A XIV CENTURY ITALIAN ALTARPIECE

By DARIO COVI

Dario Covi, formerly a Student Fellow at the Museum, is now Instructor in the history of art at the University of Louisville.

It is safe to say that most of the devotional panels and probably all the polyptychs in private and public collections in this country and abroad have come from churches and chapels that have been destroyed or no longer serve their original purpose. The separation has usually occurred so long ago and been so complete that many of these works of art are veritable orphans, with no indication of their provenance. Even when there are written documents concerning them the clues for associating document and picture are often too elusive to be appreciated. Sometimes, by luck and a sort of detective’s delight in myopic investigation, unconnected literary records, however fragmentary and scattered, may be brought to bear and may enable us to learn where and why a particular picture was painted. Such a happy result has been possible in the case of the Coronation of the Virgin given to the Metropolitan Museum by Robert Lehman in 1950.

Bearing a coat of arms and inscribed with a dedication as puzzling as it is informative, this triptych came to the Museum as the work of an anonymous Pisan painter and was so reported in the Bulletin in 1952 (vol. 10, p. 188). At that time its known history went back only to 1861, when it was owned by the Count of Cambis-Alais of Avignon and was exhibited at the Exposition Régionale in Marseilles. Now new light may be shed on it. We have resurrected a statement included in the catalogue of the Marseilles exhibition, and afterwards apparently forgotten or discounted, that the altarpiece had been purchased in the early nineteenth century in Florence, where, it was said, it had formerly adorned a chapel no longer extant. With this information we have been able, through a study of the early guidebooks and other topographical literature of Florence and the examination of relevant documents and extracts of documents in the State Archives and the National Library of Florence, to identify the chapel and to determine the circumstances of the painting of the altarpiece.

Rare in its completeness, the triptych shows Christ and the Virgin enthroned in the company of two kneeling angels playing musical instruments and four standing saints, Bernard, Sylvester, Nicholas of Myra, and Julian the Martyr. Above them are pinnacle medallions with Christ and two prophets or patriarchs holding scrolls. Below are three predella panels illustrating five scenes from the legend of Saint Sylvester, separated by two pilaster strips with profile portraits of the kneeling donors. The donors of the altarpiece illustrated on page 147, Alderotto Brunelleschi and his paternal uncle Silvestro. From the predella...
dedicatory inscription on the frieze of the frame, unchanged from its original state, is supplemented by the arms of the donors repeated four times on the colonnette bases. With misspellings and a conspicuous omission, it reads as follows:

HANC · TABVLAM · FIERI · ALDEROTVS · DE

BRUNELESCHIS · QVE · DIMISSIT · / SILVESTER ·
PATRVS · SVVS · PRO ·
REMEDIIO · ANIME · SVE · E ·
SVORVM · A · D · M · CCC ·
L · XXXX · III. At the base of the central panel are inscribed the day and month: DIE · VIII · MENSIS · NOVENBRIS.

Neither the omission of the word fecit (the usual expression being fecit fieri) nor the faulty spelling (dimisit, et) affects the sense of the text; but the use of dimisit, a verb of various meanings that is not found in dedicatory inscriptions in Italian painting, and the qve, referring either to tabvlam (if so, incorrectly; it should be quam) or to some omitted word, block immediate translation and so our understanding of the intent. The most we can deduce with certainty are the date, 1394, and the names of the donors, Alderotto Brunelleschi and his paternal uncle Silvestro. Only when we have reviewed the evidence for the origin of the altarpiece can we interpret the meaning of this dedication which names the rare if not unique combination of an uncle and a nephew as donors.

We know from the coat of arms, a bar of blue on a gold field, that Alderotto and Silvestro were members of an ancient Florentine family descending from a knight named Gando or Gandolfo. It was distinct from the family of Filippo Brunelleschi, the famous Florentine architect; but it may have been related to or allied with the Davizzi, in whose palace (now the Palazzo Davanzati) its arms can still be seen deckimg a spandrel in the nuptial chamber. Ghibelline by tradition, the Brunelleschi had played an ambitious role in the city's politics, and as late as 1391 three of them (Alderotto and Silvestro and Alderotto's son) were priors in the Republic. Apparently they were wealthy and industrious, for they owned considerable property in Florence, houses, towers, and a loggia in the Vecchio Centro, and had villas in the surrounding country. Their loggia bordered on a piazzetta that bore their name, and on the same square, almost opposite the loggia, stood a church called San Leo, where the Brunelleschi had been recorded since 1233 and in the fourteenth century were parishioners. We may therefore expect this church to have been the object of pious embellishments by them.

The parish church of San Leo in Florence as it appeared in the xv century. From the unpublished "Libro dell'andata . . ." by Marco di Bartolommeo Rustici, a Florentine goldsmith.
The Coronation of the Virgin, with Saints Bernard, Sylvester, Nicholas, and Julian, altarpiece by a Florentine painter, dated 1394. Painted for the Brunelleschi chapel in the church of San Leo. Gift of Robert Lehman, 1950

nature of Florence beginning with the important but as yet unpublished “Libro dell’andata . . .” of Marco di Bartolommeo Rustici, a fifteenth-century Florentine goldsmith, in which there is a sketch of the church, up to Walter Paatz’s recent comprehensive Dir Kirchen von Florenz (1940-1954), show or describe San Leo as a tiny church having but three small chapels, of which two were hardly more than niches cut into the side walls. According to these sources the chapel niche in the right wall belonged to the Brunelleschi.

Two accounts written before the suppression of San Leo in 1785 mention an inscribed panel painting in the right chapel niche, standing on an altar next to Silvestro’s tomb, but unhappily they do not tell us much about it. The earlier of the two, Stefano Rosselli’s unpublished “Sepoltuario fiorentino” (1657), gives neither description nor subject of the painting. In the second, Giuseppe Richa’s Notizie istoriche delle chiese fio-
rentine (1754-1762), the contents are only vaguely indicated by the general title of “Mary and Saints.” Later writers, who did not see the painting in place in the chapel, have not been able to add to these cursory observations. But if Rosselli and Richa failed to note in detail what was represented in the picture they did not overlook any of its documentary features, both quoting the dedication in full. Their transcriptions are not exactly alike, but they correspond so closely with the inscription on the Museum’s altarpiece that we are led at once to suspect it as their source. (Rosselli gives patronus instead of patruus and the date as 1393, in arabic numerals, instead of 1394; Richa gives quam instead of que.) And since to his transcription Rosselli has added a day and month, 9 November, which, he said, was on the lower part of the picture field, it seems fairly certain that the painting seen by him and Richa in the Brunelleschi chapel was the triptych Mr. Lehman has given the Museum.

It would be entirely certain if we could show that the iconography and date of the Museum’s altarpiece are inextricably related to the events in the lives of Alderotto and Silvestro that brought about the installation of the altarpiece in the Brunelleschi chapel in San Leo. For this we are fortunate in having the acts drawn up by a Florentine notary who regularly executed legal papers for both Alderotto and Silvestro. These instruments declare Alderotto the son of a deceased brother of Silvestro, named Bernardo, and therefore the legal dependent of his uncle. Married and the father of two sons, by 1391 Alderotto had become a manager and representative in Silvestro’s business affairs. Perhaps the older man’s health was failing when he charged his nephew with these obligations, for on June 10, 1391, he made his will in the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova and had six hospital servants as witnesses. The will has not come down to us in its entirety, but enough of it has been preserved in partial transcripts and records of execution to indicate, first, that Silvestro designated sums of money as gifts and charitable donations to the witnesses and to the hospitals of Santa Maria Nuova and San Giovanni tra l’Arcora and for the building and adornment of
a family chapel in San Leo and, second, that he named Alderotto as sole heir and executor of his will.

It is unlikely that Alderotto’s status as dependent and business manager of his uncle would alone have justified his being made sole heir unless Silvestro had no other family obligations. On this point the documents are mute. But Silvestro was known sufficiently well in Florence for Franco Sacchetti, the famous Florentine story-teller, to write about him in three of his Trecento Novelle, and in them we get a delightful portrait of Silvestro’s private life. According to the Novelle Silvestro (or Salvatore, as he is called) had once lived in Friuli, where he had married a “piacevolissima Friolana” who passionately desired to bear children. But her wish was not realized, and Silvestro, who did not share her enthusiasm, quickly resigned himself to the fate of a marriage without issue. So when Margherita—her name is known to us from one of the notary’s records—insisted on repeating certain bathing pilgrimages recommended by a doctor for restoring her and her husband’s generative powers, Silvestro balked and condemned her to go without him. Soon afterwards, so one of the stories relates, the unhappy woman died, and Silvestro lived on alone. As a childless widower, therefore, he was quite free to name his nephew and manager, Alderotto, as sole heir in his will.

Silvestro was still living on May 11, 1394, but he must have died soon after that, for on June 26 Alderotto filed a notice promising to pay as quickly as possible the debts of his late uncle; and the next we hear of Alderotto and Silvestro is on November 22 and 23, when there appeared three notices relating to the execution of items in Silvestro’s will.

One of these entries is of particular interest. Drawn up in the church of San Leo, it is a chaplain’s assessment referring to a new chapel with an altar set in the direction of Silvestro’s house and next to his sepulcher. According to the document it was Alderotto who, as the executor
of Silvestro’s will, had caused the chapel to be built and to be provided with the articles for divine services; and it also discloses that he embellished it with rich cloths and an altarpiece.

As a list of the objects and their value the assessment seems complete; but it does not give full descriptions, and it does not tell us anything about the structure or subject matter of the altarpiece. Nevertheless, if we consider the events leading up to the building and decoration of the chapel we are persuaded of a correspondence, too striking to be coincidental, between its documented background and the iconography of the Museum’s triptych. Although there is nothing in this background to account for the choice of the Coronation of the Virgin as the central theme or of Saint Nicholas as one of the accompanying figures, the determining factors in the choice and order of the other three saints are implicit in relationships and conditions given in the various documents. First of all, Saint Sylvester, who appears in the place of honor next to the Virgin and whose legend is told in the predella, was, of course, the patron saint of Silvestro Brunelleschi. Saint Bernard, next to Saint Sylvester, was the patron of Bernardo, Silvestro’s brother and Alderotto’s father. Less clear is the significance of Saint Julian, who follows Saint Nicholas in the right wing. While there is no mention of him in our notary’s records, the patronage of this saint becomes apparent from other references, including an old tax record, which state that the Brunelleschi houses were adapted for public use as hotels or inns. That is to say, Alderotto and Silvestro were innkeepers, of whom the patron saint is Julian the Hospitaler. True, in the altarpiece Saint Julian is designated in the inscription on the frame below him as Martyr, not as Hospitaler. But there are numerous Saint Julian Martyrs, and we know of no cult in Florence, or in all Tuscany, dedicated specifically to any of them; whereas identifiable representations of Saint Julian having the same attributes as our figure are without exception the Hospitaler.
Thus we can associate one of the saints in the right panel with the guild or profession of the Brunelleschi, and we can refer both saints in the left panel to Alderotto’s paternal relatives.

The dominance of Saint Sylvester is noteworthy. We learn from three manuscript notes in the National Library of Florence, copied in the seventeenth century from earlier tax records that no longer exist, that this saint was also the titular of the Brunelleschi chapel in San Leo. That a veneration of Saint Sylvester marks both a triptych inscribed with the name of Silvestro as one of its donors and a new chapel requested by him in his will reveals a common intention, and this is assured by the date of November 9 inscribed on the central panel. In the Christian liturgy November 9 is a day of special devotion to Saint Sylvester, although his principal feast falls on December 31. On November 9 the Church commemorates the dedication of the Holy Saviour’s Basilica (St. John Lateran) in Rome, which is regarded as the emperor Constantine’s first concession to the Christians. In celebrating this feast she pays homage to Saint Sylvester, who consecrated the basilica and was the first priest to offer up the holy sacrifice of the Mass with the official sanction of the emperor. In 1394 the feast of the dedication would have occurred about five months after Silvestro’s death and would have preceded by only fourteen days the assessment of November 23, in which the Brunelleschi chapel and altar in San Leo are described as new. Thus it seems very probable that the altarpiece was commissioned by Alderotto when he ordered the building of the family chapel and altar and that it was, with them, completed or intended to be completed by November 9. Alderotto could thus have made the occasion of the installation doubly solemn by having the new chapel, altar, and altarpiece consecrated and dedicated on a feast day of the titular saint, an opportunity which, we may be
Madonna and Child, central panel of an altarpiece painted by Spinello Aretino in 1385 for the convent of Monte Oliveto. Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge

sure, an Italian of the fourteenth century would hardly have overlooked.

The meaning of the inscription now becomes clear. The word dimisit, from dimittere, which may mean “to leave,” as in a will, was doubtless used here because of the dependence of the altarpiece on the execution of Silvestro’s will. Although it was rare in such a context in the fourteenth century, a preference being shown for relinquere, the probable intention is confirmed by Ducange’s standard medieval glossary, in which the first meaning listed for dimittere is relinquere testamento, “to leave by testament.” If we accept this solution, then the substitution of quam for que is impossible: it presupposes that Alderotto ordered the altarpiece and Silvestro left it. Such an arrangement would have been highly unlikely at any time and is chronologically impossible in this instance. Silvestro died at least five months before the altarpiece was dedicated, and whether or not he had specified it in his will it could only have been commissioned during the execution of the will after his death.

Silvestro did not leave the altarpiece; he left the money or property to pay for it. In Latin such sources are bona, or “goods,” a term that appears in two of the documents most closely related to the will. Thus, with bonis understood as its antecedent, que is correct as it stands. (Bonis may have been overlooked by the artist or it need not have been inscribed.) The inscription may now be translated: “Alderotto Brunelleschi had this altarpiece made with what (or the goods which) his paternal uncle Silvestro left in reparation for his soul and the souls of his people, in the year of Our Lord 1394.”

The style of the altarpiece is in accord with the Florentine provenance for which we have given evidence. In spite of previous attributions to the Sienese Taddeo di Bartolo, to an unknown follower of Giotto, and to an anonymous painter possibly close to Simone Martini, a Florentine authorship had already been assumed by Bernard Berenson, Mario Salmi, and Richard Offner.

Both Professor Salmi and Mr. Berenson saw in the style of the painting a remote derivation from Andrea Orcagna, though not without certain influences of Agnolo Gaddi and Niccolò di Pietro Gerini. Yet the connections with Orcagna are only apparent in the frontal figures, whose faces recall types that ultimately go back to Christ and Saint John the Baptist in the Strozzi polyptych of 1357 in Santa Maria Novella. We find few traces of the influence of Orcagna in the rest of the altarpiece. Indeed, as Dr. Offner has observed, the figures in the central panel belong to a totally different tradition. The low forehead, which is most noticeable in the heads of Christ and the Virgin, is characteristic of the figures of Taddeo Gaddi. We may note this by comparing the head of Christ with that of Saint Luke in Taddeo’s altarpiece in the sacristy of Santa
Felicità in Florence or with that of Saint James in the polyptych in the Metropolitan Museum. It will be seen that not only the low forehead but also the structure of the head as a whole, the short, stiff beard, the fall of the hair over the ear and along the neck, and the elongated shape of the eyes are features of a Taddeo Gaddi tradition.

At the same time there are details in the altarpiece that recall other Florentine paintings of the second half of the fourteenth century. For example, the way the medallion busts are differentiated from each other by beard, hair, head-dress, and position is remarkably close to the treatment accorded the prophets by Jacopo di Cione on the frame of the Academy Coronation of 1372-1373; and the complicated, pointed base of the throne has its nearest parallel in the central panel of the Monte Oliveto altarpiece of 1385 by Spinello Aretino, of which this panel and a lateral leaf are in the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge. One may therefore conclude that the author of our triptych was an eclectic painter who received his basic tenets from followers of Taddeo Gaddi and formed the rest of his style on a number of other traditions in the Florentine school.

I wish to thank Miss Caroline Feudale for a number of helpful suggestions in the preparation of this article. An earlier version with complete references and texts of relevant documents was published in Marsyas, vi (1951-1953), pp. 58-69.

Saint Sylvester baptizing Constantine and, at the left, Constantine's vision of Peter and Paul. Panel from the predella of the Museum's altarpiece, which shows scenes from the legend of Saint Sylvester.