

Adoration of the Shepherds with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Bartholomew

Sieneese School, ca. 1440

Egg tempera on wood panel

24^{5/8} × 19^{3/4} in. (62.6 × 50.2 cm)

El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, Texas

1961-6/6 (K-1434)



FIG. 1. *Adoration of the Shepherds with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Bartholomew*, before restoration.



FIG. 2. *Adoration of the Shepherds with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Bartholomew* (fig. 1), after restoration.

A Portable Triptych in El Paso

Dianne Dwyer Modestini

ONE OF THE FINEST and least frequented of the regional Kress Collections is in the old Mexican border town of El Paso. The largest and most profitable of the S.H. Kress five-and-dime emporiums was in El Paso and, in recognition of this fact, the city was designated to receive an extraordinary group of fifty-eight paintings, chosen by Robert Manning, assistant curator at the Kress Foundation, excellent connoisseur and loyal son of Texas.¹ The quality of the El Paso collection is even more remarkable because it was the penultimate collection to be allocated, opening in 1960, a telling indication of the richness and depth of the Kress reserves even at that late date when the collections in Washington and seventeen other Regional Collections had already been formed.

The collection consists primarily of Italian and Spanish masters and also includes three fine portraits by Van Dyck, Rigaud, and Largillière. The Sienese School is represented by a damaged but genuine *Madonna and Child* by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, a Giovanni di Paolo *Assumption of the Virgin*,² and a perfectly preserved *Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels* by Sano di Pietro, comparable in quality to the National Gallery of Art's, in its original frame and finely finished on the reverse with a gilded and tooled emblem of San Bernardino. Among the Sienese works is an ornate portable triptych (figs. 1 and 2), which had over the years been attributed to Sassetta, the Osservanza Master, Giovanni di Paolo, Pellegrino di Mariano, and Sano di Pietro.³ With this lack of consensus, it was finally catalogued simply as Sienese School, circa 1440, exhibited at

the National Gallery of Art from 1951 to 1956 and ultimately given to El Paso.

The central panel of the portable triptych has a particularly elaborate representation of the Adoration of the Shepherds, and is surmounted by a separate compartment with the Last Judgment. In the right wing a figure of Saint Bartholomew holds his knife with the Virgin of the Annunciation in the gable, while on the left Saint John the Baptist is seen below the Angel of the Annunciation. The reverse sides of the wings are painted in faux porphyry inside an earth-green border with medallions enclosing drawings of the Madonna on the left and the Crucified Christ on the right executed in lead white and red earth on a yellow ochre field (figs. 3 and 4). The moldings are original, although the tips of the crockets of the central pinnacle are broken. X-radiography reveals holes for the dowels that originally fixed the central panel to a base, now lost.

In the early nineteenth century, the painting was recorded in the collection of Max Chabrière-Arles in Lyons before it was acquired by Harold I. Pratt of New York.⁴ While in the Pratt Collection, it was exhibited in the Loan Exhibition of Italian Primitives, at the Kleinberger Galleries in New York in November 1917, catalogued by Osvald Siren and M. W. Brockwell as Sassetta⁵ and in the 1939 New York World's Fair Exhibition, number 350, catalogued by G.H. McCall, again as Sassetta.⁶ It was bought by Wildenstein and exhibited in *Italian Paintings, 1947*, catalogue number 24, as Sano di Pietro.⁷

Attributions to the Master of the Osservanza provoke the most contentious arguments⁸ in the study of fifteenth-century Siennese painting. The intricate and often contradictory art historical vicissitudes of this artist or group of painters, first identified by Roberto Graziani in 1948 following a suggestion of Roberto Longhi,⁹ and named after a tripartite altarpiece in the Church of the Osservanza near Siena, arise not only from the total lack of documentation about this gifted painter but also from inconsistencies in the body of work assigned to him. The critical history has



FIG. 3. *Adoration of the Shepherds with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Bartholomew* (fig. 1), reverse of side panels before restoration.



FIG. 4. *Adoration of the Shepherds with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Bartholomew* (fig. 1), reverse of the side panels after restoration.

been succinctly summarized recently by Cecilia Alessi¹⁰ in the *Grove Dictionary of Art*:

Longhi recognized that two triptychs, formerly attributed to Sassetta, were the work of another hand. The Virgin and Child with SS Jerome and Ambrose (Siena, Osservanza) and the Birth of the Virgin (Asciano, Mus. A. Sacra), formerly in the Collegiata, Asciano, both have a stylistic affinity with Sassetta's works but, in terms of narrative expression, still belong to the Late Gothic tradition. Longhi observed that a further group of paintings was closely related to these works. This included the predella of the Osservanza Altarpiece (Siena, Pin. N., 216), a predella of St Bartholomew (Siena, Pin. N.), scenes of the Passion (Rome, Pin. Vaticana; Philadelphia, PA, Mus. A.; Cambridge, MA, Fogg) and the scenes from the Life of St Anthony Abbot (dispersed; e.g. panels in Washington, DC, N.G.A.; New York, Met.; Wiesbaden, Mus. Wiesbaden) previously also attributed to Sassetta. These last panels are difficult to integrate into the group. The full-length painting of St Anthony Abbot (Paris, Louvre), which scholars have attempted to integrate with the small scenes from the saint's life into a multipartite altarpiece, seems to come from another altarpiece.

Graziani named the painter the Master of the Osservanza after the altarpiece in that church and reconstructed his oeuvre around this work, ranging between the Pietà with St Sebaldus and a Devotee (Siena, Monte Dei Paschi priv. col.), datable 1432–3, and the painted cover of the Gabella (tax records) showing the Archangel Michael (Siena, Pal. Piccolomini, Archv Stato), dated 1444. Graziani proposed that the Master took as his models Giovanni da Milano, Gregorio di Cecco and Masolino, thereby combining Siense and Florentine stylistic elements. Graziani's theory was accepted by Zeri, Carli, Volpe, Laclotte, Benati, Angelini and Christiansen.

A different theory was proposed by Berenson, who suggested that the Master's oeuvre was the early work of Sano di Pietro, known to have been active from 1428 but whose earliest dated work is the Gesuati Polyptych of 1444 (Siena, Pin. N.). This was accepted by Brandi (1949), Pope-Hennessy (1956), Torriti and Boskovits.

A third hypothesis was put forward by Alessi and Scapecchi (1985). They established that the Osservanza panel was painted for S Maurizio, Siena, and that the date on the painting, 1436, refers to the foundation of the chapel by its patron, the grocer Manno d'Orlando (d 1442), and not necessarily to the year in which the altarpiece was painted. They suggested that the Osservanza Altarpiece and the Birth of the Virgin date from the late 1440s and that the Master was active from the 1440s to the 1470s and was influenced by developments in Florentine painting of that date, particularly by Fra Angelico and Uccello. They further proposed that the Master could be identified with Francesco di Bartolomeo Alfei, a well-documented artist who was associated with Sano di Pietro but whose work has not been identified. While Pope-Hennessy (1987) did not accept the identification of the Master with Alfei, he accepted Alessi's and Scapecchi's attribution of additional works to the Master. These include the Virgin and Child (New York, Met.) and two paintings of the Virgin of Humility (Altenburg, Staatl. Lindenau-Mus.; New York, Brooklyn Mus. A.).

The El Paso triptych is mentioned only a few times in the literature on Sassetta and the Master of the Osservanza. Its location is often incorrectly described, and it has not been illustrated in any publication about Sassetta or his followers.¹¹ Since my first visit to El Paso, I have been intrigued by this delightful object, particularly by the fanciful depiction of the Adoration of the Shepherds, and in the course of my travels, I have had occasion to compare it with the generally accepted works by the Osservanza Master and Sano di Pietro. At some point I focused on an unusual punch mark common to most of the small-scale works of the painter called the Osservanza Master but not used by Sano di Pietro after he became an independent artist, beginning in 1444 with the signed and dated altarpiece of the Gesuati.

An opportunity to study the work closely came in 1999, when it arrived at the Conservation Center to have a broken hinge replaced and a treacly varnish removed. It was encased in a shadow box, which had been manufactured for

it in the 1950s,¹² shortly after its acquisition by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation. Professor Mina Gregori, confirming my long-held belief, immediately attributed it to the Osservanza Master.¹³ This publication seemed an opportune vehicle to present the results of my examination and, above all, provide good reproductions of the El Paso painting alongside four other portable triptychs which have all, at one time or another, been attributed to the Master of the Osservanza.

The central panels of the other four triptychs represent the Madonna and Child, while the wings, like κ-1434, bear standing saints with annunciation figures in the gables. They are in the collections of the Pinacoteca of Siena, the Chigi-Saracini Collection, the Diocesan Museum of Pienza, and the Rijksmuseum Meermanno-Westreenianum in The Hague. Longhi's famous 1940 footnote¹⁴ mentions the two Siena triptychs, and Graziani writing in 1948¹⁵ dates the first two to around the time of the *Birth of the Virgin* from Asciano, and accepts the Meermanno-Westreenianum triptych as rather later, after 1440, and under the influence of Vecchietta. The El Paso work is not mentioned, and Graziani seems not to have been aware of its existence.

The attribution of the Saint Anthony series is as convoluted as that of the five triptychs. Initially they were given to Sassetta, and then, by Longhi and Graziani, to the Osservanza Master. Pope-Hennessy (1956) postulates that the panels are the work of three different painters.¹⁶ 'Artist A' is Sassetta himself, entirely responsible for the Berlin *Mass* and collaborator with 'Artist B,' his assistant, on other panels from the series. 'Artist B' may be one of Graziani's candidates for the undocumented Master of the Osservanza, Vico di Luca, who is also the author of the *Passion predellas*, the "Pratt Triptych" (by that time in Washington), and the Meermanno-Westreenianum triptych. A third figure, 'Artist C,' is Sano di Pietro, and to him Pope-Hennessy assigns the Osservanza and Asciano altarpieces, the *Serristori Pietà*, and "three interrelated triptychs in the Siena gallery (no. 177), the Chigi-Saracini Collection and the Museo d'Arte Sacra at Pienza."



FIG. 5. *Annunciation to the Shepherds*, Sano di Pietro, after 1450, tempera on wood panel, 21¹/₄ × 27¹/₈ in. (54 × 69 cm). La Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena, Siena.

In 1957 Enzo Carli published his essential monograph, *Sassetta and the Maestro dell'Osservanza*,¹⁷ revising Graziani's dating (and his own initial notion). Arguing that the Asciano Altarpiece depends from Sassetta's scenes from the life of Saint Francis in the Borgo San Sepolcro Altarpiece (1437–44), he assigns also to this period the triptychs 177 of the Siena Pinacoteca and the Chigi-Saracini Collection. Carli agrees with Graziani that the Meermanno-Westreenianum triptych is of a slightly later date. Equivocating over the dating of the Saint Anthony panels, he argues for an Osservanza Master still under the influence of Sassetta's *Arte della Lana* altarpiece, that is between 1426 and 1432, and sees the hands of two different artists where Pope-Hennessy saw three. However Carli rejected the Vico di Luca hypothesis stating, "I wouldn't be surprised if Artist B is early Sano di Pietro and some day it might be proven."¹⁸ He excludes the Pienza triptych from the oeuvre of the Osservanza Master, considering it by an inferior hand, and gives "the charming triptych from the Pratt Collection, New York (sic)" to the same painter whom he baptizes the "Master of Pienza," noting the influence of Giovanni di Paolo in the figure of Saint John the Baptist. In a meandering and inconclusive rumination about the scene of the

Annunciation to the Shepherds in the El Paso triptych he compares it to:

the enchanting panel No. 262 in the Pinacoteca of Siena [fig. 5] a work by Sano di Pietro [for which] one could consider a date of around 1450; but the reverse is more likely—that Sano based his work on that of the Master of Pienza.

Referring to this painting by Sano di Pietro, which measures 54 × 69 cm, Piero Torriti writes:

Not a work of refined execution, in fact, one would have to say that it was rather *grossolana* (and perhaps for this reason later than the traditional dating of 1450) but of great fascination because of the extraordinary interpretation of the event: in the center, closed in a paddock, is a group of hairy black and white sheep, crowded one against the other in such a way that the flock becomes simply a black and white patch. The



FIG. 6. *Saint Anthony Tempted by Gold*, Master of the Osservanza, mid-1430s, tempera on wood panel, 18³/₄ × 13⁵/₈ in. (47.6 × 34.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

shepherds, with their great winter mantels, are warming themselves, and ecstatically greeting the sudden apparition of the angel in a cloud of gold against the blue sky. Over the barren and gray landscape of the *crete senesi*, punctuated by only a few trees, a red turreted city sprouts, rendering even more magical the idea of the apparition.¹⁹

While not an exact copy, the composition clearly, as Carli observed, derives from the El Paso painting: the angel, the cloud of gold (in our case real gold leaf and not yellow paint), the flock of black and white sheep in their enclosure, the magical turreted towns scattered about, the same type of dog. Unfortunately Carli neither reproduces the El Paso triptych nor follows this intriguing line of reasoning about its charming landscape background which, both stylistically and technically, is closely related to the fanciful and much admired landscape in the background of *Saint Anthony Tempted by Gold* in the Lehman Collection (fig. 6).

Cecilia Alessi and Pietro Scapecechi²⁰ argue that the two portable triptychs that Carli assigned to the Master of Pienza (ours and the Pienza triptych), are in fact by the Master of the Osservanza, painted around 1445 and reflecting the influence of Sassetta's Borgo San Sepolcro Altarpiece; they point out the similar figures of the two lateral saints in both triptychs.²¹ Dr. Alessi, in a verbal communication, pointed out the strong influence of Giovanni di Paolo, to whom the young artist may have been apprenticed, indicating that, according to her reconstruction, it is among the earliest of his works.

Finally, Keith Christiansen noted: “perhaps most illuminating are four small portable triptychs in the Pinacoteca Nazionale and the Chigi-Saracini Collection, Siena; the Museo della Cattedrale, Pienza; and the Rijksmuseum Meermanno-Westreenianum, The Hague.”²² For the fifth portable triptych, *The Adoration of the Shepherds with Saints John and Bartholomew* in the Kress Collection in El Paso, Christiansen followed Carli in attributing it, together with the Pienza triptych, to a different hand, the same one responsible for the predella with scenes from the life of the Virgin in the Vatican. While the Pienza and El



FIG. 7. *Madonna and Child with Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Saint Peter*, Follower of Sassetta, 1460/70, tempera on wood panel, 19 × 16 1/2 in. (48.2 × 41.9 cm) including molding. Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS.

Paso triptychs are clearly by the same hand, especially evident in the lateral wings, it is difficult to connect either of them to the Vatican predellas, which, at least to this viewer, are instead stylistically closely related to the painter of the portable triptych in the Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence, Kansas²³ (fig. 7), another in the Siena Pinacoteca, number 158, a *Madonna of Humility* flanked by Saint Catherine on the right and Saint John the Baptist on the left, attributed to an unknown painter working in the middle of the fifteenth century, and perhaps the Vatican *Scenes from the Life of the Virgin*. The Kansas triptych, presently catalogued as Follower of Sassetta, has been attributed to Pellegrino di Mariano by Fiocco, Longhi, Suida, Venturi, tentatively by Berenson, and by Pope-Hennessy to a follower of Sassetta who shows some influence of Pellegrino di Mariano.

In summation, the El Paso triptych has been attributed unequivocally to the Osservanza Master

by Alessi and Scapecchi. Pope-Hennessy appears to have held the same view as he assigned this work to 'Artist B,' possibly Vico di Luca, Sassetta's assistant in the *Death of Saint Anthony* and the same painter responsible for the five Passion predellas, implicitly assigning the El Paso work to the artist or group of artists now accepted as the Osservanza Master. Carli and Christiansen consider both the El Paso triptych and the one in Pienza to be by a different hand called the "Master of Pienza," although they do not concur about other works assigned to this artist.

Let us for a moment turn our attention to the five triptychs under discussion.

1. TRIPTYCH 177, PINACOTECA DI SIENA (FIG. 8)

The central panel depicts the Madonna and Child seated on a cushion. Four angels hold a cloth of honor, once silver leafed, as was the Madonna's robe. Over her dress the blue mantle covers her head and cascades from a clasp at the neck. In the pinnacle is a figure of Christ Blessing. An attenuated figure of Saint John the Baptist occupies the right wing with the Virgin of the Annunciation, seated on the ground, in the gable above, while on the left is Saint Catherine of Alexandria, in a dress that was once silver leaf, surmounted by the Angel of the Annunciation who leans back in a somewhat awkward pose in order to fit into the triangular space. Both saints stand on marbled floors. The moldings are battered but original, as are the hinges. Each compartment has three crockets per edge and a finial. There is no base. The wings are well preserved though covered with grime and discolored varnish. The central panel has suffered: the azurite robe of the Madonna has many losses, the foreground is illegible, and the Child is severely scarred, while the head of the Madonna, the angels, and the Blessing Christ are all well preserved as is the gold ground throughout. The punch work, though simple, is finely executed. Four different punches are used: a rosette, two circle punches of different sizes, and an odd punch, an imperfectly cut diamond or quatrefoil

shape, slightly longer than it is wide that could perhaps best be described as an irregular mandorla. The garments of the angels are sgraffitoed, making a pattern with the underlying gold ground. Unfortunately it was not possible to see the back of the doors.

2. THE CHIGI-SARACINI TRIPTYCH (FIG. 9)

The central panel depicts the Madonna seated in a three-quarter pose similar to that of the Siena triptych 177, but her head, with elaborately braided hair, is uncovered, and she holds a leaping Child against a white cloth. Four angels stand slightly behind her in attitudes of prayer, while in the cusp, a figure of God the Father emerges from a starry firmament. The floor is covered with a carpet of oriental design. John the Baptist, nearly a twin to the figure in the Siena Pinacoteca, and a Virgin of the Annunciation above, seated on a bench but otherwise similar to number 177, occupy the right wing. On the left, a monastic saint, later replaced by a figure of Saint Catherine, was once depicted below the Angel of the Annunciation, a different model this time, slightly smaller in scale, with elegantly designed raised wings, better adapted to the space. Both saints stand on marbled floors. As expected, the azurite robe of the Madonna has suffered, and there are numerous scattered losses to the foreground of the central panel making it barely legible; of the monk in the left wing only traces remain. The painting has recently been cleaned and restored. The carpentry is identical to the Siena triptych and, of the five, this is the only one which retains its original base. Apart from some flaked losses in the central panel, the gold ground is well preserved, the punch work finely executed and only slightly more elaborate than number 177. The same four punches are used in a different variation and there is a fifth punch, a small star (also used by Sano di Pietro, see below), identical to one used in the Saint Anthony series along the top of the uppermost panel and which also occurs in the Asciano Altarpiece. The reverse of the doors is faux porphyry with a green earth border.



FIG. 8. *Madonna and Child with Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Saint John the Baptist*, No. 177, Master of the Osservanza, tempera on wood panel, $21\frac{7}{8} \times 18\frac{1}{4}$ in. (55.5 × 46.5 cm). La Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena, Siena.



FIG. 9. *Madonna and Child with Saint Francis and Saint John the Baptist*, Master of the Osservanza, tempera on wood panel, $25 \times 21\frac{5}{8}$ in. (63.5 × 55 cm). Collezione Chigi-Saracini, Siena.



FIG. 10. *Madonna and Child with Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Saint John the Baptist*, Pienza, tempera on wood panel, 25 1/4 x 23 1/4 in. (64 x 59 cm). Museo Diocesano, Pienza.



FIG. 11. *Madonna and Child with Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Saint John the Baptist* (fig. 10), reverse of side panels.

3. PIENZA TRIPTYCH (FIG. 10)

A Madonna of Humility seated on a beautifully preserved oriental carpet occupies the central panel. Again she is seen in three-quarter view, but facing right rather than left. A Christ Blessing surrounded by half figures of angels and prophets hovers above. The right wing depicts Saint Catherine of Alexandria dressed in an elaborately worked gown of sgraffitied and incised gold and painted decoration. Saint John the Baptist is on the left, facing left and in a slightly different pose than in the other two triptychs. The Angel of the Annunciation is similar to that of the Chigi-Saracini Altarpiece, while the Virgin is of a different type than in the other two paintings, more elegant with finer garb. Again, the carpentry is identical. The gold ground is well preserved, and we observe the same punches: the rosette, the irregularly cut mandorla, and two circle punches of different sizes. Of the three described thus far, this painting is the best preserved. The reverse of the wings are decorated with faux porphyry with an elegant central geometric design (fig. 11). The base is modern.

4. THE HAGUE TRIPTYCH (FIG. 12)

In the central compartment the Madonna is posed in three-quarter view on a draped throne facing right. She is flanked by Saint Catherine of Alexandria on the left and a female saint on the right, possibly Saint Lucy.²⁴ Two angels stand in prayer behind the throne and a figure of God the Father is in the gable above. The Christ Child holds a scroll with the word "EGO." A carpet of similar design to that in the Pienza triptych covers the floor. Saint Ansanus, one of Siena's patron saints, stands in the left wing holding the *balzana* in his right hand. Saint Lawrence with his grill occupies the right wing, and the Angel and Virgin of the Annunciation are in their customary positions in the left and right gables, respectively, of the wings. The angel is the same figure used in the Pienza triptych, while the Virgin is rather solemn, seated on a bench in a simple painted interior suggesting a loggia. The carpentry is identical to the other three triptychs. The backs of the wings



FIG. 12. *Madonna and Child with Saint Catherine of Alexandria and a Female Saint*, Attributed to the Master of the Osservanza, tempera on wood panel, $24 \times 20\frac{7}{8}$ in. (61 × 53 cm). Museum Meermanno-Westreenianum, The Hague.

are painted to resemble porphyry, and each has a painted shell in the center, which may refer to the Sienese district, the *Contrada di Nicchio*. Two holes bored into the wood of the central panel suggest dowels for a base such as that still retained by the Chigi-Saracini triptych. The gold background is well preserved. None of the costumes displays the elaborate Sassettesque sgraffito and incising of the gold that are an important feature in the other triptychs. The punches used are also somewhat different: a Gothic arch motif along the borders, one circle punch, and the familiar rosette. The punching is slightly irregular in places and suggests an unsure hand.

5. THE EL PASO TRIPTYCH (see figs. 1, 2, 3, and 4)
The subject of the central panel is a complex scene representing the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Annunciation to the Shepherds set in a fully developed landscape that recalls the one around San Leonardo al Lago, the buildings on

the island in the lake similar to those depicted in the Lehman *Saint Anthony* with a slight resemblance to the hermitage itself.²⁵ In the foreground the Madonna sits in front of the manger with Saint Joseph behind and to her right. Over the newborn Child, Christ's "xp" monogram hovers accompanied by six cherubim with the Holy Spirit below. The ox and ass are represented on the far left, and a saddle and a double pouch of linen decorated with red embroidery rest on the ground. Three shepherds stand to the right of Saint Joseph, accompanied by a small white sheepdog. At the extreme right behind the shepherds is a city gate. On the hillside beyond, on a smaller scale, the same three shepherds and their sleeping dog gather around the comfort of a fire fashioned of painted and sgraffitooed gold leaf, gazing towards the heavens at an angel in a golden nimbus wrought, like the fire, in gold leaf, painted and sgraffitooed. Black and white sheep occupy a pen enclosed by white lattice. A crane looms large in contrast to the small trees. A red bridge crosses a stream, and the dark blue sky is streaked with white clouds over the distant hills. It is a composition of infinite refinement and is the scene that so impressed Carli and Torriti. Sano di Pietro later borrowed it for his much larger and coarser panel of around 1450 in the Pinacoteca of Siena (see fig. 5).²⁶

The upper compartment is unique to this triptych, otherwise the carpentry of the moldings and the crockets are the same as in the other four. This unusual element depicts a miniature Last Judgment complete with trumpeting angels, souls rising from their graves, and vicious devils prodding the damned into their ghastly realm. The figure of Christ would seem to derive from Sassetta's *Last Supper*, part of the dismembered *Arte della Lana* altarpiece.

The pose of the Virgin of the Annunciation (fig. 13) is a direct quote—with the exception of the position of the hands—from the *Pala dell'Osservanza* (fig. 14), but set into rose and white marble domestic architecture with a plaid bed cover and a glimpse of a garden in the distance. The angel is a new variation from those in the



FIG. 13. *Adoration of the Shepherds with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Bartholomew* (fig. 1), detail of the Virgin Annunciate.



FIG. 14. *Pala dell'Osservanza*, Master of the Osservanza, tempera on wood panel. Church of the Osservanza, Siena, Italy. Detail of the Virgin Annunciate.

other triptychs and occupies the ample space with great conviction. The robes are elaborately worked in sgraffitoed brocade; the pricked fabric, which also comes from Sassetta, and a charming detail of a gilded vase with flowers fills an empty corner.

As already stated, old dowel holes at the bottom indicate a lost base. The backs of the doors are painted in fictive porphyry with central medallions containing small sketches of the Mater Dolorosa and the Crucified Christ. When closed the gable with its scene of the Last Judgment projects above the doors.

There are technical and stylistic differences among the five portable triptychs. The two in Siena, in Palazzo Chigi-Saracini and in the Pinacoteca, are somewhat more refined, with minute and carefully integrated brushwork, pale flesh tones, and sweet facial types resembling Sassetta's early work. This style also characterizes the predella of the Osservanza Altarpiece and the smaller scenes of the Asciano *Birth of the Virgin*.

The facial types in the Hague triptych are more closely related to these two triptychs, although not as finely executed. The Pienza and the El Paso triptychs are clearly related stylistically and technically and admittedly are populated by more swarthy figures dominated by a dark *verdaccio* underpaint in the flesh tones, and executed with coarse brushwork, at times summarily applied. This style can also be observed in some of the predellas of the Passion series, particularly in the Vatican *Flagellation*, and in the panels of the Saint Anthony series. The figures in the *Death of the Saint*, *Saint Anthony Distributing his Wealth to the Poor* (National Gallery of Art, Washington) (fig. 15) and *Saint Anthony Tempted by the Devil in the Guise of a Woman* (Yale University Art Gallery) are all close cousins of the shepherds (fig. 16) in the El Paso triptych and are not painted with more refinement. Nor would *Saint Anthony Tempted by Gold* find himself out of place in the El Paso painting, and, as has already been pointed out, the landscape,



FIG. 15. *Saint Anthony Distributing his Wealth to the Poor*, Master of the Osservanza, tempera on wood panel, 18 ⁵/₈ × 13 ⁵/₈ in. (47.5 × 34.5 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Detail.



FIG. 16. *Adoration of the Shepherds with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Bartholomew* (fig. 1), detail.

technically and in the poetry of its invention, is closely related to the Lehman panel. The water (figs. 17 and 18) for example, in both panels is a dark brownish green that might be mistaken for earth were it not for the bridge and the boat. Close examination shows it to have a pale blue underpaint and what would have been a translucent bright green copper resinat glaze, now altered. Because it is painted in a different medium, the water in the Cambridge miniature of the *Burial of Saint Monica and Saint Augustine Departing for Africa* gives some idea of the original appearance of similar passages in the other two panels.

The Berlin *Saint Anthony at Mass* is superior in perspective and execution to the other panels of the Saint Anthony series, and as Pope-Hennessy observed, very close to Sassetta himself, with its sophisticated lost profiles and the delicate tempera hatching in the lapis lazuli drapes of the officiating priest. Comparing the awkward, reworked, and unsuccessfully rendered tile floor in the *Death of the Virgin* (Villa I Tatti), a compartment of the Asciano Altarpiece, with the perfect realization of the patterned floor in the Berlin painting, it is hard to believe that the same painter was responsible for both works.



FIG. 17. *Saint Anthony Tempted by Gold* (fig. 6), detail of San Leonardo al Lago.



FIG. 18. *Adoration of the Shepherds with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Bartholomew* (fig. 1), detail of San Leonardo al Lago.

It should also be noted that the different states of the various panels of the Saint Anthony series do not allow for comparison on the basis of their palette. Three of the Washington panels are covered with thick coatings of yellowed dammar and shellac, severely distorting the original colors, which are both cooler and more brilliant. This is true to a slightly lesser degree of the *Death of Saint Anthony*, which has a thinner varnish that has significantly discolored since it was applied in the mid-1940s when the painting appeared on the art market. The other panels of the series have all been cleaned in the recent past.

The punch work may have some significance. As already described, the painter of four of the portable triptychs—those in the Pinacoteca of Siena (no. 177), the Chigi-Saracini Collection, the Diocesan Museum in Pienza, and the El Paso Museum of Art—used the same four punches (figs. 19 and 20). Three of them are common designs—the rosette and the two different-sized circles. The fourth punch is an unusual shape



FIG. 19. *Adoration of the Shepherds with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Bartholomew* (fig. 1), detail of punches.

and has been cut unevenly in such a way that it is easily recognizable; this odd shape is difficult to accurately classify but can be described as an irregularly cut mandorla. It is present not only in these four triptychs but also in the predella of the *Pala dell'Osservanza* and is used as an outline for the nimbus of the *Madonna and Child with Four Angels* atop the Asciano Altarpiece. The star punch observed in the Saint Anthony series and the Hague triptych is also used in Asciano. Keith Christiansen has noted that:

a number of the punches employed in tooling the gold in the *Osservanza* altarpiece and in the *Birth of the Virgin* in Asciano recur in the Saint George, the Lehman *Madonna and Child*, and in Sano's signed and dated *Gesuati* altarpiece in the Siena Pinacoteca.²⁷

Both the star punch and the rosette used in Asciano and in the Saint Anthony cycle can be found in other works by Sano di Pietro as late as the 1447 *Madonna and Child with Saints Bartholomew and Lucy*, the 1449 polyptych of Scrofiano where they decorate the mitre and gilded border of Saint Biagio in the predella. Strangely, for what it is worth, in the *Santa Bonda* altarpiece dated between 1450 and 1452 the original rosette punch is used in the predella scenes of the Last Supper and the angels, while a slightly different rosette punch, larger and more accurately cut, is used in some of the other predella scenes. This larger rosette is also used in the altarpiece of Saints Cosmos and Damian from the convent of the *Gesuati* of San Girolamo.

The irregular mandorla punch seems to be used only in those works that are associated with the *Osservanza* Master, and I have not seen it in any paintings done independently by Sano di Pietro after 1444. However, a similar punch, again, like Sano's new rosette, larger and more regularly cut, can be found in several smaller paintings by Sano di Pietro, such as *The Crucifixion* in Washington.

Another technical feature of some of the small-scale works attributed to the *Osservanza* Master is the presence of significant pentimenti, unusual



FIG. 20. *Adoration of the Shepherds with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Bartholomew* (fig. 1), detail of punches.

in this period. In *The Way to Calvary* (Philadelphia Museum of Art), the building on the right has been painted over a mountain. In *The Death of the Virgin* (I Tatti), the landscape and fence in the background have been moved. In the Pienza triptych there is a pentiment of the robe of the Baptist, as there is in the El Paso triptych, which also has a change in the position of the finger of the right hand (fig. 21) and various other corrections of contours.

As far as the state of the El Paso triptych is concerned, while it is quite well preserved for a painting of this period, it has been slightly abraded in the past. An old varnish or patina can be seen in between some of the thickly clotted paint of the brushwork, especially in the



FIG. 21. *Adoration of the Shepherds with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Bartholomew* (fig. 1), detail of pentimento.

flesh tones; it has been removed from the more prominent areas. The azurite robe of the Madonna has been scraped down and some of the painter's corrections, especially around the ox in the foreground, have flaked off or have been scraped away in the past. The gold leaf is worn in places: the haloes of Saint John, the Madonna and Saint Joseph and, sadly, part of the golden nimbus radiating from the Child, which is also incised and painted. The head of Christ in the medallion on the back of the right door is missing, and the backs of the doors are generally a bit battered. And, as mentioned earlier, the original base is gone. However, much of the altarpiece is in lovely condition, and the decision was made to restore it as completely as possible, including replacing the missing gold with new leaf on a wax mordant. The reverse of the wings were also restored, with the exception of the missing head of Christ, and new hook fasteners, made in imitation of antique ones, were inserted to replace the unsuitable modern brass hinges.²⁸ The central panel had a typical Kress cradle but had not been thinned. This unnecessary secondary support was removed.

Whatever conclusions may be drawn about its authorship, the publication of good color images of this long neglected work will bring it the attention it merits and allow scholars to compare the five triptychs.

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NOTES

1. The extensive Suida-Manning collection is now in the Jack Blanton Museum at the University of Texas, Austin.
2. Part of the *Coronation of the Virgin* altarpiece in the Robert Lehman Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
3. According to Shapley (1966), the portable altarpiece should be dated probably after 1440. It has been attributed to Sassetta (Siren 1917, Van Marle 1927); follower of Sassetta, the Vatican Master, or Vico di Luca (Pope-Hennessy 1956); early Giovanni di Paolo (Berenson 1932); Master of Pienza (Carli 1957 and Zeri 1954; the latter identifies this painter as the Pseudo Pellegrino di Mariano); Sano di Pietro (Volpe 1958, comparing it to an Assumption

- in the Siena Pinacoteca; and Berenson in 1947, verbally, to Wildenstein); Master of the Osservanza (Alessi and Scapecchi 1985); Master of Pienza (Christiansen 1988).
4. Harold Irwin Pratt, Brooklyn, 1877–New York, 1939. The youngest son of Charles Pratt (1830–1891), John D. Rockefeller's partner in Standard Oil of New Jersey, founder of the Pratt Institute. Harold I. Pratt built and lived in a mansion on the southwest corner of Park Avenue and 68th Street donated in 1944 by his widow to the Council on Foreign Relations, of which Pratt had been a member since 1923. The Council converted the residence into offices, meeting rooms, and a library. Presumably the collection was acquired by Wildenstein around the time of Mrs. Pratt's gift, and three paintings were bought by the Kress Foundation: the Sieneese triptych, a *Madonna and Child* by Andrea Solario now in Columbia, South Carolina, and the Piero di Cosimo in Honolulu.
 5. Shapley (1966), p. 147.
 6. Ibid.
 7. The attribution to Sano di Pietro was likely made by Bernard Berenson since he was Wildenstein's expert in that period.
 8. That the problem is still controversial one only has to read Kanter's note in his review of the London National Gallery's new catalogue of fifteenth-century Italian paintings in the February 2004 issue of *The Burlington Magazine*, p. 107: "NG 5114: This panel of the *Birth of the Virgin* (fig. 34) is by Sano di Pietro, not the Osservanza Master. Confusion between these two painters still allows for their identity as a single hand to be entertained as a serious possibility, but is ruled out by their having worked side by side and in distinctive styles and techniques on the St. Anthony Abbot series." In sharp disagreement, Boskovits (2003) attributes all four panels from that same series in the National Gallery of Art, Washington to Sano di Pietro.
 9. Longhi (1975), p. 60.
 10. Turner (1988), pp. 738–40.
 11. *Kress Acquisitions, 1951–1956*, National Gallery of Art, Washington; Fern Rusk Shapley, *The Samuel H. Kress Collection, El Paso Museum of Art*, 1961, cat. no. 5; Shapley (1966). All three illustrations are mediocre quality black and white overall shots.
 12. Invoice from Robert M. Kulicke, Inc., Framemakers, September 30, 1955, where, interestingly, κ-1434 is referred to as Master of Osservanza. It is likely that Mario Modestini believed it to be by that artist since he would have been working directly with Kulicke.
 13. Verbal communication based on her observations in front of the original.
 14. Longhi (1975).
 15. Graziani (1948), pp. 75–88.
 16. Pope-Hennessy (1956).
 17. Carli (1957).
 18. Ibid., in 'Nota' following p. 121.
 19. Torriti (1977), p. 276 (author's translation).
 20. Alessi and Scapecchi (1985).
 21. The rest of their argument has not found acceptance with other scholars. It depends on an interpretation of new archival material about the two patrons who commissioned the Osservanza and Asciano altarpieces.
 22. Christiansen et al. (1988), p. 107
 23. Shapley (1966). κ-444, Follower of Sassetta, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, portable triptych, 19 × 16 1/2 in. (48.2 × 41.9 cm), including the molding. Very good condition. Frame regilded. Given in the past to Pellegrino di Mariano (in ms) by Fiocco, Longhi, Suida, and Venturi; to Pellegrino tentatively by Berenson; school of Sassetta by Perkins. Pope-Hennessy (1939) to follower of Sassetta who had worked in Sassetta's *bottega* and shows some influence of Pellegrino di Mariano. Provenance: Achillito Chiesa, Milan, Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi, Kress, 1936. Exhibited at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. from 1941–52 (fig. 8).
 24. Van Os et al. (1989), p. 127.
 25. The hermitage of San Leonardo al Lago is recorded as early as 1119, and a church existed by 1168. Eventually the church was joined to the Augustinian Order. The Beato Agostino Novello retired to the hermitage and became a cult figure after his death in 1309, and the church prospered. Around 1350 it was rebuilt in the Gothic style, frescoed by Lippo Vanni in 1370 and decorated with other images. In 1366 the hermitage offered refuge to the population of nearby Santa Colomba during a siege and was fortified with a wall and two towers, one round and one square in plan. Giovanni di Paolo painted a Crucifixion for the chapter room, his only fresco. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it was accorded particular reverence as attested by the 1460 papal visit of Pio II. It was once surrounded by water, thus the reference to a lake in its name. Now drained, it stands on a hilltop in the middle of fields of grazing sheep.
 26. The hilltop scene of the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* measures 54 × 69 cm.
 27. Christiansen et al. (1988).
 28. Giovanni Marussich replaced the hinges and removed the cradle.

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PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

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