

Embriachi workshop (active in Florence and Venice between about 1370-1380 and about 1430)

First quarter of the 15th century

Wood, bone, horn, colored woods, metal

Measures: 27 x 32

The triptych, hitherto unpublished and not known to studies, refers to the workshop of the Embriachi, an activity founded in Florence by Baldassarre Embriachi around the 1370s and then moved to Venice probably from 1392. Here the workshop remained active even after the death of the founder, up to the thirties of the fifteenth century, specializing in artefacts consisting of bone reliefs applied to a wooden core decorated with "a toppo" inlays. This technique and this type of production had already been developed by other contemporary and even previous workshops, but it is with the Embriachi that sacred and profane objects made of bone and polychrome inlays acquired a considerable fame and circulation, so much so that they became serial products and, in the most refined results, requested by important clients such as Gian Galeazzo Visconti and the dukes Giovanni di Berry and Filippo di Borgogna.

This triptych is made up of a wooden core on which five carved bone plates are applied and is decorated at the base and along the profiles by Carthusian bands. The central cusp body, occupied by three plates.

The largest, in the center, is carved with the Madonna and Child flanked on the left by Santa Caterina identified by the crown and the wheel, emblem of her martyrdom; on the right a second saint with a book on the left and on the right an unclear attribute, perhaps a small cross or a lamp: it could therefore be Saint Lucia. In the doors there is a bearded saint with a pilgrim's stick on the left, to be recognized with St. James the Greater, while on the right, in the figure of an elderly monk with a long beard and cane, you can recognize St. Anthony the Abbot.

The figures rest on smooth bases, profiled by thin moldings. On these pedestals there must have originally been devotional or identifying inscriptions of the saints as it is possible to suppose thanks to the comparison with works of the same workshop that still retain these inscriptions. Even the reliefs had to be embellished with touches of color and gold, both in the backdrops and in the lapels of the garments, of which only tiny traces remain today.

The upper part of the slabs is carved with a cluster of buildings and simplified architecture of which you can see the battlements and a series of openings. Only the central bone lamella, higher than the others, is distinguished by a pointed arch with a trefoil internal profile, to give prominence and evidence to the Marian figure, housed within an ideal niche.

The triptych is practically intact and - not a secondary aspect in the case of serial artifacts like these, which have often had numerous collecting passages between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - the work has received few and insignificant additions. Only the face of the saint to the right of the Virgin is a replacement, perhaps the result of an already historicized restoration, carried out by inserting a new piece of carved bone in order to fill a gap. The modern insertion is recognized by the color, the more common quality of the carving and the lack of the golden halo, which is instead recognizable, through the mark left by the mission, behind the heads of the other characters. In the same intervention, the plate with the Virgin and Child must have been consolidated, crossed by cracks in the middle and lower right parts.

On the other hand, the crack that runs in the upper part of the relief with San Giacomo has remained evident and now very dark, an indication of damage dating back to over time.

The side doors are linked to the central body with noose hinges with hooks riveted on the back, a technique that recalls the one used for these artifacts between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The hook that allows you to keep the doors closed could instead be of restoration.

Besides the structure, the composition, the technique and the Carthusian motifs, it is precisely the stylistic features of the carvings that allow this relief to be compared to the workshop of Baldassarre Embriachi, establishing itself as an artifact of good quality. The slightly square faces of St. James, the Virgin and St. Anthony the Abbot, with minute features, elongated eyes, small and close nose and mouth, or even the hair in parallel striae that draw the volume of the ear, or finally the draperies resolved with few and severe folds, they can in fact be punctually approached to the production that came out of the shop.

Similar altars were intended for private devotion and constitute a good part of the common production of the Embriachi. Small in size and of discontinuous quality, these triptychs show decidedly serial aspects in the processing, with constant shapes and sizes (the average height about 30 cm), a restricted selection of subjects and saints, an indication of a high organization of the shop, capable of offering the market already processed products, with little margin for customization and probably at a low cost. As well highlighted by Elena Merlini, the Embriachi workshop produced numerous altars of similar layout and dimensions, with the Virgin among Saints or the Crucifixion carved in the central panel (see Merlini 1991, pp. 56-62). For example, among those of better workmanship and similar to the triptych in question, two tritici in the Galleria Cini in Venice (M. Tomasi in *La Galleria di Palazzo Cini* 2016, pp. 274-277, nos. 68-69), one in the collections of the Castello Sforzesco in Milan (Zastrow 1978, pp. 35-36, n. 49), or one of the Victoria and Albert Museum (G. Davies, in Williamson, Davies 2014, II, pp. 780-8781, n. 259).

A triptych in the Diocesan Museum of Lleida, albeit not in good condition, is strictly comparable to this one for the use of the ornaments, the triloba arch above the Madonna and even for the same selection of saints in the lateral doors that show somatic characters and garments almost superimposable to the two saints in the triptych in question, so much so as to suggest the presence of repertoires or models used in the workshop (see M. Rodríguez Cano in *Cofres de amor* 2007, pp. 96-97).

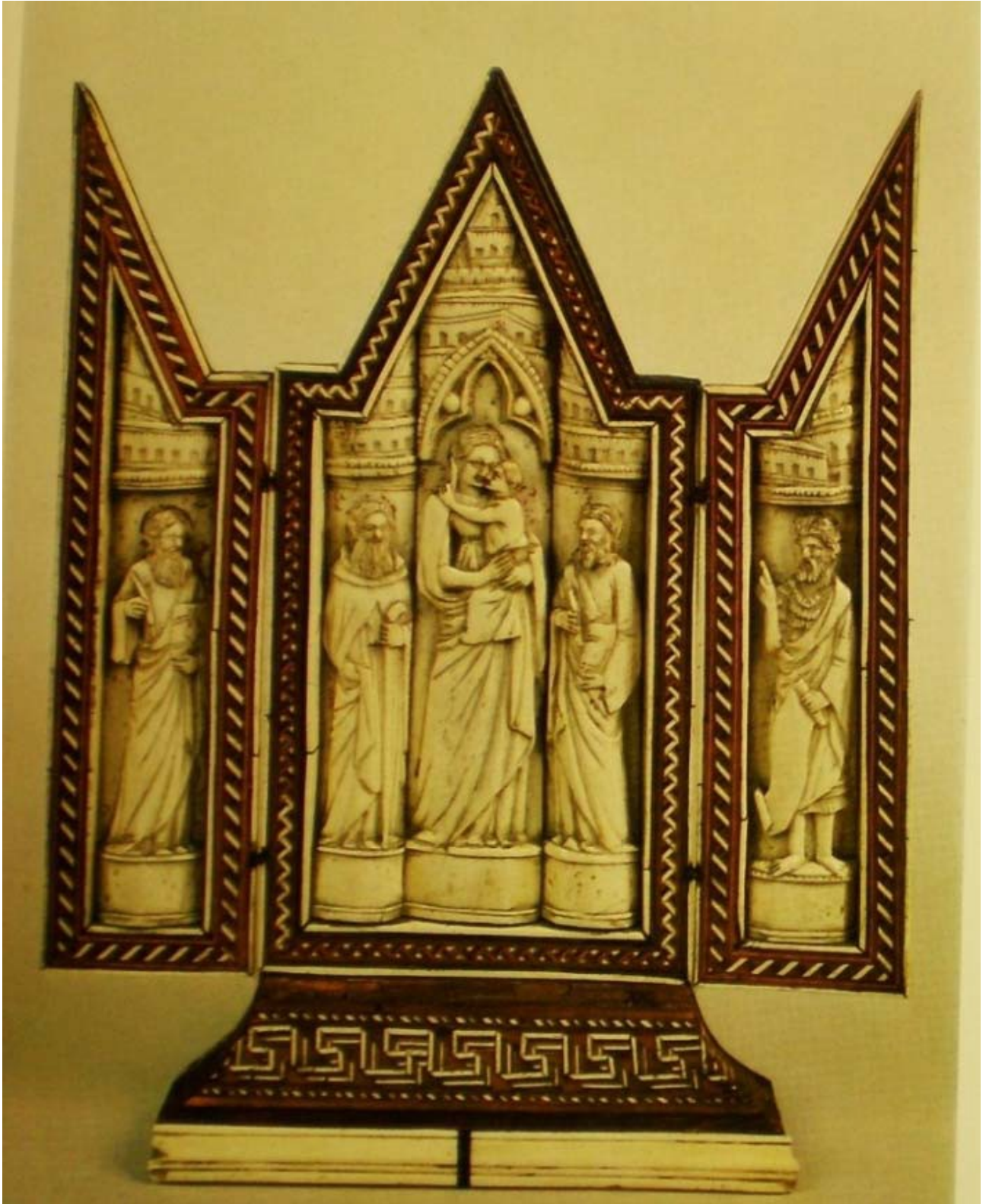
This triptych is distinguished by the presence of pictorial decorations on the outside of the doors: here you can see two angels facing each other, in monochrome on a red background, with their wings extending into the cusp of the doors and their arms folded over the chest. Usually the triptychs with a register have simple decorations on the outside of the doors in imitation marble or with a radiant sun, as can be seen in an example of the Castello Sforzesco in Milan and in one of the Galleria Cini in Venice (see Zastrow 1978, pp. 35-36, n. 49; M. Tomasi in *La Galleria di Palazzo Cini* 2016, pp. 276-277, n. 69). Figurative decorations with angels are instead found on monumental triptychs and two registers, with greater narrative development, such as that of the Bargello Museum or that of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore (Randall 1985, pp. 236-237, n. 356, for that of the Bargello and other examples see B. Chiesi, in *Gli ivori* 2018, pp. 339-343, n. IX.4). The paintings on the outside of these triptychs have been combined, at least for the definition of the original compositional model, with the circles of Rossello by Jacopo Franchi, a painter active from the second decade of the fifteenth century (Tomasi 2007; Tomasi 2010, pp. 77-83).

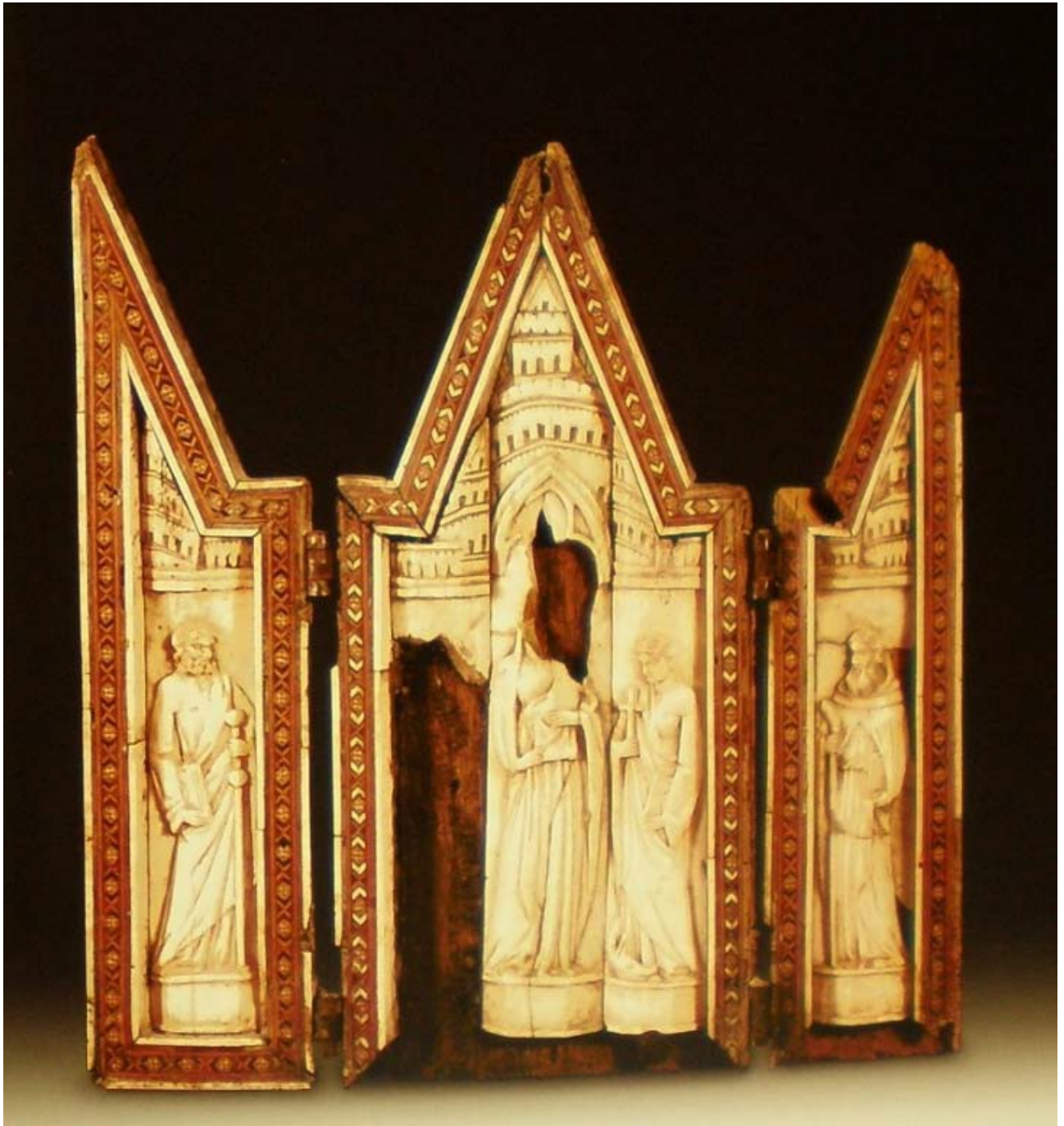
The figures on this triptych have less slender proportions and less elegant workmanship than those mentioned above, but nevertheless refer to the same chronological height, which can be placed within the first quarter of the 15th century. Another small triptych (h 34 cm) with a single register, with the doors painted with two angels in monochrome was sold by Sotheby's in 2019 (Sotheby's,

Old Master Sculpture & Works of Art, 2 July 2019 lot. 12) : these few specimens known up to now attest to an interesting hybrid typology within the rigid repertoire of the Embriachi workshop, where the small size of the altarpiece is nevertheless combined with a pictorial decoration usually destined for larger and more valuable artifacts.

- *Dr. Benedetta Chiesi*

Comparison photos









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