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From Polyptych to Easel Painting:

A Panel from A Dismembered Altarpiece by Giusto De' Menabuoi

Saint Paul and Saint Augustine by Giusto de' Menabuoi (Fig. 1) belongs to the Samuel H. Kress Study Collection at the Georgia Museum of Art. The panel, originally a part of a multistoried polyptych, was gifted in 1961 along with four other panels from the same altarpiece. Giusto de' Menabuoi initially trained in Bernardo Daddi's studio in Florence and established his reputation as a painter in Milan.¹ He then moved to Padua by 1373 and received regular commissions for lavish funerary chapels, including his most noted works in the Paduan Baptistery.²

The panel depicting Saints Paul and Augustine constituted a polyptych, henceforth will be referred to as the Terzago polyptych, commissioned by Suor Isotta Terzago in 1363. The polyptych is Menabuoi's earliest securely attributed work and one of three extant gold ground paintings ascribed to the artist.³ Currently, only thirteen other fragments have been securely identified: the central panel, *Madonna and Child Enthroned* in the Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Reale in Pisa, inscribed with the name of the artist, date, and the donatrix⁴; four panels each depicting a full-figured saint—*Saint John the Baptist*, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, and *Saint Anthony Abbot*; two half-figured saints—*Saint Ambrose* in the Francesco Arcangeli Collection in the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna and *Saint Cecilia* in an undisclosed private collections in Italy; and six roundels previously owned by the Stamford Museum & Nature Center in Connecticut and sold to benefit the museum's collections fund at Sotheby's New York in 2008. Despite the lack of surviving contractual documentation, the polyptych has been roughly attributed to a Dominican church in or near Milan.⁵

¹ Bernardo Daddi's studio was active in Florence from 1320 to approximately 1348. See Emmerson, *Key Figures in Medieval Europe*, 260; For a discussion of Menabuoi's Milanese works, see Delaney, "Giusto de' Menabuoi in Lombardy," 19.

² Richard Emmerson believes that Menabuoi must have arrived in Padua by 1367. However, the earliest documentation associated with Menabuoi dates from 1373. See Emmerson, 259; Fina Buzzaccarini, a renowned patron of the arts and wife of the lord of Padua, appointed Giusto to decorate the baptistery of Sant'Antonio to serve as the couple's funerary chapel. Many of the lavish commissions such as this stemmed from the patrons' desires for an optimistic and hopeful life after the Black Death. See Ibid. 259 and Baragli, *European Art of the Fourteenth Century*, 219.

³ There are a few frescoes in and near Milan that have uncertain attribution; the fresco of a Madonna and child with saints and donor in the tribute of Abbazia di San Pietro, Viboldone may be the earliest surviving work by Giusto if attribution can be confirmed. See Emmerson, 259.

⁴ The inscription on the central panel reads, "Justus pinxit/hoc opus fecit fi(e)ri dona soror Ixotta filia qdam dni Simonis De Terzago MCCCLXIII mesis Martii."

⁵ Components of the polyptych have Milanese provenance. The depicted saints are prominently associated with the Dominican Order—Saint Catherine of Alexandria is the patroness of the order; Saint Thomas Aquinas represents the learning and sanctity of the order; and Saint Augustine, whose rules the Dominicans followed. While Saint Anthony Abbot is not a typical Dominican saint, he is dressed in a Dominican habit. The two kneeling figures in the lower foreground of the central panels, one of which has been identified as the donatrix, wear habit of Dominican nuns. The donatrix was a member of the *casato Lombardo* (ruling family in Milan). The presence of Saint Ambrose, a patron saint of Milan, further confirms such provenance. For a discussion of the Terzago (Terzago or Terzaghi) family, see Cordelia F. J. Warr, "Female Patronage and the Rise of Female Spirituality in Italian Art of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries," (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 1994), 35-36.



Figure 1. Before treatment. Giusto de' Menabuoi, *Saint Paul and Saint Augustine*, 1363. Tempera on wood. 58.3 x 33 cm (painted surface) 58.8 x 35.5 x 0.8 cm (panel). Georgia Museum of Art Athens, Georgia, Kress Collection

Roberto Longhi's 1973 reconstruction of the Terzago polyptych, suggested to be the first recreation of the altarpiece, has three registers and a predella (Fig. 2).⁶ Longhi placed three full-figured saints on either side of the central panel in the first register: Saint Anthony Abbot, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Saint John the Baptist to Madonna's right; Saint Paul, Saint Augustine, and Saint Catherine of Alexandria to Madonna's left. According to Longhi, the final height of the first register likely extended to 60 cm due to the frame element. Longhi situated two half-figured panels, *Saint Ambrose* and *Saint Cecilia*, in the second register in what he claimed was a standard configuration for Venetian altarpieces. In the third register, Longhi designated spaces for four roundels in between the interstices of the second register panels and assigned six roundels to the predella.

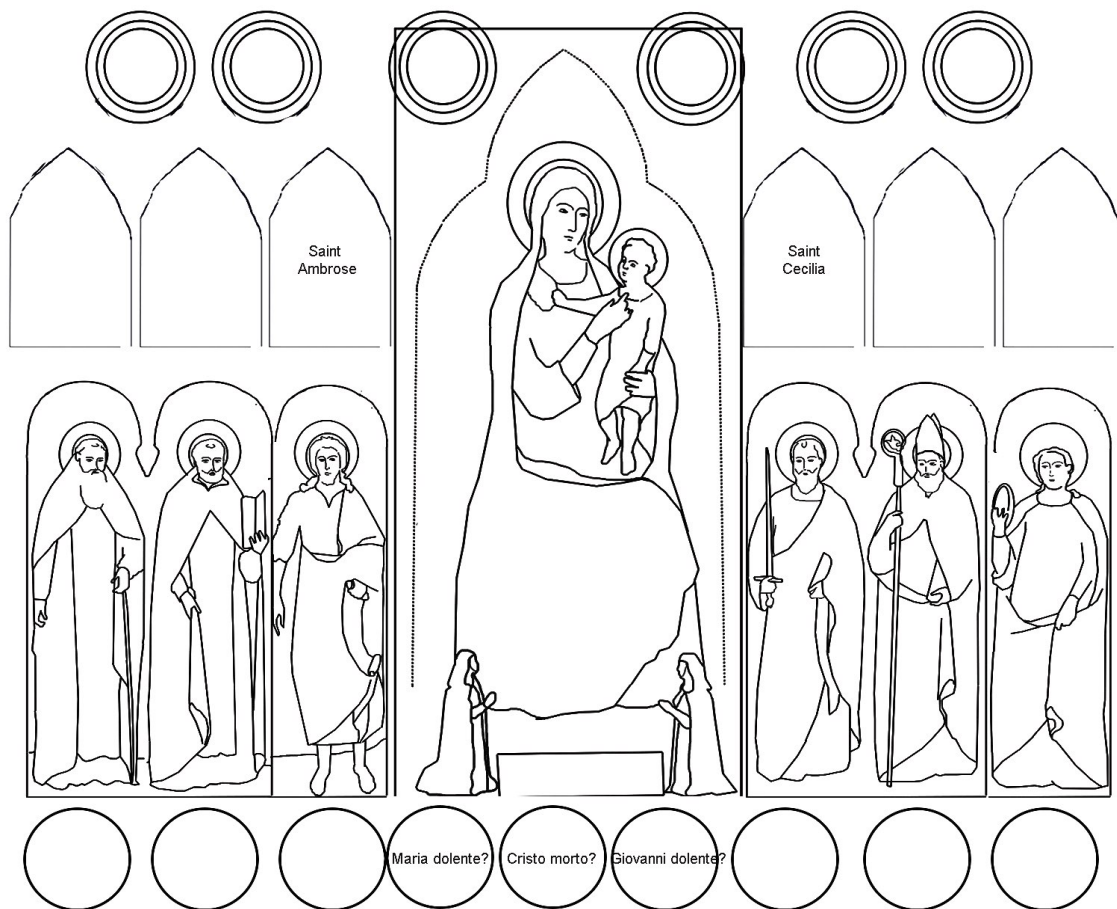


Figure 2. Longhi reconstruction. Diagram by author

⁶ Roberto Longhi, *Lavori in Valpadana: dal trecento al primo cinquecento. 1934-1964. Pittura Bolognese ed Emiliana del trecento. Tramonto della pittura medioevale nel Nord Italia. Aspetti dell'antica arte Lombarda*, (Firenze: Sansoni, 1973), 256.

In 1976, Bradley J. Delaney proposed a new configuration. Rather than six saints flanking the Madonna, Delaney, recognizing that two saints were originally paired in a single continuous panel, suggested a pentaptych model with eight-saint flanking the Madonna.⁷ Delaney also argued that all of the roundels belonged in the third register, rather than in the predella. In 2010, Perri Lee Roberts supported Delaney's reconstruction and identified the two missing saints (Fig. 3).⁸

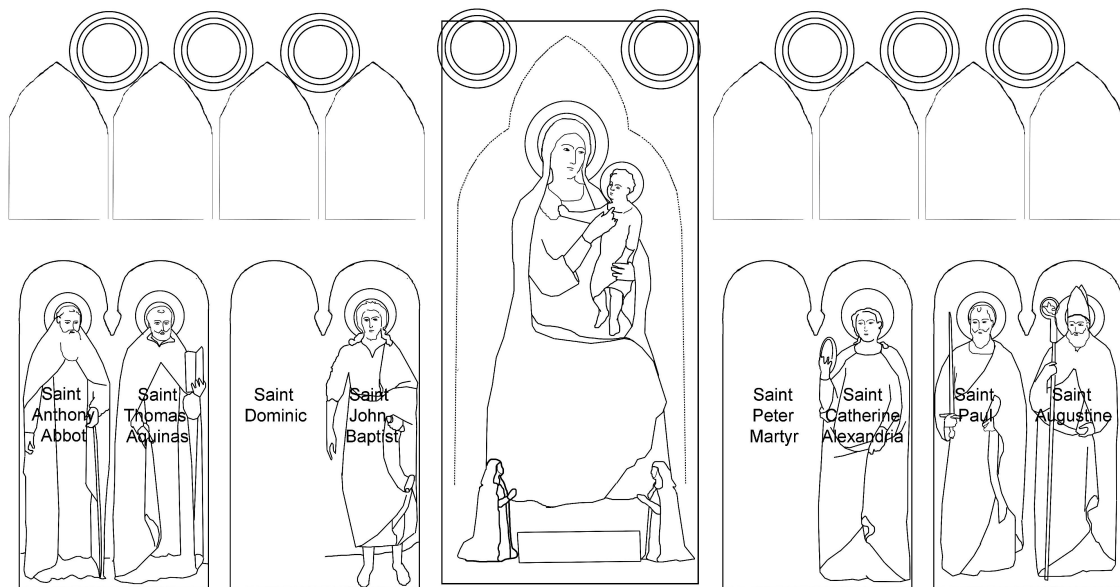


Figure 3. Delaney and Roberts' reconstruction. Diagram by author

The purpose of the postscript is to correct the former views of the Terzago polyptych by proposing a new configuration based on the recent examination of *Saint Paul and Saint Augustine*. The study and treatment of the panel are also intended to establish the groundwork for future scholarship on Menabuoi's Lombard and Paduan works.

The construction of the panel roughly followed that of an established tradition of Florentine panel painting as outlined in *Il Libro dell' Arte*. The support, thinned to the current thickness of

⁷ "SS. Anthony Abbot and Thomas were probably once joined in a single panel, as is suggested by the tooled borders that indicate a cusp between the two. They must have been placed to the far left, balancing SS. Paul and Augustine, who rule Anthony followed. The panels of Saint John and Saint Catherine may not be mated, for the tooling located the cusp on the left of each panel, indicating that at least two panels are missing. John is most at home to the immediate left of the central panel, against which the ground-line banks. St. Catherine would then be placed beside St. Paul. Following this reconstruction, all of the saints to the right hold their attributes with the right hand, and vice versa. It is generally agreed that the three-quarter-length saints were in the second register. Their measurements are unavailable, so it is difficult to claim certainty for the most plausible arrangement that one was above each standing figure. The roundels (which have been reframed) probably filled the interstices between the upper saints, with the two still attached to the central panel intervening between it and the neighboring busts." Bradley, Delaney, "Giusto de' Menabuoi in Lombardy," *The Art Bulletin* 58, no.1 (1976): 21.

⁸ "...St. Anthony Abbot, St. Thomas Aquinas, a missing saint (perhaps St. Dominic), and St. John the Baptist on the left, and by a missing saint (perhaps St. Peter Martyr), St. Catherine of Alexandria, St. Paul, and St. Augustine on the right." Perri Lee Roberts, "Giusto de' Menabuoi Painting."

0.8cm and cradled, is a transversally cut wooden panel, likely poplar, with vertical wood grain. The x-radiograph showed the presence of plain woven fabric, the edges of which were exposed after the removal of the fills and identified as linen with stiff, z-twisted warp and weft.⁹ The barbes along the right, left, and bottom edges of the panel indicated the location of the original engaged decorative molding and confirmed that the original horizontal dimension was preserved. The painting had been prepared with a white ground, identified as calcium sulfate through elemental analyses. There were traces of what might be pounce marks in the faces and drawing using a liquid material outlining the folds. The similarities between the facial features and postures not only between Saints Paul and Augustine but also all full-figured saints from the Terzago polyptych, suggested uses of a template. The outlines were incised into the gesso layer to demarcate the figures, halo, spandrel, and the arches. The red bole and gilding partly extended into the incised outlines of the figures. The binding medium for the paint layers, identified as egg tempera with Fourier Transform Infrared spectroscopy, was thinly applied with fine interlacing brushstrokes. For *Saint Paul and Saint Augustine*, the artist worked with a limited palette of lapis, cinnabar, lead white, iron-earths, and carbon-based black.

Interestingly, the examination also revealed that the painting did not completely conform to the methods outlined in Cennino's treatise; rather, the panel is a result of an amalgamation of Tuscan and Lombard style and practices, which Menabuoi took to Padua.¹⁰ Instead of the Florentine green *verdaccio* applied as a base color for the flesh tones, the panel had a warm red underlayer primarily composed of an iron-based earth pigment. This technique is also used by the painter in his frescoes at the Paduan baptistery. Moreover, the apparent opacity of the preparation in the X-radiograph and elemental analyses suggested a notable presence of lead in the off-white ground layer, perhaps mixed evenly throughout the gesso, as opposed to the typical calcium-sulfate ground or the lead white applied as a layer of *imprimitura*. This preliminary finding prompts future studies into the grounds of remaining four Kress panels as well as the Paduan altarpiece and frescoes. While the coloristic refinement, delicate modeling of the robes, and the sharply

⁹ Approximately 0.5 cm weft and warp samples were taken from the proper left edge of the panel. Both the weft and warp exhibited Z-twist pattern. At 200x magnification, both the weft and the warp had cylindrical filaments with nodes at intervals, characteristic of linen fibers. Stiff remnants of organic material, probably from the glue size, were also observed during analysis.

¹⁰ This is highlighted by the fact that Menabuoi trained in Florence and resided in Milan during the 'Tuscanizing phase' of Lombard paintings.

defined eyebrows are qualities frequently associated with Lombard artists, the panel and the polyptych as a whole have Daddesque characteristics such as the conical arrangement of the Virgin, the imagery of the Christ child tugging on the veil, overall symmetry, as well as a repetition of forms and composition.¹¹

The thick overpaints and shellac-dammar varnish coatings from 1932 have discolored significantly over the course of eighty years. These discolored materials were disruptive to the overall harmony of the paintings and the darkened dammar varnish dulled the vibrancy of the pigments and the shimmering gold-gilded background. The varnish on *Saint Paul and Saint Augustine* was cleaned with a solution of acetone and mineral spirit while the modern fill and the overpaint were removed mechanically and using a Klucel gel containing ethyl acetate and dimethyl sulfoxide. The cleaning revealed heavily deteriorated punch work that continued beyond the top edge of the panel as well as a triangular pattern in the spandrel (Fig. 4).¹² A careful examination of the top edge also revealed that the seemingly simple arches had cusps, which indicated that the panel originally had been much taller with trefoil lobes above each saint similar to one in the central panel and in Menabuoi's altarpiece for the Paduan Baptistery (Fig. 5). The shape of the decorative arches was mirror-opposite along the central vertical axis; based on the consistency of the shape, Menabuoi likely had a template that he used to incise the exact design into the gesso.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion about Tuscan and Lombard influences on Menabuoi's style, as well as his relationship to the other artists, see Delaney, "Giusto de' Menabuoi in Lombardy," 19-35.

¹² The smooth preparation is tinted with brownish-black glaze. Four triangular areas are left in reserve in the spandrel. Dr. Laurence Kanter, Chief Curator of Yale University Art Gallery, suggested that these areas may have originally been silvered and visible through the pierced openings of the engaged framing elements, although no traces of silver were detected with a portable x-ray fluorescence.



Figure 4. Detail of the punchwork, cusps, and triangular pattern after overpaint removal

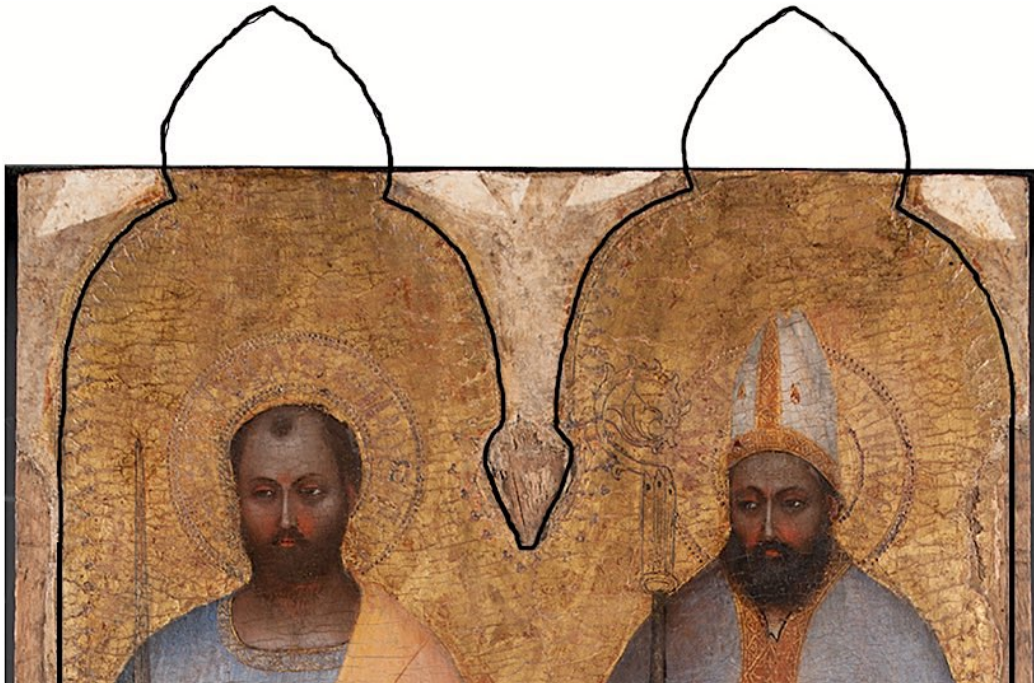


Figure 5. Outline of the trefoil arches

The discovery led to a proposal for reconfiguration of the polyptych. While *Saint Paul and Saint Augustine* remained as a pair and retained three of its original edges, *Saint John the Baptist*, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, *Saint Anthony Abbot*, and *Saint Thomas Aquinas* were separated from their accompanying saints and trimmed on all four sides along the decorative arches. The traces

of the cusps on the four panels observed during a survey in 2016, however, confirmed that a single continuous panel featured two saints of identical height partially partitioned by a central cusp on the top edge of the panel, as suggested by Delaney and Roberts. However, the panels depicting full-figured saints occupying the first register, now 59 cm, would have risen to approximately 65 cm with the addition of the top lobe of the trefoil arches and would have had an even larger dimension with the engaged framing elements. Moreover, Longhi, Delaney, and Roberts suggested that *Saint Anthony Abbot* and *Thomas Aquinas* were a pair as “the tooled borders that indicate a cusp between two.” However, when the two panels are aligned based on the punch work and traces of their cusps, the heights of the saints and the painted foreground in the two panels did not line up. Both panels likely had individual companion saints of their own.¹³ Base on the measurements provided by the respective institutions, the six roundels likely occupied the third register while smaller half-figured panels likely surmounted the full-figured panels in the second register, as stated by Longhi, Delaney, and Roberts.¹⁴ These findings suggest a heptptych model with three panels or twelve saints on either side of the Madonna and Child (Fig. 6).

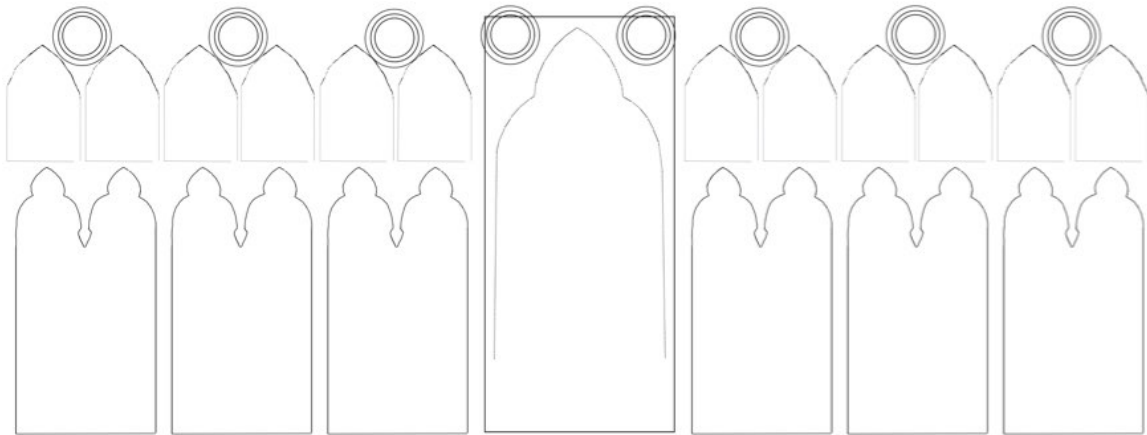


Figure 6. Outline of the heptptych model. Diagram by author

¹³ Similarly, the remnants of the central cusps were both found on the proper right edge of *Saint John the Baptist* and *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*. The two panels cannot be a true pair as suggested by their placement in the modern Kress frame.

¹⁴ The half-figured panels are approximately 29 x 19 cm while the full-figured panels are 59 x 36 cm. Two half-figured panels could potentially fit over the full-figured panels, just as in Simon Martini's polyptych for the convent of Santa Caterina in Pisa (Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa; Fig. 29) The six roundels, each approximately 10.67 cm wide, likely occupied the third register as suggested by Delaney. Longhi estimated that the diameter of a roundel corresponded to the width of a single full-figured saint, and expected the roundels to fit in the predella. However, the roundels are significantly smaller than the panels, which measure to between 15.75 to 16.51 cm. Rather, the dimension of the six roundels match closely to that of the two hovering over the enthroned Madonna in the central panel.

A polyptych with seven panels is not unusual in Dominican altarpieces. In fact, Simon Martini's polyptych completed in 1320-1321 for San Domenico in Orvieto (Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Orvieto), as well as the polyptych complete in 1320 for San Caterina in Pisa, have seven-panel configurations. However, Martini's polyptychs depict one saint per panel for a total number of six saints accompanying the Madonna and the child. In comparison, the seven-panel configuration of the Terzago polyptych would yield twelve saints flanking the Madonna. While no such large configuration for an altarpiece occurs in Richard Fremantle's corpus of Gothic paintings studied in 1975, Andrea Bonaiuto's *Madonna and Child with Ten Saints* for the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence (National Gallery, London) has a total of ten saints.¹⁵ Cannon hypothesizes that due to the limited viewing conditions in most chapels, a multi-panel configuration came about during the fourteenth-century to depict a range of patron saints and intercessors, almost like a liturgical calendar.¹⁶ Cannon also stated that having multiple saints in an altarpiece was intended to represent as many different principle feasts as possible. Moreover, such configuration also provided an opportunity for the devotees to construct multiple readings on their own. Thus, while the twelve saint configuration is unusual, it is certainly not impossible. In this configuration, however, 56% of the altarpiece is missing from the first three registers. A complete reconstruction is therefore unfeasible and any attempts at arranging the panels in the first register can be solely achieved through iconographic evidence and comparison with other Trecento Dominican altarpieces (Fig. 7).

¹⁵ *Virgin and Child with Ten Saints* was a Dominican Trecento altarpiece with largest number of accompanying saints surveyed by Joanna Cannon. For a full list of saints depicted in the altarpiece, see Joanna Cannon, *Religious Poverty, Visual Riches: Art in the Dominican Churches of Central Italy in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 215.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

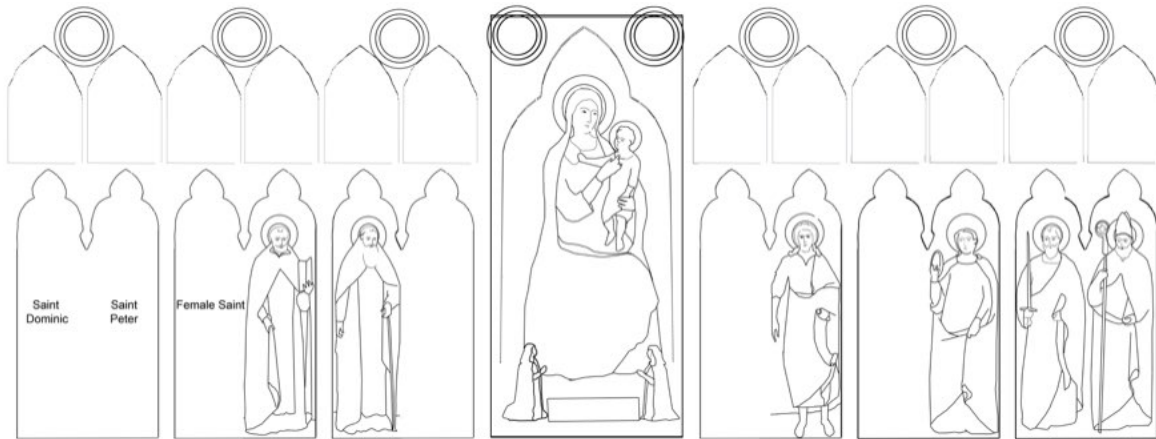


Figure 7. Reconstruction based on the heptptych model and comparison to a limited corpus of Trecento Dominican altarpieces. Diagram by author

As the punch work provided important information about the construction of the painting, new fills made from a traditional mixture of Bologna chalk and rabbit skin glue were added to level the losses along the top edge. The fills were carved in imitation of the extant punch work to provide a better suggestion of the decorative design going beyond the top edge (Fig. 8). The panel was saturated with a thin brush coat of Talens Retouching Varnish to act as an isolating layer for subsequent retouches. Two media were used for retouching: dry pigments in an AYAB medium (PVA) diluted in ethanol and extended with ethylene glycol; and Winsor&Newton watercolors for final glazes. The dry pigments were layered in lighter and cooler colors then toned with watercolor to simulate the aged patina. As the cleaning also revealed insoluble dark deposits, strongly bonded with the paint layer, scattered throughout Saint Augustine and Saint Paul's robes. These deposits were unsightly and disturb the refined gradation of color. These were remnants of old retouches or coatings, transformed into calcium oxalates that had chemically bonded to the original paint surface over time.¹⁷ Because these were difficult to remove mechanically without damaging the underlying paint layer, they were therefore disguised by thin optical stumbles using dry pigments bound with polyvinyl acetate (Fig. 9). In addition to the retouching the losses and abrasions on the painted passages, the exposed bole was regilded using a reversible method developed by Mario Modestini. A thin layer of clear wax was applied

¹⁷ FTIR analysis of a sample was performed with the assistance of research scientist at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The FTIR results were largely inconclusive, however, the general number and trend of peaks at 780, 1320, 1620-1640cm⁻¹ were determined to be close to that of calcium oxalate.

to areas of abraded gilding and polished with silk to remove excess material. Pieces of gold leaf and ribbon gold were then laid down over the waxed areas and tamped with cotton to burnish the surface. The new gilding was distressed using a bamboo skewer and mineral spirit. Craquelure was painted in with watercolor.

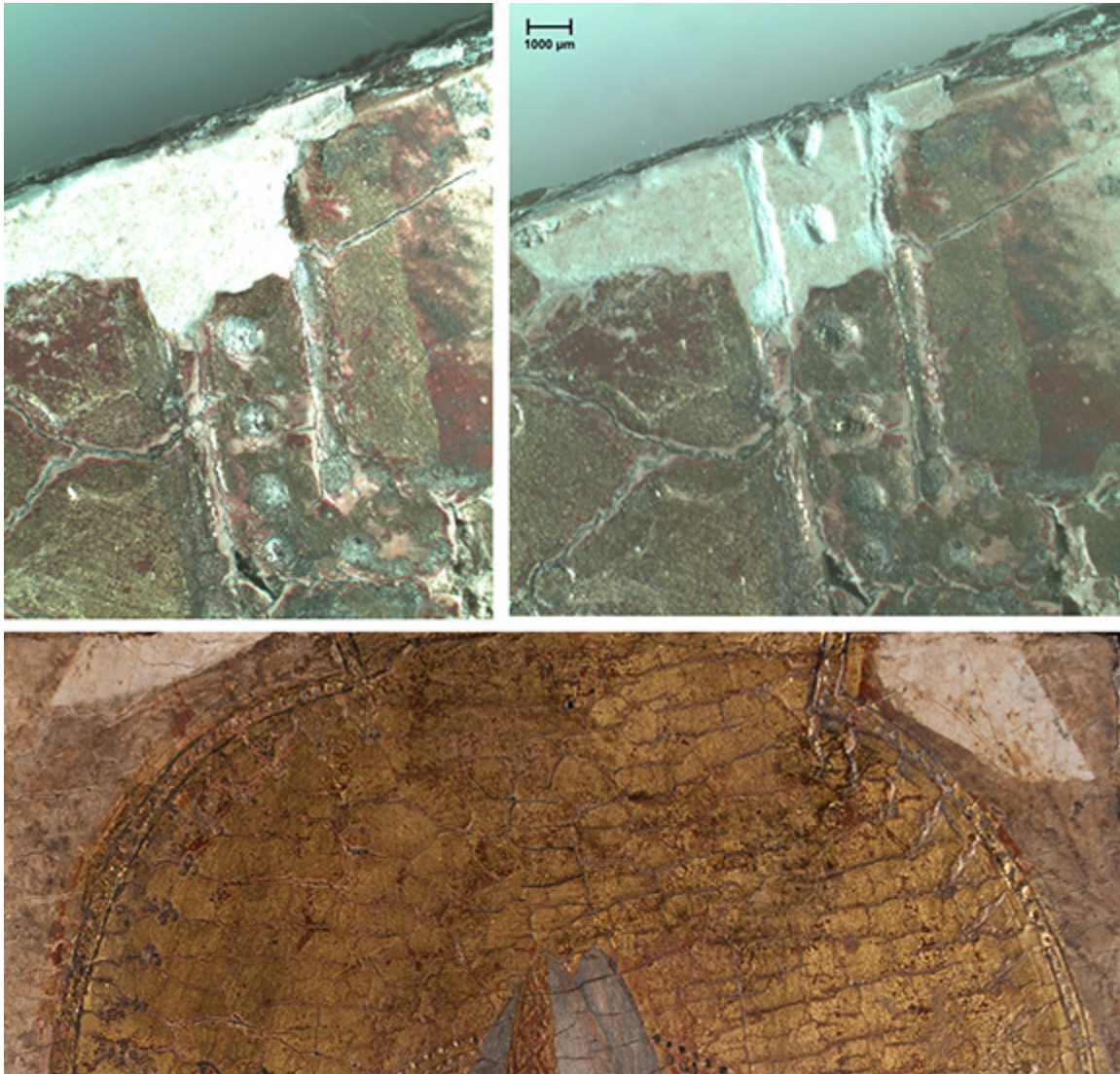


Figure 8. Photomicrographs of the top edge and detail of the area after treatment

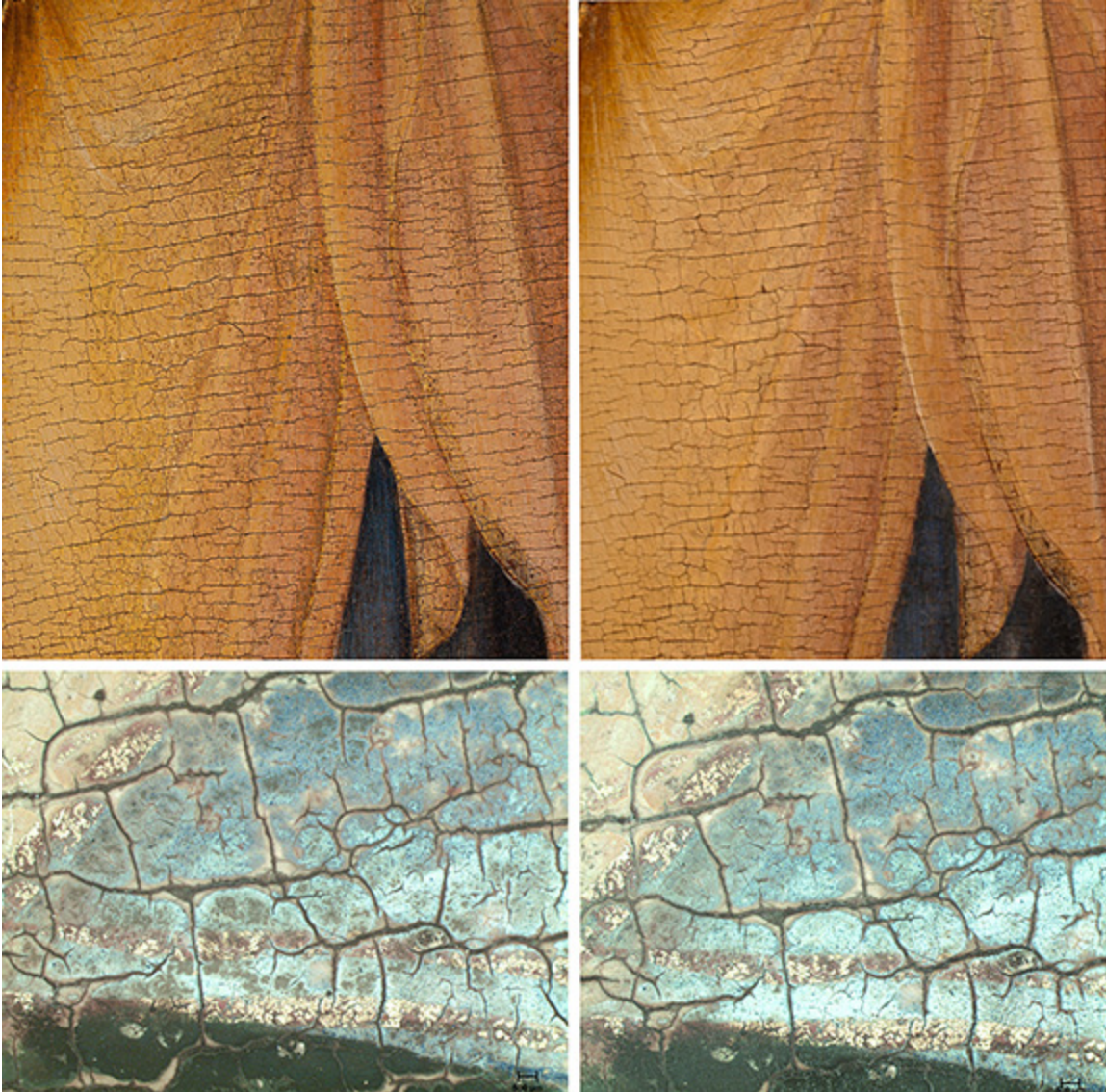


Figure 9. Details of before and after scumbling oxylates

The technical examination and treatment revealed the presence of trefoil arches above the full-figured saints and provided a new dimension of the panels in the first register. Furthermore, my investigation confirmed the placement of half-figured panels and roundels in the second and third register respectively. I hope that my recent treatment of *Saint Paul and Saint Augustine*, which will be exhibited at the Georgia Museum of Art without its non-period frame, as well as complete examinations of the remaining companion panels to be continued at the Institute of Fine Arts would encourage future scholarship in Giusto de' Menabuoi and the Terzago polyptych.



Before, during, and after treatment

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