

THE POLYPTYCH OF THE CHURCH OF ST. FRANCIS IN MONTEFALCO

ART-HISTORICAL NOTES AND RESTORATION



In 1336, for the conventual church of St. Francis in Montefalco, Jean d'Amiel commissioned the great polyptych of the *Crucifixion and the Stories of the Passion* attributed to a painter traditionally known as the Master of Fossa.

The polyptych consists of five elements which were reconstituted during restoration into their original order. Thanks to this, the partially lost inscription beneath the central scene has been fully brought to light. This discovery has enabled two important acquisitions. The dating of the painting to May 1336 allows us to enrich the chronology of the Master of Fossa. There is also the important mention of the patron, Jean d'Amiel (*Joannes de Amelia*) who in 1333 had promised to decorate the Chapel of the Holy Cross belonging to the nuns of Saint Clare and was now also involved with the new church of the Franciscans.

The polyptych, situated on the high altar, was still in the church in 1798, but by 1811 there is no further record of it being there. It reappears in the Vatican Library in 1867, then passing in 1909 to the Museums' Pinacoteca. Since 1963 it has formed part of the furnishings of the Pontifical Apartment.

The miniaturist detail of the style in which the scenes have been rendered draws on a common pictorial repertoire translated into various linguistic variants, sometimes Franciscan (*Prayer in the Garden*) and sometimes local (*Communion of the Apostles*). These variations reflect the intense exchanges occurring in those years between the Umbrian artistic milieu and the Avignon court.

The design of the composition as a whole, however, was directed by the Master of Fossa who led the painters of his studio with rigour and intelligence, laying down precise rules. All the characters should be immediately recognizable in their facial features, stature, and the colour of their clothing, so as to make it easy for the faithful to identify them.

In the *Communion of the Apostles*, the presence of the Host seems to allude to the Feast of *Corpus Domini*, which Urban IV instituted in 1264 after the eucharistic miracle which had occurred in Bolsena the year before.

When it came to the Vatican in the nineteenth century, the polyptych had no frame and was in separate pieces. It is likely that the sections had already been separated in Montefalco in 1475 or 1562 during construction work on the Church of St. Francis. It seems that in 1771 the parts of the polyptych were "hanging" in the naves. In some images of the Vatican Pinacoteca from 1909, the polyptych can be seen reassembled and set in a new frame.

The 2017 intervention enabled the sequence of the components to be re-ordered, assembling them by adopting a traditional local technique, but the most important gain has been the restoring of the ancient inscription, previously hidden by the frame. The letters, scratched in white paint on a silver lamina, were barely visible, but after cleaning and subsequent repair work, it has been possible to make them legible.

The direct examination of the panels has confirmed the high quality of the work. Reflectography has revealed the presence of a preparatory drawing underlying the painted

surfaces. A series of direct incisions partitions the space and establishes its architectural layout. The lacunar ceiling is constructed in perspective with the vanishing point in the central panel.

However, the preparatory drawing of the figures reveals the presence of several hands. In the *Prayer in the Garden*, the Apostles are very freely delineated, perhaps indicating a spontaneous conception of the figure. In the *Ascension* the clothing is very lightly sketched and faint areas of chiaroscuro endow the clothes with volume. In the rendering of the faces, the features are defined with only a few precise marks and with barely perceptible shades of chiaroscuro.

The same refinement of execution appears in the employment of gilding techniques: gold leaf for the backgrounds, the haloes and Christ's clothes and brushwork "*à la mixtion*" for the decorative details.