

Essays for Docents Project, 2007-2009
On the Occasion of UMMA's Expansion and Renovation



Jacopo del Casentino

Enthroned Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels

tempera and gold on panel

ca. 1325

25 1/2 in x 15 1/4 in x 7/8 in

Museum Purchase, 1960/2.123

Background

Jacopo del Casentino, active in Florence in the mid-fourteenth century, was a significant reason for the city's reputation as a hub of early modern culture and art. Until the mid-nineteenth century, when it was finally unified, Italy was not a country but instead a collection of city states which were governed independently. For centuries Florence was one of the most important and powerful examples of these cities including the era when Jacopo¹ was active. Around the time that this painting was made Florence had a population of roughly 120,000 making it one of Europe's five largest cities. By the thirteenth century Florence had twenty-one guilds—an association of people within one trade or craft formed to protect mutual interests and to maintain standards within the trade or craft—which dominated the politics of the city. Florence was not alone in this. These guilds were everywhere in Europe by this time and Jacopo himself would have belonged to the painter's guild when he produced this painting.

Guilds formed out of the chasm between the nobility and the merchant class. Principally, guilds aimed to uphold standards for whichever particular "art" (usually merchant or artisan) they were associated with. This was in an effort to maintain peace amongst the brothers and to protect them from unfair competition whether from within or outside the guild. The guild also functioned as a place for the proper training of new masters. The

¹ It is proper to refer to the artist by Jacopo instead of del Casentino as that denotes where he hailed from, a region in eastern Tuscany, and is not a surname in the contemporary sense of the word.

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training of an apprentice was important for the future of the guilds and would usually last several years. This training was essentially an education and would provide the apprentice with required skills, room and board, and sometimes care when they were ill.

Guilds strictly regulated the materials used in their art, the process that was to be followed in working with these materials, and the quality of the finished products. Authority in the guilds usually fell into three groups. First, there were the patrons. Patrons were more prominent in the guilds of northern Europe where the lay lord or bishop of the city would develop and protect the guild and in turn would receive yearly gifts from it. Second, were the elected officials of the guild. These were usually aldermen, wardens, or consuls and they were always several in number and chosen yearly. These were the real executives of the guild. They were the administrators of their property as well as its inspectors and judges. Finally, there was the assembly of masters. This group met yearly and was comprised of the masters of the guild. They elected the chief officials as well as amended the guild statutes. Guilds came to dominate cities like Florence to the point of establishing them as guild republics. The 1293-1295 Ordinances of Justice in Florence banned those not belonging to a guild in the city from holding public office essentially turning the guilds into the ruling factions of the city.

Guilds also served a devotional function and were the primary example of catholic lay religious life between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. The guild system aimed to promote the social, religious, and professional interests of all of its members. Guilds would sponsor banquets for their members, aid those struck by disaster as well as help out their disabled, sick, or aged masters. They also supported the widows of members, the education of orphaned sons, and even supplied dowries to bereaved daughters. Ten to twenty percent of men and women in urban areas joined guilds, more in rural areas and northern Europe.

Artist

Jacopo del Casentino specialized in small-scale panel paintings for private devotion, but also produced larger painted altarpieces. This piece is a good example of Casentino's art. His work on this type of painting helped to popularize devotional panels in Italy. Two very different styles influenced Jacopo's art: Sienese and the Florentine style of Giotto. Developed from gothic art, the Sienese style was less natural and reserved, influenced by the marked exaggerations of Byzantine art. This style is characteristic of the works of Simone Martini. Interestingly, Jacopo, like many of his contemporaries, was also a follower of the famed painter Giotto who created more naturalistic and life-like, notably ponderous figures. There is even some evidence that Jacopo may have been an apprentice of Giotto's or of Taddeo Gaddi's, another follower of Giotto and fellow practitioner of the Florentine style. Jacopo was financially and socially successful during his life time and so highly respected that he was elected, in 1339, to be the first *consigliere* of the newly formed painter's guild in Florence, the *Compagnia di S. Luca*, appropriately named after St. Luke, the patron saint of painters.

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Object Information: Personal Devotion

As the viewer looks upon this panel their eyes are immediately met with the Virgin and child who sit atop the dais encompassing much of the panel. Their throne is enclosed by a baldachin (a canopy-like structure hung over an altar or sacred object in a church) of gothic ornamentation, which implies a church location. Surrounding them are fourteen angels and four saints. To the left of Mary is St. Louis of Toulouse. He wears the humble cassock of a Franciscan with a cape decorated with fleurs-de-lis over it. At his feet sits a crown representing his renouncement of secular kingship. He was a popular saint in Florence at the time, mainly because of his ties to the French court at Naples, and his direct stare at the viewer may denote that he was the patron of the family that commissioned this work. Standing behind him is St. John the Evangelist who is holding a quill representing his authorship of a Gospel and the book of Revelations. To the right of Mary is probably St. Zenobius a protector of Florence, often represented in art at this time. Behind him stands St. John the Baptist with his recognizable lean look and his slender cross. The infant Jesus gestures towards him, thereby signaling him as the “herald of the Messiah.”

Typical of medieval art from the time, the painted panel represents an Italian tradition of devotional painting. The Virgin Mary, enthroned as the Queen of Heaven holding the infant Jesus on her lap, was possibly originally part of a triptych. Judging from preserved triptychs of Jacopo's it is probable that the panel was originally between scenes of the Nativity and the Crucifixion. Its intimate size indicates its use in a personal sphere, most likely on the altar of a domestic chapel. Devotion at home was not prevalent at this time and domestic chapels were unusual but not nonexistent. The primary place for worship was still the church but there were a select few who not only could afford the cost of a domestic chapel but also had the required connections to the clergy, specifically a Bishop, necessary for their construction. Due to the stringent guidelines these chapels were only found in the homes or palaces of the wealthy and noble, or the clergy.

Personal devotion was not, however, only relegated to those who could afford a chapel. Not many could afford a domestic chapel but more could afford a personal prayer room or corner in their homes. Prayer rooms were usually located by the bedchamber. They did not have a consecrated altar. Without a consecrated altar, rites like mass could not take place. These rooms usually held icons or images of saints that were particularly important to, and worshipped by, the family of the home. Prayer corners were even more common. These were much simpler, just a place where a religious representation, such as a panel painting, could be placed so that people could kneel before it and pray. The *Enthroned Madonna* was a very common subject for personal or private devotion.

Not much is known, however, about the commissioners of these paintings. Much like the altars of churches, the subjects of panel paintings are pretty standard. They usually portray themes of the incarnation along with a theme of the passion, the virgin enthroned surrounded by saints or as a half-length figure with the crucifixion. There would have been no real iconographic difference between Jacopo's *Enthroned Madonna* and a

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monumental one for the altar of a church. Artists who produced panel paintings would most likely have a supply of half finished panels in varying sizes of the same subject for potential patrons. They could add the saints or supplicants the commissioner wanted in the image. The chosen saints rarely help identify the lay patron because they were usually standard, well venerated, saints. This is less true for the altarpieces because their iconography was more specific to a group or individual associated with the clergy or monastic order.

Technique

The process of panel painting was not a simple one. It required many stages of preparation before the first bit of paint could even be applied. To start, the artist would order the wooden support and frame, from a separate guild of woodworkers; this could also be done by the patron who would, after ordering it, give it to the artist. The artist would usually receive the wood with framing and other decorative elements in place from the woodworker. The most common type of wood used for these paintings was poplar. The selection and curing of wood was an incredibly important step because if not handled correctly warping and cracking could occur.

To prepare for painting the artist would first cover the smoothed surface with fine linen and brush onto that a coarse layer of gesso (ground plaster and glue). This would act as a base for future layers of very fine gesso applied before any one of them dried. Once it was finished and dried the artist would scrape and burnish it for a smooth finish. At this point decorative details such as haloes, borders of costumes, and inscriptions could be built up on the panel surface with plaster giving dimension to the forms they depicted. After this the artist would draw on the gesso surface with charcoal, which could be easily erased or edited. Once the artist was happy with the drawing it would be reinforced with ink.

After the drawing was set the artist would apply large areas of gilding. The areas that were to be gilded were first painted with a red bole (a fine clay suspended in liquid size--glue mixed with water used as a binding medium). Bole was a common base for gilding because it added luster to the normally thin gold leaf or foil pressed onto the wet surface to adhere. The artist would begin the painting processes with a green layer of pigment on the areas where flesh was to be painted. Flesh was painted pink. Green is opposite of pink on the color wheel and opposite colors make each other zing, so, a green underpainting gave vitality to the flesh tones of the skin.

The type of paint used in panel paintings was tempera (pigments suspended in the medium of egg yolks). Typically painting with tempera was a slow and painstaking process, which required short repeated strokes. Finally, metal punches could be used to create texture in the borders, haloes, or clothing. The texture and dimensionality of panel paintings caught and reflected candlelight, which would intensify the otherworldly quality of the images, and allowed them to be read in the dark confines of the church or chapel.

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