

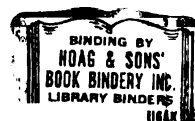
THE DEFIANCE PANELS:
AN EXAMINATION

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ABSTRACT

THE DEFIANCE PANELS: AN EXAMINATION

By

Doramae Ann O'Kelley

Two predella panels, in the possession of The Defiance College, Defiance, Ohio, have been dated by two American museums as late fifteenth century. They depict, respectively, two incidents in the life of St. Peter and the apparent martyrdom of an unidentified saint. Resemblances between these panels and works by the fifteenth century Italian painter known as the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception, as well as works by Filippino Lippi and Domenico Ghirlandaio which can be shown to have influenced the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception, justify the tentative addition of the Defiance panels to the list of almost thirty paintings now attributed to the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception.

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AN EXAMINATION

By

Doramae Ann O'Kelley

A THESIS

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Two predella panels from an unknown altarpiece were given to Defiance College in 1946, by its then retiring president, Dr. Kevin McCann. The panels had been dated late fifteenth century by two American museums, and were thought to be of Italian origin. They had never been subjected to a thorough study until I began working with them in 1967.

The wood used for both panels is poplar with a base of gesso applied before painting. The panels would seem to have belonged to the same altarpiece, as each measures 23 x 50.5 cm. and on both panels the scene is terminated at either end by an ornamental baluster. They have never been restored and are in a bad state of repair. For the sake of clarity I shall refer to them as the first and second Defiance panels. (Figure 1 and Figure 2.)

The first panel (Figure 1) depicts two scenes from the life of Saint Peter, his deliverance from prison by an angel, and the Domine Quo Vadis. This second scene is taken from the apocryphal acts of Peter and depicts his visionary meeting of Christ along the Appian Way as he flees Rome and prosecution. In answer to his question, "Domine Quo Vadis?", Christ answers that he goes to Rome to be crucified. This answer inspires Peter to return to Rome, where he is a short time later martyred by crucifixion. In the scene, as depicted on the first panel, St. Peter is kneeling before Christ who bears a cross.

The Deliverance scene depicts Saint Peter twice, first at the window of his prison, head in hand, staring out

dejectedly, and secondly, being led from prison by an angel, while the prison guard sleeps. This deliverance scene bears some resemblance to the same scene as rendered by Filippino Lippi, in the Brancacci Chapel, Florence. (Figure 3) The simple architectural detail and arrangement in the two scenes are similar. The sleeping guard, though he assumes a slightly different position of head in the Brancacci Chapel, is otherwise similar to the guard in the Defiance panel.

The second scene, the Domine Quo Vadis, does not appear in the Brancacci Chapel fresco cycle, but does appear in at least two other late fifteenth century works. A predella panel attributed to Bartolomeo di Giovanni,¹ which is part of an altarpiece by Domenico Ghirlandaio, depicts the same combination of scenes. (Figure 4) This altarpiece is in a sacristy of Lucca Cathedral. The other example is a predella panel, from an unknown altarpiece, attributed to the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception, owned at present by the City of York Art Gallery, York, England. (Figure 5) On both of these panels the Domine Quo Vadis comes first, reading from left to right. The order is reversed in the Defiance panel, the Deliverance scene coming first.

Resemblances between the Bartolomeo di Giovanni predella panel and the Defiance panel are not strong. The

1. Bernard Berenson, Italian Pictures of the Renaissance, (London, 1963), p. 26.

figures in both scenes in the Bartolomeo di Giovanni panel seem large for the space they occupy: in the Deliverance scene St. Peter and the angel are too large to have emerged from the doorway through which they have just passed. A narrow shelf, beyond which Christ's toes extend slightly, in the Bartolomeo di Giovanni Domine Quo Vadis takes the place of the landscape setting for this scene in the Defiance panel. The difference in the two Domine Quo Vadis scenes is in the gestures of the principal figures: in the Bartolomeo di Giovanni panel Peter receives Christ's blessing; in the Defiance panel he is being directed back to Rome. In the former panel Peter has his hands crossed on his chest while in the latter one hand is at the level of his waist.

In the deliverance scene both panels, as well as the Brancacci Chapel fresco, show the angel grasping Peter's hand, wherein all three differ from the York panel. In the York panel (as in the Defiance panel) the angel points the way, but only in the York panel is the gesture echoed by Peter, who, using his first, second, and fourth fingers, makes a gesture symbolizing the trinity.²

The young guard watching St. Peter is dressed in the same way and carries the same sort of lance in all four examples. In the Bartolomeo di Giovanni panel he is turned inward, toward the action, with his head up leaning on his hands. The guardian figure in both the York and Defiance

2. George Ferguson, Signs and Symbols in Christian Art. (New York, 1959), p. 27.

panels leans toward the outside edge of the panel and his face, because of his position of his head in his hands, is completely hidden.

The Deliverance scene in the Bartolomeo di Giovanni panel shows St. Peter depicted twice, as he is in the Defiance panel. He stares out dejectedly from the window of his prison, which however, in this case is a square window, while in the Defiance panel it is round-headed. In this scene the Bartolomeo di Giovanni panel bears a resemblance to a predella panel by the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception in the Lee Collection of the Courtauld Institute, London, depicting the Legend of St. Thomas (Figure 6), specifically that scene showing St. Thomas in prison.

The York panel is consistently closer to the Defiance panel than either the fresco by Filippino or the panel attributed to Bartolomeo di Giovanni. The Deliverance scene is enacted in a setting very much alike in the York and Defiance panels. The arrangement of the architectural elements and the use of light and shaded areas in them is almost identical with the exception that the artist of the Defiance panel has eliminated the entablature and decorative molding found on the architecture in the York panel.

The angel, leading the aged St. Peter from prison, wears transparent fluttering drapery blown back against the legs, in both cases forming an identical pattern of folds. The garment is not the same color in each case nor is the hair of

the angel. He is blonde in the York panel and brown-haired in the Defiance panel.

The guardian figures, already discussed, differ only in dress.

A particularly interesting similarity is to be found in the garments of St. Peter (as he kneels before Christ in the Domine Quo Vadis) the folds of which break as they touch the ground and rest in exactly the same way. This same motif can be found in other works by the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception, for example in the kneeling saint on the right, in a Madonna Enthroned with Saints (Figure 7), and in a figure of a young woman kneeling before St. Thomas in the aforementioned panel by the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception (Figure 6).

The figures in both panels are typical of the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception: they are devoid of facial expression and they communicate with one another solely through animated gestures.

The York and Defiance panels are all terminated at both ends by ornamental balusters all of the same shape. The York panel, because of the appearance of these balusters as well as stylistic similarities, has been related to three panels in private Florentine Collections depicting the Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian (Figure 8), Martyrdom of Saints Peter and Paul (Figure 9), and a Pieta (Figure 10).³ All

3. Hugh Brigstocke, "Three Fifteenth Century Italian Panels," Preview: City of York Art Gallery Quarterly, XXI (April 1968), p. 754.

four of these panels have been attributed to the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception and are thought to have belonged to the same altarpiece. The difficulty of incorporating the Defiance panels into this group is that they are about 16 cm. longer and the York and Defiance panels are too similar in subject matter to have come from the altarpiece. The same balusters appear again in the St. Thomas panels from the Lee Collection (Figure 6).

The second Defiance panel is more problematic. It depicts an injured or dying figure, with a halo, lying on a table, covered by transparent drapery, with two attendant figures bending over him. At the head of the table stands a robed and hatted figure holding a scepter. The scene takes place out of doors on an open platform before a wall. To the right of the scene just described stand four soldiers. The soldiers seem very little aware of the activity to their left and therefore I have not been able to determine whether they are supposed to be participants in the scene, or to constitute another scene altogether (Figure 2). Since the first panel is composed of two scenes, Deliverance and Domine Quo Vadis, perhaps this is the case here also.

The fact that the left leg of the recumbent figure is colored red, along with the lower portion of the chest, and is apparently bloody, would suggest a martyrdom, by flaying. There were actually very few Christian saints thus martyred. St. Bartholomew was one of these. St. Proculus was also flayed, but when the descriptions of the two saints, as given

by Kaftal, are compared, the figure here seems to fit the description of St. Bartholomew, as middle-aged with dark hair and beard.⁴

Mr. Everett Fahy, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has indicated to me that he regards the recumbent figure as being covered up by the two attendant figures rather than being flayed.⁵ The answer seems to hinge upon whether one can determine what the figure bending over the table grasps in his right hand; either a knife or the edge of the covering. Careful analysis of this passage has not enabled me to decide. There is no evidence of skin around the table or other evidence pointing toward a flaying. But there are indications that, whether the figure is being flayed or covered, a martyrdom is taking place. The figures bending over the recumbent one are wearing clothing characteristic of that of executioners in many contemporary depictions of martyrdom. The figure in front of the table is dressed very like the executioner to the far right in the Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian (Figure 8) attributed to the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception. The figure behind the table wears a garment similar to the executioner securing St. Peter to the cross in Filippino's Martyrdom of St. Peter in the Brancacci Chapel (Figure 11). In the Defiance panel, however, he also wears an apron, which seems appropriate for

4. George Kaftal, Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting (Florence, 1952), pp. 138-139.

5. Letter dated October 18, 1968.

such a figure.

Figures in the act of being martyred, especially those being flayed, are more often than not standing or kneeling rather than laid out as in this panel. I know of one earlier example of a flaying with the victim lying on a table, a predella panel by Andrea di Giusto depicting the Flaying of St. Bartholomew from the Triptych of S. Bartolomeo alle Sacra in the Prato Pinacoteca, dated 1435 (Figure 12).

The figure holding the scepter and standing at the head of the victim evidently commands the martyrdom, and this sort of authoritative figure is often present in other treatments of martyrdom. One such scene is the panel attributed to the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception depicting the Martyrdom of Sts. Peter and Paul (Figure 9), where such an official is present and is holding an identical scepter.

The presence of a group of soldiers at a martyrdom is in keeping with other such scenes of the same period. But as before mentioned, the degree of their involvement here is difficult to assess. They are clad in military garb that seems to derive more from Roman than from contemporary Italian armor. The arrangement of the four figures in a circular form is typical of figural compositions of the time, but I think this particular example may be related directly to a composition in the Brancacci Chapel. The Tribute Money fresco, painted early in the fifteenth century by Masaccio, and part of the fresco cycle finished much later

by Filippino Lippi, shows such an arrangement in the figure of Christ, the tax collector, and the two apostles to the far right of the group, although in the Defiance panel the figures are closer together (Figure 13). The soldier to the left of the group in the Defiance panel strongly resembles the figure of St. Sebastian in the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian and the official holding the scepter in the Martyrdom of Sts. Peter and Paul, both attributed to the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception. All three figures have the same mannered, hip-shot pose, the same position of the feet, and the same tilt of head. In each case the head of the figure is elongated and the face vapid. The other figures making up the scene are equally lacking in facial expression although they display a greater variety of types than is to be found in most of the work of the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception.

As in the first panel of the Defiance group, the figures are painted with more care than the architectural or landscape elements. While there is no great dwelling on detail in the figures, the rendering of various textures is well done: the luxuriant fabric of the garment worn by the official, the coarse peasant fabric of the garments worn by the attendant figures, the metallic quality of the armor worn by the soldiers.

While the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception usually favors hastily brushed in landscapes with gently rolling hills, tall straight trees with a tuft of feathery

leaves, short bushes also feathery and an occasional far away cityscape, the artist of the Defiance panels simplifies his landscape elements more severely, reducing them to only suggestions of hastily painted rolling hills. The pattern of overlapping the hills in the background of the first Defiance panel follows that of its York counterpart.

The architectural elements in the second Defiance panel have been reduced to little more than a backdrop for the scene, or scenes, as the case may be. The table placed on an open, broad, and foreshortened platform, which seems rather tilted up as it recedes, reminds me of a similar arrangement in another panel by the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception depicting the Virgin Immaculate Reconciling Two Enemies (Figure 14).

The Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception would seem to have been closely related to the workshop of Filippino Lippi, as some of his works show correspondences with authenticated drawings by Filippino.⁶ The question as to whether Filippino Lippi ever went to Lucca is still unanswered. Vasari says, "He also wrought certain things in Lucca, Particularly a panel in a chapel of the church of S. Ponziano which belongs to the Monks of Monte Olivieto."⁷ But there is no trace of this work. The only work by his hand now in Lucca is a painting of Four Saints in the church

6. Everett P. Fahy, "A Lucchese Follower of Filippino Lippi," Paragone, 185, p. 14.

7. Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, trans. Gaston De Vere (London 1912), Vol. V, p. 5.

of San Michele. The painting is usually dated between 1480 and 1490. He would, of course, not have had to go to Lucca to execute the painting. There is only one piece of evidence, aside from Vasari's statement, to support a theory that he did so. In Filippino's *Portata al Catasto* of 1497 he mentions that he made no tax declaration in 1480 because he was outside of Florence. A commission in Lucca might explain his whereabouts during that year, and thus would establish 1480 as the date for the painting.

One reason for placing Filippino's contact with Lucca later in the ten-year period is the existence, in the Pinacoteca, of a painting, dated 1487, showing such strong Filippino Lippi influence that it is thought the artist must have had access to Filippino's drawings. This painting depicting the Madonna and Child with Saints John the Baptist, Matthew, Frediano and Pelligrino has now been attributed to the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception. Miss Neilson had expressed the opinion that the painter of this altarpiece may have been a native Lucchese painter who, attracted to Filippino while he was in Lucca, may have returned to Lucca by 1487, after spending a while in Filippino's workshop in Florence.⁸ If Miss Neilson's theory is correct, the Lucchese Master would have been a member of Filippino's workshop in 1485 and 1486, the years he probably was working on the fresco cycle in the Brancacci Chapel. This would explain the similarities between the Lucchese Master's work and the

8. Katharine B. Neilson, Filippino Lippi (Harvard, 1938).

frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel.

Ghirlandaio's presence in Lucca is not documented. His connection with Lucca is mentioned by Vasari in the following manner: "For S. Martino in Lucca, he painted S. Peter and S. Paul on a panel."⁹ Ross and Erichsen feel this refers to the altarpiece, the predella of which was painted by Bartolomeo di Giovanni, because the altarpiece depicts the Madonna and Child enthroned with Saints, including St. Peter and St. Paul.¹⁰ They would date it before 1506. It is sometimes dated as early as 1485. This, of course, does not say that Ghirlandaio was ever in Lucca.

Professor Richard Offner was the first to call attention to the distinct personality of that Lucchese artist, influenced especially by Filippino Lippi and Domenico Ghirlandaio, whom we now identify as the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception.¹¹ Miss Sibilla Symeonides gave him that name because of his authorship of a work in San Francesco, Lucca, concerned with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.¹² Now a group of twenty-nine works has been attributed to him.

I propose that the Defiance panels be added to the list. They reflect evidently the same sources as those used by the Lucchese Master, and the similarity between the York and the first Defiance panel would indicate use of the same workshop cartoons.

9. Vasari, Vol. 3, p. 230.

10. Janet Ross and Nelly Erichsen, The Story of Lucca (New York, 1912).

11. Sibilla Symeonides, "An Altarpiece by the "Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception," *Marsyas*, 8, 1959, p. 55.

12. Symeonides, p. 55.

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LIST OF FIGURES

1. Deliverance of St. Peter, Domine Quo Vadis
Defiance College, Defiance, Ohio
2. Panel Two
Defiance College, Defiance, Ohio
3. Deliverance of St. Peter
Filippino Lippi
Brancacci Chapel, Sta. Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy
4. Deliverance of St. Peter, Domine Quo Vadis
Bartolomeo di Giovanni
Lucca Cathedral, Lucca, Italy
5. Deliverance of St. Peter, Domine Quo Vadis
Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception
City of York Art Gallery, York, England
6. Legend of St. Thomas
Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception
Lee Collection, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, England
7. Madonna enthroned with Sts. Nicholas, Dominic, Vincent, Peter
Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception
Berlin Museum (destroyed 1945)
8. Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian
Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception
Private Collection, Italy
9. Martyrdom of Saints Peter and Paul
Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception
Private Collection, Italy
10. Pieta
Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception
Private Collection, Italy
11. Martyrdom of St. Peter
Filippino Lippi
Brancacci Chapel, Sta. Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy
12. Flaying of St. Bartholomew
Andrea di Giusto
Triptych of S. Bartolomeo alle Sacra, Prato Pinacoteca
13. Tribute Money
Masaccio
Brancacci Chapel, Sta. Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy

14. Virgin Immaculate Reconciling Two Enemies
Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception
Vatican Gallery, Rome

FIGURES 1 - 14



Figure 1:
 DELIVERANCE OF ST. PETER, DOMINE QUO VADIS
 DEFIANCE COLLEGE, DEFIANCE, OHIO



Figure 2:
 PANEL TWO, DEFIANCE COLLEGE, DEFIANCE, OHIO



Figure 3:
DELIVERANCE OF ST. PETER, FILIPPINO LIPPI, BRANCACCI
CHAPEL, STA. MARIA DEL CARMINE, FLORENCE, ITALY



Figure 4:
DELIVERANCE OF ST. PETER, DOMINE QUO VADIS, BARTOLOMEO DI
GIOVANNI, LUCCA CATHEDRAL, LUCCA, ITALY



Figure 5:
DELIVERANCE OF ST. PETER, DOMINE QUO VADIS, LUCCHESE MASTER
OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, CITY OF YORK ART GALLERY, YORK,
ENGLAND



Figure 6:
 LEGEND OF ST. THOMAS
 LUCCHESSE MASTER OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
 LEE COLLECTION, COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART, LONDON
 ENGLAND



Figure 7:
MADONNA ENTHRONED WITH STS. NICHOLAS, DOMINIC,
VINCENT, PETER, LUCCHESI MASTER OF THE IMMACULATE
CONCEPTION, BERLIN MUSEUM (DESTROYED 1945)

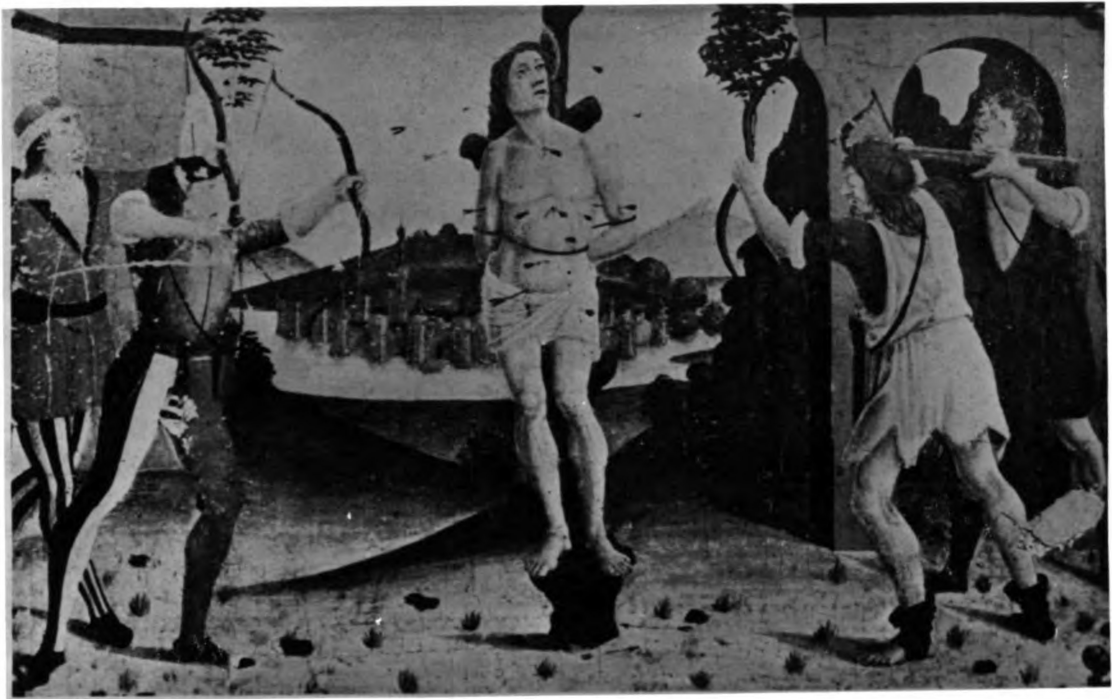


Figure 8:
MARTYRDOM OF SAINT SEBASTIAN
LUCCHESSE MASTER OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
PRIVATE COLLECTION, ITALY

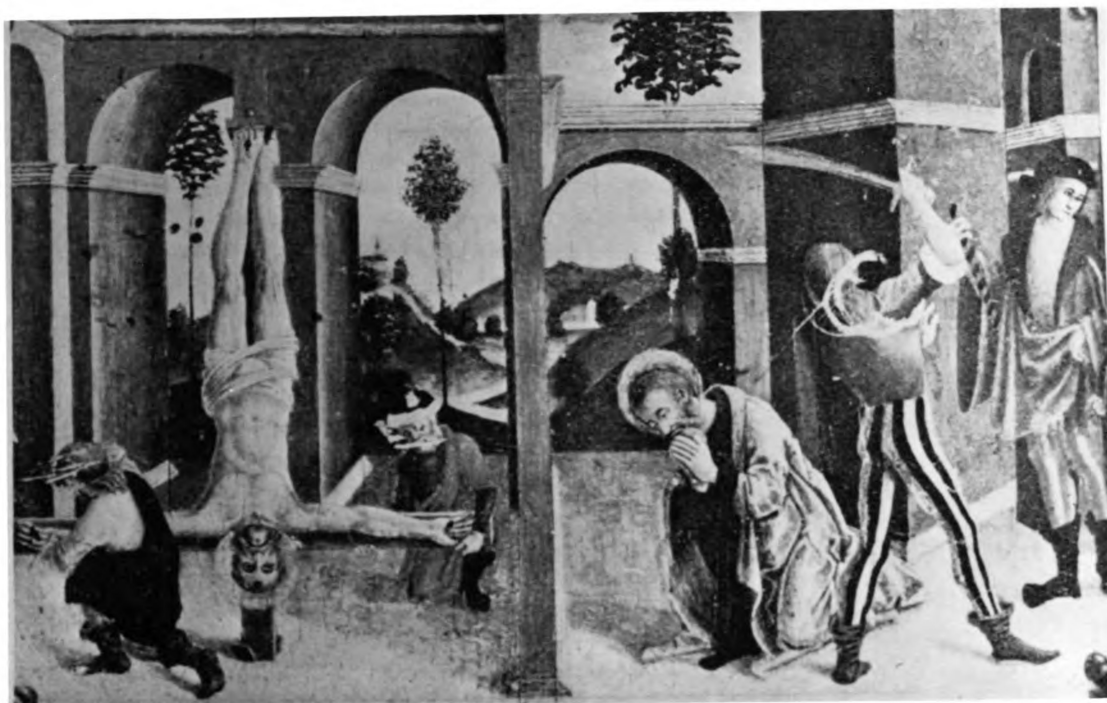


Figure 9:
MARTYRDOM OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL
LUCCHESI MASTER OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
PRIVATE COLLECTION, ITALY



Figure 10:
PIETA
LUCCHESI MASTER OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
PRIVATE COLLECTION, ITALY

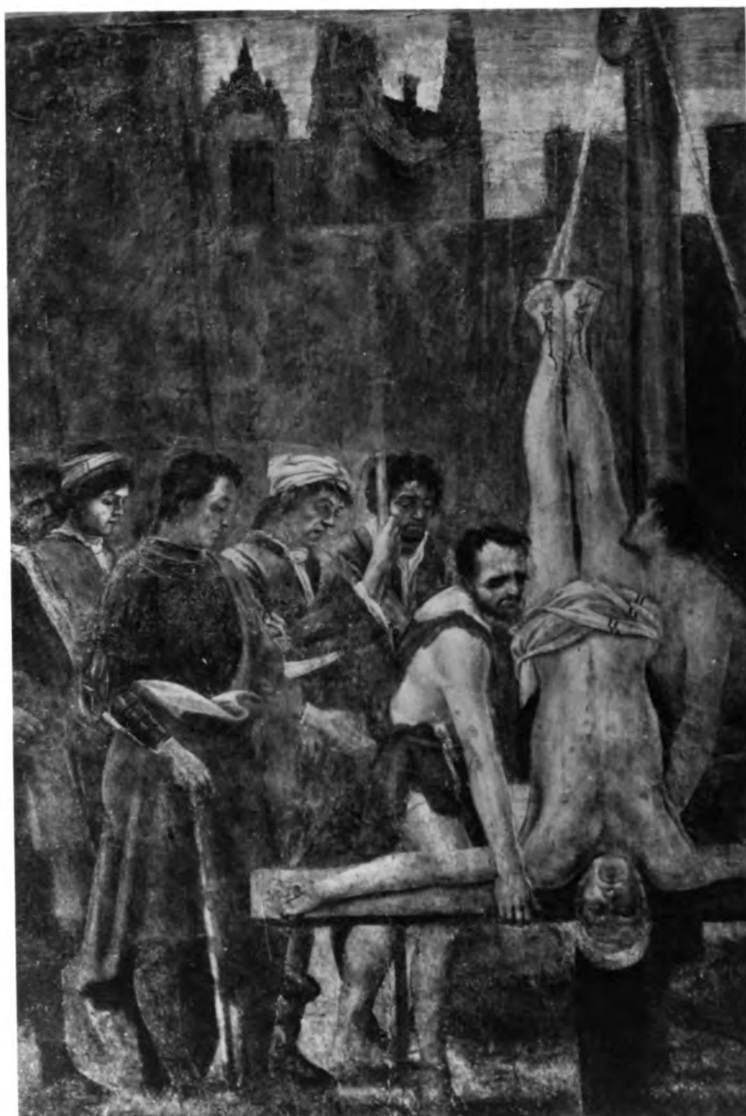


Figure 11:
MARTYRDOM OF ST. PETER
FILIPPINO LIPPI
BRANCACCI CHAPEL, STA. MARIA DEL CARMINE, FLORENCE, ITALY

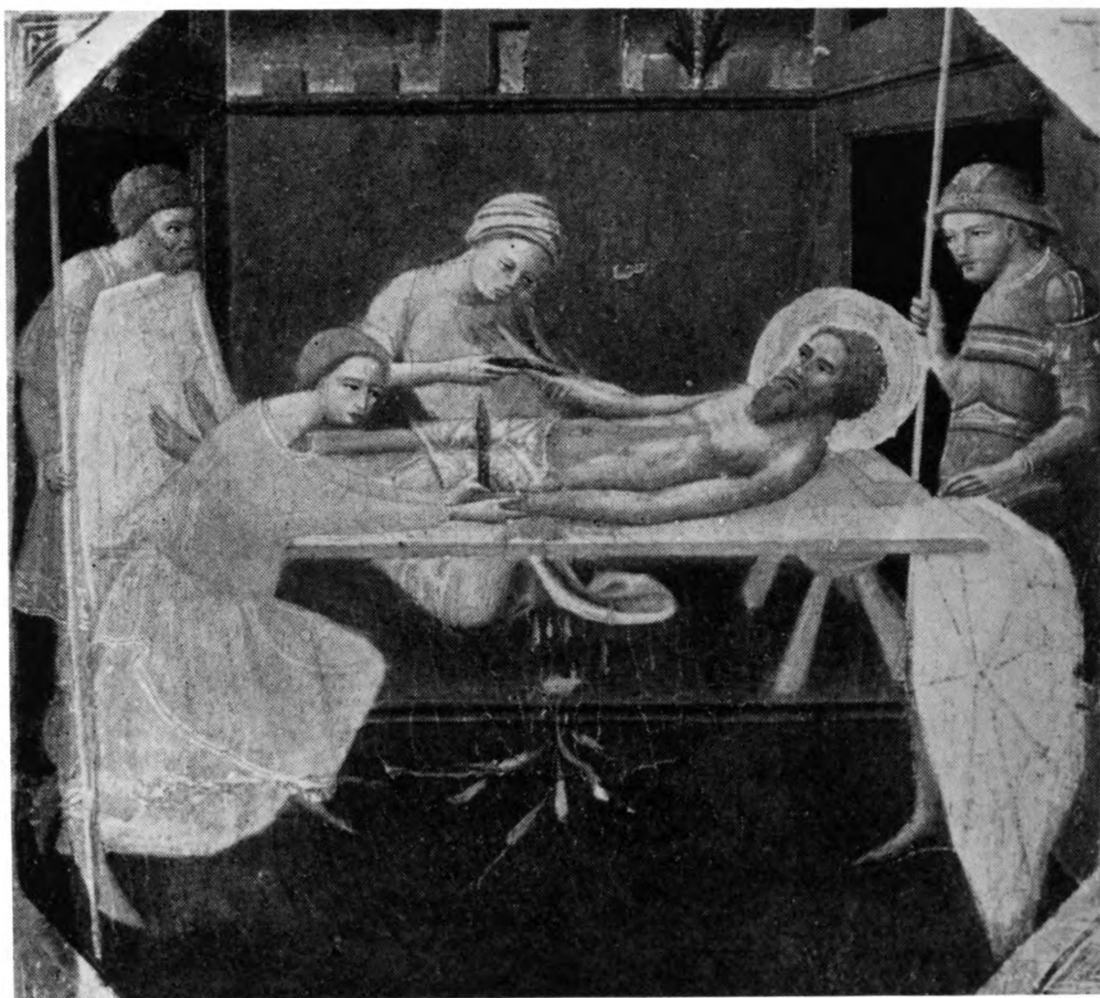


Figure 12:
FLAYING OF ST. BARTHOLOMEW
ANDREA DI GIUSTO
TRIPTYCH OF S. BARTOLOMEO ALLE SACRA, PRATO PINACOTECA



Figure 13:
 TRIBUTE MONEY, MASACCIO, BRANCACCI CHAPEL, STA. MARIA
 DEL CARMINE, FLORENCE, ITALY



Figure 14:
 VIRGIN IMMACULATE RECONCILING TWO ENEMIES
 LUCCHESE MASTER OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
 VATICAN GALLERY, ROME

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