

Prologue

The Borgo San Sepolcro altarpiece was one of the largest and most splendid altarpieces of the early Italian Renaissance. Six meters wide and five meters high, painted on both sides like Duccio's *Maestà* in Siena, and made up of sixty images, it was created in 1437–1444 by the crown prince of Sienese painters, Stefano, the son of Giovanni of Cortona, whom we know by the eighteenth-century nickname Sassetta. Then at the height of his career, Sassetta enjoyed such fame that an earlier wooden structure, on which the young Piero della Francesca had been employed, was rejected and a new, miniature cathedral of carpentry was fashioned for his brush. Spiritual power radiated around the painting from a local holy man, the Blessed Ranieri, whose body had been interred a century earlier in the crypt below the altar. Franciscan friars sang their communal office day and night in a frescoed choir facing one side of the altarpiece, where they saw a monumental image of Saint Francis in glory and eight smaller scenes of his legend, while the citizens of Borgo San Sepolcro worshiped on the other side, where they could see a tall icon of their local saint in the exalted company of the Virgin and Child, with Saints John the Baptist, John the Evangelist, and Anthony of Padua.

The dismantling of Sassetta's masterpiece began in the Counter Reformation. The altarpiece was removed from the high altar and the individual panels were mounted on other altars in the church. The process accelerated after the Napoleonic suppression of convents and religious orders in the first decade of the nineteenth century, when the panels were sold, sawn down the middle to separate fronts from backs, and dispersed, at first to local collections around Arezzo and Siena, then to Florence, then further afield to France, and finally, as Sassetta's fame grew, to museums in the United States, Britain, Germany, and Russia. By the time of the last major museum acquisitions in 1956, 1965, and 1988, when five pieces entered the Louvre, the number of known fragments had shrunk from sixty to twenty-seven.

The discovery of three panels of this altarpiece by Bernhard and Mary Berenson in a Florentine antique shop on 27 October 1900 was only one episode in the work's dispersal, but it marked the beginning of Sassetta's recovery in scholarship. Sleuthing, especially by Mary Berenson, led the couple to suppose that their panels, showing the Blessed Ranieri, Saint Francis in Glory, and Saint John the Baptist, were the front of a double-sided triptych. The eight scenes of the life of Saint Francis that they had located in three French collections would, they surmised, have constituted the back.

The years 1900 to 1903 marked the opening of new directions in Bernhard Berenson's aesthetics. In the 1890s, in full collaboration with Mary, he had trained himself with single-minded dedication in the practice of scientific connoisseurship, refining the techniques first developed by Giovanni Morelli. However, for an

article on Sassetta that would eventually appear in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1903, Bernhard immersed himself in Franciscan literature. His writing assumed a lyric tone as he assayed the spiritual element in painting, West and East. He found an analogue for Sassetta's poetic art in Chinese Buddhist painting, to which he had been introduced in Boston by Denman Ross and Ernest Fenollosa. In a style not completely emancipated from the cadences of John Ruskin and Walter Pater, he interpreted the stories of the *poverello* of Assisi as a troubadour's romance culminating in the theophany of the soul and in the poetical transubstantiation of historical events. In the backgrounds of the scenes of the Franciscan legend he saw a landscape that lightened, uplifted, and spiritualized the viewer. New concepts were forming in his mind: "imaginative design," for painting that does not simply depict events but rather exudes poetry as flowers exhale fragrance, and "space composition," for an art of sky and earth that dematerializes, but does not devalue, such as would later be found in the landscapes of Perugino, Raphael, and, in his own time, Cézanne.

Even if the dispersal of Sassetta's panels can never be reversed, the Borgo San Sepolcro altarpiece can be reconstructed virtually. Although this has been the ambition of art historians ever since the Berensons in 1903, reconstruction of the panels based on more than aesthetic speculation and piecemeal technical insight became possible only in 1991, with the discovery by James Banker of the *scripta*, a set of detailed instructions drawn up for the painter by his Franciscan patrons. This precious document, when interpreted by the historian of religion and the art historian working together, held the promise of seeing the altarpiece, at least on paper, whole and entire. Over the past two decades, though, the burgeoning knowledge of the painter and the period seemed to be fragmenting into specialized fields: conservation and technique, altarpiece morphology and theory, liturgy and cult, theology and hagiography, iconography and style. A strong and capacious net would be required to tie together branches of knowledge that were drifting apart.

This multifaceted investigation of a painter of "subtle ingenuity," to use the expression of the *scripta*, was happily directed by a scholar who shares that quality. It was conceived by Machtelt Israëls during her fellowship year at I Tatti in 2004–2005. Trained in art history but also at home in the world of scientific conservation, fresh from completing a monograph on Sassetta's *Madonna della Neve*, tireless in commuting between Amsterdam and Florence, she formed a team of historians, art historians, and conservators from eight countries, including all scholars working on Sassetta and his world. The project evolved in a spirit of sharing and mutual support, achieved amid trips spanning half the globe from San Francisco to Moscow, study days in Florence

and Borgo San Sepolcro, and intense Internet traffic. A pool of documents and technical information was made accessible to all involved, and texts were shared before publication. The result, rather than a collection of essays, is a book by a close-knit team.

One might ask, finally, what Bernard and Mary Berenson would have thought of this publication of “their” Sassetta. Of course, they would have been delighted that an unknown painter whom they felt to be their own discovery has risen to such heights in the canon of Renaissance art. They would have appreciated the size and brilliance of the reconstructed altarpiece, which they originally thought was just a triptych. After toying briefly with the idea of giving their panels back to the church for which they had been painted, and then changing their minds when they found that it had been transformed beyond recognition in the eighteenth century, they would probably be pleased with the virtual reconstruction of the altarpiece in its original Gothic setting. Bernard would certainly have been content that his appreciation of Asian art, though not shared by Mary, is now widespread. On the other hand, the Berensons would be surprised that the knowledge of their trusted restorer, Luigi Cavenaghi in Milan, is now considered primitive, and perhaps disturbed that Sassetta can be treated like a patient in a hospital, with his panels subject to X-radiography and CT scans. Bernard was eager to set Sassetta’s poetic mode of composition against the more scientific art of Giotto, and one

feels he might be irked at the discovery of an advanced perspective construction just under the surface of the altarpiece’s scenes, now revealed by infrared reflectography.

At the time of the discovery, the Berensons operated in a jealous world of dealers, collectors, and connoisseurs, where research was often kept secret and primacy of discovery was of supreme importance. On the other hand, late in life, when Bernard left I Tatti to Harvard University, he set great store on conversation as the means by which culture could be deepened and knowledge advanced. Conversation and collaboration are the ideals that inform the present book. The painting here studied was itself conceived in the course of conversations between painter and patron, as we learn from the passage in the scripta that stresses the word *insiemi* (“to compose and order the figures and histories of the altarpiece,” say the Franciscans, “as appears best to us and the painter *together*”). The intense interaction in which this book has taken shape, the spirit of reciprocal exchange and mutual education summed up by *insiemi*, continue in a most satisfying way the spiritual heritage Bernard Berenson left to Villa I Tatti.

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