AN EARLY ALTARPIECE FROM THE CATHEDRAL OF FLORENCE

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Rich though our museums may be in examples of early Italian painting, they offer in one respect a very incomplete representation of this art. Of the two major modes of painting practiced in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, tempera and fresco, our galleries can show almost nothing of the latter—through no fault of their own, to be sure, because all sorts of difficulties prevent the detachment and transportation of large mural paintings on plaster. These difficulties have resulted, nevertheless, in a real lack—almost as if we had only the chamber music of the nineteenth century and not the symphonies. It is not simply that we cannot often see here paintings done in the water-color technique. We miss, as it were, the variety of voices in the larger works, the broader design, the expanded scale. And this is true even though Italian paintings vary less than others in relation to their size. For these reasons the Mannerist and baroque pictures in Mr. Ringling’s museum in Sarasota, many of them very large, give an unusual impression of historical completeness and authenticity. This impression is enhanced by the building and the site, and altogether it is so vivid that a spectator, standing amidst these enormous canvases hung on water-stained walls and sensing the cool dampness of the vast interior while looking outside at the blue sky, the brilliant light, and the palms—this spectator would believe himself to be in a museum in Rome were it not that the shoes of the guards fail to squeak.

Sarasota however is unique, and for the earlier period of Italian painting we find only occasionally in our museums a fresco or a very large altarpiece. The Metropolitan Museum has a large Florentine fresco and an altarpiece of similar size by Benvenuto di Giovanni. A second altarpiece, earlier and more interesting, has just been acquired for The Cloisters. The new painting, which is exhibited in the Early Gothic Hall, measures 99 by 64 inches, approximating in size the largest early altarpieces that we know: the great Madonnas by Giotto and Cimabue and the still larger Rucellai Madonna by Duccio. It shares with these works also a proportion of roughly 3 to 2, but in two respects it is quite different. Instead of terminating above in a gable in the fashion of these and other fourteenth-century altarpieces, it is rectangular. Furthermore, it has a blue rather than a gold background, and it is painted not on panel but on cloth—several pieces of cloth stitched together. It cannot have been painted originally on panel and later transferred to cloth, for the characteristic craquelure of wood is absent and the designs in the halos are painted rather than stamped.

In the course of the fifteenth century cloth alone without wood backing began to be used occasionally as a ground for paintings. Earlier, in the fourteenth century, cloth was employed only for processional banners, and Borenius as well as Van Marle have therefore claimed that the Cloisters picture was one of these. In the banners, of which the Museum’s Spinello Aretino is one of the best extant examples, the ground was prepared by superimposing layers of gesso on the cloth, as in the case of panels. The main field of these works, furthermore, was rectangular. The new picture is similar in both these respects. Was it then a banner? Works of this sort are, so far as I know, painted on both sides. Though the reverse of the Cloisters canvas is no longer visible because of relining, X-rays disclose, as Murray Pease has told me, that there was never any painting there. And while banners, which were carried in processions by religious societies, often portrayed the members, the Cloisters picture seems to represent not a group of this sort but a family. Also, banners are seldom over five or six feet high. To suppose that a pic-
The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin, an altarpiece by a Florentine painter, 1402 (?). Tempera on canvas. Formerly in the cathedral of Florence. At The Cloisters
ture more than eight feet high by more than five feet wide was periodically carried through the streets of Florence in religious processions would imply either that the city was regularly windless on holy days or that the citizens actually possessed the stature of the people that Michelangelo conjured up for us. There is, moreover, every good reason to believe that ever since the early fifteenth century this picture stood on the altar of a church—no less important a church, indeed, than the cathedral of Florence, as we shall see. While the picture once stood on this altar, it is just possible that it was not originally made for it. If we cannot then definitely claim for it the distinction of being the earliest known painting on canvas that was commissioned for an altar, it is, so far as I know, the earliest painting of this sort that was actually displayed in such a place.

The composition of the painting consists essentially of three figures: God the Father above, Christ and the Virgin kneeling below, with a group of eight very small figures between them. God the Father, seen frontally, is a broad, massive form; but by a variety of devices the painter has suspended this heavy figure above the other two with such skill that at first we are not aware of its weight. In accordance with an established fourteenth-century tradition he has shown God in half-length only, losing the lower part of his body in a bank of clouds, and he has represented him on a slightly smaller scale than Christ and the Virgin below. He has also fixed the figure within a series of concentric circles. The head and halo, though somewhat off center, compose the innermost of them, and the circles are anchored at the top by their relation to the upper frame. The inner three circles of this symbol of the heavens are painted in successively darker shades of blue, the third similar to the blue of the background (now much repaired), thus serving further to stabilize this floating form. The gradation from light to dark blue in the inner circles is followed by a similar sequence of ocher in the outer three, the last of which still shows traces of stars similar to those in the areas of blue.

As a suspended figure God is painted in light colors, light in value and in their weightless effect; he wears a mantle of pale violet with a scarlet underlining. The colors given to Christ are similar bound up with his role in the composition. He is the focal figure, the most active of the three. He is engaged with both God and the Virgin, receiving spiritual sustenance from one and physical from the other. He bears the strongest color—maroon—and the changeable yellow-green of the lining of his mantle corresponds to the “changeableness” of his role in the picture.

The geometry evident in the aureole and in the relation of God the Father to it pervades the entire composition—sure evidence that we are dealing with a Florentine work. The three chief figures compose an isosceles triangle, its apex in the head of God the Father. Within this main overlying triangle there are two smaller ones, both inverted. One is formed by the lower edges of the clouds, the other by the inner outlines of Christ and the Virgin. These three triangles, though pointed in opposite directions, are closely interrelated. The apexes of the small triangles lie approximately on the perpendicular from the apex of the large triangle, and the opposite sides of the triangles are parallel. The axis of Christ’s body, for instance, parallels the side of the main triangle formed by the Virgin, God’s upraised hand, and his head. Similarly, the lowered arm of the Virgin is parallel to the left side of the main triangle formed by the lowered arm of God and the bare arm of Christ. The basis of the design may be described, then, as an isosceles triangle containing two parallelograms inscribed within it. Along with these triangles and parallelograms there are marked verticals, such as the main axis of God, and horizontals, such as the apple-green floor and the gilt inscription extending from the Virgin to Christ. These two different groups of forms, the horizontal or vertical and the triangular, with their raking lines, are then mediated by a third, diagonal, group, including the inscription issuing upward from Christ and his forearm parallel to it below.

To a Florentine only such a prominent interlocking of shapes would allow the presence of a main figure as inherently unstable as that of Christ. And if this figure is the least successful of the three, that is not because the geometric design fails to sustain it. Its weakness must be attributed in good part rather to a weakness of the entire Giottoesque tradition, as late even as
Detail of the altarpiece, showing the Virgin interceding for a group of people
the Vatican frescoes of Fra Angelico. The massive, ponderous figures of this tradition tend to topple when moved into positions other than vertical.

Giottesque, then, in a larger sense the style of this painting undoubtedly is. It clearly belongs to a late phase of this tradition—a phase in part anti-Giottesque because, for one thing, it values so highly the expressiveness of line. The swirl of the mantle below God’s left arm, the flow of contours and drapery folds in the kneeling figures below disclose an admiration for the linear art of Siena. Indeed, this lower part of the picture in particular brings to mind the painting of the most “Sienese” master in Florence at this time, Lorenzo Monaco. It is especially with early works by Lorenzo, such as the Man of Sorrows of 1404 in the Florentine Academy, that the Cloisters painting shows affinities. But whereas Lorenzo’s art emerged from that of Agnolo Gaddi, the style of our picture is still basically related to that of an earlier Florentine painter—Andrea Orcagna. Symptomatic of this relation are the beautifully designed hands of the three figures, especially those that are extended palm outward. In their shape and in their expressiveness as gesture they resemble very closely the hands in Orcagna’s Strozzi altarpiece. Neither Niccolò di Pietro Gerini nor Mariotto di Nardo, to whom the Cloisters picture has been attributed, were capable of forms so deeply Orcagnesque, or indeed so eloquent, as these. Neither of these painters could conceive so poetic a Madonna, nor so rich a geometric structure for the design as a whole. Our painter must have been a superior, belated follower of Orcagna, active in Florence around the turn of the century, who developed linear “neo-Gothic” forms reminiscent of Lorenzo Monaco. His style is different from that of any of the painters known in Florence at this time, and his identity therefore continues to elude me.

Whoever the painter, his distinction is suggested also by the memorable design—memorable in his own time as we shall see—that he gave to a novel representation. One aspect of the theme is traditional enough—the Trinity; and it was this familiar aspect that eighteenth-century writers described first. But even the Trinity, as it appears here, is unconventional. In earlier fourteenth-century altarpieces representing this subject God the Father held a cross to which Christ was affixed; in our picture, on the other hand, Christ is kneeling and pointing to the wound in his side, a sort of living Man of Sorrows. Such a change in the nature of the Second Person is characteristic of the time. There are, at least in the North, contemporary Trinities in which a wounded, pathetic Christ likewise appears—the well-known tondo in the Louvre, for instance, or, a little later, two paintings by the Master of Flémalle. In our picture, however, Christ has a dual role, and it is his second function that decisively influences his attitude and his appearance.

In the course of a book devoted to praise of the Virgin Mary, Ernaldus of Chartres, who died in 156, described a scene of double intercession that caught the imagination of the later Middle Ages. So widely was the image disseminated that it was soon ascribed not to the little-known Ernaldus but to Bernard of Clairvaux, the most famous of the twelfth-century worshipers of the Virgin. In its most current form, the passage read:

“O man, you have a secure access to God when the Mother is before her Son, and the Son before his Father. The Mother showed her breast to her Son, the Son showed his wounds to his Father: there where the proofs of love are so many no one can be denied.”

The image was further disseminated by the Speculum humanae salvationis (Mirror of Human Salvation), which was composed in the early fourteenth century and rapidly became one of the most widely read of all religious texts. The double intercession forms the basis of chapter 39 of this treatise; illustrations of this chapter show in one picture Christ, his arms raised in an orans posture, exhibiting his wounds to God and, in another picture, the Virgin exposing her breast to Christ. In early illustrations of the Speculum these actions of Christ and the Virgin were not combined in one picture, and the painting at The Cloisters seems, indeed, to be the earliest instance of such a combination. It is also the subtlest. For whereas many representations, such as the Turin Hours or Gozzoli’s picture in San
Left, the Man of Sorrows, by Lorenzo Monaco. Dated 1404. Academy of Florence. Right, the central part of the Strozzi altarpiece by Andrea Orcagna. Dated 1357. The upper hand at the left particularly resembles the hands in the Cloisters altarpiece. Santa Maria Novella, Florence
Gimignano, both later, simply depict Christ and the Virgin exhibiting to God their respective “proofs of love;” the Cloisters picture shows the Virgin addressing Christ while Christ addresses God the Father. God himself looks aside, a detached and superior being, and his entire body is contained within the aureole except for the hand that emits the dove. The painter has thus established a sort of hierarchy of intercession. He has further differentiated the figures by a highly expressive pantomime, especially God’s beautiful emission of the dove and Christ’s very eloquent left hand that conveys both acknowledgment of the Virgin’s prayer and a recommendation of her to God. And the painter has perhaps suggested the different nature of the “proofs” offered by the two—the milk and the wound—by the color of their garments. Abandoning the blue customarily worn by the Virgin, because it would in any event present a problem against the blue ground, he has clothed her in white, while he has given Christ the usual red-dish mantle—“a bloody cloth,” the Speculum says, “like the clothes of men who tread red grapes for wine.”

Following a method popularized by Simone Martini, words spoken by the mediators are written on the background (on a black band) as though they issued from the speakers’ mouths. Christ says: PADRE MIO SIENO SALVI GHOSTORO PEQUALI TU VOLESTI CHIO PATISSI PASSIONE (“My Father, let those be saved for whom you wished that I suffer the passion”). The Virgin says: DOLCIXIMO FIGLIUO PELLACTE CHIO TIDIE ABBI MIA [MISERICORDIA] DI GHOSTORO (“Dearest Son, because of the milk that I gave you have mercy on them”).

Ideas of the Virgin and Christ as merciful intercessors for the sinner were prominent in the religious thought of the fourteenth century. These ideas gave impetus to the creation of new images, the two most popular being the Man of Sorrows, in which the wounded Christ is presented, and the Madonna of Humility, in which
The Virgin and Christ, from the Last Judgment by Francesco Traini. About 1355. Campo Santo, Pisa

the lowly Virgin suckles her son. Early in the century, too, these images, or at least quite similar ones, were juxtaposed. This occurred in numerous diptychs representing the Man of Sorrows in one panel, the Madonna with the Infant in the other. These diptychs are predecessors of the painting at The Cloisters: they imply the kind of intercession that has become explicit in the latter. In one respect, however, the Cloisters picture is without precedent in this tradition of devotional painting. Christ does not simply show his wounds to the beholder, nor, as in the early illustrations of the *Speculum*, to God. He actively points to the wound in his side. This novel behavior recalls Christ in the great Last Judgment in the Campo Santo at Pisa, painted around 1355. At the moment of judgment, his right hand raised in an irate gesture of damnation, he draws aside his mantle to reveal the wound in his side. This act is described in the chapter on the Judgment in the *Speculum*—the fortieth chapter, in fact, immediately following the one devoted to double intercession. "He shall show sinners his wounds," the text says. These wounds are shown, however, not as "proofs of love" and therefore claims upon God for forgiveness but as signs of pain. As the text says, "They shall cry vengeance sharply" upon sinners. It is the Virgin in this moving scene in Pisa who, seated alongside Christ, gives proof of love by touching her breast with her hand.

In the Cloisters picture, too, the Virgin is a more sympathetic figure, closer than Christ to humanity. It is she who recommends to him, with a beautifully eager yet deferent gesture, eight small figures who kneel in adoration and prayer. The two foremost of these are middle-aged laymen, the next two religious women. Both the women wear wimples. The mantle of one is black, of the other green. Behind them we can see the face of a boy and three additional heads. The presence of a youth probably eliminates the possibility that a confraternity is represented and leaves us with the likelihood of two
Plan of the cathedral of Florence, from "Il Duomo di Firenze," by Poggi. The altarpiece was at "o."

families—perhaps the Pecori—for reasons to be mentioned later. The claim of one eighteenth-century writer, V. Follini, followed, curiously enough, by Paatz, that this group represents the Signoria of Florence proves only that the writers did not look carefully at the picture. The claim of another—Richa—that the foremost man wears the costume of a gonfaloniere di giustizia (a municipal executive) perhaps merits more credence. But with the mention of these writers we have anticipated our story.

In his description of the Florentine churches, published in 1757, Giuseppe Richa describes a painting in the cathedral that is indubitably the one now at The Cloisters.

"Having previously observed how many notable things are to be seen on the exterior of Santa Maria del Fiore, we are now finally about to enter the church; that is to say we are at the portal of a temple containing a world of marvels. . . . Within this interior there are to be seen in the first place two chapels alongside the main portal, and they are that of the Trinity on the left hand and the Conception on the right. Facing the former, before which burn three lamps alluding to the Holy Mystery [the Trinity], the altarpiece is composed of four pictures. In the principal one we see a God the Father with the dove, usual symbol of the Holy Ghost. On his right hand appears Jesus Christ, on his left the Virgin, and below a group of little kneeling figures, among whom we may see a person who, by his red toga with a fold of another color on his shoulder, may perhaps be recognized as a gonfaloniere di giustizia. And the painter presents his idea by some words written in Gothic characters. [Here Richa records in full, and exactly, the inscriptions on the Cloisters picture.] This first picture made in oil [sic!] is surrounded by two canvases painted in tempera; there, in lateral bands, are King David, Moses, Isaiah, and Jacob, each having a motto taken from Scripture alluding to the incarnation of the Word. Below, in the fourth part, Christ as Man of Sorrows appears between Saint John Evangelist and the Magdalen. Very beautiful also is the baldac-
chino, in which are painted the four Doctors of the Latin Church, who surround a central figure of Christ.”

According to guidebooks of Florence and histories of the church the paintings continued to stand on the altar at least until 1846. After their removal we no longer hear of the predella and the wings, though they are probably preserved somewhere, unidentified. The central picture was bought by the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres and remained in his family’s collection for a long time. Much more interesting, however, is the question—when was it first put on the altar in the cathedral? Strangely enough, though an exceptionally extensive series of records about the early history of the altar has been preserved, not one refers to the paintings that stood on it. Nevertheless, evidence of two different kinds will enable us to answer our question rather precisely.

First let us consider the altar itself, placed against the west wall of the church between the main portal and the smaller north portal—in other words, immediately on the left hand of a visitor entering the church through the main door. This was a very conspicuous but uncommon place for an altar, and indeed, along with a corresponding altar on the opposite side of the main door, it was sharply criticized by the eighteenth-century historian Follini. Follini asserts that the altars were not in the original design of the building by Arnolfo, who would not have assigned them to this “lowest part” of the church. They give the impression, he added, that more decent and convenient places for altars were lacking.

The altar on the opposite side of the main door was established first. In 1398 the operai of the cathedral decided to move to this place a fresco of the Madonna. Because of miraculous qualities this fresco was attracting so many of the pious that a space suitable for large crowds was needed. An altar was erected, Mariotto di Nardo painted a panel of the Madonna to be placed on it, and the fresco was attached to the wall, apparently above the altarpiece. Over all this a huge wooden tabernacle was raised. It must have looked something like the stone tabernacle built about 1368 over the Dragondelli altar in San Domenico, Arezzo, one of the few surviving structures of this kind. In the ceiling of the wooden tabernacle in Florence, called celum and symbolizing the heavens, were set five quatrefoils representing the four Evangelists and, in the center, the Lamb of God. Three of the Evangelists, painted by Lorenzo di Bicci, are now in the sacristy of the cathedral. In the field around these quatrefoils stars were painted—twelve hundred to be exact, according to a record of payment to the painter.

This large and unusual construction had a spectacular position in the church, equaled only by the high altar. It was visible the length of the great nave. It apparently proved satisfactory visually and as a center for the cult, for a few years later the operai decided to establish a corresponding altar on the opposite side of the main
By 1402 the tabernacle had probably been raised over this altar, and Mariotto di Nardo, who had painted the altarpiece for the first altar, was now paid for five quatrefoils to be placed in the "celum." These quatrefoils, representing Christ surrounded by the Doctors of the Church, were still in the tabernacle when it was described in 1757 by Richa. Today they are preserved in the sacristy.

But what about the images on the altar itself? In 1409 we learn that the altar was dedicated to the Trinity, while on the mensa stood two marble statues of the Annunciation, possibly the well-known ones now in the Opera del Duomo, often attributed to Nanni di Banco. It was resolved in that year, and again in 1414, that the two marble figures be removed to the Porta della Mandorla, then being built. The record states that they were made for the Porta, and they were thus placed only temporarily upon the altar of the Trinity. The strong presumption is that behind them, at the back of the mensa, there stood an image of the Trinity itself.

Now the Cloisters picture, which was definitely on the altar in the eighteenth century, represents, in one aspect at least, the Trinity, and it was as a Trinity that the writers of that period, such as Cambiagi, described it. It was, however, a Trinity of a kind that first appeared only in the late fourteenth century, the Second Person being a sort of Pietà or Man of Sorrows exhibiting his wounds. This aspect of the theme assumes special significance in the light of a record of 1439 identifying the altar as "of the Trinity or Pietà." For all these reasons, then, it seems highly probable that the Cloisters picture stood on the altar in 1409. Evidence of another kind transmutes this probability to a certainty.

The interceding Virgin appeared frequently in late medieval art. Indeed, she was represented on the very monument in the cathedral of Florence that was removed to make way for the altar of the Trinity—Tino di Camaino’s tomb of Bishop Antonio Orsi, a relief of which shows the Virgin, her hand on her breast, recommending the bishop to Christ. The Virgin and Christ were combined in a double intercession before God, however, for the first time in the Cloisters painting. Though this combination remained rare outside of illumination, I am aware of two fifteenth-century examples of it. One, already pointed out by Professor Panofsky, was designed by Filippino Lippi and executed partly in his workshop; it is in the Altere Pinakothek in Munich. The other, by a follower of Cosimo Rosselli, entered the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal at about the same time, curiously enough, that our picture entered The Cloisters. Both of these later paintings derive from the one now at The Cloisters. The picture in Montreal, the weaker of the two, imitates our canvas so closely with regard to the position and gestures of the figures that any enumeration of similarities would be superfluous. The painter has even preserved the long-outmoded concentric circles as symbols of heaven, though he has seen fit to give them a plastic character. The flock of people has been reduced to a single family, and the painter has subtly altered the meaning of the composition by turning the glances of the laymen and of the Virgin from Christ to God.

New of course is the landscape behind and the pedagogical saint kneeling below, who fixes the beholder with his glance while pointing to the inscription on his scroll. The sentences written there, beginning, “O man, you have a secure access to God,” are those originally written, as we have seen, by Ernaldus of Chartres but universally credited to Saint Bernard. And it is this white-robed monastic saint who, as the consequence of a historical error, stares out at us from the picture. He kneels upon a tesselated floor before a structure that somewhat resembles an altar. Might not this setting have been suggested by the altar of the Trinity in the cathedral of Florence, upon which stood the painted scene of intercession that the picture in Montreal imitates?

Filippino, as we might expect, freely redesigned his model. Christ inclines towards rather than away from God the Father, making over all a more precisely pyramidal design. The dove is missing, and the little laymen are relegated to the landscape behind. They are thus removed from the Virgin’s right hand, leaving it isolated; this, together with the evident change in her age and her expression, transforms her from an alert, protective young mother tending children
Two XV century paintings of the Intercession of Christ and the Virgin, following the Cloisters altarpiece. Left, by a follower of Cosimo Rosselli. Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal. Right, by Filippino Lippi and assistants, with a predella after the one missing from the altarpiece. Altere Pinakothek, Munich.
of various ages to an older, lonely, pathetic woman lamenting the fate of her only son. Filippino’s picture has a predella (painted by another hand) that represents the Man of Sorrows or Pietà, together with six saints. Interestingly enough, the predella that Richa and subsequent writers describe beneath the Cloisters painting represented the same subject, though the saints at the sides were different. Furthermore, the altar on which the picture stood was called “Altar of the Pietà” in a record of 1439. Filippino’s predella is thus very probably an echo of the original one.

The likelihood of such a dependence is greatly increased by one detail. Christ is not supported by figures at either side, neither by the Virgin and Saint John, as in fourteenth-century representations, nor by a group of angels, as in several fifteenth-century examples, beginning with Donatello. In Filippino’s predella one angel grasps the body of Christ from behind. This is a version of the Man of Sorrows that can be associated with a certain time and place. It originated in France around 1365, becoming common there in the ensuing fifty or sixty years. It was taken up briefly in Florence in the early fifteenth century; there is, at least, one Florentine example from this time—an early work of unknown whereabouts by the so-called Master of the Bambino Vispo. This painter may have found the motive in Catalonia, where he worked in the early part of his career. The popularity of this version of the Man of Sorrows did not extend beyond about 1425; its appearance in Filippino’s predella as late as the end of the century is best explained by the theory that his predella imitates a work made almost a hundred years earlier.

One other part of Filippino’s picture calls for some comment. To the left and right of God, in radiant openings in clouds that, as forms, derive from the Flemish tradition, appear the two figures of the Annunciation. This theme is, of course, a ubiquitous one in Christian art, but we are bound to observe that it has no special relation with the main theme of the picture. If any scenes from the lives of Christ or the Virgin were to be adduced in connection with this subject they would be the Crucifixion, when Christ received his wounds, and the Nativity, when the Virgin gave him her breast. Why, then, the Annunciation? The history of the altar will perhaps tell us. In 1409 and 1414, as we have mentioned, two marble statues of the Annunciation stood on the altar. Thereafter, up to 1441 at least, the records of payment for the embellishment of this altar sometimes refer to it as the altar of the Trinity, but at other times they appear to refer to it as the altar of the Annunciation. Filippino’s picture seems to reflect, in an attractive way, this dual dedication. We do not know whether it was originally destined for San Francesco in Prato or some other church, but no doubt it was commissioned by someone who intended to perpetuate elsewhere the cult of the prominent altar in the cathedral of Florence.

**DOCUMENTATION**

The painting was first published by Borenius. The other authors listed below, with the exception of Berenson, follow his attribution to Niccolò di Pietro Gerini.


Offner, R., Studies in Florentine Painting (New York, 1927), p. 94. (The painter may have been an assistant of Niccolò.)

Berenson, B., Pittori Italiani del Rinascimento (Milan, 1936), p. 295. (The painting is ascribed to Mariotto di Nardo.)


For the subject of the painting see the following:


The following section is devoted to conclusions requiring more detailed discussion than was offered above, particularly because they differ from facts or opinions previously published. These publications are listed at the end. By way of acknowledgment it should be said that Bornius (op. cit.) first referred to the passage in Richa, and Paatz applied, though not always correctly, the documents published by Poggi.

The first description of the altarpiece is given by Richa, writing in 1757. Though he is generally very reliable and describes the main part of the altarpiece so fully and precisely that there can be no doubt that it is the same as the painting at The Cloisters, he does state that this picture was painted in oil, a manifest error. On the other hand, he says that the predella representing the Man of Sorrows and the lateral bands, or wings, each representing two prophets, were painted in tempera on canvas—precisely the same technique and ground actually employed in the central field. It is apparent, then, that the entire altarpiece was uniformly executed in the unusual technique of tempera on canvas. The ensemble of pictures was transformed by careless subsequent writers into a fantastic hybrid. Richa's single error was compounded. Follini, writing in 1790 and familiar with Richa's account, continues to describe the technique of the wings as tempera, the central picture as oil, but, contrary to Richa, he asserts that the predella was painted in oil and was "more modern" than the main picture. This careless innovation was repeated in 1846 by Fantozzi, who proceeded also to transform the wings into frescoes! The predella, which had now become "more modern than the main picture," was finally transformed into something simply modern by Cavallucci in 1887. However, he rescued the wings from their metamorphosis into frescoes, describing them once again as tempera on canvas, and he even expressed surprise that Richa should have said that the main picture was painted in oil!

More recently Poggi claimed that though the main picture and the predella as described by Richa were undoubtedly old, that is, of the early fifteenth century, the wings were not, presumably because of their subject. This unjustifiable assertion was repeated by Paatz, who went so far as to specify the sixteenth to the eighteenth century as the date of the execution of these (unknown) tempera paintings on canvas!

The question of when the altarpiece was put on the altar can only be answered by inference because, curiously enough, no records referring directly to the altarpiece appear to have survived or, at least, have yet been discovered and published. Poggi and Paatz both state that the altar itself is first mentioned in 1404, and connected with the Trinity or Pietà in 1439. By 1439, Paatz infers, the altarpiece must have stood on the altar, and he selects 1414 as the most probable...
date when it would have been erected because in that year two statues of the Annunciation appear to have been removed from the altar and placed in the Porta della Mandorla, thus making way for a new embellishment of the altar. None of these assertions is acceptable.

Both Poggi and Paatz have overlooked the fact that Poggi’s document no. 371 of 1409, which clearly refers to our altar, describes it as “altare trinitatis.” The altar was therefore dedicated to the Trinity as early as 1409, not 1439. As we have shown above, we may safely infer that our picture was on the altar at that time. There is, furthermore, good reason to believe that it was there in 1402.

According to Poggi and Paatz the first notice of the altar is provided by a document (no. 1020) of 1404, which records a payment of forty florins to Mariotto di Nardo “... pro pittura capelle noviter constructe et facte in ecclesia s. Reparate in celo ipsius capelle, excepto i compassi ipsius celi.” It is surprising that whereas this record explicitly excludes as Mariotto’s work the compassi (quatrefoils) of the baldachin both these scholars claimed the surviving quatrefoils for him on the basis of the documents. The style of these panels is, it is true, Mariotto’s, and therefore we can only suppose that he was paid for them at some other time. This is precisely what seems to have occurred.

An earlier historian at the cathedral, Cavallucci, paraphrased in Italian the same document of 1404 (giving eighty florins, however, instead of forty), but he also published an illuminating, if partly cryptic, record of 1402: “Mariotto ... fl. 40 pro pictura repolita [cappelle?] noviter site et facte in ecclesia S. Reparate [in?] celo ipsius capelle et compassi ipsius celi.” The form of this entry is quite similar to that of 1404, as if the same clerk had written both (or could they possibly be variant readings of the same record?), and this supports my belief that one or two words were omitted in the transcription. I have supplied them in brackets. Cavallucci is often careless, but the document as a whole merits credence because, for one thing, it coincides with the evidence of style. (This would not be the first instance of proof of the reliability of a document by style.)

The meaning of the record of 1402 as published by Cavallucci is not entirely clear. Unfortunately, in the time available before publication of this article, I have not been able to control all these excerpts by comparison with the original entries in the archives of the cathedral—a task that might prove very difficult because Cavallucci fails to give a precise reference. At the present moment it is sufficient to say two things. First, for several reasons I would not be inclined to construe the record to read that the refurbished painting (“pictura repolita”) was newly made and located in the church (if this reading were acceptable, we might have a direct reference to our picture). It was most probably the altar or chapel that was “noviter site et facte.” In the second place, the record definitely proves that the baldachin was completed in 1402. The altarpiece, now at The Cloisters, almost certainly stood on the altar at that time. It was probably painted in that year also, unless it was originally made for another site. In that not very likely event, its style indicates that it was, at most, executed only a few years earlier.
picture is described as Umbrian, and the relationship of the subject to Ernaldus of Chartres and the Speculum is pointed out.)


Catalogue of Pictures Collected by R. and E. Benson (London, 1914), no. 21. (The picture is ascribed to Cosimo Rosselli.)


For the representation in France of the Man of Sorrows supported by an angel see Martens, B., Meister Francke (Hamburg, 1929), p. 137; for the representation in Spain see Post, C. R., A History of Spanish Painting (Cambridge, Mass., 1930), iii, figs. 253, 290.