



EDIZIONI MUSEI VATICANI

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STUDIES  
ON THE  
STEFANESCHI  
POLYPTYCH

GIOTTO  
IN THE  
VATICAN  
PINACOTECA





# The Milan Exhibition and the Opportunity for the Study

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On the occasion of the loan to the exhibition *Giotto, l'Italia* in Milan, Palazzo Reale<sup>1</sup>, the Stefaneschi Polyptych normally displayed in Room II of the Vatican Pinacoteca – that is the reason why it is referred to as ‘of Giotto’ – was provided with a climatological protection system for the painted panels and submitted to an accurate technical-scientific investigation.

For these reasons, a few months before the loan, the structure was moved to the Laboratory for the Restoration of Paintings of the Vatican Museums. Disassembled, the painted panels were delivered to the restorers and technicians of the Diagnostic Laboratory for Conservation and Restoration in order to undergo an intense program of study.

The data taken from the ancient photographic<sup>2</sup> and restoration records, cross-checked with the evidence emerged from the new observations and together with the results of the diagnostic tests carried out with an extensive use of the most modern imaging techniques<sup>3</sup>, have yielded findings which increase the understanding of the artwork and appear in this volume in the dedicated chapters.

Although of the original monumental Gothic altarpiece ‘only’ seven painted panels – trimmed several times along the edges until reaching the form of individual paintings – have survived to this day, the study that was carried out made it possible to acquire substantial information on the original structure and its lost dimensions. Thanks also to the comparisons made *in situ* with other works by Giotto displayed in Milan – in particular with the Baroncelli Polyptych and the Polyptych of Bologna – it was possible to understand the construction methods of the wooden support.

<sup>1</sup> *Giotto, l'Italia*, Milan, Palazzo Reale, 2 September 2015 – 10 January 2016, curated by S. Romano, P. Petrarola.

<sup>2</sup> On this occasion it was possible to draw from the precious photographic archive of the Vatican Photographic Library. A heartfelt thanks goes to the executive in charge, Paola Di Giammaria, for her generous helpfulness.

<sup>3</sup> The choice not to perform any restoration, not even the partial removal of the protective varnish, and to exclusively carry out analyses that did not require taking samples (non-destructive analyses) did not facilitate some of the tests. Nevertheless, the protocol of investigations produced a considerable amount of information – which constitutes an important part of this publication – on the matter and on the executive technique.

The work continued with the examination of the decoration technique and pictorial representation of the figures and scenes: from the preparation layers of the support to the realization of the gold backgrounds, from the definition of ‘palette’ to the actual pictorial execution and, in the end, with the control of the artwork’s state of conservation. The first historical-critical reflections, attentive to the relationships existing among the various artists who participated in the great enterprise, move from the material information emerged and open up exciting perspectives of study.

### The Lost Frame

The original form of the Stefaneschi Polyptych is known to us for the ‘quote’ appearing on the altarpiece itself. In the central panel, at the foot of the great figure of Saint Peter enthroned, Cardinal Stefaneschi is portrayed in the act of offering the model of the *altarium* – thus providing us with the drawing of the original frame – a gilded monumental architectural structure, carved with spires, pinnacles and rampant leaf motifs.

The loss of the support structure is not a secondary issue because both frame and representation were part of a unique creative design characterized by a strong connection between the inside and the outside.

On the *verso*, the extremely high Gothic throne where the Blessing Christ stands out takes the shape of the *retablo* frame and recalls the *ciborium*, supported by columns, which surmounted the altar of Callixtus II where the polyptych was located<sup>4</sup>.

On the *recto*, the cosmatesque throne of Saint Peter realized by Giotto reproduces the papal chair which, as Vasari described, was just a few meters away thus becoming a formidable connecting element between the frame, whose shape it recalls, and the perfect miniature model of the altarpiece offered by the patron, creating a series of references which, like a mirror effect, are reflected endlessly capturing the spectator<sup>5</sup>.

The frame, therefore, beyond fulfilling the function of partition of the liturgical space, sanctioned the link between the image and the place. It was an important aspect that we tried to recover with the virtual recreation of the collocation of the polyptych on the altar of Callixtus II in the ancient architectural context. These are suggestive speculations, made possible thanks to new photo straightening and graphics processing techniques, appearing in Appendix<sup>6</sup>.

### Conservation History

Built to be placed on the high altar of the ancient Vatican Basilica<sup>7</sup>, the polyptych must not have remained there long. High, massive, as long as the altar or a little more<sup>8</sup>, it was supported by means of lateral buttresses or, most probably, it was stabilized at the top

<sup>4</sup> The information is drawn from the essay by Pietro Zander, an indispensable reference point; Zander 2015, pp. 115-118.

<sup>5</sup> Marinacci 2009, pp. 26-27.

<sup>6</sup> A heartfelt thanks to Carlo Volken, ‘IT architect’, Pietro Zander, archaeologist, and to Guido Cornini, art historian, for the always friendly confrontations and generous adhesion to this reckless venture.

<sup>7</sup> The altar of Callixtus measures: 2.70 m wide, 1.65 m deep, 1.35 m high (Zander 2015, p. 118).

<sup>8</sup> The dimensions of the Stefaneschi Polyptych before the dismemberment are unknown; however, the accurate measurements of the painted panels, carried out by the Laboratory for the Restoration of Paintings and the reconstruction study, suggest an overall width of five *bracci fiorentini* (just over 291 cm). Excluding the two vertical supports, the painted part would correspond to the length of the altar. See M. Alesi, L. Baldelli in this book.

with hooks or other metal elements applied to the connecting chains of the columns of the *ciborium* above it. As it was decorated on both sides, it was not possible to install on the back any supporting device.

The collocation on the altar, flush with the underlying Confession<sup>9</sup>, constituted a physical barrier between the celebrant and the believers and did not allow the celebration of the Mass *versus populum*; so on the occasion of solemn celebrations – though rare since the papal court resided in Avignon – the polyptych had to be moved. When – after the return of the Popes to the Vatican – the high altar began to be used more frequently, another collocation had to be found for the polyptych, perhaps near the altar of Saint Peter's Canons, always in the Basilica.

In 1500 the polyptych was documented in the ancient sacristy of Saint Peter's, inside Saint Andrew's *Rotonda*, a building located next to the old Basilica<sup>10</sup>. This is where Vasari saw it and described it, indicating its location<sup>11</sup>. It was probably exposed with a side facing the wall, which was thus preserved by the obfuscation produced by candle smoke and dirt.

From the documents kept in the Vatican Library, we learn that in 1601 the polyptych was still intact and kept in the ancient sacristy of Saint Peter's. The source is Giacomo Grimaldi, notary of the Curia and sub-archivist of the Chapter, who described the scenes represented on both sides and also wrote that the side depicting Saint Peter enthroned had darkened in time and was almost unreadable – a sign it was the side that had long been exposed – and that the wooden structure was badly damaged because of the humidity of the place. He also mentions the presence of an inscription describing in Latin verses the patron's reasons for the gift, and the date.

According to Grimaldi's reconstruction, in 1603 the altarpiece was no longer in its place. It was moved to the Library of the Vatican Chapter, a large dry room on the upper level of Saint Andrew's *Rotonda*, undergoing important alterations during the relocation. It was deprived of the predella and – of the dedicatory inscription – only traces of Cardinal Stefaneschi's coats of arms with six red moons remained<sup>12</sup>.

The subtraction of the dedicatory inscription deprives us of important information regarding the artwork, such as the date of execution. As for the collocation of the inscription, it can be assumed it was just below the triptych or below its central panel, the one depicting Stefaneschi himself about to offer Saint Peter the *altarium* shimmering from its freshly gilded surface<sup>13</sup>, but in the extremely precise miniature model which even provides us with the subjects of the two smaller panels of the predella (now lost) – the central one could depict a *Deesis*<sup>14</sup> – there is no trace of it. It cannot therefore be excluded that the inscription was located at the base, below the predella.

The documentary sources re-emerging after a long absence reveal that in 1618 the three cusped panels of the altarpiece were exposed, separately, on the walls of the Archive of Saint Peter's. The visible side was the one depicting the Blessing Christ, the Crucifixion of Saint Peter and the Beheading of Saint Paul, the most readable one<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Thus named because it was erected on the tomb of Peter next to the so called *fenestella confessionis*. Zander 2015, p. 118.

<sup>10</sup> Zander 2015, p. 121.

<sup>11</sup> Vasari 1568, p. 384, already quoted in Zander 2015, p. 121, note 19.

<sup>12</sup> Zander 2015, note 24.

<sup>13</sup> Zander 2015, note 25.

<sup>14</sup> Marinacci 2009, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Zander 2015, note 26.

In the early eighteenth century the three painted panels were still displayed that way, although the ‘fame’ that they were painted on both sides had not ceased and, showing great consideration, the Chapter adopted protective measures “three double-faced (paintings) of pyramidal shape of Indian walnut wood [...] the Vatican Chapter in order to preserve their memory enclosed them in varnished wood coverings”<sup>16</sup>.

In 1762 Giovanni Pietro Chattard, an expert in Vatican itineraries and places, described the successful relocation in the rooms used as an archive during the demolition works of Saint Andrew’s *Rotonda*. The source is a valuable one because it also reports the displacement of the smaller panels of the predella, which were never documented before<sup>17</sup>.

In 1784 the “seven priceless paintings by Giotto”<sup>18</sup>, seven panels of which three had a large “pyramidal shape”, were transferred to the new Chapter Hall of the Basilica. It was rediscovered that the three big and cusped panels were painted on both sides<sup>19</sup>. They were mounted on rectangular frames hinged on one side so that, protected by transparent crystals, they could be admired *recto-verso*. The seven tables, thus joined together, remained in the Chapter Hall until 1931<sup>20</sup>.

In 1931 the surviving paintings of Giotto’s altarpiece were by then known, published and admired<sup>21</sup>. As the essay edited by the Historical Archive precisely indicates, Pope Ratti (Pius XI) approved Bartolomeo Nogara’s project: he was an influential proponent in his dual role of director of the Vatican Museums and director of the Petriano Museum. The painted panels were restored and reassembled in a polyptych as a memory of their lost unity<sup>22</sup>. The structure was designed by architect Luca Beltrami, designer of the new Vatican Pinacoteca, and consisted of a long *predella-dossale* in walnut wood, a model of expositive structure used by Beltrami also in other museological installations.

The restoration of the panels was carried out in the restoration laboratories of the Vatican Museums under the supervision of the artistic director for the paintings, Biagio Biagetti, who was in charge of the intervention and of the installation of the paintings in the new containment and support structure used ever since<sup>23</sup>.

In 1970 the altarpiece was the object of a new restoration by Luigi Brandi, with the scientific support of the Cabinet for Scientific Research of the Museums directed by Nazzeno Gabrielli.

This intervention, whose ‘appetizing’ technical report<sup>24</sup> is reproduced almost entirely in this book, preceded the investigations carried out by the Laboratory for the Restoration of Paintings and by the Archive of the Laboratories illustrated in this publication.

The last paper describes the handling and transport phases and the realization of the climatological protection system of the painted panels.

<sup>16</sup> Gizzi 1721, p. 30. I wish to thank Francesca Martusciello for the hints provided and Marta Bezzini for the accurate review of the notes of this paper.

<sup>17</sup> Zander 2015, p. 124.

<sup>18</sup> Cancellieri 1784, already quoted in Zander 2015, p. 124, note 32.

<sup>19</sup> Zander 2015, p. 124.

<sup>20</sup> Zander 2015, p. 125.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> Bezzini 2015, pp. 129-130.

<sup>23</sup> Redig de Campos 1973, p. 334, note 6; Biagetti 1934, pp. 115-117.

<sup>24</sup> It is a free drawing from the original text, which was longer and with attachments, kept in the Archives of the Laboratories (ALRP, Prot. 296/71). The technical prose of the elderly restorer, an indicator of a strong bond with the tradition, seems curiously distant from the outside world which was going through the protests of 1968.

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