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Italian Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Paintings

Master of Città di Castello

Italian, active c. 1290 - 1320

BIOGRAPHY

It was F. Mason Perkins, the great American connoisseur, friend of Bernard Berenson, and benefactor of the Sacro Convento Francescano in Assisi, who recognized, a century ago, a first nucleus of the catalog of this anonymous master, generally considered a follower of Duccio di Buoninsegna (Sienese, c. 1250/1255 - 1318/1319). Perkins thus reunited, by attributing to the same hand, the *Maestà* in the church of San Domenico in Città di Castello (now in the Pinacoteca Comunale) with polyptych no. 33 in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena and a fragmentary Madonna and Child formerly at Crevole near Siena and now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Siena.[1] In the following decades this brief catalog was enlarged and modified, but no evidence emerged to identify the anonymous painter or better define the chronology of his oeuvre. None of the paintings attributed to him are dated. But the hypothesis of earlier studies—that the artist's activity extended to the first three decades of the fourteenth century—no longer seems correct today.[2] Art historians now tend to push his career back in time: they detect his hand in paintings dating to the last decade of the thirteenth century. Furthermore, a group of paintings gathered under the conventional name of the Casole Fresco (or Aringhieri or Albertini) Master and classified, tellingly, by some scholars under the label "akin to the Master of Città di Castello," has now been reassigned to him.[3]

The art historical debate on the problems of defining and dating the master's work is still open. What can be asserted with some confidence is that the master of the *Maestà* of Città di Castello must have been a well-established painter, with a long career behind him, by c. 1305, the date almost unanimously accepted for the painting after which he is named. His stylistic peculiarities, in particular his figures distinguished by marked volumetric effect, executed with pronounced chiaroscuro modeling and soft brushwork, are clearly recognizable in the *Maestà* and suggest that the artist not only was trained in the circle of Duccio but must also have been in contact with other great masters: according to some, with Giotto (Florentine, c. 1265 - 1337) himself; according to others, more plausibly, with Roman painters of the late thirteenth century.[4] Particularly significant works in the group of paintings generally assigned to the Master of Città di Castello include the Madonna in a

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private collection, only recently published;[5] another Madonna and Child in the Detroit Institute of Arts; the great painted crucifix at Montecerboli; and the Crucifixion in the Manchester City Art Gallery, which probably represents the end point of his career, perhaps no later than 1315–1320. Apart from the Manchester Crucifixion, the only narrative compositions hitherto attributed to the artist are the frescoes in the chapel of the former Palazzo Vescovile in Pistoia.[6]

The inclusion in the oeuvre of the Master of Città di Castello of the group of paintings assigned to the Casole Fresco Master is admissible only if the paintings in question—the fresco *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Angels and Donors* in the museum at Casole d'Elsa, the *Maestà* no. 565 of the National Gallery in London, and the panels nos. 18 and 592 of the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena—are considered the results of an early phase in the artist's career, datable to the last decade of the thirteenth century or a little later. Combining archaizing features with a new classicizing approach, the group might have been preceded, in turn, by the *Maestà (Madonna and Child with Four Angels)*, which is, in my opinion, the Master of Città di Castello's earliest surviving work.

[1] Frederick Mason Perkins, "Alcuni appunti sulla Galleria delle Belle Arti di Siena," *Rassegna d'arte senese* 4 (1908): 51–52.

[2] For example, Cesare Brandi, *La Regia Pinacoteca di Siena* (Rome, 1933), 169–172; Cesare Brandi, *Duccio* (Florence, 1951), 148–150; James H. Stubblebine, *Duccio di Buoninsegna and His School*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1979), 1:85.

[3] Edward Garrison (1949) considered the portable triptych no. 70 in Christ Church Picture Gallery, Oxford, the earliest known work of the Master of Città di Castello, with a dating of 1300–1310. Alessandro Bagnoli (2003) accepted the attribution but pushed the dating back to the last decade of the thirteenth century. A closely related group of paintings ("affine al Maestro di Città di Castello": see Brandi 1951) was called "Casole Fresco Master" by James Stubblebine (1979), who augmented it with some paintings that others excluded. Miklós Boskovits (1982) proposed the fusion of the catalog of the Casole Master with that of the Master of Città di Castello. Gaudenz Freuler (2001) accepted the hypothesis but reconstructed the artist's career in a different way. See Edward B. Garrison, *Italian Romanesque Panel Painting: An Illustrated Index* (Florence, 1949), 138; Alessandro Bagnoli, in *Duccio: Siena fra tradizione bizantina e mondo gotico*, ed. Alessandro Bagnoli et al. (Cinisello Balsamo, Milan, 2003), 314–315; Cesare Brandi, *Duccio* (Florence, 1951), 141, 149; James H. Stubblebine, *Duccio di Buoninsegna and His School*, 2

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vols. (Princeton, 1979), 1:110–116; Miklós Boskovits, "Review of *Duccio di Buoninsegna and His School* by J.H. Stubblebine; and *Duccio di Buoninsegna* by J. White," *The Art Bulletin* 64 (1982): 497; Gaudenz Freuler, "Duccio et ses contemporains: Le maître de Città di Castello," *Revue de l'art* 134 (2001): 27–50. On the problem of the frescoes of the chapel of Saint Nicholas in the Collegiata of Casole d'Elsa, see Alessandro Bagnoli, "La cappella funebre del Porrina e del vescovo Ranieri e le sue figurazioni murali," in *Marco Romano e il contesto artistico senese fra la fine del Duecento e gli inizi del Trecento*, ed. Alessandro Bagnoli (Cinisello Balsamo, Milan, 2010), 92–111.

[4] Cesare Brandi, *Duccio* (Florence, 1951), 150, assumed the Master of Città di Castello's "conoscenza attiva del Cavallini." The present writer thinks rather of an influence like that of the so-called Master of the Cattura, one of the frescoers of the upper church of San Francesco in Assisi, or the artist of the transept of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. According to Alessandro Bagnoli (2003), however, the Master must also have succumbed to the influence of contemporary Florentine painting, since he had a "conoscenza . . . approfondita e diretta del primo Giotto;" Alessandro Bagnoli, in *Duccio: Siena fra tradizione bizantina e mondo gotico*, ed. Alessandro Bagnoli et al. (Cinisello Balsamo, Milan, 2003), 315.

[5] Cf. Gaudenz Freuler, "Duccio et ses contemporains: Le maître de Città di Castello," *Revue de l'art* 134 (2001): 37, fig. 10.

[6] Cf. Ada Labriola, "Gli affreschi della cappella di San Niccolò nell'antico Palazzo dei Vescovi a Pistoia," *Arte cristiana* 76 (1988): 247–266.

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