

**Trinity College's *Saint John the Baptist*
by Follower of Pietro Lorenzetti (possibly Niccolò di ser Tegliacci)**

Annika Finne
Ph.D. Candidate
Institute of Fine Arts, NYU

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In conversation with Alexander Nagel, Shannah Rose, and Scarlett Strauss
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Kress Number: K1237

Artist: Follower of Pietro Lorenzetti, possibly Niccolo di ser Sozzo Tegliacci

Title: *Saint John the Baptist*

Date: mid14th century, (pre-1362 if Tegliacci)

Support/Medium: Tempera, gold ground on wood

Dimensions: 108.6 x 43.2cm

Owner: Trinity College Study Collection, Hartford, CT

Signature, Inscriptions, Marks, or Labels: Inscribed on scroll: ECCE AGNUS DEI ECCE QUI TOLLIS PECCATA MUNDI MISERĒ NOBIS (Behold the Lamb of God; Thou Who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us) –partly from John 1:29.

Essay

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In this painting, a full-length St. John the Baptist stands on a marble surface. He is enclosed within a pinnacled compartment whose shape and ornamentation would have reminded the painting's mid-fourteenth century Sieneese viewers of their architectural surroundings.¹ Above the saint, in the point of the pinnacle, is a half-length bearded and winged figure, holding an open codex, who has been identified as St. John the Evangelist.²

Like many other late medieval Italian paintings in the United States, the Trinity painting is only one fragment of what was originally a multi-panel altarpiece. Both large and small St. John look intently towards the viewer's left. The object of their gazes was likely a larger painting of the Madonna and Child, positioned in the center of a now-dismembered altarpiece, as modeled by a still-intact contemporaneous altarpiece in the Siena Pinacoteca Nazionale. This altarpiece, co-signed by Niccolò Tegliacci and Luca di Tommè and dated to 1362, has a John the Baptist figure who both resembles the St. John in the Trinity panel and who holds a scroll with the same quotation (**Figure**).³

Assuming the small figure enclosed in the point of the Trinity pinnacle is in fact St. John the Evangelist, the larger Madonna and Child panel presumably at the center of the original

¹ On the connections between altarpiece design and Gothic architecture, see Henk van Os, *Sieneese Altarpieces, 1215-1460: form, content, function*, vol. 2 (Groningen: Bouma's Boekhuis, 1984), 36-39. As an illustrative example, van Os cites the ca. 1320 architectural drawings made for the uncompleted facade of the Baptistery in Siena, which, with only minor adjustments, could be easily reimagined as a design for an altarpiece.

² As will be further discussed later in this essay, to portray St. John the Evangelist with wings is unusual, see Fern Rusk Shapley Shapley: p 53. *Complete Catalogue of the Samuel H Kress Collection: Italian Paintings XIII-XV Century*, vol. I (London: Phaidon Press, 1966), 53.

³ On this altarpiece, see Sherwood A. Fehm, Jr., *The Collaboration of Niccolò Tegliacci and Luca di Tommè* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1973), 7-10. Fehm believes the present arrangement of the panels to be correct. There is no documentary record of the altarpiece prior to its 1842 appearance in the Siena Pinacoteca Nazionale catalogues. See also Henk van Os, "Tradition and Innovation in some Altarpieces by Bartolo di Fredi," *The Art Bulletin* 67 (1985) 52; Judith Steinhoff, "Artistic working relationships after the Black Death: a Sieneese "compagnia", c. 1350-1363, *Renaissance Studies*, 14 (2000) 5-6, 18-23.

altarpiece would have been flanked by four smaller panels in total, each with one of the four Evangelists shown in their four pinnacle points.

There are two other panels, a St. Catherine of Alexandria and a St. Peter, which may have belonged to the same, now-dismembered altarpiece as the Trinity St. John.⁴ As of 2001, the St. Catherine was in an unknown private collection (Figure 2).⁵ It is only three centimeters taller and seven centimeters narrower than the Trinity panel and the framing architecture of the two paintings matches precisely. The slight difference in scale could be explained by the fact that both panels have been trimmed, presumably when the altarpiece was taken apart. Although there are now differences in the gilt backgrounds of the two panels, these differences do not mean that the panels did not once match at an earlier time in their histories. It is likely that the St. Catherine panel was re-gilt to cover the oxidized silver gilding that is, unusually, still preserved on the John the Baptist panel; that some regilding has taken place is also indicated by a note reading “fondo oro nuovo” written by the Italian art historian Federico Zeri on the reverse of the photograph of the St. Catherine panel in the Zeri photo archive.

The second potential companion panel, the St. Peter, is now in the Courtauld Institute of Art collection (Figure 3). It is four centimeters shorter than the Trinity panel and one centimeter narrower, again a margin of difference that could be explained by the trimming of the panels. The Courtauld St. Peter does not appear to have been regilt: the panel also preserves darkened silver gilding, and the accenting punchwork is consistent with that of the Trinity St. John.

If the St. Peter, St. Catherine, and St. John panels did belong to the same altarpiece, the latter two panels would have been positioned on the right side of the presumed central Madonna and Child panel, while the St. Peter would have been positioned on its left side. X-radiographs of the three

⁴ The first to associate the John the Baptist with the St. Peter and St. Catherine panels was Erling Skaug, “Notes on the Chronology of Ambrogio Lorenzetti and a New Painting from his Shop,” *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 20 (1976) 324 n43.

⁵ A sale date of May 16, 2001 and size of 111.8 x 36.8 cm was retrieved from artnet.com on June 2, 2020; no further information as to place or site of sale was provided by the website. The Zeri photo archive entry on the panel (INVN 21865) lists its last known location as in the possession of P. Paolini, Rome.

paintings and close examination of their left and right side edges could provide additional information as to how they were arranged within the altarpiece. If the St. Peter was located in the position of honor to the proper right of the Madonna and Child, the possibility that Peter was the saint to whom the altarpiece and its housing chapel or church was dedicated could be explored, potentially leading to the identification of the original location of the altarpiece and its commissioning patrons.

The figures represented in the pinnacles, however, complicate the theory that the St. Peter, St. Catherine, and St. John the Baptist panels belonged to the same altarpiece. These figures do not fit neatly within the conventional ways of representing three Evangelists.⁶ In the St. Peter pinnacle is a tonsured young man, holding a codex, who has wings that end in shaped feathers colored in a gradient from white to red. This figure may represent St. Matthew, as his symbolic attribute is a winged man.⁷ However, in contemporary Sieneese altarpieces, St. Matthew is not shown as an isolated winged man but as a winged man who accompanies a conventional, wingless representation of the evangelist. Even if St. Matthew was here unusually depicted in the form of his winged man attribute, one would had least expect the remaining evangelists to be shown in the company of their symbolic animals, as demonstrated by Andrea Vanni's polyptych for the church of S. Stefano alla Lizza (Figure 4). However, perhaps the St. John the Evangelist in the Trinity panel is in fact meant to be perceived as accompanied by his attribute the eagle. The wings behind the Trinity St. John are strikingly different in style compared to the wings behind the Courtauld pinnacle figure: they are rendered with fine light strokes against a flat dark inner color and light brown outer color. These are not vibrantly colored angelic wings but wings that might be found on earth; perhaps these wings are meant to be understood as eagle wings (Figure 5).

⁶ On conventional representations of the four evangelists, see James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) 128-129.

⁷ George Kaftal does not list any examples of a winged St. John the Evangelist and likewise does not cite any examples of St. Matthew as a winged figure, only in the company of a winged figure, see *Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting*, (Florence: Sansoni, 1952) xx-xxii, 560-561, 725.

If the figure in the pinnacle of the St. Catherine panel is one of the two remaining evangelists, however, he is clearly not accompanied by either Mark's lion or Luke's cow. Even more unusual than portraying St. Matthew as an isolated winged man and portraying St. John next to eagle-like wings would be for the remaining evangelists in the final two altarpiece pinnacles to be shown without their attributes. Perhaps the Trinity and Courtauld panels did belong to the same altarpiece and their pinnacle figures do represent two evangelists, albeit in this unusual manner, but the St. Catherine panel belonged to a different, sibling, altarpiece, made from prefabricated panels of the same shape and size. Matching carpentry does not necessarily prove that panels from disassembled altarpieces originally belonged to the same altarpiece. Duccio's early Trecento Sieneese workshop used prefabricated carpentry to efficiently produce painting types which saw steady market demand; two tabernacles attributed to Duccio now in London and Boston are identical in size, shape, and moldings.⁸

The altarpiece the Trinity panel belonged to was not large. Possibly it was mounted on a side altar in a large church, or on the high altar of a small church. Despite the scale of the altarpiece, the figure of John the Baptist is still painted full-length, not half-length, and as a consequence he is significantly smaller than life-size. In the mid-Trecento, when the Trinity panel was painted, the convention of painting full-length figures of saints on the flanking panels of altarpiece was still new in Siena—at the beginning of the Trecento, altarpieces made in Siena for Sieneese patrons usually had half-length, not full-length, figures of saints.⁹ Pietro Lorenzetti's prominent altarpiece for the church of San Niccolò del Carmine, painted in 1329, has been cited as an early example of the use of full-length figures of flanking saints in Siena.¹⁰ One of these figures is a John the Baptist, now in the Norton Simon Museum. This John the Baptist is, however, over half a foot taller than the Trinity Baptist. Other full-length flanking saints from altarpieces

⁸ James Stubblebine, "The Boston Ducciesque Tabernacle, a Collaboration" in *Collaborations in Italian Renaissance Art*, eds Wendy Stedman Sheard and John T. Paoletti, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978) 3-21.

⁹ van Os, *Sieneese Altarpieces*, 1:91 and 2:36. He notes that the saints in Duccio's *Maestà* are full-length, but these saints were not painted on separate, individually framed panels.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

contemporary with the Trinity panel—such as the aforementioned polyptych in the Siena Pinacoteca— are, likewise, larger.¹¹

The art historian Henk van Os has speculated that the full-length saint figure was interesting to artists and patrons because these painted full-length saints would have been in a visual conversation with sculpted full-length saints; such sculptures were also incorporated into Siense polyptychs.¹² Given this context, the petiteness of the Trinity Baptist figure begins to remind of the petiteness of a statuette; perhaps the decision to depict full-length saints at this scale was in order to set the altarpiece into dialogue with statuettes decorating its housing church. Perhaps a statuette was in fact physically part of the original altarpiece as the central panel. There is a later Venetian example wherein similarly sized full-length painted figures flank a small central statuette (Figure 6).

Currently, a follower of Pietro Lorenzetti, possibly the aforementioned Niccolò di ser Sozzo Tegliacci, is credited as the author of the Trinity Baptist. At a minimum it is possible to say, with certainty, that the artist or artists responsible for the panel drew on the same pool of workshop resources as Pietro and Niccolò: the punches used to decorate the gilt background appear in several panels attributed to the Lorenzetti brothers, as well as panels attributed to Niccolò.¹³ The feet of the Trinity Baptist share the same high instep and approximate silhouette as the feet of the Baptist in the Siena Pinacoteca panel co-signed by Niccolò and Luca di Tommè (Figure 7). A Baptist with a similarly high instep also appears in a painting attributed to Luca in the Polesden Lacey collection (Figure 8).¹⁴

¹¹ The overall measurements of the Norton Simon John the Baptist panel are 126.4 x 46.7 cm; it is also significant that the figure of the Baptist occupies more space relatively within the panel than the Trinity Baptist.

¹² van Os, *Siense Altarpieces*, v.2, 39.

¹³ See Skaug, “Notes on the Chronology of Ambrogio Lorenzetti,” 324 and Erling Skaug, *Punch marks from Giotto to Fra Angelico: attribution, chronology, and workshop relationships in Tuscan panel painting: with particular consideration to Florence, c. 1330-1430*, (Oslo: IIC, Nordic Group, 2994) 224-5.

¹⁴ Fehm considers this instep to be characteristic of Luca, see, *Collaboration of Niccolò di Ser Sozzo Tegliacci and Luca di Tommè*, 20.

In 2011-12, during the technical examination and conservation treatment of the Trinity panel at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, the painting conservator Sophie Scully, in collaboration with Dianne Dwyer Modestini and Nica Gutman Rieppi, observed that a unusual layering technique was used to paint the shadows in the Baptist's red cloak. The artist first laid down a flat red under-layer containing lead white and vermillion, next mixtures of azurite, lead white, and black were used to approximately model the drapery folds, and next a thin layer of vermillion was scumbled over the blue under-modeling to establish mid-tone shadows which are cool in temperature but relatively light in value, such as those on the chest of the Baptist. In the darker portions of the fabric, a thicker layer of vermillion followed by a red lake glaze was applied over the blue under-modeling to make these shadows darker and deeper (Figure 9).¹⁵

No other examples of this unusual drapery modeling technique can presently be cited. Typically, shadows in red drapery are shown by strokes of dark red glazes.¹⁶ The use of a blue intermediary layer is not however completely unrelated to prevalent painting techniques; it does approximately resemble the color layering systems used by mid-Trecento Italian painters to represent skin. Here, in the areas intended to become faces and exposed limbs, the artists generally first laid down a cold mid-value under-layer, such as a green earth or a mixture of black and ochre, and then scumbled a thin, warm, opaque color, such as a mixture of lead white, vermillion, and ochre, over that base layer.¹⁷ For shaded areas that remain relatively light in value, such as where the face approaches the chin, the cool base color would be left visible, or only very thinly covered, just like the mid-tone shadows on the front face of the Baptist's cloak.

¹⁵ See Sophie Scully, "K1237 Report," Kress Files, 2011-2012, Institute of Fine Arts Conservation Center. X-ray fluorescence spectra obtained from a handheld unit were used to obtain the pigment identifications.

¹⁶ For contemporaneous example of red drapery modeled via the addition of white for the highlights and red lake in the shadows see Ciro Castelli, Marco Ciatti, Luisa Gusmeroli, Mauro Parri, Andrea Santacesaria, "Il restauro del trittico di Ambrogio Lorenzetti di Badia a Rofeno dal Museo di Asciano," *OPD Restauro*, 23 (2011) 20; for the late fourteenth-century artist and writer Cennino Cennini's instructions on how to paint drapery with a tripartite system where the darkest shade is the pigment unmixed with lead white, see Cennino Cennini's *Il Libro dell'arte*, trans. Lara Broecke, (London: Archetype, 2018) 187.

¹⁷ Roberto Bellucci and Cecilia Frosinini, "Painting flesh tones," in *The Panel Paintings of Masolino and Masaccio: the Role of Technique* (Milan: 5 Continents, 2002) 32-33.

A link can also be made between the blue intermediary layer and a drapery modeling system often associated with the representation of *cangiante* or “shot” silk. In these textiles, threads of multiple colors have been woven together such that folding the cloth or shining light on it from a new angle causes its color to change.¹⁸ Like the painter of the Trinity Baptist’s red cloak, Ambrogio Lorenzetti appears to have also layered red over blue to represent the luxury fabric wrapped around the Christ Child in his 1342 *Presentation in the Temple* altarpiece for the Sienese Duomo (Figure 10). However, Ambrogio’s wrapping fabric clearly does change color: it, like a shot silk, turns from blue to red. The Trinity Baptist cloak, in contrast, appears to be simply, plainly red: the flat red preparatory under-layer, painted prior to the blue intermediary modeling layer, suggests that the painter thought of the cloth as, entirely, a red cloth.

In the physical world, the redness of a red cloth will shift when the color goes into shadow, but the cloth itself will stay red. It is possible that the painter of the Trinity Baptist applied the blue intermediary layer in an attempt to capture this phenomenon, to model how the cloth loses saturation in shadow without losing the impression that it is a single color and not several, i.e. that the cloth has “tonal unity.”¹⁹ The Italian artists credited with prioritizing tonal unity in their paintings and with establishing new methods for representing the complex physical reality of color are not, however, the contemporaries and followers of the Lorenzetti brothers, but an entirely different artistic community working roughly a century and a half later; the most celebrated practitioner of tonal unity is Leonardo da Vinci.²⁰ The Trinity Baptist’s cloak may not resemble any cloak painted by Leonardo, but the Sienese painter’s decision to layer blue between

¹⁸ Representations of “shot” silk could well have been modeled on real textiles; Lucca and Florence were major silk production centers from the twelfth century onwards, see Melissa Jane Meier, “Cangiante and Shot Silk: Material Influence on Artistic Practice in Central Italian Painting from 1300-1550,” PhD Dissertation, Bryn Mawr College, 2015. Not all draperies modeled with two different colors were necessarily representations of shot silk; it is possible that painters were also simply taking advantage of the natural lightness and darkness of a given hue combination, for example yellow and blue, and using these pairs to model the rise and fall of fabric in a way analogous how black and white are often used, see John Shearman, “Leonardo’s Colour and Chiaroscuro,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 25 (1962) 14-16; James S. Ackerman, “On Early Renaissance Color Theory and Practice,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 35 (1980) 17-19.

¹⁹ Shearman, “Leonardo’s Colour,” 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Ackerman, “On Early Renaissance Color,” Claire J. Farago, “Leonardo’s Color and Chiaroscuro Reconsidered: The Visual Force of Painted Images,” *The Art Bulletin*, 73 (1991) 63-88.

coats of red in the shadows of the cloak's folds opens the possibility that this unlikely pair of artists were thinking about color in similar ways.²¹

There are several open lines of investigation concerning the Trinity Baptist which might be rewardingly pursued. X-radiography and photographs of the verso and side edges of the Trinity panel and the St. Peter panel in the Courtauld Gallery could clarify whether these two paintings did belong to the same altarpiece, and if so, reveal how they were arranged. While preliminary inquiries into the 2001 sale of the St. Catherine of Alexandria panel went unanswered, it is likely, given the relatively recent auction date, that the site of sale and possibly the present location of the panel could be determined. X-radiography and examination of the carpentry of the St. Catherine could, similarly, help to reconstruct the disassembled altarpiece. It is also possible that examining the layer structures of the draperies in the group of paintings associated with the Trinity panel—the St. Peter, the St. Catherine, as well as those attributed to Luca di Tommè and Niccolò di ser Sozzo Tegliacci—would lead to the discovery of intermediary color layers similar or analogous to the blue intermediary layer, which would help to contextualize this unusual modeling technique. Such an investigation may also help to specify the authorship of the Trinity Baptist.

²¹ This connection is therefore also a contribution to scholarly discussions of the possibility that the use of color in Italian painting did not follow a Vasarian teleological, linear progression between the Trecento and Cinquecento, see Paul Hills, "Review, Color and Meaning: Practice and Theory in Renaissance Painting by Marcia B. Hall," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 48 (1995) 190-192; Joseph Manca, "The Gothic Leonardo: Towards a Reassessment of the Renaissance," *Artibus et Historiae* 17 (1996) 121-158, especially 130-132.



Figure 1: Niccolò di ser Sozzo Tegliacci and Luca di Tommè, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Angels*, 191 x 297 cm, 1362, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena, source: Web Gallery of Art, accessed August 15 2020.



Figure 2: Niccolò di ser Sozzo Tegliacci (attr.), *St. Catherine of Alexandria*, 111.8 x 36.8 cm, ca. 1350-1363, unknown private collection (last sold May 16, 2001), source: (left) artnet.com and (right) Federico Zeri photo archive no. 6834, accessed August 20, 2020.



Figure 3: Niccolò di ser Sozzo Tegliacci, *St. Peter*, ca. 1350, 104.5 x 44.3 cm, The Courtauld Gallery, London, source: [ArtStor.org](https://www.artstor.org) via the Courtauld Gallery, London.



Figure 4: Detail, Andrea Vanni. *Polyptych of Santo Stefano*, ca. 1400, Santo Stefano alla Lizza, Siena, source: Wikimedia Commons, Sailko, 22 July 2015, accessed August 20, 2020.



Figure 5: Left, detail of St. Mark panel, Pietro and Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Polyptych of the Beata Umiltà*, ca. 1340, Uffizi Gallery, Florence; right: detail of Evangelist wing in the Trinity panel.



Figure 6: Jacobello del Fiore, *Polyptych of Beata Michelina*, ca 1405-15, 129 x 245 cm, Pinacoteca, Pesaro, source: Federico Zeri photo archive, no. 24047, accessed August 20, 2020.



Figure 7: Top left, detail, Niccolò di ser Sozzo Tegliacci and Luca di Tommè, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Angels*, 191 x 297 cm, 1362, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena, source: Federico Zeri photo archive, no. 6845, accessed August 20, 2020; top right, detail, feet of the Baptist in the Trinity panel; bottom: yellow tracing of the outline of the proper right Baptist foot from the Pinacoteca panel overlaid onto the Trinity Baptist foot to demonstrate correspondence of shape.



Figure 8: Detail showing high instep of John the Baptist, Luca di Tommè, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints*, 34.2 x 15.2 cm, ca 1360, Polesdon Lacey Collection, Surrey, United Kingdom, source: Federico Zeri photo archive no. 6877, accessed August 20, 2020.

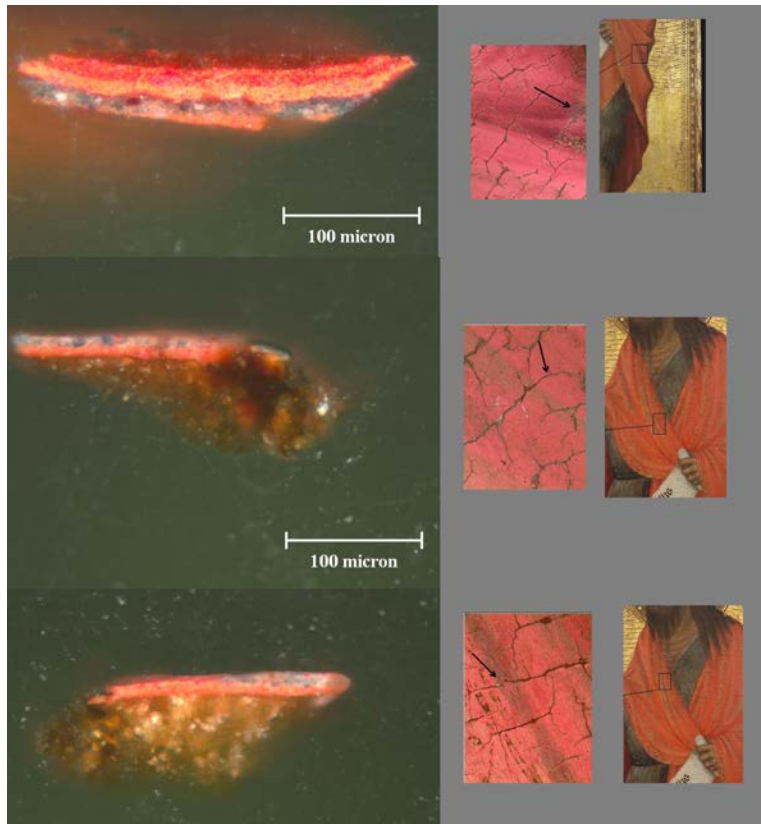


Figure 9: Left column, cross sections taken from the Baptist's cloak, right column, details of locations where the cross sections were taken. Arrangement of photographs by the author, all photographs by Sophie Scully, see "K1237 Report," Kress Files, 2011-2012, Institute of Fine Arts Conservation Center.



Figure 10: Ambrogio Lorenzetti, detail of *Presentation in the Temple*, 1342, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, source: author.