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Hayden B.J. Maginnis

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A Lorenzettian Crucifix in Cortona

HAYDEN B.J. MAGINNIS
McMaster University

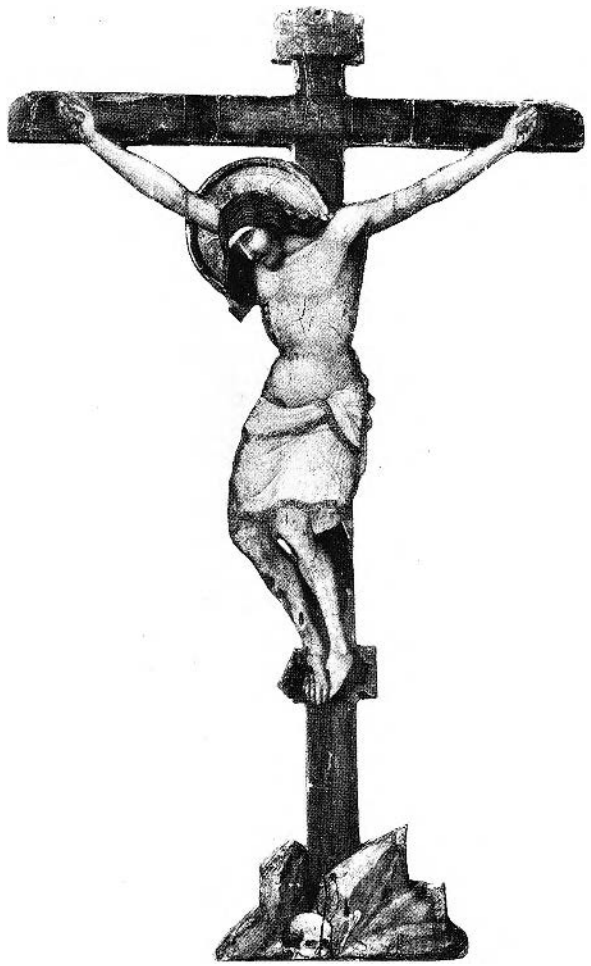

FIGURE 1. Pietro Lorenzetti and Assistant, *Crucifix*, ca. 1315-20. Tempera on panel, 1.25 m high. Cortona, Museo Diocesano (Photo: Gabinetto Fotografico).

Some time ago C. Ragghianti published what he described as a small processional crucifix (Fig. 1) which had been discovered in a wall-cupboard of what is now the Museo Diocesano in Cortona.[1] In the short paragraph he devoted to the work he merely attributed it to Pietro Lorenzetti (perhaps assisted by his shop) and dated it to the early 1320s. In the three decades since then, the picture has been ignored and its considerable significance never pointed out.

The panel has received no further attention for two reasons. Although the crucifix is very close to Pietro, the rather mechanical description of the hair and the restricted anatomical articulation suggest that at least the execution was left to an assistant. Secondly the presence of the rocks and skull at the foot of the cross cast doubt on Ragghianti's description of the work as a processional crucifix. In fact, I suspect that these features have led scholars to assume that the work is only a fragment, an image cut from a panel of the Crucifixion.

Remarkably enough, this is not the case. Careful examination reveals that while the tempera now breaks at the edges of the panel, the original linen support is clearly visible at several points, continuing from the front to the sides and thus to the back. On the sides of the cross several traces of original pigment remain. The tempera continues into the open space between Christ's legs in a manner that would be impossible had the gap been cut after the painting was finished. Finally, it

1 C. Ragghianti, 'Collezioni Americane,' *Critica d'Arte*, Anno VIII (1949), 78 and fig. 57. The crucifix is 1.25 m high.

I should like to thank the Arts Research Board of McMaster University for financial support, during the Summer of 1979, which facilitated research in connection with the picture discussed here.

should be noted that while the sides of the cross form right angles with the front, in the areas where the figure extends beyond the silhouette of the cross, in the areas of Christ's right leg, the hips, torso and arms, the back of the figure has been shaped in low relief.[2] In these areas, especially on the sides and back of the torso, we find traces of pigment as well as the linen support. In other words, the panel is and always was a 'cut-away' crucifix.

Once we realize this, other details are explained. For example, the edge of Christ's halo is physically raised from the surface of the main panel by a rounded moulding, a feature unknown in early trecento Sienese panels of the normal type. Instead of having the blood spurt from the wound in Christ's side – the customary rendering of this detail – the painter has shown the blood dripping down Christ's side and onto the abdomen. The strange and disconcerting projection of the now-unpainted support below Christ's halo is not the result of a sloppy attempt to cut around the figure but was the ground for tresses of Christ's hair that originally fell beyond the halo.

Cut-away crucifixes have traditionally been associated with the fifteenth century and their origin with Lorenzo Monaco.[3] In the Cortona panel, however, we discover an example that is not only Lorenzettian but, I believe, dates to the second decade of the trecento.[4] While art historians are all too aware that accidents of survival can distort our view of the past, it seems startling to find an example of a form a century earlier than its supposed appearance. Or is it? Elsewhere I have discussed several instances of remarkable illusionism in frescoes of the early trecento, attempts to provide painted images of holy figures that were to be read as real presences.[5] Nor were more mundane objects excluded from such illusionistic treatment. In the work of Pietro Lorenzetti at Assisi, we find a fictive bench and a painted niche with the wine and water of the mass.[6] In another case an entire tomb was frescoed to appear as sculpture, and we know of instances where frescoed polyptychs were created.[7] Panels of the period likewise employ illusionistic devices, to say nothing of the architectural fiction of the polyptych form itself.[8] The Cortona crucifix is simply another manifestation of the documented contemporary desire to conflate reality and the painted image.

The shaping of the back seems to be highly unusual, if not unique, although it is understand-

FIGURE 2. *Verification of the Stigmata of St. Francis*, late 13th century. Assisi, San Francesco (Photo: Alinari).

2 The shaping and the traces of pigment clearly suggest that the crucifix was, in its original location, visible from behind.

3 See, for example, the remark to this effect in E. Sandberg-Vavala, *La Croce Dipinta* (Verona, 1929), 73.

4 Christ's halo was decorated with incisions produced by a stylus. This indicates the work dates before 1329 when Pietro and his shop began to employ punches for halo execution. I would suggest that the panel was executed, perhaps as a minor project, while Pietro was engaged on his large crucifix now in the same museum: a work which on stylistic grounds I date to the period ca. 1315-20.

5 H.B.J. Maginnis, 'Assisi Revisited: Notes on Recent Observations,' *Burlington Magazine*, CXVII (1975), 511-17. The reader may also wish to consult the discussion of the meaning behind such illusionistic devices in R. Goffen, '*Nostra Conversatio in Caelis Est:* Observations on the *Sacra Conversazione* in the Trecento,' *Art Bulletin*, LXI (1979), 198-222. I am not, however, completely convinced by Dr. Goffen's argument.

6 Maginnis, 'Assisi Revisited.'

7 See M. Meiss, 'Alesso di Andrea,' in *Giotto e il suo Tempo* (Rome, 1971), 415-17 and figs. 30-34. The best known frescoed polyptych is that by Lippo Vanni in the Seminario, Siena.

8 Segna di Bonaventura and Simone Martini both produced panels wherein St. John the Evangelist seems to rest his book on the lower frame. See Segna's work in the Siena Pinacoteca, no. 40, and Simone's Pisa polyptych. In a panel attributed to Lippo Memmi (Pinacoteca, Siena, no. 595) Christ, in the apex, extends his arm beyond the framing trefoil.

FIGURE 3. School of Guido da Siena, *Beato Andrea Gallerani in Prayer* (detail), late 13th century. Siena, Pinacoteca (Photo: Alinari).

able if we consider the crucifix as a painter's response to the polychromed wooden sculpture of, for example, Giovanni Pisano.[9] On the other hand we do have some evidence for the existence, at an even earlier date, of cut-away forms. That evidence comes from other pictures and perhaps for this reason it has passed unnoticed. The critical work is the fresco of the *Verification of the Stigmata of St. Francis* (Fig. 2) in the upper church of San Francesco, Assisi. There has been considerable discussion of the panel of the Madonna and Child and of the Crucifix which appear on the iconostasis above the figures but, to my knowledge, the much more unusual image of St. Michael Archangel has passed almost without comment. Its place with the other images clearly suggests that it too is a painted panel. Any doubts we may have are dispelled by the description of the edge of the angel's left wing and the edge of the dragon below. In both places the flat sides of the panel are visible. While I cannot recall any comparable depiction in other frescoes of the late dugento or early trecento, I feel confident that this is no imaginary creation on the part of the artist. One of the primary concerns throughout the St. Francis cycle is verisimilitude, an ambition that would have been thwarted by the introduction of a form with which the viewer was entirely unfamiliar.

Further, if less decisive, evidence is found in a panel from the school of Guido da Siena, now in the Siena Pinacoteca (Fig. 3).[10] I illustrate one scene from a pair of shutters dealing with the life of Beato Andrea Gallerani, that of the Beato Andrea in prayer. On the wall behind the figure stands a crucifix which does not resemble the dugento crucifixes which survive. It lacks an apron and terminals; nothing suggests it is sculptured; it is clearly painted and apparently was made to stand rather than hang as it is provided with a base. It would seem, in fact, to be a cut-away crucifix.

Almost inevitably we approach the art of any period with preconceptions about its character which, in turn, condition our perceptions. What we do not expect to see, we rarely see. We shall never know how common cut-away forms were in painting of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries; we may never know whether the cut-away figures of Lorenzo Monaco were a re-invention or, more likely, a revival. Nonetheless, the Cortona crucifix appears to be the earliest surviving cut-away crucifix, and remains an important if isolated document that sheds further light on painting of its era and directs our attention to a hitherto neglected problem.

9 For comparison see the fine illustrations of wooden, sculpted crucifixes in Max Seidel, *La Scultpure Lignea di Giovanni Pisano* (Florence, 1971).

10 No. 5. For the entire work see P. Torriti, *La Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena, i dipinti dal XII al XV secolo* (Genoa, 1977), 35.