

October 19, 2023

Ambrogio Lorenzetti's Carmine *Crucifix* returns to Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena after Restoration Coordinated by MiC's Direzione Regionale Musei della Toscana with the Support of Friends of Florence

Siena, Italy... Ambrogio Lorenzetti's painted *Crucifix* (c. 1329–30) from the Convent of San Niccolò al Carmine, meticulously restored thanks to the Friends of Florence and generous support from The Giorgi Family Foundation, was presented to the public in a dedicated gallery in Siena's Pinacoteca where it will remain on display until January 8, 2024.

Conducted by Muriel Vervat under the direction and scientific supervision of Stefano Casciu, Regional Director of the Musei della Toscana, the restoration of the 14th century Siennese masterwork by an artist considered to be one of the great masters of his age, took almost three years to complete.

When this temporary exhibition comes to an end, the Carmine *Crucifix* will return to Room 7 in the Pinacoteca, installed alongside other works by Lorenzetti (1290-1348), known chiefly for his fresco illustrating *Good Government* in the Palazzo Pubblico, Siena's town hall.

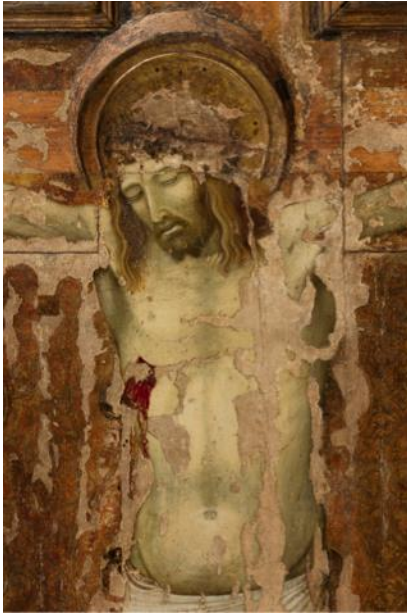
When the municipal authorities of Siena placed the *Crucifix* in the city's Regio Istituto di Belle Arti in 1862, it became part of the body of work that was to make up the Pinacoteca Nazionale's collection. From what is known of the Carmelite convent's history, the *Crucifix* was painted c. 1329–30, a date borne out by its style. It appears to be a youthful work painted at a time when Lorenzetti was still under the influence of Giotto. However, certain features are characteristics of the artist's mature work, including the elaborate decoration on the *tabellone*—the body of the cross—and Christ's halo. In terms of its structure, even though it is now missing certain parts, it is within the context of crosses painted in Siena between the 14th and 15th centuries which were remarkable for their complex carpentry, polygonal star-shaped terminals, and moulded frames, facets of a Gothic style the artist further refined.

The depiction of Christ reveals Lorenzetti's exceptional skill in handling naturalistic elements. The body's anatomy is masterfully conveyed in its volume and a delicately nuanced *chiaroscuro* defines its muscles, effectively underscoring the areas in shadow (the abdomen and the hollow of the arms) versus the lighter coloring of the figure's complexion. Bright red drops of blood also stand out in stark contrast.



Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Carmine *Crucifix*, (c. 1329–30). After 2023 restoration. Photo Serge Dominge.

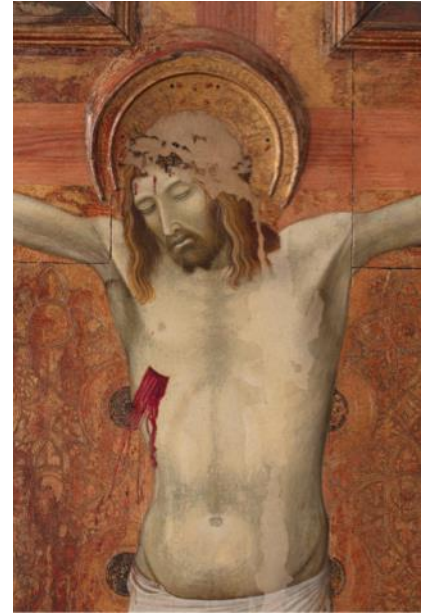
Lorenzetti's soft, slender brushstrokes define details such as the chestnut hair and beard framing the face, in which we can perceive the final moment before Christ resigns himself to death. The head bends forward, its dramatic effect accentuated by the halo in relief, while the lips are already veiled with a hint of blue and the drooping eyelids poignantly convey suffering.



Christ detail before restoration.



Christ detail before putting during restoration.



Christ detail after restoration.

Restoration

The *Crucifix* had a number of conservation issues when work began. The infiltration of rainwater into the convent in the 19th century caused extensive damage, although the face of Christ was partially spared having been protected by the halo jutting out from the cross proper.

The *Crucifix* had been restored previously from 1953 to 1955 at the Istituto Centrale del Restauro under the direction of Cesare Brandi. On that occasion, the restorers rediscovered the original paintwork by removing previous repainting and replacing it with neutral block colors below the level of the painted surface. While conducted in accordance with conservation practices of the time which are still broadly valid today, that effort produced a fragmented result.

During a monographic exhibition on Lorenzetti held in Siena in 2017–18, it was clear that his *Crucifix* should be restored and appreciated by viewers in full. Cristina Gnoni, the Pinacoteca Nazionale's Director at the time, suggested to the Friends of Florence that they might consider funding the new restoration project devised by Muriel Vervat.

The operation was preceded by a multi-faceted program of scientific investigation conducted by the IFAC-CNR and ISPC-CNR in Florence, which not only provided valuable support for the project but also enabled the investigation of Lorenzetti's painting technique in some depth. Stratigraphic analysis revealed a number of features, including the way the blood running from Christ's wounds was applied using two kinds of red. These included a basic, thicker red made

of cinnabar, overlaid with a darker, shinier layer in red lacquer made from kermes red, a pigment which was costlier than gold and which clearly indicates the importance of the patron who commissioned the work.

The restoration also offered an important opportunity for conducting a more in-depth study of the artist's executive technique and careful reflection on conservation choices, particularly with regard to the gold background and the major paint drops affecting Christ's body. The cross's gold background is not merely a decorative choice. Restoration has also revealed it to be a sophisticated study on the approach to the diffusion of light on Lorenzetti's part.



Loincloth detail before restoration.



Loincloth detail during restoration.



Loincloth detail after restoration.



Detail of the gilded decoration before restoration, in raking light.



Detail of the gilded decoration during restoration.



Detail of the gilded decoration after restoration.

In Lorenzetti's day, when the *Crucifix* was displayed in church, illumination relied exclusively on natural light filtering through the windows—which changed in intensity and direction according to the time of day—and on candle light. These sources of light imparted a vibrant, changing luminosity to the paint that underscores the sculptural quality of the anatomy of Christ's body.

The gilded material of the background, produced by the artist to resemble a richly decorated fabric almost as though it were tooled leather and with geometrical figures probably made

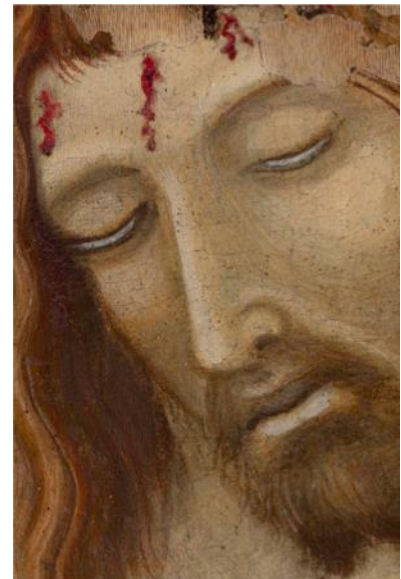
with a compass, proved to be seriously damaged. A careful study of the symmetrical modules on either side of the figure of Christ enabled the joining up the circles' lost lines without any distortion or intervention that would have had an impact on the painting's legibility.

Cleaning also brought to light the painted wood of the cross on which Christ is crucified and which, with its naturalistic veining imitating real wood, creates a deliberate contrast with the precious decoration of the geometrical fabric in the background.

The final result enables the rediscovery of Lorenzetti's original poetic and artistic intent and to restore the profound narrative quality and legibility of the original painting.

Statements

*"The restoration of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's painted Crucifix from the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena, so generously funded by the Friends of Florence for the Direzione Regionale Musei della Toscana, was a much needed and very delicate operation designed to recuperate a major masterpiece of 14th century Sieneese painting, but at the same time it was important also in critical and methodological terms," said **Stefano Casciu, Regional Director of the Musei della Toscana.** "The project brought to light the splendid tooled and gilded fabric in concentric motifs in the background, the wood of the cross, and the sublime body and face of Christ, rendered by Lorenzetti with a subtle yet intense technique still visible in the face, which has thankfully survived almost intact. This complex restoration was performed by Muriel Vervat with her customary, outstanding sensitivity and skill. In addition to Muriel, I would also like to thank all those who have made an important contribution to the study and documentation of the painting and of its restoration, and to voice my gratitude once again to the donors, particularly to The Giorgi Family Foundation."*



Detail of Christ's face after restoration.

*"In the life of a museum director, a restoration of this importance is a once-in-a-lifetime event. What does the return of one of the Pinacoteca's masterpieces, Ambrogio Lorenzetti's Crucifix restored, tell us about process?" said **Pinacoteca Director Axel Hémary.** "It tells us that today, we can no longer accept the result of a restoration that was exemplary over 70 years ago. Today, while continuing to respect the principles of restoration codified by Cesare Brandi, we can impart fresh life, movement, and meaning to Lorenzetti's original intent thanks to contemporary practices led on this occasion by restorer Muriel Vervat and made possible thanks to the support of the Friends of Florence and their President Simonetta Brandolini d'Adda. The demanding operation was set in motion and followed by my friend Stefano Casciu, the Director of the Musei della Toscana then in charge of the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena, and entrusted to the supervision first of Cristina Gnoni and then of Elena Rossoni, with the tireless participation of the Pinacoteca's resident restorer Elena Pinzauti. I would like to voice my heartfelt institutional and also personal thanks to these farsighted people for their commitment to the preservation of art."*

“The restoration of Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Carmine Crucifix has been an important project for our Foundation because it has enabled us to work once again to preserve the cultural heritage of Siena, a destination of many of the study programs which we as Friends of Florence organize periodically for our supporters.” said Friends of Florence President Simonetta Brandolini d’Adda. “Siena is a city that has always fascinated our benefactors. This particular restoration, which got under way in the midst of the pandemic, has proven to be an immensely satisfying project. In our capacity as donors, being able to witness the meticulous work of Muriel Vervat, closely supervised by Stefano Casciu, the director of operations, and by Axel Hémery, the Director of the Pinacoteca Nazionale, has been a privilege, allowing us to participate in the conservation and rediscovery of this superb masterpiece. The restoration team and art historians interactively shared decisions throughout the process in a truly creative manner. It made it possible not only to experience the work in all its astonishing beauty once again but also to discover new facts regarding the technique and skill of Ambrogio Lorenzetti, a pillar of 14th century Siennese art. As President of the Friends of Florence, I would like to thank Stefano Casciu, Regional Director of the Musei della Toscana, for agreeing to, setting up, and supervising the project, current Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena Director Axel Hémery for the amenability and interest that he has unfailingly shown us, Muriel Vervat for her peerless restoration, and all the professionals who have been involved in the project. Our heartfelt gratitude also to the donors, The Giorgi Family Foundation, who chose to support the project, offering all of us today and future generations the opportunity to enjoy the beauty of this great masterpiece.”

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