

Byzantine Art and Painting in Italy during the 1200s and 1300s

Many paintings in this room were originally parts of altarpieces, a form that first appeared in Italy in the thirteenth century as new attention was focused on the altar by changes in the liturgy, church architecture, and the display of relics. Painting on wooden panels had not been common in the West, but by this time the gilded and painted panels of elaborate altarpieces had begun to join—and would eventually overshadow—fresco and mosaic as the principal forms of decoration in Italian churches. Western artists working on panel turned for inspiration to the Christian East, adapting the techniques, style, and subject matter of Byzantine icons. For Byzantine Christians—and Orthodox Christians today—the icon was a true copy of its holy model. Theologians used the analogy of a wax impression and the seal used to create it to describe the relation between an icon and its subject. Because they depict a holy and infinite presence, not the temporal physical world, icons avoid direct reference to earthly reality, to specific time or place. Instead, backgrounds are dematerialized with shimmering gold, settings are schematized, and figures often appear timeless and static.

Icons are devotional images—windows through which viewer and holy subject make contact. Church decoration was also meant to instruct the faithful, however. And in the West, this role came to foster styles that could, in effect, tell a story. Church frescoes and mosaics—and now panel painting—illustrated the lives of Christ, the Virgin, and saints. New religious orders, especially the Franciscans, who renounced their possessions to preach in villages and towns as Christ had done, stimulated interest in the human life of holy figures. Artists sought to capture the world of everyday experience with greater verisimilitude, relying less on an “ideal image in the soul” to work instead from what was seen by the eye.

Among the first and most important artists to move in this direction was Giotto, whose work hangs in this room. Recognized as a father of “modern” painting, he was the first Western artist since antiquity to capture the weight and mass of bodies moving in space, making them three-dimensional with light and shadow. He abandoned the decorative pattern and complicated line of Byzantine art; his forms are heavy and his shapes simple. And as if to match their convincing visual form, Giotto animated his figures with human psychology. Renaissance critics contrasted Giotto’s style, which they termed “Latin,” with the work of his Sienese contemporary Duccio, whose inspiration was Greek. Two panels from Duccio’s greatest work, the monumental *Maestà* altarpiece, can also be seen in this room.



Anonymous
Byzantine artist
13th century

*Enthroned
Madonna and
Child*, 13th century

In the thirteenth century, contact between the Greek East and the Latin West intensified. Many Byzantine artists, displaced by the declining fortunes of their once rich empire, sought employment in Italy, and Italian artists adapted the sophistication of Byzantine subjects and style to work in the *maniera greca*, or Greek manner. This unique fusion energized art in the West; it is in this sense that Byzantine art has been called midwife to the Renaissance.

Certain aspects of technique suggest that the artist who painted this panel was a Greek, trained as an icon painter. However, its blend of Byzantine and Western elements indicates that he was probably working in Italy or, at least, for a Western patron. The delicate gold striations defining the folds of cloth are a Byzantine convention, and the composition itself is closely modeled on one of the most enduring icon types, the Hodegetria—the Virgin who, by indicating the Child, “shows the way.” Yet Jesus gives the Western, not Eastern, sign of blessing, and the halos are not the plain burnished disks found in Byzantium but are decorated with the floral patterns popular in Italy. The three-dimensional view of the Virgin’s throne may also reflect Western influence. With her red shoes and the archangels’ imperial regalia, the elaborate throne underscores Mary’s role as Queen of Heaven.

Tempera on panel, 1.311 x .768 m (51 5/8 x 30 1/4 in.)
Gift of Mrs. Otto H. Kahn 1949.7.1



Master of Saint
Francis
Umbrian, active second
half of 13th century

*Saint James Minor
and Saint John the
Evangelist*, probably
c. 1270/1280

Originally forming part of the back of an altarpiece, these panels when joined would have shown James Minor (illustrated here) and John the Evangelist standing under an arcade; round cuttings in the spandrels probably held glass ornaments. Other panels from this altarpiece, now in other museums, include a Madonna and the remaining apostles, as well as Saint Francis. Inclusion of the saint would have had particular significance for Franciscans, many of whom regarded their founder as the thirteenth apostle. In fact, the monks, who sat in the choir of the church behind the altar, were the only members of the congregation normally able to see these panels.

The artist apparently modeled the arcade and the Roman-style dress after an early Christian sarcophagus unearthed in 1262. This marble coffin was reused for the burial of the Blessed Egidio, a companion of Saint Francis, in the crypt of the church of San Francesco al Prato in Perugia. Probably the two panels here were originally in the same church, placed on the altar directly above Egidio’s coffin.

Note how faces and folds of cloth are defined with white highlights applied over the background colors. Later works in this room—Giotto’s *Madonna and Child*, for example—use a gradual and continuous blending of dark colors to re-create the realistic appearance of shadows.

Tempera on panel, each: .498 x .242 m (19 5/16 x 9 1/2 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.15 and 16



Paolo Veneziano
Venetian, active 1333–1358/1362

The Crucifixion, c. 1340

Petrarch called Venice “a world apart.” Protected by a bewildering network of canals, Venice naturally turned to the sea and in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries commanded an extensive empire in the eastern Mediterranean. When Venetian commercial interests diverted the Fourth Crusade from the Holy Land to loot the riches of Byzantium instead, many Greek artists were forced to find work in Italy.

That the city remained tied to its Byzantine traditions is evident in the works of Paolo Veneziano, the first Venetian artist we know by name. If he was aware of the more naturalistic styles of his contemporaries in other parts of Italy, he chose not to emulate them. This painting’s small size and arched shape suggest that it might have originally crowned a larger panel in a multipart altarpiece. Paolo’s style is essentially Byzantine, with ethereal figures and flat gold backgrounds. But his form—the altarpiece—is a Western one.

Paolo’s *Coronation of the Virgin* also hangs in this room. The subject was not painted by Byzantine artists and seems to have originated near Paris in the twelfth century. This may be the first Coronation scene painted in Venice. Its strong colors and brittle figures seem almost abstract, a sense increased by the gold striations of the drapery: even without Byzantine models to follow, Paolo’s painting has a strong Byzantine character.

Tempera on panel, .318 x .375 m (12 1/2 x 14 3/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.143



Duccio di Buoninsegna

Sieneese, c. 1255–1318

The Calling of the Apostles Peter and Andrew, 1308/1311

This panel was part of Duccio's magnificent altarpiece in Siena cathedral. With more than fifty individual scenes, the *Maestà*, or "Virgin in Majesty," was about fourteen feet wide and towered to gabled pinnacles some seventeen feet over the main altar—it would have filled the end wall of this room up to the cornice. It was installed in June 1311 after a triumphant procession through the streets of Siena. Priests, city officials and citizens were followed by women and children ringing bells for joy. Shops were closed all day and alms were given to the poor.

This is one of the *Maestà's* rear panels, which are at least partly the work of Duccio's students and assistants. Completed in less than three years, the *Maestà* was a huge undertaking for which Duccio received 3,000 gold florins—more than any artist had ever commanded. Nevertheless, Duccio, like all artists of his time, was regarded as a craftsman and was often called on to paint ceiling coffers, parade shields, and the like. Not until the middle and later fourteenth century did the status of artists rise.

Duccio signed the main section of the *Maestà*, which is still in Siena. His signature, one of the earliest, reads: "Holy Mother of God, be the cause of peace for Siena and life for Duccio because he painted you thus." This plea for eternal life—and perhaps fame—signals a new self-awareness. Within a hundred years signatures become commonplace.

Tempera on panel, .435 x .460 m (17 1/8 x 18 1/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.141



Duccio di Buoninsegna

The Nativity with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, 1308/1311

The *Nativity*, flanked by Old Testament prophets who foretold the birth of Jesus, was on the front of the *Maestà* (see preceding entry). It was one of the scenes from Christ's childhood painted above and below the central image of Mary enthroned in a crowd of saints and angels. Devotion to the Virgin, who was patron saint of Siena, increased with the new interest in Christ's humanity and the surge of popular religion that grew around mendicant preachers. By including a large devotional image of the Virgin with the kind of scene that had usually been painted on church walls, the *Maestà* combined the functions of both icon and narrative art.

A blend of Byzantine and other influences characterizes Duccio's style. Many of his motifs seem to be based on Byzantine manuscript illuminations. The cave setting, for example, is typically Byzantine. Duccio, however, added a manger roof similar to ones found in the Gothic art of northern Europe. Though he used the gold background of Byzantine painting, he was nevertheless keenly attuned to a specific sense of place, carefully repeating outdoor settings to give continuity from one scene to the next. While the effect of gold and brilliant colors is highly decorative, the elegant lines that define drapery folds and Duccio's undulating brushstrokes soften the austerity of the Byzantine style.

Tempera on panel, .438 x .775 m (17 1/4 x 30 1/2 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.8



Giotto

Florentine, probably 1266–1337

Madonna and Child, probably 1320/1330

While Duccio—with his reliance on Byzantine traditions, flat planes, and decorative line—can be said to sum up the past, Giotto was recognized even by his contemporaries as anticipating the future. Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch all praised his naturalism. Giotto's panel, probably the central section of a five-part altarpiece, was painted late in his career. The colors are sober and restrained. Soft shadows model the Virgin and Child. We sense the weight and volume of their bodies and feel the pull of gravity on them.

We also sense that they are actors in a quiet drama. Compare them with the more static figures of the two Byzantine works in this room. Though the compositions are similar—Giotto's half-length Virgin was inspired by icons—their effect on the viewer is different. In the smaller Byzantine painting, for example, Mary presents the infant to us with a formal, though tender, gesture. He turns not to his mother, but to offer blessing. The icon is a channel through which the believer communicates with Christ and the Virgin to receive their beneficence. In Giotto's painting, however, it is as if we are present, witnessing their interaction. The infant steadies himself by grasping his mother's finger and reaches—like any baby—for the flower she holds. The white rose is symbolic of Mary's purity.

Tempera on panel, .855 x .620 m (33 3/8 x 24 3/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.256



Master of the Life of Saint John the Baptist

Riminese, active second quarter of 14th century

Scenes from the Life of Saint John the Baptist, probably 1330/1340

This panel, *The Baptism of Christ* adjacent to it, and several in other museums were part of an altarpiece illustrating the life of John the Baptist. It may have been commissioned for use in a baptistery. The various panels can be linked because the halos were decorated with the same metal punches and the backgrounds carved in the same brocade pattern. Such clues can often help identify paintings from a single workshop and to reconstruct works that have been dismantled and dispersed over time.

We see a sequence of three separate events from the Baptist's infancy. First, two women admire the new infant, while a child peers in from the doorway. Next, John's father, Zacharias, writes "his name is John" on a scroll. While writing he regains the power of speech, which had been taken from him because he was skeptical of God's announcement that his elderly wife would conceive. One witness looks right, leading our eye to the third scene, where the infant John struggles to escape circumcision.

The panel's strong narrative sense and broad, simple figures reflect the influence of Giotto. But its strongly contrasting colors and rich detail—the patterned background, the heavy curtains, and architectural decoration—express the younger artist's own preferences.

Tempera on panel, .491 x .408 m (19 1/4 x 16 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.68



Nardo di Cione

Florentine, active 1343–1365/1366

Madonna and Child with Saint Peter and Saint John the Evangelist, probably c. 1360

Nardo, who with brothers Andrea (called Orcagna) and Jacopo had Florence's busiest workshop in the late 1300s, painted this smaller version of a church altarpiece for use in private devotion at home. It may have been specifically commissioned or bought from stock. The wings pivot to close like shutters; because they protected the surface, this painting is especially well preserved. Its splendor and clear colors, now rare, must have been typical.

Nardo's Virgin, despite her soft expression, appears removed from human concerns. Bright, artificial colors separate her from the real world, and the stiff saints on either side underscore her hierarchical importance. Around the middle of the fourteenth century, Florentine artists like Nardo and his brothers abandoned the human concerns and naturalism of Giotto. For several decades the older, traditional styles again predominated. Art historians continue to debate why this occurred. Perhaps Giotto's work was only appreciated, as Petrarch believed, by a small, educated elite. Perhaps intensified religious sentiment following the plague of 1348—when up to half the population of Italian cities died within a few weeks—prompted this conservatism. Or, perhaps the deaths of so many artists and patrons changed the nature of commissions and workshop practice.

Tempera on panel, center .767 x .349 m (30 1/4 x 13 3/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.261.a–c