

Niccolò di GIACOMO (Bologna c.1325 - Bologna c.1403)

The Ascension of Christ

Historiated initial P, in tempera, gold leaf and ink on vellum, cut from an illuminated antiphonary.
170 x 157 mm. (6 3/4 x 6 1/8 in.) at greatest dimensions.

ACQUIRED BY THE COLLECTION OF RELIGIOUS ART, THRIVENT FINANCIAL FOR LUTHERANS, MINNEAPOLIS.

This historiated initial P was originally part of an antiphonary; a large choir book containing the sung parts - both text and music - of the Mass or Divine Office; a series of daily services performed by the clergy. Antiphonaries were usually very large volumes that could be propped up on easels or bookstands to enable the monks in the choir to read them from a distance. Other extant cuttings from the same volume show Dominican saints, which would suggest that the antiphonary was intended for a Dominican church or convent in Bologna.

This letter P is part of a line of text from the Acts of the Apostles 1:3, for the Feast of the Ascension: 'P[ost passionem suam in multis argumentis, per dies] quadr[aginta apparens eis et loquens ea, quae sunt de regno Dei.]' ('To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God.').

This splendid illumination, with its 'heavily crowded, yet highly animated composition' of Christ hovering over his astonished disciples, was first published by Gaudenz Freuler in 1990. As he noted, 'The dramatically rendered representation of Christ's Ascension shows the Virgin and the Apostles gazing upwards to the figure of Christ flying across the sky. In his right hand he holds the banner of his glorious victory over death while he clasps with his left hand onto the initial P which defines the pictorial space. The peculiar motif of Christ propelling himself horizontally out of the pictorial space in the representation of the Ascension is an iconographical invention by Nicolò di Giacomo which he repeated in various occasions.'

Comparable figures of Christ appear in Ascensions by Niccolò di Giacomo in a gradual in the Biblioteca Antoniana in Padua, as well as a missal, signed and dated 1374, in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich and an ordinal in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York8. As Freuler

points out, ‘It is to the smaller Ascension in the signed manuscript of the Morgan library (ca. 1365), that our initial shows its strongest stylistic affinities.'

Other comparable miniatures on vellum or parchment by Niccolò di Giacomo are today in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire in Geneva, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the Biblioteca Estense in Modena and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The present Ascension of Christ can, in particular, be identified as part of a group of nineteen related illuminations by Niccolò di Giacomo, all apparently from the same dismembered Dominican antiphonary (or set of antiphonaries), which are today divided among the collections of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Free Library in Philadelphia, the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., as well as a handful of private collections. Although a chronology of Niccolò di Giacomo’s undated works is difficult, since his style did not seem to change very much throughout his long career, Gaudenz Freuler has posited an approximate date of c.1370-1375 for this associated series of manuscript illuminations.

Provenance:

From a choir book decorated for an unidentified Dominican convent in Bologna in the last quarter of the 14th century
P. & D. Colnaghi, London, in 1990
Morris J. Pinto, New York
Sam Fogg, London, in 1994
Acquired from them by Friedrich Georg Zeileis, Rauris, Austria.

Exhibitions

New York, Colnaghi, Master Drawings, 1990, no.1.

Literature:

Gaudenz Freuler, ‘Nicolò di Giacomo da Bologna’, in New York, Colnaghi, Master Drawings, 1990, unpaginated, no.1 (where dated c.1360); Gaudenz Freuler, Manifestatori delle cose miracolose: Arte italiana del ‘300 e del ‘400 da collezioni in Svizzera e nel Liechtenstein, exhibition catalogue, Lugano, 1991, pp.153-154, under no.55; Gaudenz Freuler, “Künder der Wunderbaren Dinge”: Frühe Italiensiche Malerei aus Sammlungen in der Schweiz und in Liechtenstein, exhibition catalogue, Lugano, 1991, p.154, under no.55; Friedrich Georg Zeileis, Più ridon le carte. Buchmalerei aus Mittelalter und Renaissance: Katalog einer Privatsammlung von illuminierten Einzelblättern, Rauris, 2006, pp.116-117, no.38; Gaudenz Freuler, Italian Miniatures from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Centuries, Cinisello Balsamo, 2013, Vol.I, pp.288 and 293, under no.24.

Artist description:

One of the leading manuscript illuminators of the Trecento in Italy, Niccolò (or Nicolò) di Giacomo di Nascimbene was active in Bologna over a period of more than half a century, between 1349 and 1403. As the home of a great university, Bologna was a major centre of manuscript illumination in the 14th century. Several illuminators working in the city in this period are known by name, of which the best known and most famous today, as well as perhaps the most prolific, was Niccolò di Giacomo. One of the few Trecento Bolognese illuminators who regularly signed his works (as one scholar has noted, ‘Departing from the traditional anonymity of his predecessors and contemporaries, Nicolò made it a point to prominently sign his main miniatures’), he is thought to have been a pupil of the anonymous illuminator known as the Master of 1346, who was the leading artist in the field in Bologna in the 1340s.

Niccolò di Giacomo's first dated work is an antiphonary of 1351 from the Bolognese monastery complex of San Michele in Bosco, now in the Biblioteca Estense in Modena, and within a few years he came to dominate the production of both liturgical and secular illuminated manuscripts in and around Bologna in the second half of the 14th century. He must have supervised a large workshop, and his signature appears on a large number of works, including choir books, legal and humanistic texts, private devotional books, guild registers and communal statutes. Appointed illuminator to the city of Bologna in the 1380s, Niccolò's reputation and success are also confirmed by the fact that he held other public offices in Bologna - notably his election, alongside the painter Simone dei Crocifissi, to the city's consiglio dei quattrocento in 1394 - and also owned numerous properties in the city.

As has recently been noted, Niccolò di Giacomo 'became one of the most prolific Bolognese illuminators of the second half of the Trecento, illuminating legal texts...guild registers, secular texts, and liturgical books. Using a fairly limited palette that included vermilion, lead white, iron-gall brown ink, carbon black, azurite, and an organic pink, this book painter created some of the most engaging and lively illuminations of the era.' He was the founder of an extended family of artists in Bologna which spread over four generations and included some thirteen painters and two illuminators, including his nephew, Jacopo di Paolo.

Mario Salmi has added that, 'owing to his impressive productivity, Niccolò has considerable historical importance. Apart from some minor stirrings in the regions of Emilia and around Rome, he was the dominating power and exercised a vast influence in Emilia, in the Romagna, and in the Veneto.'