

Case 12 2012/13: a painting by Pietro Lorenzetti, *Christ between Saints Paul and Peter*

Expert adviser's statement

Reviewing Committee Secretary's note: Please note that any illustrations referred to have not been reproduced on the Arts Council England Website

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Brief Description of item(s)

Pietro Lorenzetti (active 1306(?); died probably 1348)
Christ between Saints Peter and Paul, c. 1320
Tempera on panel, 32.2 x 70.4 cm

Unlike most fourteenth-century Italian pictures, this painting did not undergo restoration in the nineteenth century. There is some damage to the framing elements, and Saint Peter is not as well-preserved as Saint Paul and Christ. However, it is in good condition for a painting of its date, particularly one which has not remained in its original setting.

2. Context

Provenance:

(Possibly) purchased in Italy by Francis Thomas de Grey Cowper, 7th Earl Cowper (1834-1905), Panshanger, Hertfordshire; and by descent through his niece, Ethel, Lady Desborough (1867-1952); sold, Christie's, King Street, London, 3 July 2012, lot. 28.

Key literary and exhibition references:

The picture is a recent discovery, and it has only been published in the recent Christie's sale catalogue. See *Old Master and British Pictures*, Christie's, London, 3 July 2012, lot 28, pp. 112-15.

3. Waverley criteria

This panel meets **Waverly criterion 2** as it is a characteristic work by Pietro Lorenzetti, one of the greatest painters of Trecento Italy.

As a recently discovered painting of Pietro's maturity which can be linked to an important altarpiece commission, it also satisfies **Waverly**

criterion 3, since it is of outstanding significance for the study of early fourteenth-century Sienese painting.

DETAILED CASE

1. Detailed description of item(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.

This small panel painting is a quintessential work by Pietro Lorenzetti (active 1306(?); died probably 1348), one of the most important artists of late medieval Siena. *Christ between Saints Peter and Paul* combines the qualities of naturalism and sculptural monumentalism which are his salient artistic characteristics. Dated around 1320, it is a relatively early work of Pietro's maturity, following his emergence from the shadow of Duccio, and his full establishment as an independent artistic personality. The composition is simple, but Pietro endows it with an unusual sensibility. At this date in his career he was much concerned with establishing relationships between figures in his paintings, and although each of the three male figures is set within a separate arch, they are not placed in isolation.

Paul, at the far left, looks toward Christ, who is slightly larger than the two saints. Christ is represented as Pantocrator, or the All-Mighty, raising his hand in blessing, but without the book which is the usual attribute of this iconographic type. His robes are decorated with fine gilding, in the manner known as *agemina*, also derived from Byzantine art. Christ does not look straight ahead at the viewer but inclines his head very slightly to his proper right, towards Saint Paul. This connection can be explained by Paul's identity as the convert, who chose Christianity, rather than Peter, who merely continued to follow his master.

Peter and Paul are commonly represented saints in late medieval Italian paintings, and they bear their usual attributes, respectively a bunch of keys and a sword, but they clench them in this picture with unusual certainty. It is characteristic of Pietro that he uses such details and gestures to express both emotion and narrative significance. The saints act as intercessors between the original viewers/devotional users of this painting and Christ. The bright red scabbard of Paul's sword is depicted with great delicacy, showing - as Francis Russell has suggested - the impact of Simone Martini, while Peter brandishes his enormous bunch of keys as if they were a mace, or some form of weapon.

Christ between Saints Peter and Paul has recently been identified as a major constituent of the predella section of what must have been one of Lorenzetti's most important altarpiece commissions of the 1320s. As such it is a highly significant addition to Pietro's oeuvre. X-radiography has revealed that the panel has a distinctive wood grain, which is vertical, and is also found in Pietro's *Virgin and Child with a Donor* in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This signed full-length picture is the main panel of a dismembered polyptych, or multi-field altarpiece, to which the panel under discussion presumably also belonged.

Christ between Saints Peter and Paul is the only picture in a British collection with an unquestioned attribution to Pietro Lorenzetti. The six other paintings in Britain associated with his name have all been attributed in part to members of his workshop. Three of these are fresco fragments whose condition was greatly compromised by their removal from their original setting.

2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item(s).

The late thirteenth and early fourteenth century was undoubtedly the outstanding period of Sienese pictorial production. Sienese painting of this date is celebrated for its subtle decorative effects, with an increasing and innovative interest in spatial and architectural representation. It is particularly poignant that many of its most skilled practitioners, including Pietro Lorenzetti, fell victim to the Black Death, a pandemic which swept across Western Europe in the late 1340s.

Apart from Simone Martini, Pietro and his brother Ambrogio were the most important fourteenth-century Sienese painters active in the century after Duccio, the father of the Sienese school. But while the reputations of both Simone and Ambrogio endured, Pietro's fame waned following his death. Several of his most important painting cycles were destroyed, and his art has only been reappraised seriously in the last thirty years. We can gain a clear impression of his considerable talents from his frescoes of the Passion of Christ in the transept of the Lower Church of San Francesco at Assisi, which probably date to between c. 1316 and 1319. These narrative scenes are set within grand spatial settings, in which the participants can move at will, rather than being boxed in by their contexts. The same characteristic can be seen in *Christ between Saints Peter and Paul*, where the artist creates an emotional engagement between the figures, although they are each placed under an arched framing element.

Christ between Saints Peter and Paul is an important work of Pietro Lorenzetti's early maturity, connecting the Assisi frescoes and the impressive, documented polyptych he painted for Bishop Guido Tarlati of Arezzo between 1320 and 1324 (the main tier of this remains *in situ* in the city's Pieve di Santa Maria). But, unlike these works, it was probably made for Pietro's home of Siena, and formed part of one of his first large-scale independent commissions for the city. As has been mentioned, study of the wood grain of *Christ between Saints Peter and Paul* has connected it with the *Virgin and Child with a Donor* in Philadelphia. This latter work – which bears a partially destroyed signature (uncovered in the early 1990s) – is a rare example of a full-length figure in a panel painting by Pietro Lorenzetti at this point in his career. It must have been the central panel of a large polyptych, even more monumental than that made for Bishop Tarlati. The wording of the signature inscription suggests that it was made for a patron in Siena, perhaps the prior of Santa Maria dei Servi, as Carl Strehlke has argued. *Christ between Saints Peter and Paul* was almost certainly the predella below the Philadelphia *Virgin and Child with a Donor*, the central panel of this altarpiece.

Christ between Saints Peter and Paul appears to have entered the possession of the 7th Earl Cowper in the mid-nineteenth century. It is not mentioned in Waagen's two accounts of the collection at Panshanger (largely created by the 3rd Earl, and added to by his successors) published in 1854 and 1857 respectively. It has only recently been recognised as a work by Pietro Lorenzetti, and first came to public attention at the time of its sale in July 2012.

Works by Pietro Lorenzetti are rare, and he is not well represented in public collections in this country.

The National Gallery possesses three paintings attributed to Pietro Lorenzetti and his workshop. One, *Saint Sabinus before the Roman Governor of Tuscany* (NG 1113), is the only known predella panel from Pietro's signed altarpiece of the *Birth of the Virgin* (Siena, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo), dated 1342. Some of the picture is by Pietro, but workshop involvement is evident in some of the clumsy faces and the confusion between the spatial planes of the architecture. The other two are fresco fragments (NG 3071 and 3072), probably figures from the borders surrounding Pietro's narrative scenes in the Chapter House of San Francesco in Siena. They are in poor condition and their quality is low.

Some scholars have associated the fresco fragment of a *Franciscan Saint* in Birmingham City Art Gallery with this commission. It is also ascribed to Lorenzetti's workshop.

Exeter College, Oxford owns two panels, each representing two male saints. These are generally placed in the 1340s, but doubts have been expressed about their autograph status.

In conclusion, *Christ between Saints Peter and Paul* is a mature and characteristic autograph work by Pietro Lorenzetti, one of the most talented and original painters of fourteenth-century Siena and of Italy. Pietro's innovations, notably in naturalism and illusionism, were not equalled in panel painting until the fifteenth century. There are few pictures by the artist in British collections. The export of this picture would be lamentable for the full representation of fourteenth-century Sienese painting in Britain.