

Nicolò di Pietro

A rediscovered *Lamentation*

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FRASCIONE
ARTE



Nicolò di Pietro

Venice, documented between 1394 and 1427

Lamentation over the Dead Christ

Tempera and gold on wood panel, 8,5 x 11,25 in (21,5 x 28,5 cm)

Unpublished

The powerfully concentrated qualities of this *Lamentation*, set at the foot of the Cross, inspired Roberto Longhi to write an appraisal dated 20 June 1965. His text sought to define it – almost more out of affection than through precise demonstration – as a very early work by Masaccio, “shortly before 1420”. In 1968, he was followed along these lines by Carlo Volpe, Giuliano Briganti and Kurt Steinbart; the latter even promised to publish it. However, the painting has remained unpublished until now. Longhi was struck by the “potent pathos of the figures” and their “measured pauses”, but at the same time noted the “rhythms of the International Gothic, of Lorenzo Monaco and his kin”, thus airing the likelihood of a sort of Late Gothic infancy for the great Masaccio, precisely what he had denied, a priori, in his *Fatti di Masolino e di Masaccio* of 1940. The figures do have an emphatically Gothic cadence, swirling and swaying in the repeated rhythms of their drapery folds, which descend like flower petals and curl in at the ends. At the same time, each character stands out with

solitary intensity, forming an incisive and silent piece of sacred theatre. Yet we should understand what these flashing eyes mean, as well as the tremulous mood that runs through gestures and poses, fostered by a freedom of painterly handling, darting about almost informally: a manner that can scarcely be reconciled with the plastic concentration that interested the young genius from the Valdarno at the very outset of his career. The explanation for the “piercing eyes of the Magdalen” remarked on by Longhi should in my opinion be found in an entirely different place, even though his hypothetical date, about 1420, remains substantially the same: they are the vivid, penetrating eyes of the great protagonist of Late Gothic Venetian painting, Nicolò di Pietro, who once again reveals his superb stature, and startling – never banal – inventive qualities. But let us proceed one element at a time. First there are some aspects of technique and typology that point to Venice rather than Tuscany. This horizontally-veined little panel was part of a predella, and was likely accompanied by other



1. Nicolò di Pietro, *Crucifix* (1404). Verucchio, Collegiata of San Martino (formerly in the church of Sant'Agostino)

scenes from the Passion of Christ. It is defined by a depressed arch, as found in Venetian narrative predellas, starting with the panels of the polyptych with *Christ Giving the Keys to Saint Peter* by Lorenzo Veneziano (1369), which are three-lobed, whereas they have a single curve in Jacopo Bellini's five stories of the Virgin set below the *Annunciation* in Sant'Alessandro in Brescia. This arched format was unknown in Tuscany.

Moreover, as in the Venetian and Adriatic manner, the gesso extends beyond the gilding, and over the incised guideline for the arch, given that the frame was independent (rather than glued and nailed in, at one with the support and only gessoed and gilded subsequent to its application, as was the custom in Tuscany). Finally, the simple compass-incised haloes, accompanied by a row of dots – something entirely lacking in other stippled and punchmarked decoration – is inconceivable for a Tuscan painter, even for Masaccio, who was not particularly attentive to halo ornament, and cut very sharply-defined stippled motifs. Instead, Nicolò di Pietro often adopted a similarly minimalist approach, sometimes following the contour with a black brushstroke, or at the most creating an effect of dissolving dots within the circular field.

The holy figures are set against a rocky, reddened ground, touched by highlights of liquid pigment that emerges onto the sides, at the foot of a simple blue-toned cross (fig. 2). In Florence only Antonio Veneziano and Agnolo Gaddi had composed scenes with the Cross painted blue rather than imitating the colour of wood. In his Verucchio Crucifix, signed and dated 1404 (fig. 1), Nicolò di Pietro chose to paint the



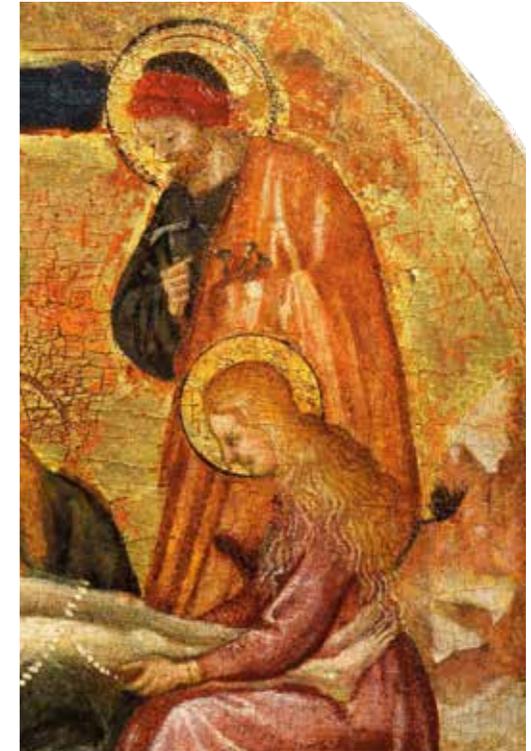
2. Nicolò di Pietro, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, detail



3. Nicolò di Pietro, *Virgin and Child with Vulciano Belgarzone* (known as the *Belgarzone Madonna*, 1394). Venice, Accademia (from the church of San Platone in Zara/Zadar)

slender, elongated body of Christ against a Cross tinted in an intense blue, loyally following a venerable iconography that had been common in the thirteenth century.

Nicolò di Pietro is a painter who combines towering figures with an intimate frailty of gesture and gaze, as we can see in this exquisitely-narrated scene. The Virgin in his own youthful



4. Nicolò di Pietro, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, detail

masterpiece, the *Belgarzone Madonna*, signed and dated 1394 (Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia, from the church of San Platone in Zara/Zadar, fig. 3), has a dome-like contour reflecting the more evolved forms of Paduan neo-Giottesque painting fashionable in those years in Padua, Treviso, Verona, Ferrara and even Bologna: this shape can be compared to our figure of Joseph of Arimathea (fig. 4), similarly rounded and grand (I shall refer to him as Joseph, since he is alone here, even though he appears to unite the two customary figures who usually detach and lower the body of



5. Nicolò di Pietro, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*

Christ, that is, Joseph and the more humble Nicodemus, hold nails and a hammer, as this figure does). To my eyes, the fall of drapery – defined by emphatic luminous brushstrokes, stretching and flexing as it moves down the bodies, fanning out at the knees, and gathering on the ground – is habitually found in Nicolò di Pietro, and also appears in paintings from a little after the Verucchio *Cross* of 1404, such as the spectacular *Coronation of the Virgin* in the Accademia dei Concordi in Rovigo (figs. 5-6). Yet there is a fine distinction here: the crisp, clean definition of the former has now mellowed, with a new softness of pictorial handling directly generated by the growing impact of Gentile da Fabriano, with whom Nicolò is documented in 1408, in the account books of Francesco Amadi, for having together painted some *anconette*



6. Nicolò di Pietro, *Coronation of the Virgin*. Rovigo, Accademia dei Concordi

commissioned by this Venetian patron; a decade later, Nicolò was to use Gentile's drawings for the marvellous *Stories of Saint Benedict* divided between the Uffizi Gallery and the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan, originally painted for the Abbey of Polirone at San Benedetto

Po, or for Sant'Andrea in Mantua. Special mention should be made of the pink drapery worn by the Magdalen, who holds her canonical position at the feet of the dead Christ (recalling the fact that she had anointed them during the supper at the house of Levi): here the white highlights crumble into little masses of dots, an effect unquestionably derived from Gentile da Fabriano, which had also been favoured in Venice by artists such as Jacopo Bellini and Michele Giambono. This new softness of treatment recurs in the *Stories of Saint Augustine* in the Vatican Picture Gallery and a private collection, originally set below the polyptych in the Augustinian church in Pesaro. There, for example, in the *Baptism of Saint Augustine* (fig. 7), we find similar agitation in the comma-shaped passages of drapery in Saint Ambrose's sleeve, or in Augustine's red robe, lying on the ground beside the baptismal font; and a similar softness in the faces. However, there is no sign yet of the dotted effect, which represents a further stage in Nicolò di Pietro's conversion to Gentile, suggesting that the painting studied here is one of his last known works, possibly dating from the early 1420s (figs. 8-13). Similar folds define the blue dress of the woman on the extreme left of our composition, with a hand on Jesus' neck, who should be identifiable as the Virgin Mary, though the depiction is far from orthodox, since she is generally placed behind the body, near his face. Her darkened blue mantle billows out



7. Nicolò di Pietro, *Baptism of Saint Augustine*. Vatican City, Vatican Picture Gallery

in a prominent calligraphic line, which recurs in the robe of Christ, near his feet, in the *Coronation of the Virgin* in Rovigo (figs. 14-15). This is tantamount to a signature. Then there are those little sparkling eyes, which are so typical of this delicate Venetian artist of the Late Gothic era. They vary: here almost anxious and distraught in sorrow, as in the pious woman in green, crouching behind the body of Christ; there looking sideways, as in Joseph of Arimathea; or

8. Nicolò di Pietro, *Baptism of Saint Augustine*, detail. Vatican City, Vatican Picture Gallery



10. Nicolò di Pietro, *Baptism of Saint Augustine*, detail. Vatican City, Vatican Picture Gallery



9. Nicolò di Pietro, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, detail



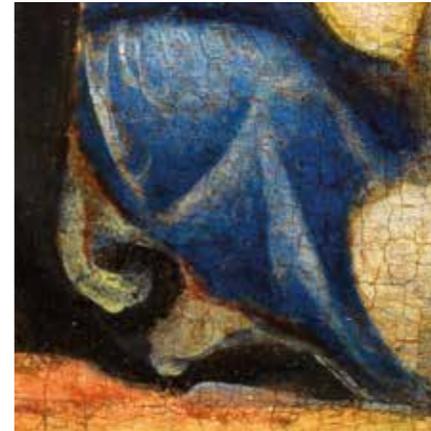
11. Nicolò di Pietro, *Conversion of Saint Augustine (Saint Augustine and Alypius receiving Ponticianus)*, detail. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts



12. Nicolò di Pietro (after a drawing by Gentile da Fabriano), *Saint Benedict Raising a Young Monk*, detail. Florence, Uffizi



14. Nicolò di Pietro, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, detail



13. Nicolò di Pietro, *Coronation of the Virgin*, detail. Milan, Brera



15. Nicolò di Pietro, *Coronation of the Virgin*, detail. Rovigo, Accademia dei Concordi



elsewhere with a more intense, almost forbidding mood, as in the woman in a dark dress next to the presumed figure of the Virgin, and connected to her in a silent exchange of gazes. Parallels for these details can be found in the *Stories of Saint Benedict*, the *Coronation of the Virgin* in Rovigo, the *Saint Ursula* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the *Madonna of Humility*

in Budapest, and the *Stories of Saint Augustine* mentioned above (figs. 16-24). But how may we explain the silent solemnity of this scene, different from the light, flowery and occasionally almost anecdotal tone, for instance, of the *Stories of Saint Augustine*? Or the potency of some of the artist's ideas, such as the Magdalen's contemplation at the feet of Christ, the composure and

affection of the Virgin's gesture as she holds her son's head, or the position, seen from behind, of the pious woman robed in blue and ashen grey? The answer is simple, although neither Longhi nor the other scholars cited above noted it: Nicolò based himself on the memorable composition by Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (figs. 25-26), whose enormous influence continued to

endure in the fifteenth century, as shown for example in about 1455 by Girolamo di Giovanni da Camerino, in the fresco cycle at Patullo, identified by Matteo Mazzalupi. The particularly original elements we have listed here are not copies but motifs, generated by a select, mature reflection on the prototype. This gives substance to the *neogiottismo* of painters like Nicolò di Pietro, beginning



From left to right:

16. Nicolò di Pietro (after a drawing by Gentile da Fabriano), *Saint Benedict and the Poisoned Wine*, detail. Florence, Uffizi

17. Nicolò di Pietro, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, detail

18. Nicolò di Pietro, *Coronation of the Virgin*, detail. Rovigo, Accademia dei Concordi



19. Nicolò di Pietro, *Virgin and Child*, detail. Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts

20. Nicolò di Pietro, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, detail

21. Nicolò di Pietro, *Saint Ursula and Her Maidens*, detail. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art



22. Nicolò di Pietro, *Conversion of Saint Augustine (Saint Augustine and Alypius receiving Ponticianus)*, detail. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts

23. Nicolò di Pietro, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, detail

24. Nicolò di Pietro, *Saint Ursula and Her Maidens*, detail. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art



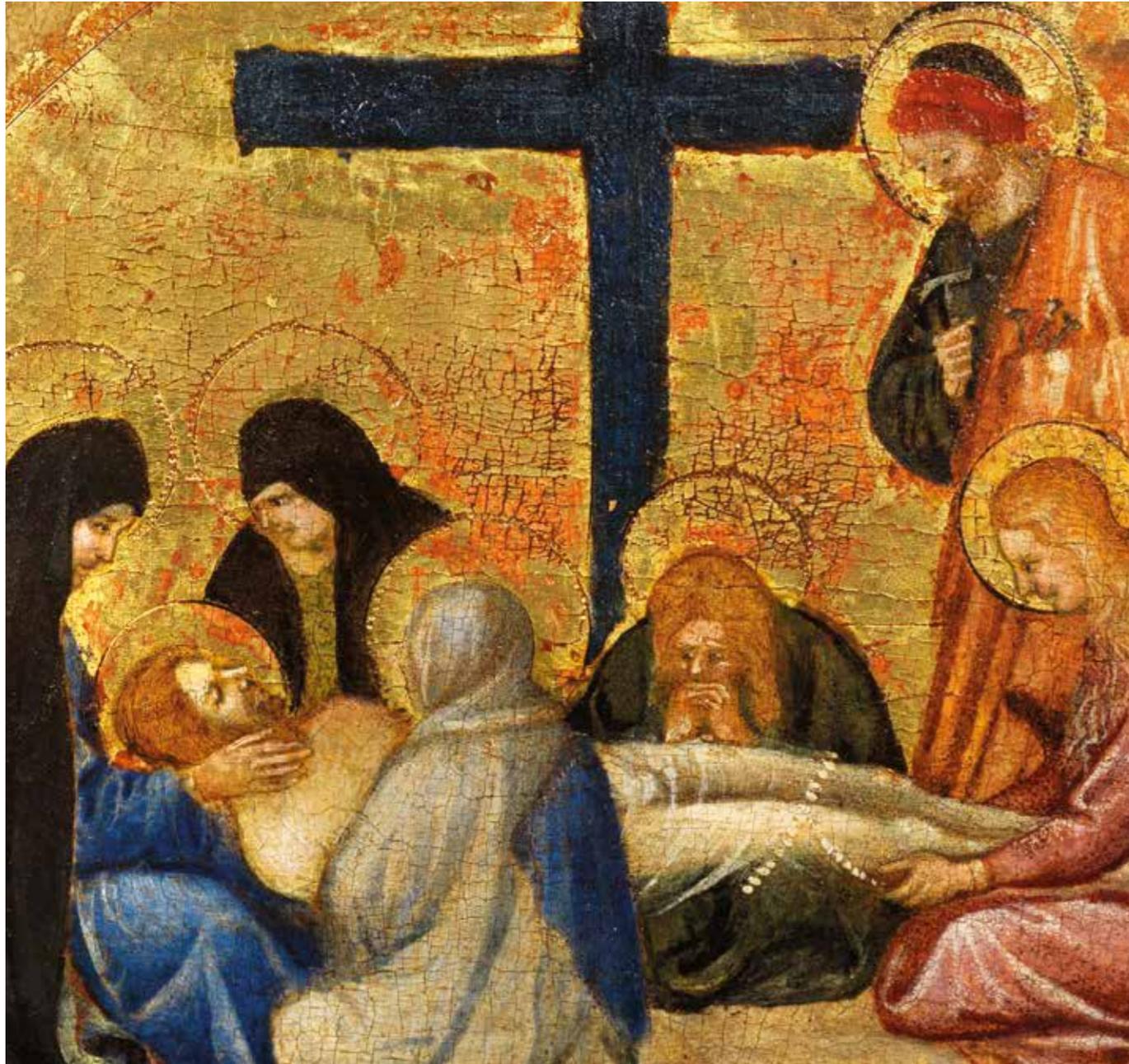
25. Giotto, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, detail. Padua, Scrovegni Chapel



26. Nicolò di Pietro, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, detail

with his years of training around 1390, as I had maintained in an article of 1987. The beautiful concept of the Virgin holding Christ's head from behind, as if in sorrowful meditation while she caresses him, is a variant of Giotto's, which was itself a moderated treatment of the pathos, replete with explicit moans or screams, of thirteenth-century Lamentation scenes, suggesting instead a more internalized and measured description of pain. Over

a century after the Scrovegni Chapel, and alongside Gentile da Fabriano, the versatile artistic temperament of Nicolò di Pietro reveals itself on yet more levels of expression, on some occasions harsher and even affected – as in the cartoon for the tapestry in Saint Mark's, where the Virgin passionately kisses and embraces the body of Jesus – and on others, as we see here, with intense pause and concentration.



Biography and selected literature on Nicolò di Pietro

The Venetian artist, who earned a knighthood (he signs himself as *miles* on the Verucchio *Crucifix*, and appears as such in a document regarding his daughter Antonia in 1430), is probably the "Nicolao" who was a pupil of Giovanni da Bologna and a beneficiary in the older painter's will, drawn up on 23-24 October 1389. He is securely documented starting in 1394, the date on the Madonna he painted for Vulciano Belgarzone, now in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice but formerly the central element of a grand polyptych, "with many saints, male and female", on the high altar of the Dominican church of San Platone in Zara/Zadar, signed with a specific reference to his being a resident of Venice "in chapite pontis Paradixi", that is, near the bridge at the end of the present-day Calle del Paradiso, heading towards Campo Santa Maria Formosa. On 27 July 1408 he is recorded alongside Gentile da Fabriano in the register of accounts of Francesco di Giovanni Amadi, a wealthy merchant originally from Lucca who had settled in Venice, and commissioned two small panel paintings from the artists. Nicolò is documented in 1419, and died before 14 April 1427. He worked for the Dominican friars of Zara/Zadar and for the Augustinians, both in Pesaro and Verucchio (in Romagna, inland from Rimini); the *Cross* in Verucchio, signed and dated 1404 and made in collaboration with the wood carver Catarino di Andrea Moranzone, probably originally included two separate figures of the Virgin and Saint John in mourning, in addition to the four terminals of the Cross, which bear the symbols of the Tetramorph. In 1731/1732, Scipione Maffei recorded a panel painting he owned that was formerly in the church of San Pietro di Castello in Verona; the work, said to have been signed "Nicholaus filius magistri Petri pictor pinxit hoc opus Veneciis", remains untraced.

See the following literature on the artist: E. Sandberg-Vavalà, "Maestro Stefano und Niccolò di Pietro", *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, LI, 1930, pp. 94-109; R. Pallucchini, "Nuove proposte per Niccolò di Pietro", *Arte Veneta*, X, 1956, pp. 37-55; F. Valcanover, "Un'opera di Niccolò di Pietro", *Paragone Arte*, IX, 1960, 123, pp. 27-30; L. Cuppini, "Niccolò di Pietro: l'Arrivo dei Magi", *Arte Veneta*, XVIII, 1964, pp. 160-161; A. Scarpa Sonino, "Per un catalogo di Niccolò di Pietro", *Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, VII, 1975-1976, pp. 765-789; M. Leoni, "Proposte per un soggiorno trevigiano di Giovanni da Bologna e note al testamento", *Arte Veneta*, XL, 1986, pp. 151-153; A. De Marchi, "Per un riesame della pittura tardogotica a Venezia: Nicolò di Pietro e il suo contesto adriatico", *Bollettino d'arte*, 44-45, ser. VI, LXXII, 1987, pp. 25-66; M. Lucco, "Venezia, 1400-1430", in *La pittura nel Veneto. Il Quattrocento*, Milan 1990, pp. 13-79,

specifically 15-21; A. De Marchi, "Ritorno a Nicolò di Pietro", *Nuovi studi. Rivista di arte antica e moderna*, 3, II, 1997, pp. 5-24; A. De Marchi and T. Franco, "Il gotico internazionale: da Nicolò di Pietro a Michele Giambono", in *Pittura veneta nelle Marche*, ed. by V. Curzi, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 2000, pp. 53-85; A. Tartuferi, "Un dipinto di Nicolò di Pietro appartenuto a Richard Offner", *Arte collezionismo conservazione. Scritti in onore di Marco Chiarini*, ed. by M. L. Chappell, M. Di Giampaolo and S. Padovani, Florence 2004, pp. 152-154; B. Brison, in *Altri quaranta dipinti antichi della Collezione Saibene*, ed. by G. Agosti, Verona 2008, pp. 26-33; A. De Marchi, "Nicolò di Pietro: Maria in Paradiesgärtlein", *Kronos*, XIII, 2009, 1, pp. 55-58; A. Griffin and A. Mazzotta, "The Discovery and Conservation of a Nicolò di Pietro in the Cuming Museum, London", *The Burlington Magazine*, CLVI, 2014, pp. 153-158.

On the crafting of gold in the paintings of Nicolò di Pietro: P. Buttus, "Sperimentazioni luministiche e geometrie variabili nelle incisioni dell'oro tra Nicolò di Pietro e Jacobello del Fiore", *Arte Veneta*, LXXI, 2014, pp. 161-197.

On the *Stories of Saint Augustine* in the Pinacoteca Vaticana, and the addition of a fifth panel with the *Conversion of Saint Augustine (Augustine and Alypius Receiving Ponticianus)*, formerly in a private collection and which entered the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon in 2008 (inv. D 2009.5.1): F. Rossi, *Catalogo della Pinacoteca Vaticana. III. Il Trecento. Umbria - Marche. Italia del Nord. Con un'appendice sui toscani*, Vatican City 1994, pp. 81-85; A. De Marchi, "Ritorno a Nicolò di Pietro", *Nuovi studi. Rivista di arte antica e moderna*, 3, II, 1997, pp. 5-24, specifically 9-10.

On the *Stories of Saint Benedict*, divided between the Uffizi Gallery, Florence and the Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan, originally in a Benedictine monastery (the provenance remains a matter of debate: Mantua or Verona) and whose author is likely to be Nicolò, after drawings by Gentile da Fabriano, towards the end of the 1410s: A. Di Lorenzo, in *Gentile da Fabriano e l'altro Rinascimento*, exhibition catalogue (Fabriano) ed. by L. Laureati and L. Mochi Onori, Milan 2006, pp. 150-155, cat. III.8.

On the series of tapestries for Saint Mark's Basilica in Venice, with *Stories of the Passion* carried out after drawings by Nicolò: M. Stucky-Schürer, *Die Passionteppiche von San Marco in Venedig. Ihr Verhältnis zur Bildwirkerei in Paris und Arras im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, Bern 1972; A. De Marchi, "Ritorno a Nicolò di Pietro", *Nuovi studi. Rivista di arte antica e moderna*, 3, II, 1997, pp. 5-24, specifically 7-8; L. Dolcini, *Arazzi della basilica di San Marco*, Milan 1999.



Nicolò di Pietro, *Coronation of the Virgin*. Rome, Palazzo Barberini

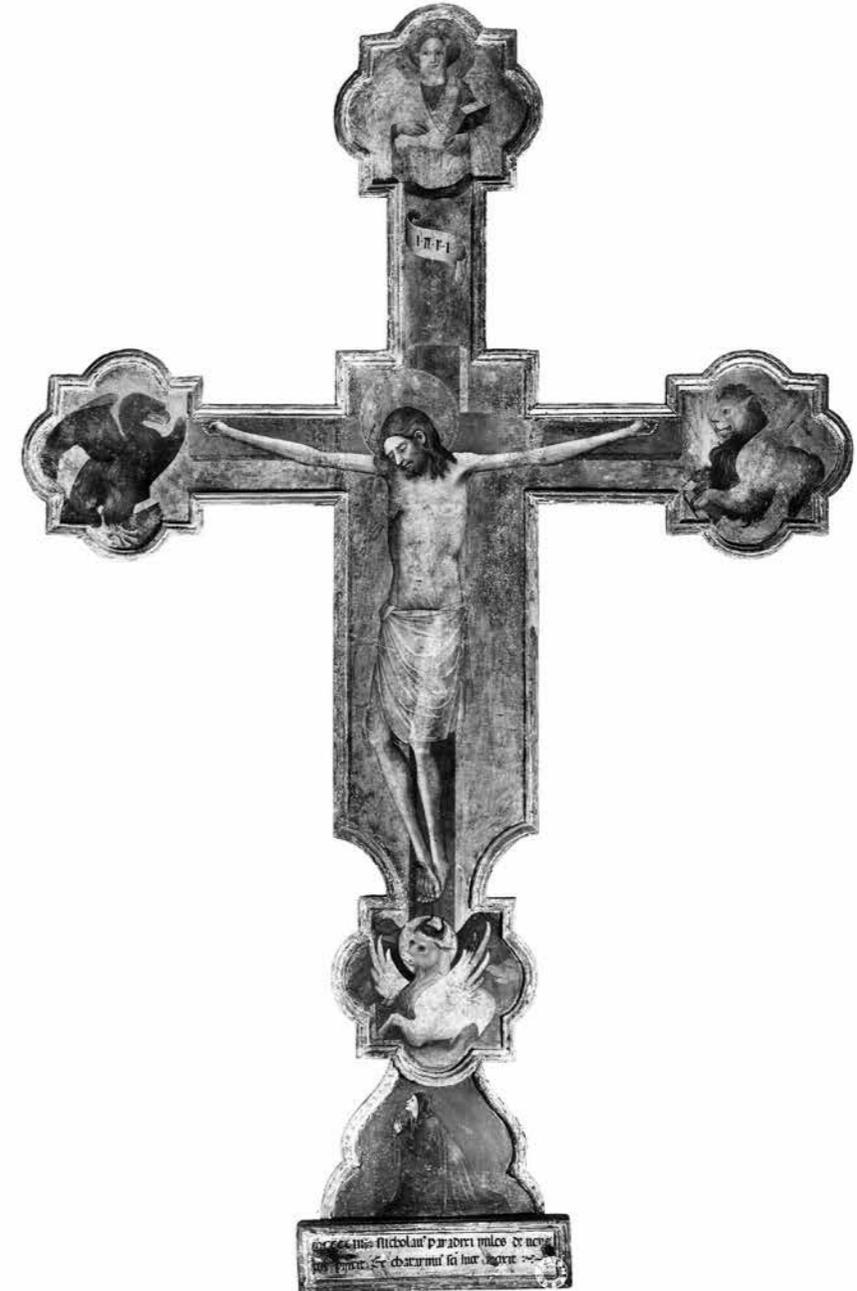


Nicolò di Pietro, *Virgin and Child enthroned with Angels*. Cambridge (MA), Fogg Art Museum



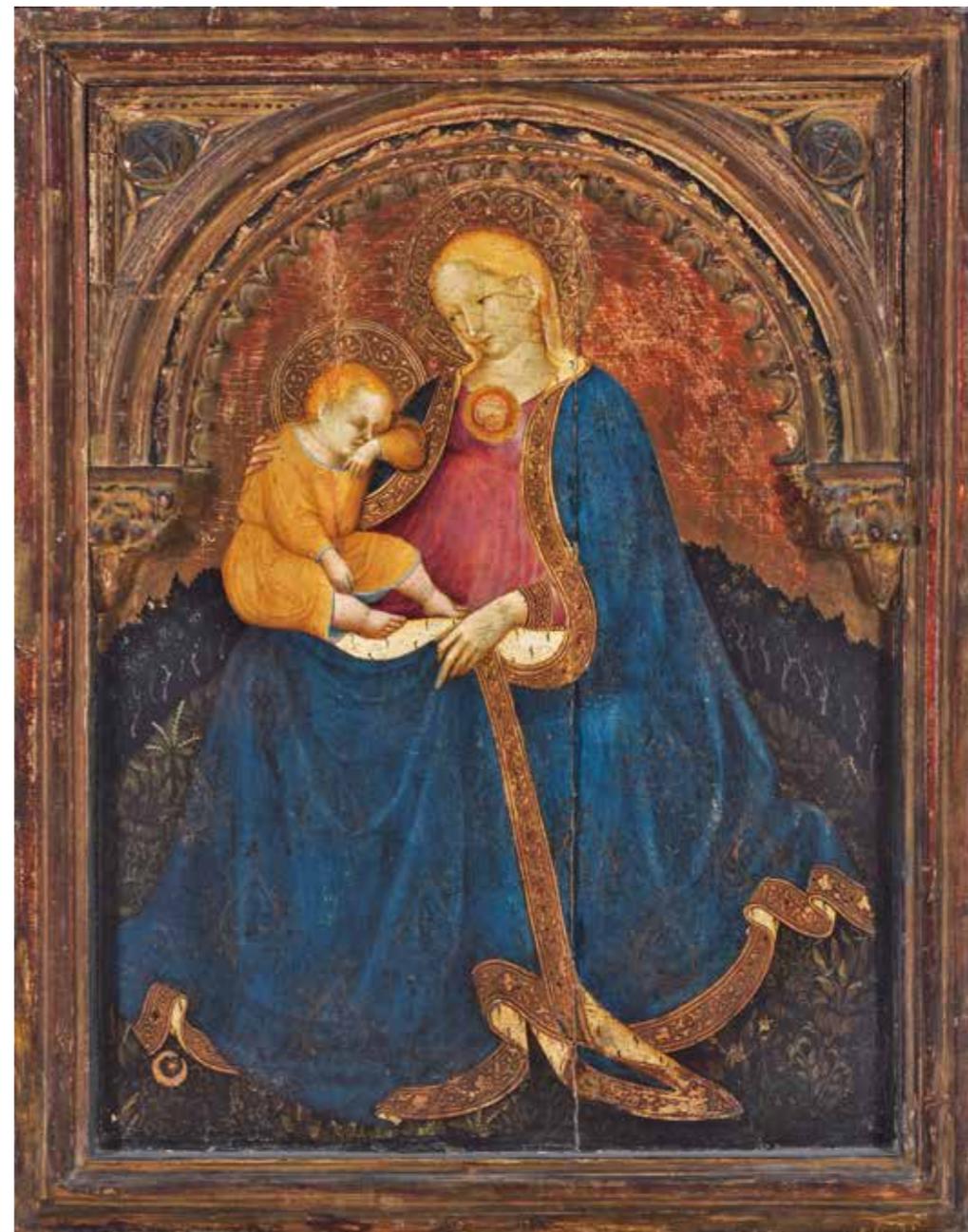
Nicolò di Pietro, *Virgin and Child with Vulciano Belgarzone* (known as the *Belgarzone Madonna*, 1394). Venice, Accademia (from the church of San Platone in Zara/Zadar)

Nicolò di Pietro, *Crucifix* (1404). Verucchio, Collegiata of San Martino (formerly in the church of Sant'Agostino)





Nicolò di Pietro, *Virgin and Child*. Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts





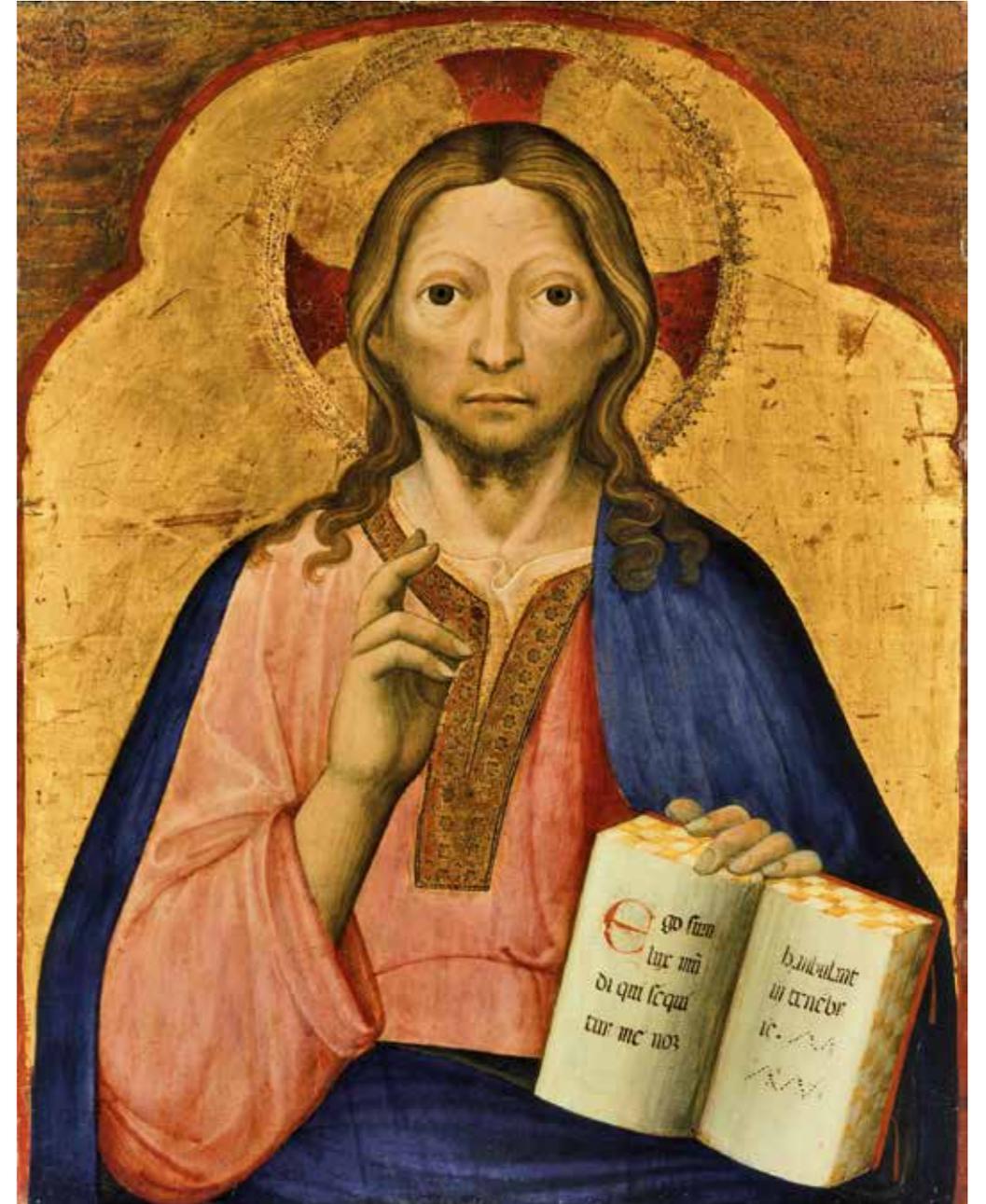
Nicolò di Pietro, *Coronation of the Virgin*. Rovigo, Accademia dei Concordi



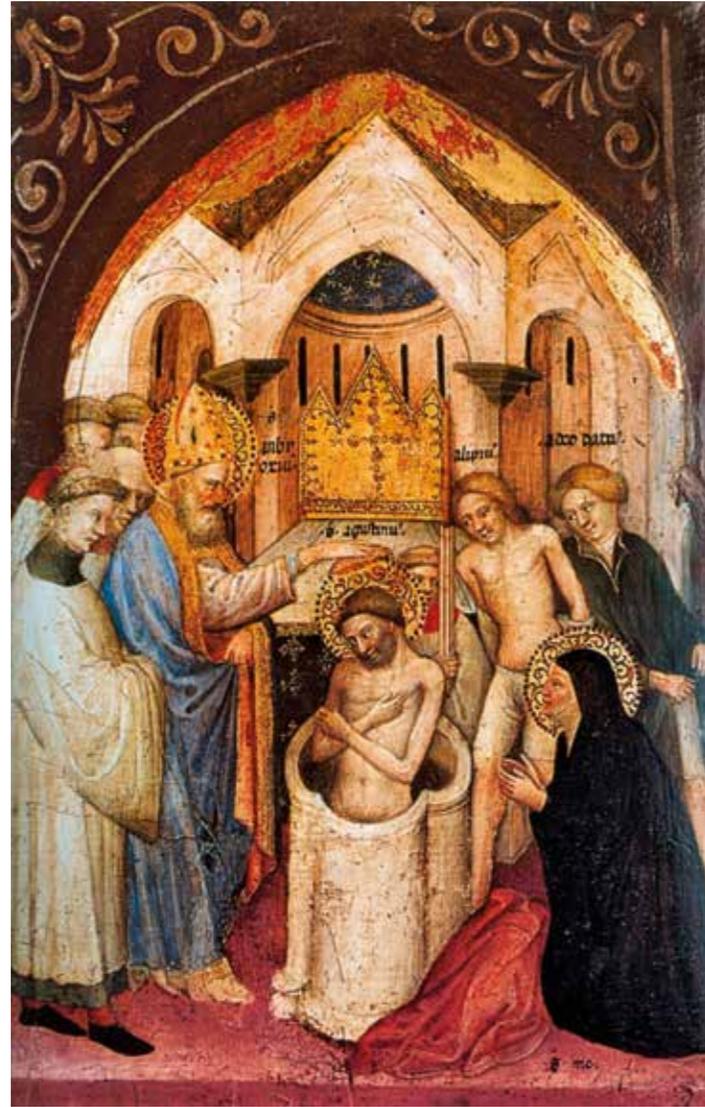
Nicolò di Pietro, *Coronation of the Virgin*. Milan, Brera



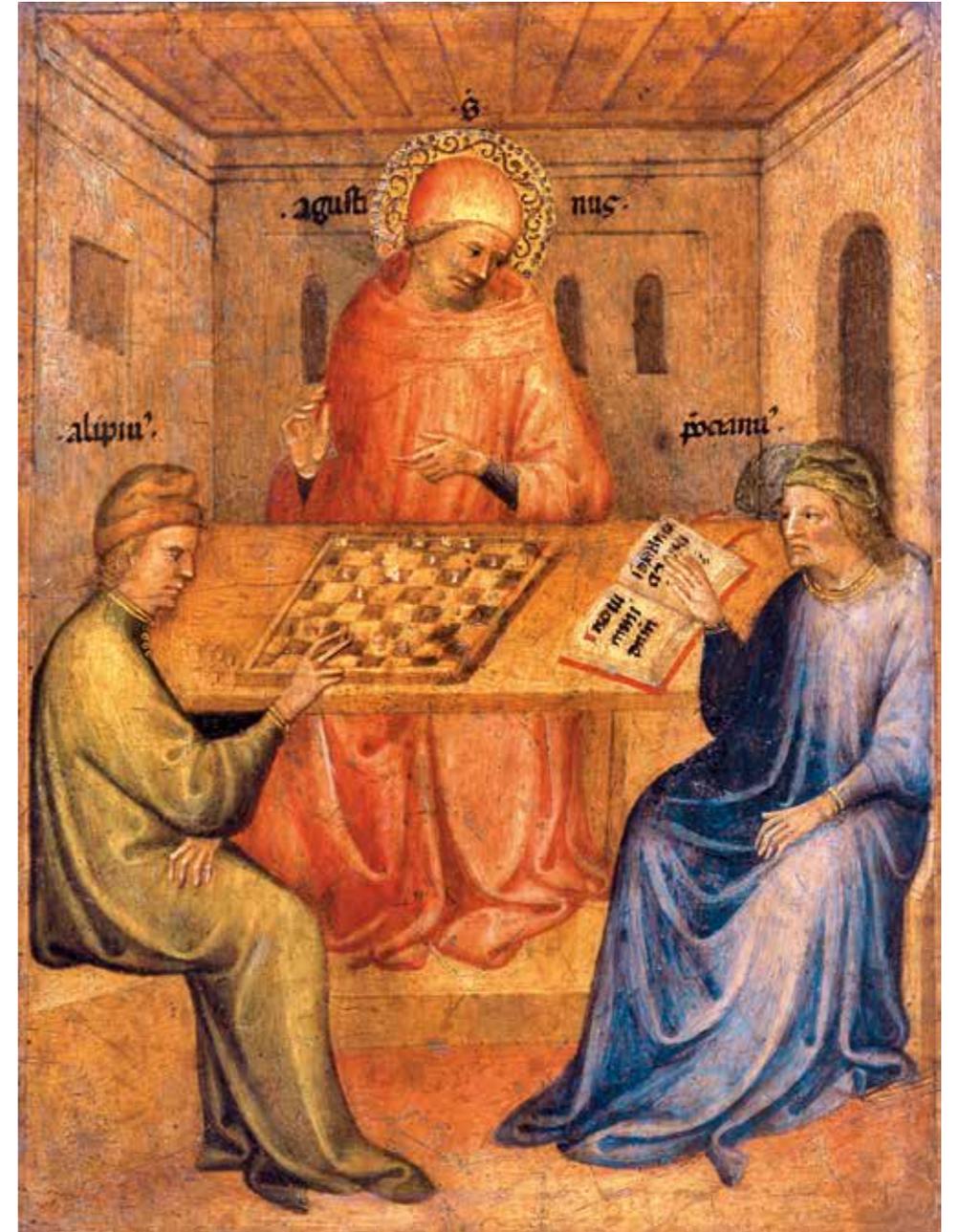
Nicolò di Pietro, *Annunciate Virgin*. London, Cuming Museum



Nicolò di Pietro, *Blessing Christ*. Private collection



Nicolò di Pietro, *Baptism of Saint Augustine*. Vatican City, Vatican Picture Gallery



Nicolò di Pietro, *Conversion of Saint Augustine (Saint Augustine and Alypius receiving Ponticianus)*. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts



Nicolò di Pietro (after a drawing by Gentile da Fabriano), *Saint Benedict Raising a Young Monk*. Florence, Uffizi



Nicolò di Pietro (after a drawing by Gentile da Fabriano), *Saint Benedict and the Poisoned Wine*. Florence, Uffizi



Nicolò di Pietro, *Saint Ursula and Her Maidens*. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art





Nicolò di Pietro, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*



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A rediscovered *Lamentation*

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English translation
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