
**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)**

Niccolò di Pietro Gerini (documented 1368, probably active from 1366; died c. 1414/15).

*Four Scenes from the Passion of Christ:* Peter Protesting at Christ Washing the Feet of the Disciples; The Betrayal of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane; The Mocking of Christ; The Flagellation, c. 1385-90.

Tempera on linen, measuring respectively 95.5 x 101 cm; 95.5 x 100 cm; 89.5 x 92 cm; 89.5 x 91.5 cm.

Very few paintings on fabric survive from fourteenth-century Italy. The Scenes from the Passion of Christ were conserved in the Department of Conservation and Technology at The Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, from 1991-97. At The Courtauld they were restored under the direction of the late Caroline Villers and strip-lined and wrapped around aluminium honeycomb boards.

2. **Context**

**Provenance:** Acquired (probably in Italy) by William Young Ottley (1771-1836), perhaps between 1791 and 1799; inherited by his brother Warner Ottley (1775-1846), of York Terrace, Regent’s Park, and Stanwell House, Middlesex; thence by descent to his son Edward John Ottley (b. 1821); offered for sale (by the Executors of Warner Ottley’s Estate), London, Foster’s, 30 June 1847, lot 14 (as ‘School of Giotto. 1300.’), unsold at the price of 11 guineas and returned to the family; presented by Edward John Ottley to the Church of St Michael and All Angels, Withyham, East Sussex, 1849; in the last quarter of the nineteenth century they were removed (possibly by Reginald Sackville West, 7th Earl De La Warr, and former Rector of the church) to the Earl De La Warr’s private chapel at Buckhurst Park, Sussex; recorded at Buckhurst, 1902; returned to the Church of St Michael and All Angels, Withyham, 1920; removed in 1990 and taken to the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, for conservation and restoration (1991-97); on loan to Leeds Castle from 1997 – 2012; offered for sale by the Parish of Saint Michael and All Angels, Withyham at Sotheby’s, Bond Street, London, 5 December 2012, lot 16, where sold for £1,105,250.00 (including hammer price).


3. Waverley criteria

This group of four pictures meet Waverley criterion 3 as they are the only known surviving examples of a fourteenth-century Italian pictorial narrative cycle painted on a linen fabric support. As such, they are of outstanding significance for the study of the techniques and formats of fourteenth-century Italian painting. They are also of interest to historians of nineteenth-century Anglicanism, as they were among the first ‘Primitive’ paintings to be reused for devotional purposes in an English parish church.
DETAILED CASE

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

The fourteenth century witnessed the flowering of Italian narrative painting, a genre which dominated the production of the greatest contemporary painters, including Giotto and the Lorenzetti brothers. Most surviving Italian fourteenth-century narrative paintings are frescoes, which can still be found on the walls of the churches, chapels and civic buildings for which they were painted. The four Scenes from the Passion of Christ must have been part of such a cycle. But, almost uniquely among surviving large-scale narrative pictures from Trecento Italy, they were painted on a fabric support.

The Scenes from the Passion of Christ are widely attributed to Niccolò di Pietro Gerini, one of the most successful Florentine painters of the second half of the fourteenth century. He may have trained with Taddeo Gaddi, and often collaborated with the brothers Jacopo and Andrea (Orcagna) di Cione. Niccolò painted frescoes and altarpieces for major Florentine churches and civic spaces, and worked extensively elsewhere in Tuscany, in particular for Francesco di Marco Datini, the celebrated ‘Merchant of Prato’. His compositions are noteworthy for their clarity, their sense of dynamism (particularly evident in the Flagellation scene discussed below), and for their attention to detail, gesture and costume.

Painted on linen, each of these four large, almost-square pictures depicts a discrete episode from Christ’s Passion. Representations of this in fourteenth-century Italy followed no set iconographic pattern. However, the fact that two scenes, The Mocking of Christ and The Flagellation, immediately follow each other in the Passion narrative, suggests that these four works originally formed part of a much larger cycle. The vibrant and varied colours, and the exaggerated facial expressions of the figures, indicate that the compositions were intended to be clear and understandable even when viewed from afar.

The first among these four scenes is Peter Protesting at Christ Washing the Feet of the Disciples. St. John’s Gospel relates how, after the Last Supper, Christ begins washing and drying the disciples’ feet. Peter protests, embarrassed by such a humble gesture. Surrounded by the other disciples, Christ is shown kneeling in front of Peter, as if asking for his support. Further on in the narrative sequence, The Betrayal of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane illustrates the episode of Jesus’ arrest, told by all four evangelists. Judas is shown kissing Christ’s cheek, while a crowd of soldiers and guards jostle to seize the Messiah.

Christ’s humiliation and sorrow also form the subject of the next painting in the cycle, The Mocking of Christ. Seated on a dais and wearing a white robe, a blindfolded Christ endures the indignities of his many torturers while the crown of thorns is placed on his head. The fourth painting depicts the Flagellation, an episode mentioned in three of the Gospels. Wearing only a loincloth, Christ is tied to a column and flogged, his tormentors’ energetic gestures contrasting strongly with Christ’s submissive and resigned pose. These depictions of a suffering, human Christ are in keeping with the devotional practices which developed in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy under the influence of the mendicant orders and of lay confraternities. Christians were encouraged to seek a more personal and emotional relationship with Christ.
Five paintings by Niccolò are present in British public collections, while a smaller picture is on long-term loan to the National Gallery. The most significant of these works is *The Baptism of Christ* (NG 579) in the National Gallery, an altarpiece painted in 1387 for the Stoldì Chapel in the Camaldolese monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli, Florence. None of these paintings was executed on canvas or formed part of large-scale narrative cycles.

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

Niccolò di Pietro Gerini’s *Scenes from the Passion of Christ* are the only known examples of a Tuscan fourteenth-century narrative cycle painted on fabric. This makes them of outstanding significance for any study of the techniques and materials of Italian Trecento painting, as well as of exceptional interest for scholars of narrative paintings.

Italian tempera paintings on fabric dating before 1400 are extremely rare, as painters tended to work on panels, or – in the case of fresco painting - directly onto walls. In 2000, Joanna Cannon and the late Caroline Villers estimated that no more than twenty Italian paintings on fabric supports survive from this period. Tuscan pictures on fabric, such as the *Scenes from the Passion of Christ*, are particularly unusual, as the production of such works seems to have been more common in Northern Italy and the Veneto than in Tuscany.

Until recently, it has been assumed that all Italian paintings on fabric supports were made as banners, to be carried during religious processions, especially those of Passion Week. Banners were used – and replaced – frequently, and those that have survived are often double-sided (such as the *Crucifixion and Saints Anthony Abbot and Eligius*, attributed to Spinello Aretino, in the Victoria and Albert Museum). But these works – unlike the *Scenes from the Passion of Christ* - tend not to depict complicated, multi-figure narratives.

Moreover, the techniques employed in Niccolò di Pietro Gerini’s four pictures have little in common with those used for processional banners, as described by the late Trecento artist Cennino Cennini in his *Libro dell’Arte*. During conservation treatment it was discovered that a thick layer of ground was applied to disguise the weave of the textile surface, a practice comparable to the preparation of a wooden panel so that it had a smooth surface for painting. The presence of this relatively brittle under-layer would have made it impossible to fold, roll or unroll the *Scenes from the Passion of Christ* without causing significant damage to the paint surface. As the paintings are richly decorated, with high quality and costly materials, including ultramarine, mordant gilding, and silver leaf (which has now discoloured), and do not exhibit the signs of frequent folding, it seems highly unlikely that they were made as banners.

The *Scenes from the Passion of Christ* must have been part of a larger narrative cycle, depicting a sequence of episodes from the story of Christ’s torture, death and resurrection. Cycles of Christ’s Passion became increasingly popular in Italy from the thirteenth century onwards, as Christians were urged to identify with his human suffering. It has been argued that these paintings were made for the meeting room of a lay confraternity in Florence or its environs, perhaps one dedicated to the Passion. The multi-coloured chevrons which once bordered all four pictures would have served as frames, linking one scene to another.

In terms of function, connections have been drawn between the *Scenes from the Passion of Christ* and the later narrative cycles on canvas which the Venetian scuole
(confraternities) commissioned into the sixteenth century. More pertinently, there are four surviving works by the Maestro delle Tempere Francescane (a Neapolitan follower of Giotto), which also belonged to a larger cycle of painted stories. Such series of canvas pictures could include numerous separate paintings. For instance, documents record the existence of a vast cycle of fifty-six paintings on linen from the life of St Benedict, painted in 1367 by Matteo Giovannetti for the college of the saint founded by Pope Urban at Montpellier.

Further visual parallels exist with Florentine fresco cycles of the late fourteenth century, such as the wall paintings Niccolò di Pietro Gerini executed with Mariotto di Nardo for the church of the monastery of Santa Brigida al Paradiso on the outskirts of Florence, dated to the 1390s, or Spinello Aretino's frescoes of St Benedict in the Sacristy of San Miniato al Monte, of 1388. It may be that the Scenes of the Passion were intended to act as substitutes for a fresco cycle. Lay confraternities sometimes moved their premises, and pictures on fabric could be moved, unlike those painted onto a wall.

Nearly five hundred years after their creation, the Scenes from the Passion of Christ once more assumed a devotional function, in a small Church of England parish in Sussex. The Scenes from the Passion of Christ are among the very first early Italian pictures to be used in this way in a church setting in Britain. This was at a time when 'Primitive' works, those of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, were particularly prized for their spiritual qualities. Having been purchased by William Young Ottley (the now celebrated collector of the 'Italian Primitives') in Italy in the late 1790s, they were given by his nephew Edward John to the Church of St Michael and All Angels at Withyham, Sussex, in 1849. The pictures, then accounted 'School of Giotto', were hung in the chancel but they were not simply decorative: The Mocking of Christ was placed over the altar. These paintings were used in a devotional context in Britain for over 140 years.

Very few Italian paintings on fabric dated before 1400 survive. There are two other examples in British public collections, but neither are narrative pictures. One is the double-sided processional banner in the Victoria and Albert Museum by Spinello Aretino mentioned above, commissioned by the confraternity of St Anthony Abbot in Borgo Sansepolcro (V&A, 781-1894). The second is the Madonna of Humility in the National Gallery (NG 752) by the Bolognese artist Lippo di Dalmasio (c. 1390), probably made as an altarpiece.

Italian fourteenth-century pictorial cycles are not well represented in this country, since most of them were painted in fresco. They have therefore remained on the walls of the Italian buildings they were made for. The acquisition of Niccolò di Pietro Gerini's Scenes from the Passion of Christ - a very rare ensemble of narrative pictures on a fabric support - by a British collection would enable the public presentation of a genre of painting otherwise sparsely represented in the UK, and which dominated the production of the greatest artists of the Trecento.