The Presentation in the Temple by Giovanni di Paolo

By Harry B. Wehle

The Museum’s painting of the Presentation in the Temple, reproduced on the cover of this Bulletin, is characteristic of Giovanni di Paolo’s elaborated style. On this small panel the much loved Sienese artist exhibits to the full his dainty, somewhat high-strung vivacity, his delight in slender, graceful dramatis personae, with strange, thin faces and ropy hair. He reveals also his fondness for fresh, gay color and pervasive ornamental detail. Here as in most of his works Giovanni renounces solemnity and force in favor of delicacy and charm.

Though he was an unusually prolific painter, his work is seldom if ever tedious. That his highly individual qualities are appreciated by American collectors is evidenced by the fact that some fifty paintings by him are to be found in this country. In this connection we should remind ourselves that most of such pictures, entire though they are in themselves, were originally no more than the component parts of complex altarpieces. The Museum’s large polyptych of 1454 by Giovanni di Paolo, showing the Madonna and Child with Saints, is about 7 feet high and 8 feet wide. Originally it may have been surmounted by pinnacles with painted figures of saints or angels, and most likely it rested upon an architectural base or predella carrying three or five paintings of appropriate subjects.

Our little Presentation in the Temple must originally have belonged in the predella of some such altarpiece. Thus far nobody has identified the main altarpiece of which it formed a part, but John Pope-Hennessey (in his book on Giovanni di Paolo, dated 1937) and Henry S. Francis (in The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art for 1942) have recognized five existing paintings, including our Presentation, which apparently at one time constituted a complete predella. Four of the panels, our Presentation among them, are about 15 1/4 inches in height and 18 1/8 inches in width. In the National Gallery in Washington (Kress collection) is the panel with a combined subject, the Expulsion from Eden and the Annunciation, which was probably at the left end of the predella. Next came the Vatican Gallery’s Nativity, while beyond the center would have been the Cleveland Museum’s Adoration of the Magi and finally our Presentation in the Temple. In general the central panel in a predella was of the same height as the others but wider—and more weighty in subject matter. In the case of this predella the picture answering such requirements of size, style, and subject matter is the Crucifixion belonging to the Berlin Museum. It is about 2 3/4 inches wider than the other four.

Many beholders, having found in our paint-
ing of the Presentation such a markedly personal style, such an integrated completeness, must feel a distinct sense of surprise on learning that Giovanni di Paolo has taken bodily from the works of other artists practically all of the compositional ideas which are found in his picture. Such is the fact, however, and we are left marveling at the perfect assimilation of the appropriated elements, while we force ourselves to meditate upon the comparative lack of stress which the fifteenth century placed upon originality in art. Perhaps the connoisseur of Giovanni’s time recognized borrowed motives in such paintings with the same pleasurable sense of recognition that present-day concertgoers feel when they listen to Dvorak’s New World Symphony or to Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture.

The story of our picture’s precursors or creditors is a somewhat complicated one. It goes back to a great and impressive Presentation painted in 1342 by the Sienese Ambrogio Lorenzetti for the local Spadaletto di Monna Agnese. The painting, now in the Uffizi, was one of Ambrogio’s most elaborate works and it must long have held a high place in the popular esteem. It was in 1447, more than one hundred years after its completion, that Giovanni di Paolo received a commission to paint a large altarpiece with the same subject for the hospital of Santa Maria della Scala in the same city. Although no such specification actually appears in the extant contract for the altarpiece, the rectors of the guild ordering the work almost certainly made the verbal stipulation that the composition be based on Ambrogio’s painting. In any case the picture by Giovanni di Paolo, now in the Accademia at Siena, follows Ambrogio with surprising fidelity. The elaborate architecture of the church interior, with its tall, slender columns, is carefully reproduced and all the actors in the drama, as described in the second chapter of Saint Luke, make the same gestures and bear the same relation to one another. In both paintings the high priest officiates at the altar, Simeon, at the right, carries the infant Jesus, and the prophetess Anna, next to him, holds her scroll inscribed with the promise of redemption. At the left stands the Madonna with two women in attendance, and finally there is Joseph. Despite Giovanni di Paolo’s close adherence to his model his total effect is entirely different, for whereas Ambrogio’s figures preserve a calm Giottesque ponderousness, Giovanni’s are animated by his usual happy pizzicato. The new altarpiece evidently met with approval, for Giovanni was asked to repeat it for the Conservatorio di San Pietro at Colle di Val d’Elsa, this time on a somewhat smaller scale and omitting the protruding top which accommodated the cupola of the temple.

OPPOSITE: the Presentation in the Temple, by Ambrogio Lorenzetti. In the Uffizi, Florence
Thus we have seen the source from which Giovanni drew the composition of his two large Presentations. We come now to our own little panel, in which there appear some divergences from Ambrogio Lorenzetti's prototype. These are due in the main to elements borrowed from a painting of the Presentation that forms a part of the predella in Gentile da Fabriano's famous Adoration of the Magi, completed in 1423 for the church of Santa Trinità in Florence. Gentile had spent two years in Siena at a time when Giovanni di Paolo was just beginning his career, but this was after the altarpiece of the Adoration had already been installed in Florence. Unquestionably, on the other hand, our friend Giovanni visited Florence, though when or how often we do not know. Nor do we know whether the borrowings from Gentile in our Presentation indicate that it was painted later than the large altarpieces which adhere so closely to Lorenzetti's composition. Figures from Gentile's altarpiece are to be found even in one of Giovanni's quite early paintings, the Flight into Egypt in the Siena Accademia.

In our own Presentation the spectator no longer finds himself inside Ambrogio Lorenzetti's ornate temple. Instead he seems to stand in a pretty old Italian street looking into an elegant hexagonal *tempietto*. Gentile da Fabriano in his predella, of which this part is now in the Louvre, had already shown the selfsame street and buildings, though he had extended the street farther at each end. His little temple, like ours, is hexagonal, and the Madonna's two graceful attendants in the street at the left, as well as the two beggars at the right, are Gentile's by right of prior use. But Gentile's temple is low and comparatively heavy, whereas Giovanni preferred to retain the tall, slender architecture of Ambrogio Lorenzetti. Likewise Giovanni had a fondness for Ambrogio's stern high priest and kept him in the picture, whereas Gentile had seen fit to eliminate the priest altogether. In Giovanni's favor it may be observed that neither of his forerunners could have managed such a sustained and delicate interplay of ornament as we find in our Presentation. His marvelous pavement and the vivacious folds and hues of his garments are the perfect response to the sharp-cut masonry in the buildings, which he appropriated from Gentile's predella.

The confession should be made at this point that there were in the predella to which our little Presentation belonged, further compositions abstracted from Gentile da Fabriano. The Nativity panel in the Vatican Gallery repeats within a more nearly square space one of the compositions in the predella of Gentile's Adoration of the Magi. In the same unabashed manner, and from the same source, Giovanni lifted almost the entire assembly of Gentile's main picture of the Adoration for use in his smaller painting of the same subject in the Cleveland Museum. But in the Cleveland panel, small though it is, he introduced a marvelous landscape of his own invention.

It was indeed in his landscapes more than in any other category that Giovanni di Paolo revealed his surprising imagination and high talent. But his imagination was by no means confined to his landscapes. One could scarcely ask for greater creative originality than Giovanni shows in the conception of his pictures in Chicago illustrating the life of Saint John the Baptist. Thus it appears that we would do well to bear in mind the possibility that all the borrowed motives found in our predella, as well as those discovered in the large altarpieces showing the Presentation, may have been demanded by the patron.

*The painting on the cover, the Presentation in the Temple, by Giovanni di Paolo, was a gift from George Blumenthal in 1941 (acc. no. 41.1004). It was formerly in the collection of Sir Charles Noel Carnegie, tenth earl of Southesk, Kinnaird Castle, and in that of R. Langton Douglas, London.*