

CHIARA GUERZI

PAINTING AND GOLDWORKING
IN CONVERSATION
A RARE FOURTEENTH CENTURY
SIENESE CASKET

PITTURA E OREFICERIA
IN DIALOGO
UN RARO COFANETTO SENESE
DEL TRECENTO

CESATI
CESATI

Design

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Cesati e Cesati

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Foreword

A small box, ostensibly a simple object but actually anything but banal. The imitation using painting techniques of a product of goldsmithery, almost unique of its kind, encapsulates many features of 14th-century artistic culture, particularly in a city like Siena, which succeeded in combining a tireless quest for refinement with an exploitation of the illusory potential of the new art. The surfaces of this little box and its moulded lid are gilded and decorated with plant tendrils, roundels and heart-shaped motifs enclosing lobed leaves, executed in reserve against a granulated background. These are motifs and techniques that were widely used in late 13th-century Tuscan panel painting. In apparent contrast with this very traditional granulated working, on the long sides we see six four-lobed medallions with the Madonna and Child and a series of saints, drawn with scratchy lines in black varnish with the point of a very fine brush on the gold leaf and light blue ground. This is clearly an imitation of the effects, attained by gilded and incised glass objects, the so-called *verres églomisés*, much loved in 14th-century Tuscany and Umbria. The minute and disconnected strokes create the illusion of the woolly softness of fabrics, forming imposing and very expressive fleshy figures whose dominant reference point is the world of the Lorenzetti brothers.

For me the closest parallel is with the gilded and incised glass of the monumental reliquary in the form of a triptych belonging to the Compagnia dei Disciplinati di Santa Maria della Scala, and now in the well-hidden and marvellous museum of the Società degli Esecutori delle Pie Disposizioni in Siena, near Porta Romana. This is a spectacular object, presented at the exhibition *Il gotico a Siena. Miniature pitture oreficerie oggetti d'arte* in 1982,

which in the intentions of Giovanni Previtali had to document the insoluble bonds between the arts and in particular between the microtechniques of the goldsmith and painting, as an interpretative key to understanding the great art of 14th-century Siena. On this occasion, the glass pieces were attributed to Lippo Vanni, a mid-century painter who trained in the fourth decade in the workshop of Pietro Lorenzetti, and who in San Francesco in Siena painted a fresco imitation of a polyptych, thus demonstrating his fondness for the illusory potential of Gothic painting. The glass parts of the reliquary, too, of towering and exquisitely Gothic shape, presented a plant tendril with twisted, lobed leaves around St James and St Philip, still in keeping with 13th-century taste.

How can we justify this presence of deliberate archaisms in the city that invented translucent enamels and heralded the use of the punch in panel painting? It was probably inspired by its appropriateness to the object, to artefacts that were at heart highly traditional despite the elegant form of the moulded lid, in part to safeguard a more sober religious connotation. We should thus ask ourselves about the function of this sort of *goffanuccio*, comparable in shape to others with a purely secular purpose, used to store jewellery and women's valuables. We know of some little boxes of between the 13th and 14th centuries that seem to have served as reliquary cases, like that by the Master of the Madonna di San Remigio formerly owned by Carlo

De Carlo, that belonging to the same great antiquarian and attributed by Luciano Bellosi to the Duccesque Master of the Casole fresco, that by the Umbrian expressionist Master of Santa Chiara, belonging to the Galerie Brimo de Laroussilhe, and again that by the Master of the Trevi Crucifix in the Bogdan and Varvara Khanenko Museum of Art (former Museum of Western and Oriental Art) in Kiev, painted all over with stories of the Passion. The latter have plainer sloping lids, and in some cases depressed medallions for the figurative representations, painted or relief arcades.

The very shape of this little box, whose flared lid is shared by secular betrothal caskets, allowing them to be held more easily, suggested to Chiara Guerzi a different theory that I find very attractive. In a drawing by Lorenzo Lotto (London, British Museum, reproduced in Fig. 24), showing a young churchman with a somewhat dandified and knowing air, intent on reading in his study, we see on his work table an open box, a casket for small and precious objects and the tools of his profession. It is tempting to imagine that our casket too was used by an important member of the church to store his own small personal effects. In Siena, in around the mid-14th century.

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I. The Casket from the Cesati Collection: A Description

This rare and valuable little wooden casket from the Cesati collection is a perfect embodiment of the medieval casket, commonly described in the contemporary central Italian sources with the diminutives *goffanuccio*, *forzerino*, or *bossoletto*¹ due to the small size – 19 (height) x 24 (width) x 14.5 (depth) centimetres – typical of such artefacts, their gilded painted decoration and above all their shape. The latter is characterized by a rectangular base and moulded socle, and a lid with concave sloping or inclined sides (sometimes also known as a ‘plinth-shaped’ lid) that slightly overhangs the body upon which it rests. This is an architectural typology, also described as ‘pagoda-shaped’ for the tall and narrow lid, that replicates in miniaturized form the shape of Gothic sarcophagi, as we will see in more detail below². At the top, as usual, is a mixtilinear metal handle, perhaps contemporary with the internal lock and key, chronologically pertinent with the body.

The interior preserves a lining in a fine cloth. Though not contemporary with the exterior decoration, this covering is undoubtedly a rarity for objects of this type, in part because it is extremely unusual to find intact linings in either small boxes or *cassoni*, but also because it testifies to the practice of replacing the inner lining of these artefacts over time.

Following a practice typical of medieval panel painting, the wooden core was covered with a fine preparatory layer of plaster, and gold leaf was then applied to the whole surface after further preparation with red-orange burnished bole. Animated half-length busts of saints are enclosed within four-lobed medallions (measuring 5x5 cm) – three on the front (Pl. II) and three on the back (Pl. III) of the casket (two decorate the body and one the lid) – whilst the short sides of the lid are decorated with two coats of arms that can no longer be identified (Pl. I and VII).

Among the figures on the front we can make out the Madonna and Child in a position of prestige at the centre of the lid and then, further down on the left, St Peter flanked by a saint with a thick beard and a book, perhaps St Andrew (Pl. V). On the back, at the top and thus as a counterpart to the group with the Madonna and Child and probably connected to the person who commissioned the work, is an apostle with a long beard who may be St Bartholomew, whilst beneath we can identify, from left to right, the figures of St Paul with a sword and a bishop saint with a crosier and book (Pl. III).

As shown by recent restoration work, the figures within medallions

were once set against a light blue ground; they were painted on the gold in imitation of the exquisite effects of gold-working techniques such as enamels, niellos or *verres églomisés*³. As a result, the overall effect is that of rapidly executed monochrome drawings. The remainder of the surface is occupied by a plant motif executed with a reserve technique, in other words by densely working the background using small punches and leaving intact the figurative part of the tendril. Like the medallions, the heraldic motifs of the coats of arms on the short sides of the lid were executed by painting on the gold, whilst both the body and base have a frame with a black (or dark blue) background around the edge of each side, decorated with circles with larger punched dots at their centre (Pl. IV).

The object's state of conservation is better than good; consequently, during the recent cleaning work – on this, see the relevant entry⁴ – only a very few limited repairs were carried out, such as stuccoing microdetachments of the plaster primer on the edges of the lid and base.

From the point of view of the technique, the work belongs to the not particularly large group of caskets painted in imitation of gilded and incised glass artefacts, a product of the medieval taste for variations in colour and light that in other contexts led in a matter simulation game, to the use of glass to imitate enamel⁵. As a result, from a terminological point of view, based on exactly this analogy between these two techniques, inserts of gilded and painted glass were often called enamels⁶.

A representative example of this class of artefacts is the little wooden box with a pyramid-shaped lid in a private collection (Fig. 1) that, once ascribed to 1370s-90s Tuscany, should probably be considered as an early 15th century Catalan work, as Andrea De Marchi points out⁷. Its decoration has both Christological monograms and intertwined letters, perhaps to be interpreted as the initials of the names of a husband and wife⁸. These inscriptions⁹ – in capital letters and probably executed using a template given the clearly visible incision marks around the edges – completely fill the spaces of the sides of the lid, the front face and the short sides of the body and allude to the *nomina sacra* “IHS” of *Iesus* (still lacking the superimposed cross but surmounted by a long abbreviation symbol) and “XPS” of *Christus*. On the sides are the intertwined letters “M” and “W” referring to the patron or patrons if this is indeed a marriage casket. Were this the case we might perhaps be dealing with an object designed in accordance with the well-known precepts of San Bernardino invoking greater restraint among women in regards to the *goffanucci* in which girls of marriageable age kept gifts from their *fiancés* – such as rings, jewellery more generally or girdles – as tangible marks of their commitment to marriage and the agreement made¹⁰. However, this would obviously mean assuming an unlikely date



1. Catalan workshop (?), *Marriage Casket with 'nomina sacra' and intertwined letters*, 1440-1450, Unknown location.



II. The Casket from the Cesati Collection in the Context of 14th-Century Siena



3. Coppo di Marcovaldo, *Madonna with the Child and Angels*, 1261, Siena, Santa Maria dei Servi, detail.



4. Coppo di Marcovaldo and Master of Santa Maria Primerana, *Saint Francis and Stories From His Life*, circa 1265-70, verso, Pistoia, Museo Civico.

The polymateric style of both the casket from the Cesati collection and that sold at auction by Sotheby's (Fig. 2) is highly reminiscent of the creations typical of the Siennese workshops of the circles of Duccio in the first two or three decades of the 14th century. We could mention, for example, the geometrical frames and plant ornaments imitating glass or enamel inserts decorating the space above the arch in the *Madonna and Child Enthroned, Angels and Saints* (Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello) by the so-called Master of the Maestà Gondi¹, active in Siena between the second and third decades of the 14th century. Also similar is the style of the frame, unfortunately very ruined, executed by the provincial Master of Monterotondo for the panel with *Sts Justus with King David and Hugh with the Prophet Daniel* in the Pinacoteca Comunale in Volterra², reminiscent of the *ductus* adopted by the Duccesque painters of the third generation and later the more modern ones typical of the Lorenzetti brothers.

In both caskets, it is the identical typology of the plant motif that, specifically, in its continued allusion to 13th century prototypes (large lobed leaves inside heart-shaped motifs), leads us to ascribe their execution to an early date, and above all to rule out that we might be dealing with a revival of such motifs by a workshop active in the second half of the 14th century, as I had initially thought. To understand the extent to which the solutions favoured by this workshop looked to the past, suffice it to compare them with the decoration of the haloes on the panel painted in 1261 by Coppo di Marcovaldo for the Siennese church of Santa Maria dei Servi³ (Fig. 3) or with the painted motif, in black monochrome on a white ground (Fig. 4), on the back of the panel with *St Francis and Stories From His Life* (Pistoia, Museo Civico), dating to roughly the same period (1265-1270)⁴. Overall, compared to Coppo's schematic prototypes, the curvilinear forms of the tendrils on the two caskets appear more vigorous and are constructed with a freedom that is already wholly Gothic. This freedom is reminiscent of the broad bands with smooth plant motifs on a granulated ground by the painter Niccolò di Segna who started from a solid Duccesque influence and later evolved in the direction of ampler and more severe forms thanks to the teachings of Pietro Lorenzetti. In the works of his early maturity, caught between deference to the style of Duccio and interest in the early works of Simone Martini, like the panels in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena probably originating from the dismembered polyptych executed

for the Vallombrosan Abbey of San Michele Arcangelo in Siena⁵, we see in the frames that same desire to imitate glass or enamel inserts, but also the preference for a decorative system with minutely punched, granulated and then incised gold⁶, in keeping with a date in around the early 1330s. His later production, typical of the painter's full stylistic maturity and ascribable to the 1350s, presents expanded forms and thicker brush strokes, as in the *Blessing Redeemer* within an eight-point star (Siena, Salini Collection) attributed to Niccolò di Segna by Federico Zeri⁷. It is here that we find, among the always sumptuous decorations, technical and stylistic support for a less generic contextualization of the linear Gothic style that inspires the plant motifs on the Cesati casket. In the even later *Polyptych of the Resurrection* for Borgo Sansepolcro – the final work in his corpus of paintings⁸, dating to after 1348 – on the edges of the central panel showing the resurrected Christ at the centre of the tomb with the figures of the sleeping soldiers filling the foreground, we see, just beyond the midpoint of the space occupied by the tomb, the start of a large decorative insert in the form of a branch with ample volutes twisting around lobed leaves (Fig.5). This application of decorative details, more substantial and expansive, and centred on the use of a less fine, perhaps coarser but still highly virtuoso granulation, is typical of the mature works of Niccolò. It has been said that the Resurrection polyptych perfectly reflects the cultural climate of mid-14th century Siena, where painters shifted their attention to new models, Simone Martini and the Lorenzetti brothers⁹.

On the Cesati casket this copious use of gold contrasts with the casual rendering of the Saints inside medallions, whose highly personal expressive power belongs to the same cultural context; the densely and rapidly applied black lines, in part copying the effect of a decoration on glass, form fresh and lively sketches that have the effect of actual drawings. The figures are rendered with a witty and amusing *verve*, but above all indicate a desire for characterization and a *gravitas* reminiscent of the works executed by the followers of the Lorenzetti brothers. Well known is the role played by Pietro Lorenzetti in the stylistic evolution of Niccolò di Segna, with whom he collaborated in the Spinelli chapel in Santa Maria dei Servi in Siena and thanks to which he succeeded in consolidating the construction of the figures. Despite this, the medallions on the Cesati casket find closer parallels both with the still enigmatic master belonging to the close circles of the Lorenzetti brothers and formerly known as the Master of Santa Maria dei Servi, in between the style of Pietro and that of Ambrogio, and on the other, as suggested to me by Andrea De Marchi, the works executed by the versatile and better known workshop of Lippo Vanni (documented 1340 to 1375).



5. Niccolò di Segna, *Polyptych of the Resurrection*, 1348 ca., Sansepolcro, San Giovanni Evangelista cathedral, detail.



6. Lippo Vanni, *Reliquary Triptych*, Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery.

Both artists oscillate between deference to the works of the Lorenzetti brothers and a predilection for lavishly decorated and elaborate – sometimes excessive – painted surfaces, which give the works an archaizing appearance. Suffice it to think of the reliquary altarpieces produced by Vanni’s workshop, from that in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore (Figs 6 and 10), to the extremely rare piece in gilded glass (*verre églomisé*) executed in around 1340 for the Ospedale di

Santa Maria della Scala¹⁰ (Siena, Museo della Società di Esecutori di Pie Disposizioni) (Fig. 11); these objects clearly encapsulate the vivacious style typical of Lippo’s workshop, simultaneously engaged in the illustration of books “con lo stesso duttile impegno”¹¹. It is precisely the graphic and draftsmanlike style of some of his works on parchment, dating to between the fifth and seventh decades of the 14th century, that provide an opportunity for conceptual comparisons helpful in understanding the “drawings” on the casket in the Cesati collection. We can compare the white-haired St Marino next to the young Romuald in the miniature of the manuscript with the *Life of St Romuald*¹² (Fig. 7 ;Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 13674), or the little heads of apostles, rendered in a liquid and

7. Lippo Vanni, *San Romualdo and San Marino at the Basilica of Sant’Apollinare in Classe*, Ms. Vat. Lat. 13674, *Life of San Romualdo*, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 13674, detail.



8. Lippo Vanni, *Christ blessing the Apostles*, Austria, Private Collection.



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