, Brussels. H. 11, w. 11 inches.

9. Christ Appearing to Saint Catherine in the Guise of a Beggar, Stoclet Collection, Brussels. H. 11, w. 11 inches.

10. The Death of Saint Catherine, Minneapolis Museum. H. 11, w. 11 inches.

The nine Ramboux panels were thought by their former owner to have had a common provenance and to have formed a predella to the large Presentation in the Temple which Giovanni di Paolo painted in 1447 for the hospital of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena (now in the Accademia). But neither the dimensions nor the subject matter validate Ramboux's assertion. Placed side by side the ten panels would form a predella far too wide for the Scala picture, and there is no especial reason why a Presentation should have a predella devoted to Saint Catherine. Mr. Pope-Hennessy accepts Ramboux's provenance but objects to the idea that the pictures composed a predella. He concludes that there were probably in the original series more panels than now exist and suggests that they all may have been arranged around some image of Saint Catherine like the half-length painting of her

8 Op. cit., p. 133. 9 Pages 130 f.
Of the ten panels now known five are square and the other panels of approximately the same height, but narrower, so that any arrangement around a central figure is difficult to imagine unless one supposes that there were originally at least two more panels, or several very narrow panels with figures of single saints or angels to fill out the spaces and make the grouping symmetrical.

A careful examination of Mr. Lehman's panel offers one clue which might be expanded into a really useful argument about the original arrangement, were we able to see the others of the series, which are unfortunately now divided between Belgium and the repositories in this country where they have been...
sent for safekeeping. The right-hand edge of the panel, which is about one and five-eighths of an inch thick, shows distinct traces of a scene originally painted there. Some architecture is still visible; there is a shed roof with lines incised in perspective and above it a small patch of clear, light blue that must have been sky. The left-hand edge of the panel was originally gilded. Now if the sides were ornamented and expected to be seen, this panel must have projected beyond the setting of its neighboring panels. It might have adorned the base of one of the pilasters that often framed the ends of complicated polyptychs like the one by Sano di Pietro in the gallery at Siena. It could even have been attached to another panel set at right angles to it, to form the corner of a shrine or vestment chest. But the lack of any further or more convincing evidence renders any ideas about the original use of the panels mere guesswork. A vivid imagination, however, can conjure up a blissful moment: the weary student, abandoning the unfinished puzzle, opens some ancient guidebook to Siena, and comes quite accidentally upon a detailed description of an altar to Saint Catherine, decorated somehow with ten panels showing just the scenes depicted in our fascinating series.