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RECONSTRUCTING A RECONSTRUCTION: ALTABELLO MELONE'S "PICENARDI ALTARPIECE"

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The paintings of the Cremonese artist, Altobello Melone (flourished ca. 1508–1535) are not very well known, in part because relatively few of them are located outside of Italy. The recent migration of two of his works, both predella panels, *Saint Helen Questioning Judas* (Fig. 8) and *Proving of the True Cross* (Fig. 9), to the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri–Columbia, is, then, especially welcomed. The arrival of the panels, which were formerly in a private collection in Milan, is unusually significant for another reason, too. The museum already owns the central panel of the altarpiece (Fig. 3) to which the two much smaller works originally belonged.¹ Most importantly the panels offer the opportunity to appreciate two paintings of singular beauty.

The attribution of the two predella panels (Figs. 8 and 9) to Altobello, who was a pupil of Romanino, seems certain.² One needs only compare the larger figures in them to the figures in his *Tobias and the Angel* (Fig. 1) and *Saint Helen* (Fig. 2), both in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and to the *Madonna and Child* (Fig. 3) to see similar morphological features.³ The figures in the larger panels, as well as those in the two predella panels, share the same earthy, almost peasant-like, broadness of facial features and psychological presence. Those qualities, however, are tempered by a certain graceful ease to the poses of the figures, which carry themselves with an almost aristocratic self-confidence. In this regard we should notice, too, that the bright red color of the virgin's tunic in the *Madonna and Child* (Fig. 3) is echoed in one of the predella panels (Fig. 8), while the dark green of her mantle is repeated in both.

If the paintings just mentioned are all by Altobello, there is nevertheless a significant difference between the two predella panels (Figs. 8 and 9). Certainly both were drawn by Altobello, for, in addition to a similar quality of line and form, they each exhibit a consistency of invention. For example, in both panels there are indistinct figures in the background who peer around doorways and other portions of the architectural setting. The colors used in each panel, however, are not entirely the same. In *Saint Helen Questioning Judas* (Fig. 8) the flesh of the figures is



Fig. 1. *Tobias and the Angel*. (22.5 × 47.5 cm) Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (Photo no. A290).

pinkish and there is a relatively liberal use of bright red for some of their clothing, while in the *Proving of the True Cross* (Fig. 9) the flesh is colored a pale, grayish white and there are no intense reds to be found anywhere. Another difference between the two panels is that in one (Fig. 9) there is a darker, more somber atmosphere than in the other (Fig. 8). Lastly, in both panels portions of Saint Helen's clothing have been overpainted with a web of white highlights, but in one panel (Fig. 8) the lines were laid on with much more confidence and calligraphic elegance than in the other (Fig. 9). All of these similarities and differences suggest that the *Proving of the True Cross* (Fig. 9) was probably drawn and colored by Altobello, while *Saint Helen Questioning Judas* (Fig. 8), though drawn by him or at least under his supervision and guidance, might have been colored by one of his assistants. About fifteen years ago Francesco Frangi, inspired by the work of previous scholars, suggested that the panels we have mentioned so far, the two in Oxford (Figs. 1 and 2), and the three in Columbia (Figs. 3, 8 and 9), plus the *Finding of the True Cross* in the National Museum, Algiers (Fig. 6), also a predella panel, were once part of a single altarpiece, the so-called "Picenardi Altarpiece."⁴ In other words, Frangi has proposed what scholars call a

“reconstruction” of the original work (see Fig. 5).

Between the Renaissance period and the beginning of this century, numerous altarpieces were removed from their original locations and their panels sold separately to mostly European and American collectors who often donated them to major museums. Thanks to the efforts of various art historians, a few of those “dispersed” altarpieces have been physically reintegrated and many others have been reconstructed. In other words, scholars have noticed from time to time that panels in one location and another originally belonged to a single altarpiece and have brought them together again, if only on paper, by means of photography.

The reconstruction of an originally multi-paneled altarpiece sometimes requires decades to accomplish. First, one scholar will connect two or more works; then, perhaps after a long while, others will suggest further additions. Yet another scholar might discover documentary evidence relevant to the task, while still another might question a portion of the reconstruction or reject it entirely. Eventually, when a consensus is reached, we gain a better idea of the original state of the altarpiece, and a better understanding of some particular aspect of the history of art. Sadly, however, the frame, which in the case of Renaissance altarpieces was an important part of the work of art, is almost always missing.

Too often, once the dispersed panels have been linked and the altarpiece’s stylistic or other importance agreed upon, no further attention is given to the work. Rarely is the subject matter of a reconstructed altarpiece discussed, even though such discussion might help to establish its authenticity. That is to say, if the appearance and dimensions of the panels in question fit together, then their subject matter should also be integrated.

The recent reconstruction of the Picenardi altarpiece offers an excellent opportunity not only to retrace the complex history of a reconstruction, but to demonstrate the importance of iconography to a fuller understanding of the reassembled work.

In 1872 Federico Sacchi described three panels, formerly in the Picenardi Collection in Cremona as follows: “The Virgin and Child enthroned in the middle, Saint Helen and Tobias and the Angel [i.e., the Archangel Raphael] on the sides. Triptych in oil on wood; 1 m. 12 cm. high and 1 m. 42 cm. wide. This painting, coming from the gallery in the tower of the Picenardi [family], was sold to an English antiquarian in 1869.”⁵ The collection mentioned by Sacchi was originally formed by Conte Giovanni Battista Biffi of Cremona, a cousin of the Picenardi family, who died in 1807. In 1816 the collection was inherited by Serafino



Fig. 2. *Saint Helen*. (22.5 × 47.5 cm) Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (Photo no. A291).

Sommi (d. 1857), who planned to build a combination library and gallery (“Biblio-Pinacoteca”) to house the collection. In 1820 the gallery-library was still under construction. By 1838 Sommi had made over his possessions to his sons, Girolamo and Antonio Sommi-Picenardi. Eventually, Marchese Araldi-Erizzo, also of Cremona, inherited the Sommi-Picenardi Collection, most of which was sold to Giovanni Baslini, a Milanese antiquarian, in 1869.⁶ From Baslini at least two panels went in 1872 to an anonymous English dealer, from whom they were bought by J. D. Chambers.⁷ Chambers, in turn, gave the two panels, *Tobias and the Angel* (Fig. 1) and *Saint Helen* (Fig. 2) to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford in 1897. The *Missouri Madonna and Child Enthroned* (Fig. 3), believed to be the central panel of the Picenardi triptych, might also have been sold by the anonymous English dealer, but to a collector other than Chambers.⁸ In any case, the panel eventually entered the Contini-Bonacossi Collection in Florence and from there went to the collection of Samuel H. Kress in 1936.⁹ In 1961 the Kress Foundation gave the *Madonna and Child Enthroned* to the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri–Columbia. In 1950 Luigi Grassi, citing the aid of Luigi Salerno and Roberto Longhi, suggested for the first time

that the Missouri *Madonna and Child Enthroned* (Fig. 3), was once the central panel of a triptych (see Fig. 4) that included the Oxford panels (Figs. 1 and 2). Grassi also connected the Missouri and Oxford panels with Sacchi's description and hence with the Picenardi triptych.¹⁰ That reconstruction has been generally accepted among scholars (see Fig. 4).

After Grassi's reconstruction appeared, other panels were linked to it. Federico Zeri first suggested that the *Finding of the True Cross in Algiers* (Fig. 6) was once part of a predella originally below the three larger panels.¹¹ Less convincing has been Mina Gregori's identification of a *Saint Helen Traveling to Jerusalem* in a private collection (Fig. 7) as a panel formerly in the predella.¹² Most recently, Frangi, rejecting Gregori's proposal, placed the *Saint Helen Questioning Judas* (Fig. 8), and the *Proving of the True Cross* (Fig. 9), in the predella of the Picenardi triptych, now viewed as a polyptych (see Fig. 4).¹³ Frangi also identified the reconstructed polyptych (Fig. 5) with a seventeenth-century altarpiece once in the church of Sant'Elena in Cremona.¹⁴ That altarpiece was described by Paolo Merula in a book of 1627 on churches in the city of Cremona: "the Virgin with the Christ Child and on the sides, the Archangel Raphael and Saint Helen."¹⁵ Certainly the reconstructed



Fig. 3. *Madonna and Child Enthroned*. (22.5 × 47.6 cm)
Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri–
Columbia, acc. no. 61.77.



Fig. 4. Picenardi Triptych. Reconstruction proposed by L. Grassi.

altarpiece, which features a full-length figure of Saint Helen as well as episodes from her life in its predella, would have been appropriate in a church dedicated to her. We should notice, too, that normally a panel in the predella of an altarpiece will show a scene from the life of the saint above it. Each of the three panels in the predella of the Picenardi polyptych represents scenes from a single narrative, the life of St. Helen, which circumstance tends to confirm the suggestion that the polyptych was painted for the church of Sant'Elena.

Although the reconstruction is convincing, there are some important details regarding the dismantled Picenardi altarpiece that deserve consideration. One such detail is the measurements given by Sacchi. He says that the triptych he saw in the Picenardi Collection was 112 cm high and 142 cm wide. Together, the *Madonna and Child Enthroned* (Fig. 3) and the Oxford panels (Figs. 1 and 2), which are each about 112 cm high and measure 142.3 cm in total width, are compatible with Sacchi's measurements. Thus we may assume that when Sacchi measured the three panels, they were not in a frame. Had they been, the dimensions certainly would have been greater. We should notice, too, that if the triptych seen by



Fig. 5. Picenardi Altarpiece. Reconstruction proposed by F. Frangi.

Sacchi contained predella panels, which, in any case, he does not mention, his measurement of the height would have been greater. We may also assume, then, that when Sacchi saw the three panels, the altarpiece to which they originally belonged already had been dismantled, and that the original work could have contained both additional side panels and a predella.

One curious feature of the reconstruction (Fig. 5) is that the background in the three large panels is discontinuous. In the Oxford panels (Figs. 1 and 2) the figures stand in a landscape. Moreover, the landscape in one panel (Fig. 1) is similar to that in the other (Fig. 2), as if the figures stand in one and the same

location. In the central panel (Fig. 3), however, the Virgin and Christ child are situated in an architectural setting. This use of both landscape and architecture as settings for the figures in a single altarpiece, while not unique—it recalls paintings by Giovanni Bellini and Cima da Conegliano—is very unusual. Still, the original frame might well have obviated the contrast between the architectural setting of the central panel and the landscapes in the side panels. For example, the frame might have somehow enhanced the impression that the Virgin and Child reside in a separate, even transcendent realm, while the two saints are, so to speak, earthbound.

There are, however, other features of the reconstruction that strongly suggest its authenticity. For example, the handling of the paint, which is consistent throughout the three large panels (Figs. 1, 2 and 3), has been described by Sydney J. Freedberg as follows: "A subtly worked calligraphy, made of threads of light, instills power in the quiet forms, and a shimmering illumination suffuses colours. The persons in the triptych resemble Romanino's, but they have been made more poignant, given a deliberately unbeautiful Germanic cast."¹⁶ Also supporting the proposed reconstruction (see Fig. 5) is the fact that the width of each predella panel is virtually the same as the width of each of the large panels.

There are also significant thematic connections among the various panels that further authenticate the reconstruction. The story of Tobias and the angel, represented in one of the Oxford panels (Fig. 1) is told in the book of Tobit in the Apocrypha. Tobit, who accidentally had lost his sight and thought himself near death, instructed his son Tobias to travel to Media to collect some money owed him. Tobias found a companion, really the Archangel Raphael in disguise, to go with him on the journey, and they set off accompanied by a dog. On this journey, Tobias caught a fish, which Raphael instructed him to disembowel, keeping the heart, liver and gall. The first two named organs, Raphael said, could be used to drive off evil spirits, and the gall would heal Tobit's eyes. Eventually Tobias returned home and used the gall to heal his father's eyes. In the Oxford panel representing Tobias and the Archangel (Fig. 1), we see Raphael, holding a walking stick in one hand as he gazes out toward the viewer. He also grasps the hand of Tobias, represented as a small boy holding two fish on a string. At the feet of the Archangel a dog sniffs the ground. Significantly a small dog is also represented in two of the predella panels (Figs. 8 and 9), but even more significant is the way in which the Christ child in the central panel (Fig. 3) turns toward Tobias, who gazes back at Him. The two panels seem to suggest a thematic link between



Fig. 6. *Finding of the True Cross*. (28 × 50 cm) Musée National des Beaux-Arts, Algiers.



Fig. 7. *Saint Helen Traveling to Jerusalem*. (25.5 × 46.5 cm) Private Collection.

Christ and Tobias, both of whom are children: like Christ, who healed the blind (Matthew 12:22), Tobias was able to restore his father's sight. In addition, Christ was able to heal spiritual blindness, just as Tobias was able eventually to see that his companion was really an angel. Lastly, fish, like the ones held by Tobias, are a conventional symbol of Christ.



Fig. 8. *St. Helen Questioning Judas*. (22.5 × 47.5 cm) Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri–Columbia, acc. no. 98.2.1.

Saint Helen, the patron saint of the church of Sant'Elena in Cremona where the altarpiece was originally found, stands in the right wing of the triptych (Fig. 2). While gazing at the infant Christ in the central panel, she embraces the very Cross on which He will later be crucified. Like the Virgin, she is a mother and embraces the Cross in a manner that echoes the way in which the Virgin holds the Christ child. In addition, the gaze of Tobias and Christ at one another echoes the glance of St. Helen, who, in turn, looks at them, and the three gazes together suggest a rising diagonal from the lower left panel through the central panel and into the upper part of the right panel, linking all three both formally and iconographically. This rising diagonal implies the motion of raising a cross, such as occurred at Christ's Crucifixion, and echoes the movement of the cross lifted over the dead man in the predella panel under St. Helen (Fig. 9).

The scenes depicted in the predella panels (Figs. 6, 8 and 9) are from the legend of Saint Helen, mother of Constantine the Great. The story is told in, among other places, *The Golden Legend* of the Genoese bishop, Jacobus de Voragine (ca. 1229–1298).¹⁷ Helen sets out to find the True Cross, that is the Cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. In Jerusalem, she found a group of Jews, one of whom, a man named Judas (who was later baptized and became Quiriacus, Bishop of Jerusalem), knew the whereabouts of the Cross but refused to divulge the



Fig. 9. *Proving of the True Cross*. (22.5 × 47.5 cm) Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri–Columbia, acc. no. 98.2.2.

location. Helen then had Judas put into a dry well until he either starved to death or revealed what he knew. In one of the predella panels in Missouri (Fig. 8), we see Judas kneeling before Helen, while in the background to the viewer's right-hand side, he is being lowered into or taken out of the dry well. After the True Cross and the other two on which the thieves were crucified were discovered near Golgotha, as is depicted in the panel in Algiers (Fig. 6), Helen could not identify the one on which Christ was crucified. She therefore instructed that each be held over the corpse of a man who had recently died. When the True Cross passed over him, he sprang to life. As is depicted in the other panel in Missouri (Fig. 9), the dead man was resurrected by the Cross.

We have been reading the predella panels horizontally, but the Renaissance viewer might also have read them vertically. For instance, the raising of the dead man in the right predella panel (Fig. 9) suggests the theme of resurrection which is brought about by Christ, shown with His mother (Fig. 5), through His crucifixion on the Cross held by Saint Helen.¹⁸

The proposed reconstruction of the Picenardi altarpiece, formerly in the church of Sant'Elena in Cremona, has taken decades to accomplish. Possibly other panels were also once part of the work and will eventually come to light. For the moment, however, we can say with some assurance that the reconstruction is

correct. Not only are the panels compatible in terms of measurements and the artist's style, they are linked thematically, too. The narrative scenes in the predella are directly related to the panel with Saint Helen holding the True Cross (Fig. 2). Moreover, the themes of blindness and healing not only connect the *Tobias and the Angel* (Fig. 1) with the figure of the Infant Christ in the central panel (Fig. 3), they are present in the scene in which Saint Helen interrogates Judas (Fig. 8), who is also blind to the message of Christianity, although according to the legend, his eyes will soon be opened.

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NOTES

1. For the Missouri panel, see *The Samuel H. Kress Study Collection at the University of Missouri*, ed. Norman Land (Columbia and London, 1999), pp. 53-61.
2. The attribution was first made by Francesco Frangi, in *I Campi e la cultura artistica cremonese del Cinquecento*, ed., Carlo Pirovano, (Milan, 1985), pp. 96-7. See also Marcantonio Michiel, *The Anonimo: Notes on Pictures and Works of Art in Italy Made by an Anonymous Writer of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. George C. Williamson, trans. Paolo Mussi, (New York, 1969), p. 50. Michiel says that Altobello was a pupil of the Brescian painter, Girolamo di Romano (ca. 1485-ca. 1560), better known as Romanino. For more information about Altobello and for further bibliography, see Marco Tanzi, "Melone, Altobello," in *Dictionary of Art*, ed., Jane Turner, 34 vols. (New York, 1996), 21: 93-94. Altobello's style, like that of a number of his contemporaries in Cremona, reflects his synthesis of several sources, not only Boccaccino and Romanino, but Albrecht Altdorfer and Albrecht Dürer, as well as sixteenth-century Venetian artists, especially Lorenzo Lotto, Giorgione, Titian and the much less famous Marco Marziale, who lived in Cremona from 1500-1507.
3. For the Ashmolean panels, see Christopher Lloyd, *A Catalogue of the Earlier Italian Paintings in the Ashmolean Museum* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 114-155.
4. Francesco Frangi, in *Pittura a Cremona dal Romanico al Settecento*, ed. Mina Gregori (Milan, 1990), pp. 35 and 260. For the panel in Algiers, see note 11 below.
5. Federico Sacchi, *Notizie pittoriche cremonesi*, Cremona, 1872, p. 134: "La Vergine ed il Bambino in trono, nel mezzo, S. Elena e Tobia coll'Angelo, ai lati. Trittico dipinto in tavola ad olio; alto un metro e 12 centim., largo un metro e 42 centim. Questo dipinto, proveniente dalla Galleria delle Torri de' Picenardi, fu nel 1869 venduto ad un antiquario Inglese," cited by Luigi Grassi, "Ingegno di Altobello Melone," *Proporzioni* 3 (1950), p. 159, n. 25. In an inventory of the collection from 1827, the triptych is identified as the work of Gian Francesco Bembo, a Cremonese artist who was active between 1515 and 1543. See Gerolamo

Sommi-Picenardi, *Le Torre de' Picenardi* (Modena, 1909), p. 155, cited by Mina Gregori, "Altobello, il Romanino e il '500 Cremonese," *Paragone* 69 (1955), p. 4.

6. Facts relating to the collection and to the Sommi family may be found in Gerolamo Sommi-Picenardi, *La famiglia Sommi-Picenardi*, (Cremona, 1893), pl. XV (privately printed), cited by Lloyd, *A Catalogue of the Earlier Italian Paintings in the Ashmolean Museum*, p. 115; Giuseppe Picenardi, *Nuova Guida di Cremona per gli Amatori dell'Arti del Disegno*, (Cremona, 1820), pp. 304-310; and Pietro Maisen, *Cremona Illustrate e suoi Dintori*, (Cremona, 1865), p. 440.

7. Lloyd, *A Catalogue of the Earlier Italian Paintings*, pp. 113-115.

8. There was, however, a sale of 81 of the Picenardi paintings in Paris (Hotel Drouot) in April, 1881. The Missouri panel might have been sold then.

9. Fern Rusk Shapley, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: Italian Schools, XV-XVI Century*, (London, 1968), p. 86.

10. Grassi, "Ingegno di Altobello Melone," pp. 153-155.

11. Federico Zeri, "Altobello Melone: quattro tavole," *Paragone*, 39, 1953, p. 43.

12. Mina Gregori, "Altobello e Gianfrancesco Bembo," *Paragone* 93, 1957, pp. 32-33.

13. Francesco Frangi, in *I Campi e la cultura artistica cremonese* pp. 96-7. See also Frangi, in *Pittura a Cremona*, p. 260.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Paulus Merula, *Santuario di Cremona*, pp. 226-7: "la Vergine col Bambino e ai lati l'Arcangelo Raffaele e Sant'Elena," cited by Frangi, *I Campi e la cultura artistica cremonese*, p. 97. Unfortunately, Merula did not mention the artist responsible for the work.

16. Sydney J. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy 1500 to 1600*, 3rd ed. (Harmondsworth, 1991), p. 375.

17. Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, transl. William Granger Ryan 2 vols. (Princeton, 1993), 1:277-284. See also Butler's *Lives of the Saints: Complete Edition*, ed., rev. and suppl. Herbert Thurston, S. J. and Donald Atwater, 3 vols. (New York, 1956), 3: 346-348 (contains further bibliography on the life of Saint Helen).

18. I am indebted to William E. Wallace, Washington University, St. Louis, for this observation and others silently incorporated into this paper.



Fig. 1. Evarts Tracy, American, 1868-1929 and Egerton Swartwout, American, 1872-1944, architects. *Missouri State Capitol*, South Elevation, Jefferson City, Missouri, 1912-1917. Photo: Jeffrey L. Ball.