

“The Adoration of the Magi by Bartolo di Fredi: A Masterpiece Reconstructed”
Museum of Biblical Art, New York.
June 8–September 12, 2012

Stories of unlikely yet joyous reunions are invariably heartwarming and, moreover, make for excellent copy: comrades-in-arms who, as survivors, embrace for the first time in decades; long-lost offspring rejoining a family incapable of comprehending its good fortune—the variations are both infinite and infinitely moving. Albeit with considerably less drama, The Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA) was the recent venue where several paintings, rather than people, were reunited. It was a significant and satisfying event, both historically and artistically.

In the attractive and spacious second-floor area that the Museum occupies in the American Bible Society building at 61st Street and Broadway, curators of several institutions collaborated in bringing together for the first time fragments of a major fourteenth-century altarpiece: a masterpiece by the Sieneze painter Bartolo di Fredi (c. 1330–1410) that was brutally dismembered and dispersed in the early nineteenth century. That deplorable event is yet another sad example of the carelessness, even contempt, with which early Italian “primitive” paintings were regarded in the waning years of the Baroque and Rococo age. Emblematic, in this respect, was the fate suffered by that absolute pinnacle of Medieval art, Duccio’s *Maestà*, installed in 1311, eventually demoted from the high altar of the Cathedral in Siena, and finally cut to pieces in 1771.

The focus and centerpiece of the MOBIA exhibition is the large main panel of the altarpiece depicting *The Adoration of the Magi*, painted around 1380 by Bartolo di Fredi. The stunning (and stunningly preserved) panel normally resides in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena. It survives today unfortunately shorn of many elements that once comprised a typical, and flamboyantly Gothic, retable: the flanking “wing” panels, the many subsidiary narrative scenes, as well as the intricately carved and gilt framing surrounding and em-

bellishing the whole. Virtually all this is now lost. What escaped the senseless vandalism, besides the central panel, are fragments of the mutilated *predella*, a long, narrow, horizontal panel that originally appeared just below the *Adoration*. At some point after the altarpiece was dismembered, this *predella* was itself cut into three pieces. The larger, central segment depicts Christ crucified, flanked on either side by groups of saints kneeling in adoration, the whole against a tooled gold background. By the mid-1840s, it had found its way into the hands of a pioneer collector of early Italian paintings, Bernhard August von Lindenau, and is still conserved in the museum founded by him in his native city of Altenburg, Germany. A smaller fragment depicting kneeling female saints, clearly cut from the left side of the *predella*, reappeared fleetingly in a 1927 New York auction and then, finally, came to rest in 1971 as a gift to the University of Virginia Art Museum. The location of a similar fragment with male saints cut from the right side, although known to exist from photographs, remains unknown.

This very partial “reconstruction” of the Bartolo di Fredi altarpiece, with the three pieces now hanging in close proximity, is a tribute to the curators and staff, not only of MOBIA, but of the University of Virginia Art Museum as well as the Pinacoteca Nazionale, the latter two collaborating in an exemplary instance of restitution (by UVaM) of archaeological material removed illicitly years ago from the Morgantina site in Sicily. The fact that a large, multi-section, poplar panel such as the *Adoration* would be allowed to travel to two American venues (Charlottesville was a first stop before New York) is also a testimony to contemporary advances in conservation and packing techniques. All this has allowed this remarkable, yet fragmentary, Sieneze masterpiece to be viewed both with a smattering of its original ancillary elements, and an interesting and revealing way, removed from the context of the Pinacoteca where it is normally submerged by a mind-boggling wealth of *other* Sieneze masterpieces. Seen in such splendid isolation, the *Adoration* reveals, as if for the first

time (even to those fortunate to know the Pinacoteca well), a rich mixture of narrative invention, subtle psychological perception, and sublime execution.

More importantly, the exhibition serves as a belated rebuttal to a view, still widely held in some quarters, that later fourteenth-century art in Siena was, essentially, little more than a tired reiteration of earlier prototypes. No one denies, of course, how decisively the great innovators of the first half of the fourteenth century—Duccio, Simone Martini, and the Lorenzetti—conditioned what followed over the subsequent decades. Nothing new here: generations of art historians have noted the derivative aspects of Siennese art after the 1340s, attributing this to a variety of factors, including the Black Death of 1348. But, whatever the causes, this dependency had been interpreted as a symptom of regression, isolation, and, ultimately, decline. Another persistent and oft-repeated criticism of the Siennese school was that, grounded as it was in the tradition of manuscript illumination, it found the reduced scale of the *predella* or of the intimate image for private devotion far more congenial to its practice than the large-scale, monumental altarpiece.

About three decades ago, a shift away from these prejudicial readings was evidenced in an unparalleled and unforgettable exhibition held in Siena's Palazzo Pubblico (*Il Gotico a Siena*, 1982). Despite this, Bartolo's *Adoration* (which was not included) was stigmatized in the show's catalogue as "difficult to digest" and "ornery" ("*indigesta e coriacea*") by the distinguished scholar Luciano Bellosi. The great altarpiece, seen today, reveals, if not the fallacy, certainly the inadequacy of persistent and recurring criticisms such as Bellosi's regarding the perceived "miniaturist" limitations and derivative weaknesses of later fourteenth-century Siennese art. As regards the former, no doubt there are everywhere in the crowded vortex of this *Adoration* myriad details rendered with the elaborate care and fastidious precision of the choir book: from the gorgeous *coiffes* and caparisons of the horses to the lavishly embroidered kingly robes and accouterments—all a joy to be-

hold at close range. The overall composition, on the other hand, so dynamically unbalanced and complex, delivers its message with stunning directness. The energy that gradually builds up as the Kings' cavalcade progresses through the landscape background towards its intended destination explodes, finally and with supercharged intensity, in the multitude of heads, hands, eyes—all directed towards that one small, incredibly noble, creature in His Mother's lap, raising His hand in benediction. The lone counterbalance to this onslaught of sheer color and gold is the standing figure of Joseph, facing the crowd as if to protect his precious wards within their elaborately arched marble niche (no thatched roof hut for these aristocrats!).

Finally, how justified is it to classify this composition by Bartolo di Fredi, dating to the third quarter of the century, as simply a continuation of tired, repetitive pictorial schemes? Undeniably, its visual grammar owes an overwhelming debt to the works of Simone Martini; one needs only to think of the narrative fresco cycle of *St. Martin* in the Lower Church at Assisi (ca. 1315–18). Yet here Bartolo reserves a wealth of surprises for the attentive viewer. For instance, the courtly procession with the Three Kings depicted several times before their arrival—including a stop in a lifelike "Siena-as-Jerusalem"—is a startling invention destined to be repeated (in reverse) by Gentile da Fabriano in his celebrated Strozzi Altarpiece of 1423. Also, never before had horses played such a prominent role in the sacred story of the Epiphany: they are the only participants present incapable of comprehending the significance of the momentous event, twisting and recoiling with bizarre expressions and in the most awkward postures. Not surprisingly, their minder shows more than a hint of unease. It is with these subtle human (and non-human) psychological notes, as well as with the extravagant profusion of colors and gold, that the artist underscores the drama and solemnity of this set piece.

Quite in contrast to conventional wisdom about Siennese painting, the *predella*, or at least what is left of it, is decidedly *not*

the main event, hardly rivaling the principal *Adoration* panel in terms of either novelty or excitement. The same can be said about another, smaller version of a similar subject by Bartolo (*Adoration of the Shepherds*), now in the Lehman Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Two further items on exhibit (a large cross and a portable triptych) by other contemporary masters also add little to the story. What matters is that this excellent MOBIA effort affords a rare opportunity to revisit a magnificent Sieneese altarpiece and to reassess its significance in the context of that city's late medieval art.

—*Marco Grassi*