

INTRODUCTION

THE PASSION CYCLE IN THIRTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTING: CONTENT AND CONTEXT



Profound changes took place in central Italian narrative painting in the course of the thirteenth century. The thirteenth century was an expansive age in central Italy: The population was surging; merchants, missionaries, and adventurers were plying the Mediterranean; mendicant orders and popular movements were transforming the religious landscape. It is not surprising that changes of a similar magnitude occurred in the visual arts. What is perhaps surprising is that the narrative expansion of duecento painting is so little known.

Unlike historians, art historians have traditionally characterized the duecento as stagnant, a kind of hiatus in the history of Italian art until the arrival of Giotto. The century is often still treated cursorily in histories of Italian painting.

The duecento's marginal position is felt in a discussion of Italian narrative painting by Hans Belting.¹ Belting's comments are both provocative and revealing. He states first that narrative "changed profoundly in the age of Giotto."² He then goes on to compare narrative prior to this point – about 1300 – with the text of the Bible, which is, as he notes, a spare and factual record of biblical events. Belting argues that narrative before the age of Giotto was similarly spare and had the same intention as the Bible: to instruct the viewer/reader. But in the time of Giotto, "the Bible was being retold in a novellike form that invited the reader's empathy and offered not only information on details but also stimuli to sympathetic and affective participation."³ For Belting, the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, which enlarged the narrative beyond the terse biblical text and elicited emotional responses in readers, corresponds to the new pictorial cycles (at the Arena Chapel, or in

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the Upper Church of San Francesco, Assisi) that similarly enrich the narrative and appeal to their viewers' emotions.

Much about this discussion of narrative, both visual and textual, rings true. However, neither the changes in pictorial narrative nor the concomitant changes in devotional texts, which Belting convincingly links, originated with the age of Giotto. The transformations that he describes are powerfully felt in art and devotional texts from around the year 1300, but they began more than half a century earlier. The transformation of narrative painting is especially pronounced in depictions of the Passion of Christ, which will be the specific focus of this study.⁴

Of the narrative cycles that survive in duecento panel painting – the Infancy of Christ, the Ministry of Christ, cycles of saints' lives, and so on – none is more common than the story of Christ's suffering and death on the cross. We have from this period a fairly large corpus of narrative cycles of saints' lives, by far the largest number representing St. Francis.⁵ Of christological cycles, the Infancy of Christ is featured on surprisingly few extant panels and the Ministry is still less common.⁶ But a much larger number of panels include narratives depicting the Passion; fairly often only the Passion appeared.⁷ Relatively few duecento fresco programs in central Italy have escaped destruction, but of those that remain, several include Passion themes.⁸ Thus, to judge from the available evidence, if a narrative cycle depicting the life of Christ was painted in thirteenth-century central Italy, it generally included Passion scenes, and not infrequently it depicted only the Passion.

The surviving panels with Passion cycles vary considerably in size, format, and program; indeed the theme is so common that it is impossible to point to a single representative example. The majority were large enough to have been destined for altars; among them are a Lucchese diptych in the Uffizi from Santa Chiara, Lucca (Fig. 1), circa 1255–65; a Pisan dossal in the Bargello, Florence (Fig. 2), circa 1260–70; or an Umbrian dossal in Perugia from the Convento dei Frati Minori del Farneto (Fig. 3), circa 1285–90.⁹ Smaller panels, presumably intended for private devotion, also often included Passion themes.¹⁰

The altarpieces shown here depict three or four episodes of the Passion cycle; but at times, especially in the last decades of the century, the narrative program expands substantially. For instance, in a Florentine dossal from the late duecento in San Diego (Fig. 4), the Passion story is detailed in ten separate episodes.¹¹ This dossal, with two post-Passion scenes as well, offers an especially rich narrative program, and we will return to it in the Conclusion. Programs like this one anticipate the proliferation of narrative in the early trecento, as in Duccio's *Maestà* and Giotto's Arena Chapel.¹²

Until the densely illustrated cycles of the later duecento, some of the most extensive Passion cycles to survive in thirteenth-century painting are

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Figure 1 Diptych from Sta. Chiara, Lucca, c. 1255–65. Florence, Uffizi. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource.

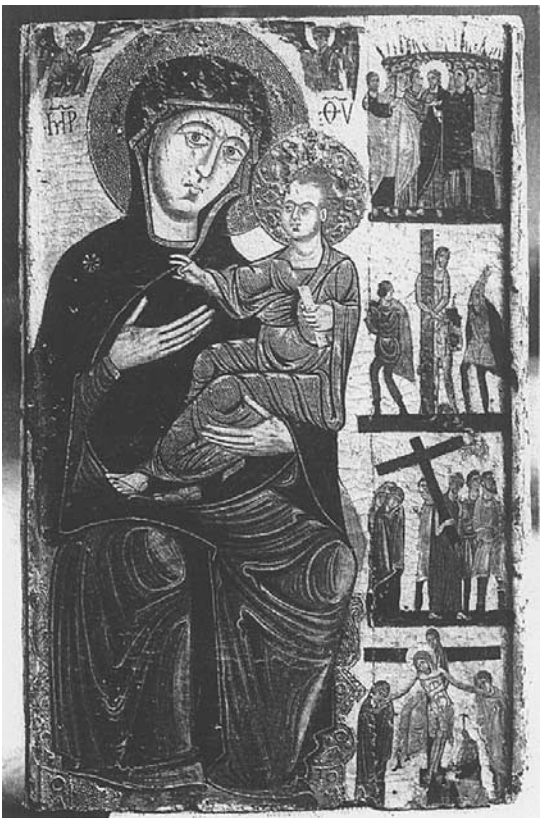


Figure 2 Madonna and Child with Passion Scenes, c. 1260–70. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello. Photo: The Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art.

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Figure 3 Madonna and Child with Passion Scenes, from the Convento dei Frati Minori del Farneto, c. 1285–90. Perugia, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource.



Figure 4 Magdalen Master and San Gaggio Master. Madonna and Child with Passion Scenes, from Sta. Maria dei Candeli, Florence(?). Madonna and Child by Magdalen Master, 1280s; narratives by San Gaggio Master, 1290s. San Diego, Calif., Timken Museum of Art, The Putnam Foundation. Photo: museum.

found on historiated painted crosses. Painted crosses must have been found in most Italian churches during the thirteenth century.¹³ These crosses were placed on altars, hung over them, suspended in apses, and attached to rood beams. They predate the duecento: The earliest dated example is from 1138, and they continue throughout the thirteenth century and into the early trecento. Of the surviving crosses, some twenty-five, all of which are Tuscan, include narratives of the Passion in the side panels, also known as apron panels, flanking the central image of Christ.¹⁴ Like other historiated panels, such as the Marian altarpieces cited above and the hagiographic panels so common in duecento painting, these crosses fuse icon and narrative; here the viewer at once contemplates the body of Christ and reads the events leading to his death on the cross.¹⁵ Illustrated here are two particularly detailed examples, both Pisan: a late twelfth-century work from the church of San Sepolcro, Pisa (Fig. 5) and a mid-thirteenth-century example in San

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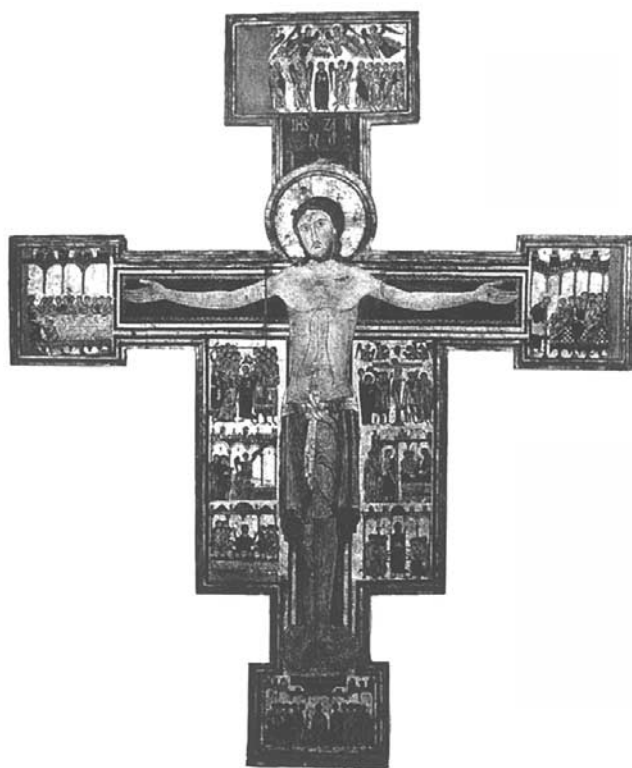


Figure 5 Painted cross from S. Sepolcro, Pisa, late twelfth century. Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa, no. 15. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource.

Martino, Pisa (Fig. 6).¹⁶ Historiated crosses like these were probably intended for altars or rood screens; the small scenes would not have been visible if the cross were suspended high above the apse.¹⁷ Historiated apron panels occur in the earliest painted crosses and continue well into the thirteenth century; an occasional archaizing example dates from the trecento. But they gradually fell from favor as the narratives were increasingly replaced with decorative patterns, a scheme apparently introduced by Giunta Pisano in the fourth decade of the thirteenth century.¹⁸

The earlier crosses, whether historiated or not, are consistent in their representation of the central Christ: Like the San Sepolcro cross (Fig. 5), they depict the traditional *Christus Triumphans*, a Christ who transcends suffering and is victorious over death, gazing out with head held erect. In the early decades of the thirteenth century, this type was gradually displaced by a new type, the suffering Christ or *Christus Patiens*. The San Martino cross (Fig. 6) is typical of this type, in which Christ as suffering human replaces the triumphant savior: His eyes are closed, his head bowed, and his body begins to lose its upright stance, sagging to the left. Though long familiar to modern scholars, these are remarkable changes. The new images must have seemed almost unbearably graphic to the first observers.

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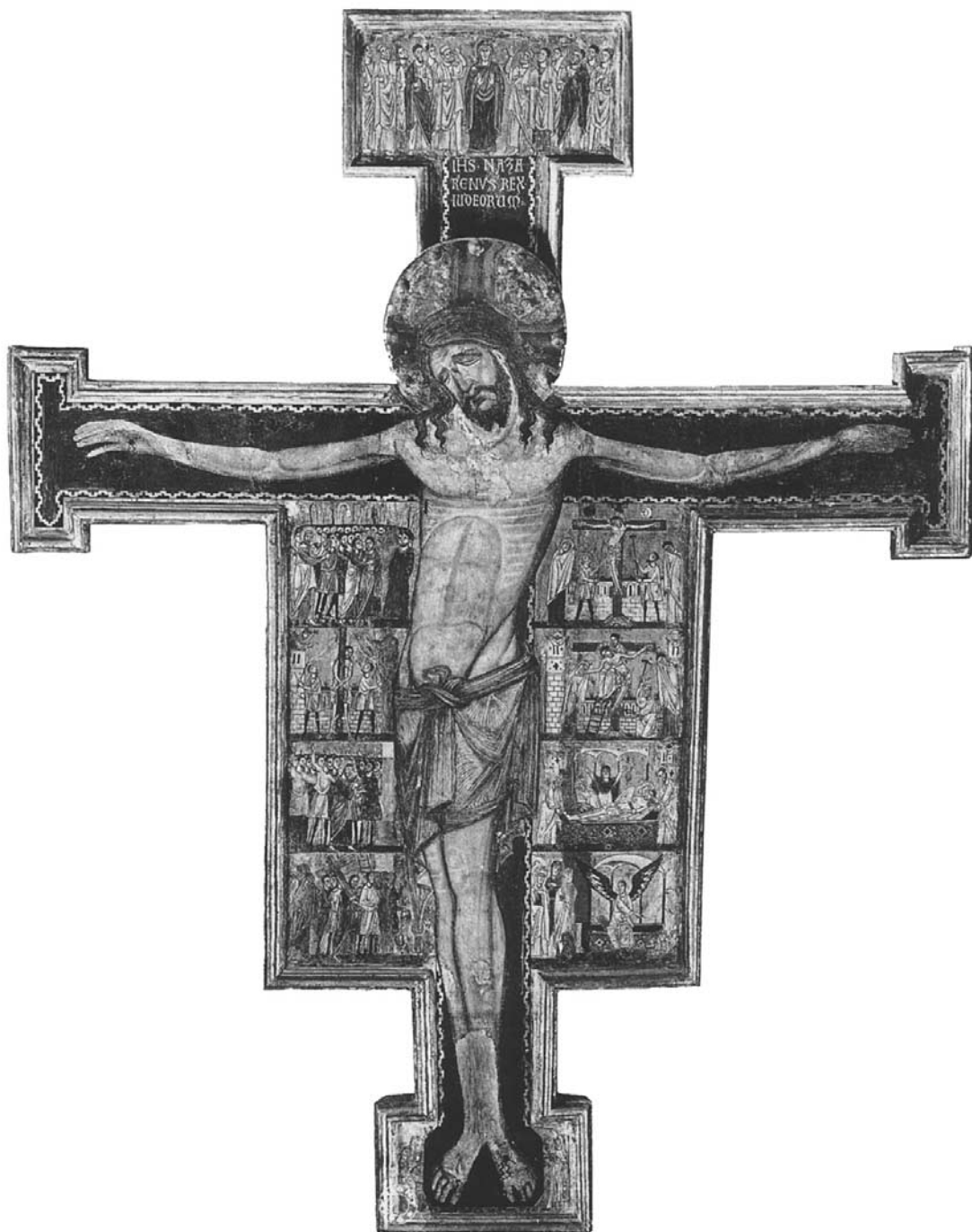


Figure 6 Enrico di Tedice. Painted cross, c. 1245–55. Pisa, S. Martino. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource.

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Figure 7 Painted cross, c. 1240–5.
Florence, Uffizi, no. 434. Photo:
Alinari/Art Resource.

The fact that the *Christus Patiens* gradually displaced the *Christus Triumphans* is well known to students of Italian art.¹⁹ But the image of the crucified Christ is not the only indication of the radical revision in the understanding and depiction of Passion; rather, it is merely one symptom of an extraordinary transformation. Another symptom is the changing narrative program; the choice of narratives typically depicted on earlier crosses often differs considerably from those seen in later examples. The two Pisan works represented here offer an instructive example. In the earlier work, the San Sepolcro cross (Fig. 5), the small scenes (both in the aprons and in the terminals) reveal an approximate balance between the events of the Passion (the Last Supper, the Washing of the Feet, the Mocking of Christ, the Crucifixion) and the events that followed the Resurrection (the Marys at the Tomb, the Road to Emmaus, the Supper at Emmaus, the Apparition at the Closed Gates, Pentecost).²⁰ In fact, only two of the nine scenes – the Mocking and the Crucifixion itself, both at the top of the apron and thus least visible to the viewer of all the apron scenes – depict Christ in the hands of his captors.²¹ It was clearly the intention of the painter and his patron to minimize references to Christ's suffering and to stress instead his triumphant resurrection from the dead, an intention reinforced by the central image.

In the San Martino cross (Fig. 6), by contrast, we find instead the Betrayal, the Flagellation, the Mocking, the Way to Calvary, the Crucifixion, the

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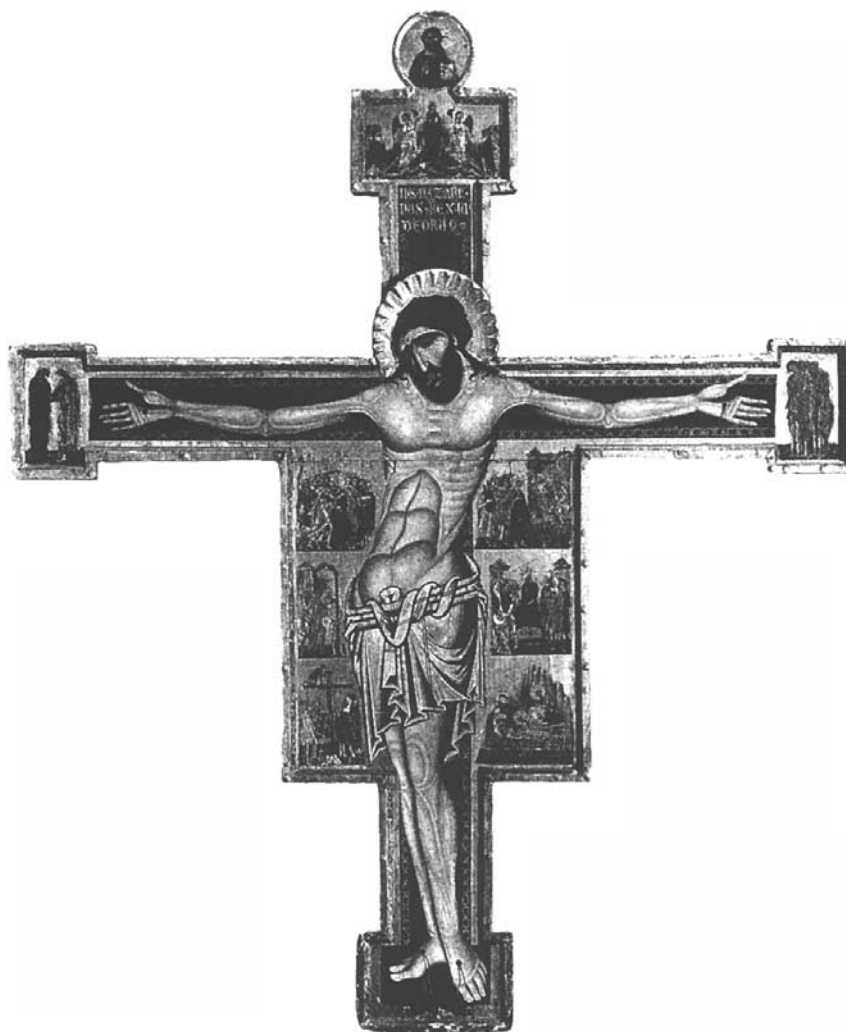


Figure 8 Coppo di Marcovaldo. Painted cross from Sta. Chiara, San Gimignano, c. 1261. San Gimignano, Museo Civico. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource.

Deposition, the Entombment, and the Marys at the Tomb. Only the final scene promises Christ's triumph over death; the other seven record in considerable detail the torments to which he was subjected, and the ultimate result. Again, the emphasis of the narratives is consistent with the *Christus Patiens*, now featured in the center. Almost all historiated crosses representing the *Patiens* similarly emphasize the Passion cycle in the apron panels. They typically limit the post-Passion images to one or two scenes, as in a cross of about 1240–5 in the Uffizi, one of the first extant Florentine crosses to depict Christ as *Patiens* (Fig. 7). Another example – a cross of c. 1261 by another Florentine painter, Coppo di Marcovaldo, in San Gimignano (Fig. 8) – eliminates them altogether.²² Coppo's cross differs from most other ver-

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Figure 9 Mocking of Christ. Detail of painted cross from S. Sepolcro, Pisa, late twelfth century. Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa, no. 15. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource.

sions as well in the sequence of the narratives, which here read from left to right across the body of Christ – reinforcing the viewer’s experience of the Crucifixion.²³ The two Florentine crosses and the San Martino cross are both typical of crosses featuring the *Patiens* in that the cycle does not begin before the Betrayal and Arrest of Christ; the Last Supper and Washing of the Feet, though theologically important, are generally omitted in favor of the expressive force of the later episodes.

The heightened emphasis on the Passion in duecento painting is seen in other respects as well. By the third quarter of the century, the Passion cycle was enlarged with the introduction of new episodes like the Stripping of Christ and the Ascent of the Cross, both of which appear in the San Diego panel (Fig. 4). Both of these new episodes intensify the affective power of

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Figure 10 Mocking of Christ. Detail of painted cross, c. 1240–5. Florence, Uffizi, no. 434. Photo: Courtesy of Luigi Artini/Miklós Boskovits.

the cycle and serve as well to protract it, prolonging the moments just before the Crucifixion.²⁴ Further, sacred figures, especially the Virgin, are now shown responding with appropriate anguish to the emotionally charged events. Thus Mary, long depicted as standing stoically erect throughout the Passion, now swoons – often during the Crucifixion, and at times on the road to Calvary and during the Lamentation – a development that recalls the shift from the *Christus Triumphans* to the *Christus Patiens*.²⁵ Similarly, Mary Magdalen becomes increasingly conspicuous and increasingly impassioned; in the Crucifixion and Lamentation she hurls her arms up in a gesture evocative of the grieving Dido.²⁶

Perhaps the most dramatic change of all, however, is the revolution in rendering the traditional episodes of the Passion cycle. By the middle of the century, in every episode of the Passion cycle from the Arrest of Christ up to the Crucifixion, a long-established image that stressed Christ's stoicism during the Passion was discarded and replaced with a new image that depicted the reality of the moment in more immediate and expressive terms. These breaks with inherited tradition seem directly comparable to the replacing of the *Christus Triumphans* with the *Christus Patiens*; in fact, the new narra-