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The Technical Evidence and the Origin and Meaning of Simone Martini’s ‘Guidoriccio’ Fresco in Siena

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I had not intended to speak at this symposium, nor to concern myself further with the polemic surrounding the ‘Guidoriccio’ fresco (Fig. 1) which has come to resemble more an Italian opera than a serious professional exchange of views and information. I have, however, changed my mind for several reasons: first and foremost, because information of a technical nature can be used in this particular case as a means of limiting the range of possible interpretation, thereby illustrating its value in relation to traditional modes of art historical discourse that involve historical or archival data, its meaning, iconography and style. Indeed, the present confused state of opinion offers an appropriate setting for showing how, and the limits within which, technical data can be used. It can, in this instance, offer a precise relative chronology, which is fixed in the coatings and abrasions evident on the wall bearing the fresco, and which, in turn, may limit, depending mostly on further controlled observations to be made, the time when the fresco would have been painted, thus restricting the range of speculation concerning its painter.

I believe everyone present here is acquainted with the polemic concerning the fresco, which has been quite widely publicized. It began with Gordon Moran’s article of 1977,¹ and has crystallized into two opposing points of view. The most prevalent sustains the traditional one that Simone Martini was the painter, and that the date 1328, appearing on the lower frame (quite reliable although partially repainted) refers to the Sienese siege of the castle at Montemassi which took place during that year.² Accordingly, the condottiere appearing at the fresco’s center would be Guidoriccio da Fogliano, general of the Sienese forces. On the other hand, Gordon Moran and Michael Mallory insist that the fresco is not from the trecento, but that it is a species of historic reconstruction of a later period. They have mentioned the

1 Gordon Moran, in Paragone (Nov. 1977), 81 ff.
2 See especially Max Seidel, in Prospektiv (Jan. 1982), 17-41, and L. Bellosi, 41-65. Joseph Polzer, in Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen (1983), 103-141. The coat-of-arms on the rider’s cloak and the horse’s gualdrappa is that of the Da Fogliano (or Fogliani) family. It appears, colours matching, in examples reaching from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The family derived from Reggio Emilia and its province, playing a significant political and military role during the duceto and trecento (see conveniently, for the family’s history, Pompeo Litta, Famiglie celebri italiane, Series 1, c-c, 1834, and for the Da Fogliano coat-of-arms, Polzer, op. cit., 108 ff.).
seventeenth or eighteenth century as the period of its origin without, however, having been able identify either a painter or a circle which could have reproduced, or intended to reproduce, the trecento style of the fresco with such fidelity and precision. Their discussion has led, however, to a closer scrutiny of the fresco by many scholars as well as of the early pictorial decoration of the Palazzo Pubblico and the contemporary history of Siena. It also led, by chance, to the discovery of the new fresco beneath Guidoriccio.

4 The MacDonald Stewart Foundation of Montreal generously contributed to the financing of the initial technical examination of the Guidoriccio fresco by Leonetto Tintori, under the auspices of the commune of Siena and the Superintendency for the Artistic and Historical Estates of Siena and Giotto.

Motif punches of the same design and the same size, consisting of series of small pyramids that are virtually identical to those evident on the equestrian group in question, are already found on the medallions from the lower frame of the Maestà (Fig. 3). Simone Martini used this type of punch repeatedly, in various sizes. Its imprint is visible in his Frescos at Assisi, as well as his Neapolitan panel of Saint Louis of Toulouse (Fig. 4). In the latter two instances it often

FIGURE 2. Detail from the Guidoriccio
(Photo: Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence.)
appears on cloth. Further, this type of punch was used exclusively by him, with the possible exception of Lippo Memmi, his brother-in-law, who used a related diamond pattern punch on his Maestà in San Gimignano. One should realize that the use of the motif punch in fresco painting was restricted to the Italian proto-Renaissance, and within this period, with the fewest exceptions, to the circle of Simone Martini, Lippo Memmi and Barna. It is worth noting that the latter, in his frescoes in S. Gimignano, used a type of punch for rendering the relief of the coat of mail of certain soldiers, which resembles the design evident on the armour of Guidoriccio. It is unprecedented to assume the existence of a seventeenth or eighteenth-century painter endowed with the idea (assuming the manual ability) of reproducing Simone’s motif punch so precisely. Such an eventual-ity would extend well beyond the norms of historical imitation in fresco painting. This situation is essentially different from careful restoration, which would imitate a motif punch still evident on the surface being restored. Even in the event of such restoration, the exact replication of an original punch mark would be exceptional.  

The evidence of the motif punch is difficult to dismiss. We should look as well at other kinds of evidence and specifically at the wall on which the fresco is painted (Fig. 5). The wall consists of a brick support covered with diverse and successive layers of plaster and colour, which often overlap at the margins of their respective fields. Their superposition has been examined by Leonetto Tintori and by Giuseppe Gavazzi, who recovered the fascinating new fresco representing a fortified site on the top of a hill. This new fresco is located directly below the Guidoriccio fresco; its discovery constitutes one of the most significant finds of the last decade in proto-Renaissance Sienese art (Fig. 6). Most scholars have placed its origin close to the completion of the rebuilding of the Palazzo Pubblico, around 1314, and have identified its painter as Duccio. Memmi and Filippuccio, or someone close to them. Essentially, this would conform to my notion of its style and date. Here again, however, Mallory and Moran stand sharply apart; for iconographic reasons, they identify the site with Arcidosso. Since the documents relate that Arcidosso was painted by Simone Martini in the Palazzo Pubblico, they insist that he is the painter of the new fresco. Frankly, I am among those who find this point of view incomprehensible on stylistic grounds.

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6 A more detailed study of Simone Martini’s ornament, including that evident on his frescoes, is in progress.
7 Verbal and written information has been offered me by Erling Skaug, Mojmir Frana and Norman Muller.
8 Leonetto Tintori, Ricerche tecniche su Guido Ruccio e gli altri affreschi nella Sala del Mappamondo del Palazzo Pubblico di Siena, 1979, typescript, library, Deutsches Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence; Seconda ricognizione degli affreschi sulla parete del Mappamondo nella sala grande del Palazzo Pubblico di Siena, typescript, n.d.
10 A review of various attributions concerning the recently rediscovered Sienese fresco is given by G. Borghini in Il Palazzo Pubblico di Siena, vicende costruttive e decorazione (Siena, 1983), 218, with bibliography; I place the fresco close to the style of Memmo di Filippuccio (see also Enzo Carli, verbal information; idem, La pittura senese del trecento (Venice, 1981), 160, n. 64.
11 Recently Mallory and Moran, in Notizie d’arte (Siena, May-June 1983), 52 ff.
But let us return to the technical data. It is useful to quote Gavazzi: "The wall is like a book: it is composed of leaves superposed one on the other." Let us read the book together. The earliest fresco which one still sees on the wall is the one which has been recently uncovered (Fig. 6). Its upper edge extends beneath the lower edge of the Guidoriccio. This is certain. The Guidoriccio represents the second visible fresco. A recent ultrasonic examination of the Guidoriccio by Maurizio Seracini seems to indicate the presence of an earlier fresco below. This presumed fresco would have been the first one painted.

12 I am puzzled why indirect scientific means are used when the evidence can be examined directly, in this case by means of the extraction of a core reaching to the brick (removed in unobtrusive places). Concerning the existence of an earlier fresco beneath the Guidoriccio, I refer to the important observations by Leonetto Tintori in his Seconda riconoscenza... (see note 8):"Partendo dal reperto più importante rimasto nascosto per secoli sotto lo scialo: la resa del Castello, non ancora identificato ed intorno al quale vertono appassionate ipotesi, dovremo collocare questa scena ad un secondo posto per quanto riguarda la precedenza nel tempo. Prima di questo Castello conquistato, altri ne erano stati dipinti precedentemente nella zona soprastante. Purtroppo, per queste pitture demolite per far posto al Condottiero a cavallo, possiamo solo produrre un argomento tecnico che ritiene come le pitture murali si iniziano sempre partendo dall’alto: tesi apparentemente smentita dalla presenza del Guidoriccio al posto d’onore. Però, se consideriamo il Guidoriccio un insieme posteriore quale è risultato dalle recenti ricerche, possiamo ritenere attendibile la sequenza proposta, tanto più che in alto a destra, vicino al solfito, è stata trovata, durante il restauro, una zona di intonaco con caratteristiche molto diverse dall’intonaco nuovo fatto per il Guidoriccio, che possiamo presumere appartenesse alla vecchia pittura."

‘Questo grande frammento di intonaco, un triangolo irregolare alto due metri che si protende a sinistra per circa tre metri, conserva poche tracce dei colori originali alla pittura più antica e questi sono confusi e coperti da una tinta grigia data quale preparazione per l’azzurrite del fondodel ‘Gavallerie’. Su questo grigo esistono, tracciati rapidamente con un grigo un po più chiaro, due vessilli molto simili a quelli adottati per coronare le torri del ‘Battifolle’: soltanto sono assai più grandi e di una proporzion impossibile per decorare delle torri incluse nella scena. Per questo dovrebbero essere considerati quali cespiti destinati ad essere coperti dal colore finale del fondo.’

‘Assai più importanti sono invece i resti di un accampamento militare in alto sul colle ed i tetti di due tenderi minori inclusi nell’accampamento dipinto sull’intonaco nuovo. Questi avanzi di vecchia pittura si distinguono dal nuovo per l’uso di un colore diverso e per l’espressione dei tratti assai più forti e semplici.’

‘A sostegno dell’ipotesi che attribuisce l’appartenenza di questo intonaco alla pittura precedente, precedentemente anche a quella della Resa, esiste il fatto che l’azzurrite del fondo qui si è comportata in modo diverso da quella stessa sull’intonaco nuovo, dove ha potuto usufruire dell’ausilio della carbonatazione della calce non perfettamente secca come quella del vecchio intonaco."

The partial use of a plaster layer belonging to an earlier fresco, following Tintori, and also the unusually large giornate (underscored by Gavazzi in his technical reports; see note 9) would indicate the hurried painting of the Guidoriccio fresco, for reasons to be considered under separate cover.

In its present condition the Guidoriccio comprises two phases. The principal section is original. However, the left section, with the view of Monternassi, was repainted, on account of damage sustained by water seeping from the roof. Tintori believes that this restoration took place quite early in the Renaissance. This restored section with its rougher style and clearly evident overlapping edge can be easily distinguished from the original part. All this was recorded by Tintori and confirmed by Gavazzi. It is generally assumed that the Renaissance restorer faithfully copied what had been there before, because two structures resemble those still in situ at the fort of Monternassi, in their respective locations.

The next object set on the wall was not a fresco, and it no longer exists. It was Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s mapamondo, which was mounted on a wooden circular disc so that it could be turned. It was completed in 1345. Its repeated rotation has left grooves on the wall, constituting a regular series of concentric circles. Until it disappeared at about the end of the eighteenth century, this mapamondo occupied the central space on the wall. It was large, having a diameter of close to five meters. When it was installed it

13 See Tintori’s and Gavazzi’s technical reports (notes 8 and 9).

14 For the topographical resemblance of Monternassi and the site to the north of it to the landscape and the architecture on the fresco, see Uta Feldges, Landschaft als topographisches Porträt (Bern, 1980), 25 ff.; and I. Moretti, in Prospettiva (1980), 62-72. I am investigating this problem further.
covered the recently rediscovered fresco. The fresco was probably plastered over since it was no longer needed. The examination of certain circular grooves at the extremity of the mappamondo’s location, which are not concentric with the rest, indicated that the mappamondo was moved shortly after it was initially put in place. This may have been done because in its first location it would have hidden the central portion of the lower frame of the Guidoriccio with the date, 1328 (Fig. 1). 15 Around the beginning of the cinquecento the size of the mappamondo was reduced, before Sodoma painted his frescoes of Sant’Ansano Battistiano and Saint Victor at the lower sides of the wall. They were painted in 1529. 16 This is quite clear because these frescoes cover the side portions of the circular grooved area.

Recently, Moran proposed that the mappamondo of Ambrogio Lorenzetti was a smaller mobile object once located in the sala dei nove, rather than the large disc in the hall which still carries its name. 17 This seems a difficult argument to sustain in light of many references to the mappamondo. Be this as it may, what is clear is that a large circular mobile object occupied the center of the wall, that it was put over the newly discovered fresco, and that it preceded the Sodomas. This chronology is incontrovertible.

We have now arrived at a point where the chronological stance of Mallory and Moran seems logically absurd. Both Tintori and Gavazzi agree in their careful scrutiny of the Guidoriccio fresco that the Sodomas extend above it (Fig. 7). Certainly, Sodoma’s Sant’Ansano extends over the repainted portion including Montemassi. This was also my observation when I examined the wall some years ago. At the time I never thought anyone would contradict this. And there were others on the scaffold who observed the same evidence. Yet this chronology has been denied by Mallory and Moran, with reference to Vasari, whose account concerning these frescoes does not quite mesh with what one now sees, and with the suggestion that the sword of Saint Victor extends beneath the Guidoriccio. 18 One hardly needs to affirm the obvious logical absurdity of this stance. Adjacent frescoes can only be simultaneously above and below each other in case of their absolute coextensivity, and this is not the case here. Moran and Mallory say that they often were on the scaffold. I wonder what they did there. Why did they not check this necessary technical fact when their late chronology of the Guidoriccio hinges on this very examination? If necessary, the pertinent examination can be repeated and documented. One needs but remove a bit of plaster at the juncture of the two frescoes in order to ascertain which one was painted first.

This leads me to the final issue of what still ought to be done: namely, the careful scrutiny of the right corner where the Guidoriccio meets the large fresco by 15 This theory seems convincing. See Scelet, 22 ff., fig. 4 — he bases himself on Gavazzi’s findings, concerning the mappamondo generally, see Edna Carter Southard, The Frescoes in Sienna’s Palazzo Publico, 1289-1339, Studies in Imagery and Relations to other Communal Palaces in Tuscany (New York and London, 1979), Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, June 1978), 237-241.

16 Concerning the two frescoes by Sodoma beneath Guidoriccio, see A.M. Hayum, Giovanni Buzzi ‘Il Sodoma’, 1976 (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1976); Enzo Carli, II Sodoma (Vercelli, 1979), 65 f.

17 Moran (note 11), 52. Idem, in Notizie d’arte (Siena, Feb. 1982), 61. Significantly, the mappamondo was already substantially restored by Bartolo di Fredi, Cristofano di Bammadino and Meo di Pietro in 1395. The pertinent document is quoted by Carter Southard, 237. This early restoration project involved substantial expenses for colours and is hardly compatible with work on a smaller object.

18 Verbal information given repeatedly and in public by Moran and Mallory.
Lippo Vanni, which represents the victory of the Sienese over the Compagnia del Capello in Val di Chiana, in 1362 (Fig. 8). The fresco is signed and dated 1363 (the date has also been read as 1373—but this difference does not affect the issue here considered). At the left of this military panorama, next to the corner of the wall, appears Saint Paul, protector of the Sienese forces. Clearly, the superposition of these adjoining frescoes, if it still can be observed, would reveal whether Simone Martini, who was long dead when Lippo Vanni painted his fresco, could have painted the Guadoriccio. I should like to illustrate the importance of this examination by reference to an analogous situation in the south-eastern corner of the cloister of the Campo Santo in Pisa where the famous Triumph of Death met the Crucifixion. It will be recalled that toward the end of the last world war the roof of the Campo Santo burned down so damaging the frescoes that they had to be removed from their walls. One saw, and one still sees, that the arriccio of the Crucifixion leans directly on the brick that once supported the Triumph of Death. The plaster of the latter was not applied on the wall directly, but on a woven matting of reed which was nailed to the brick—an exceptional proto-Renaissance example of such an architectural insulation. Accordingly, the pigment extended some centimeters beyond the brick. Obviously, the Crucifixion was painted first. For many years art historians thought the opposite, and this interfered with our grasp of Pisan trecento painting.

This comparison should not, however, be overstressed, for the situation in the right-hand corner of the wall of Guadoriccio is much more complicated. The corner has been repaired for its entire length, on account of the separation of the walls at an unknown time and for unknown reasons. In addition, here we have a situation of conflicting information. Giuseppe Gavazzi insists that when he examined one opening in the corner of the wall toward the lower portion of the frescoes, he could observe that the plaster belonging to the fresco by Lippo Vanni reached the very brick of the adjoining wall. This would mean that the Lippo Vanni’s fresco therefore preceded the Guadoriccio. The opening was closed in the normal course of the restoration program, without further scrutiny and documentation. Clearly, the superposition of the plaster layers in this corner should have been examined under appropriate scientific conditions. Since it was not done then it should be done now. My doubts concerning Gavazzi’s interpretation of what he saw are shared by a significant number of scholars and restorers.

This discussion leads to the following conclusions: any explanation of the Guadoriccio fresco, whether it accepts or denies the hand of Simone Martini, must accept that it precedes the Sodomas and that it therefore dates before 1324. A partial confirmation or absolute denial on technical grounds of Simone’s authorship of the Guadoriccio fresco can be ascertained under appropriate scientific conditions if it can be shown, on the basis of their respective superposition in the corner where they meet, whether Lippo Vanni’s or Simone’s fresco was painted first. If it is decided to penetrate into the corner, this should be done by expert and impartial parties. If the original plaster of just one of the frescoes can be located in its original extension toward the corner, then the relative chronology of the two frescoes can be deduced.

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19 Meiss, in Art Bulletin (1953), 144, considered the principal master of the Crucifixion to be deeply influenced by Francesco Traini, whom Meiss considered the painter of the adjacent Triumph of Death. He retained this opinion in Burlington Magazine, CXII (1971-1), 181, but acknowledged at the time the priority of the Crucifixion on the basis of the technical evidence indicated here (182, n. 15).

20 Giuseppe Gavazzi (note 9). From what can be seen on fig. 8, his conclusion seems doubtful.

21 This paper restricts itself to aspects of technique. I shall consider other unresolved and questionable problems concerning the Guadoriccio fresco elsewhere.