

Benifacio Bembo c. 1444–1477 | Italian



Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian

TABLE OF CONTENTS



Painting Overview.....	3
Literature	5
Museum Comparables	19

Tempera on panel | Circa 1454-1458

Panel: 14 7/8" high x 11 3/4" wide | 37.78 x 29.85 cm

Frame: 15 1/2" high x 12 3/8" wide x 1/2" deep

39.37 x 30.43 x 1.27 cm

OVERVIEW

These exceptionally rare early Renaissance panels of Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian are an extraordinary new discovery.

Based on the research of art historians Marco Tanzi and Andrea de Marchi, it is believed that these represent the missing panels from the famed polyptych formerly displayed on the altar of the Chapel of San Nicola da Tolentino in the Church of Sant'Agostino in Cremona, Italy. To find two matching early Renaissance panels outside of a museum or church, particularly in such remarkable condition, is an extraordinary rarity.

The central and left-sided panels of the original five-part polyptych are currently in the collection of the Museo Civico Ala Ponzzone in Cremona. These panels have luckily remained intact, and respectively portray the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Angels and Donor*, *Saint Nicholas of Tolentino* (the chapel's namesake) and *Saint George*.

While the present panels have since been reduced, that they belong to the Cremonese altarpiece is confirmed by a number of stylistic elements. All five panels contain the same rich decorative arabesque pattern on their stamped gold background, while the figures' knurled haloes are identical in both their fineness of line and use of perspective. The proportions of the figures coincide perfectly; Saints Cosmas and Damian would have originally also been depicted as full-length figures, fitting into the vertical, Gothic style of the altarpiece.

According to the Christian religion, Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian were 3rd century physicians born in Arabia. Little is known about their lives except that they were reputedly twin brothers and that they were martyred in Syria during the persecution of Emperor Diocletian. It was believed that the saints were skilled in healing, and when their medicines failed, their faith and prayers could always perform miracles. Thus, the saints are often depicted with their medical equipment while wearing the traditional medieval doctor's garb of crimson robes and distinctive round red hats.

The saints are similarly depicted in the present panels, though considering the manner in which they have been cut, their medical tools are not immediately evident. The saints were highly popular as patrons of wealthy families during the Gothic and Renaissance eras, particularly the

Medici, and thus they occur frequently in art from the era. The twins, for instance, are found in the famed San Marco Altarpiece by Fra Angelico in the San Marco Museum (Florence), as well as in a set of Medici panels crafted by Filippo Lippi currently in the collection of the National Gallery (London).

Along with the remainder of the Cremonese altarpiece, these present panels have been attributed to the Northern Italian Renaissance painter Bonifacio Bembo. Active in Cremona throughout the 15th century, he would have been a natural choice for the construction of the altarpiece, which was to be part of a new chapel dedicated to San Nicola da Tolentino in the church of Sant'Agostino in Cremona. The Cavalcabò chapel, which is also in the Sant'Agostino, is similarly attributed to him. Several other of his works can be found in museums and churches throughout Italy and beyond, including the Pinacoteca di Brera (Milan), Denver Museum of Art, and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (Paris), among others. ●



PROVENANCE

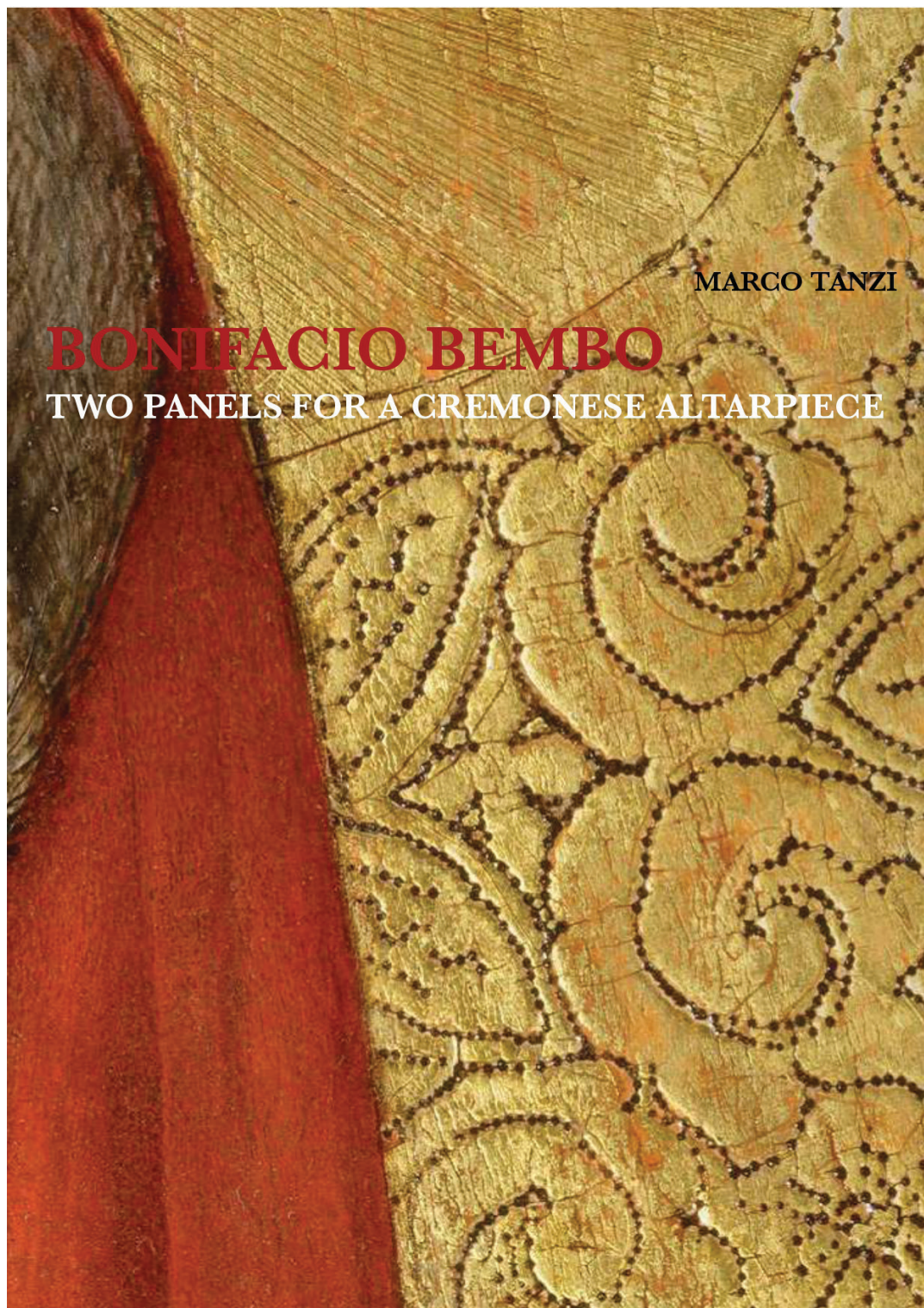
Private Collection, London

M.S. Rau, New Orleans

LITERATURE

Marco Tanzi, *Two panels for a Cremonese Altarpiece*, Torino, 2017





MARCO TANZI

BONIFACIO BEMBO
TWO PANELS FOR A CREMONESE ALTARPIECE

Marco Tanzi, *Two panels for a Cremonese Altarpiece*, Torino, 2017





1. Bonifacio Bembo, *Saint Cosmas*, 1454 -1460 circa. Private collection.

Marco Tanzi, *Two panels for a Cremonese Altarpiece*, Torino, 2017





2. Bonifacio Bembo, *Saint Damian*, 1454 -1460 circa. Private collection.

Marco Tanzi, *Two panels for a Cremonese Altarpiece*, Torino, 2017



BONIFACIO BEMBO

Cremona, documented from the 2nd of May 1444 to the 25th of February 1477; deceased by the 3rd of May 1482

Saint Cosmas

1454-1460 circa

Panel, 39 x 31,3 cm

Saint Damian

1454-1460 circa

Panel, 39,4 x 31,4 cm

In September 2016, I was able to examine these two small 15th century panels with half-length figures of *Saints Cosmas* (figs. 1, 8, 21) and *Damian* (figs. 2, 10, 17) and the fact that they belonged to the “civiltà degli ori lombardi” was immediately apparent to me: for someone who has spent a lifetime studying this topic, it was not difficult to recognise the fragments on the right side (as you observe it) of a five-part altarpiece of which the Museo Civico “Ala Ponzzone” of Cremona holds the central part and the two left-hand panels (inv. 27-29) which respectively portray the *Madonna and Child enthroned, Angels and Donor* (fig. 3), *Saint Nicholas of Tolentino* (fig. 5) and *Saint George* (fig. 4).¹ In spite of their present partial condition due to the extensive re-sectioning of the original panels which resulted in the almost total disappearance of the iconographical attributes which traditionally identify the Anàrgiri saints, they remain recognisable, though not singly so, thanks to the particularly sumptuous elegance of their clothes, with precious materials, damasks and elegant fur inserts; and because of the remains, albeit partial, of the instruments which identify their medical profession: the little vase in which to collect urine and the scalpel or stylo in the hands of the Saint dressed in pink.

Apart from stylistic characteristics, the hypothesis that they belong to the Cremonese altarpiece is confirmed by the rich decorative design of the arabesque-patterned and stamped gold ground and their knurled haloes, also in gold, finely traced with lines which irradiate in an “almost perspectival” way, from the centre outwards; identical in all panels. *Saint Nicholas of Tolentino* and *Saint George* are full-length figures, as were *Saint Cosmas* and *Saint Damian* originally, but they are decidedly in a more precarious state than the two cut panels which, from many points of view, are in prodigiously good condition; the Cremonese panels are both worn and heavily repainted, as is the central panel of the *Madonna and Child enthroned with Angels and kneeling Donor*; Pinin Brambilla Barcilon has pointed out, moreover, how the latter has been widened on both outer sides and rounded off in the upper area at some unknown date.² Originally, therefore, the entire frame of the altarpiece would have been more vertical, more Gothic in style, which gives greater effect to the way that the saints are firmly anchored in space, already tending, as they do, towards that “Rinascimento umbratile” magically evoked by Roberto Longhi as the specific expressive key to a precise moment of passage of Italian figurative art between the Gothic and the Renaissance, which Federico Zeri was to alternatively call the “Pseudo Rinascimento”.

It has already been suggested, not wholly correctly though, that the three panel paintings in the Pinacoteca of Cremona might have been executed for the Church of Sant’Agostino, having been commissioned by Agnese Stanga, the noble protagonist of the cultural and artistic events regarding

¹ For reproductions and a brief “appetizer” on the positions of critics with regard to the three panels, to be discussed at greater length in note 7, see M. Marubbi, in *La Pinacoteca Ala Ponzzone. Dal Duecento al Quattrocento*, edited by M. Marubbi, Cinisello Balsamo 2004, pp. 173-176, n. 50; Idem, in *Arte lombarda dai Visconti agli Sforza*, exhibition catalogue, edited by M. Natale, S. Romano, Milan 2015, pp. 290-291, n. IV.13; and M. Tanzi, in “*quelle carte de triumphs che se fanno a Cremona*”. *I tarocchi dei Bembo. Dal cuore del Ducato di Milano alle corti delle valli del Po*, exhibition catalogue, edited by S. Bandera, M. Tanzi, Milan 201, pp. 82-85, n. 10.

² P. Brambilla Barcilon, A. Zanni, *Integrazioni, rifacimenti, manomissioni: il fascino ambiguo del restauro*, in *Pittura Italiana dal '300 al '500*, edited by M. Natale, Milan 1991, pp. 28-29, figs. 13-14.

the building in the years of passage between the end of the 14th century and the mid 15th century.³ In the light of the rediscovery of the two fragments, together with the re-examination of documents relating to the altars of the Temple of the Hermits at Cremona – which I analysed for the most part several years ago with the assistance of Elisabetta Filippini in order to reconstruct the context of the painting of the *Triptych of the Conception*, showing *The Meeting of Joachim and Anna at the Golden Gate with the Prophet Eliseo and Saint Nicholas of Tolentino*, the *Coronation of Christ and the Virgin by God the Father* and *The Adoration of the Magi*, distributed between the Cremona Pinacoteca (inv.40) and the Denver Art Museum (inv. 1957.166-167) – I believe that the original location of the ancona may be said, with only a slight margin for error, to have been finally established.

Let us briefly summarise the question by considering the documents pertaining to it in chronological order:

- In a first will, dated January 15th 1399, Agnese Stanga, wife of Gaffarino (Gasparino) Barbò and evidently still young since she is referred to as Agnesina (“little Agnese”), gave instructions for the construction and fitting out of the Chapel and of the altar of Saints Cosmas and Damian, on which a “pulchra tabula” was to be placed.⁴

- In the following and last will and testament dated May 12th 1426, Agnese established the building of the Chapel devoted to the Madonna delle Grazie and the decoration of the altar with an ancona of several panels, “ad similitudinem et formam tabule existentis ad altare sancti Augustini constructi in dicta ecclesia”. The Chapel of the Grazie was the second on the south nave (which was subsequently occupied by the 17th century stucco *Calvary* by Giovanni Battista Barberini, 1666): there was probably once a stone inscription walled in there, now missing, dating to the 1st of October 1432, which testified to its erection on the part of Agnese, widow of Gaffarino, according to the last will and testament of her father, Francesco Stanga.⁵

- In 1454, the name Madonna delle Grazie was officially replaced by that of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, thenceforth solemnly celebrated with an annual oblation paid by the Ducal Lieutenant Francesco Visconti and representatives of the city. From that time on, the Chapel fell under the patronage of the Strada family: the daughter and heir of Agnese Stanga and Gaffarino Barbò, Antonia Barbò, in fact, married Musso Strada from Pavia and, by him, had two sons, Ruffino and Gaffarino Strada. The change in the dedication of the Chapel is further corroborated by Antonia’s will, dated July 23rd 1458, in which, apart from leaving everything to her two sons, she left a legacy of twenty Imperial Lire to the Chapel of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, in accordance with the legacy already established by her mother, Agnese Stanga, in her will of 1426. Another document of the 21st of November 1502 registers the agreements made between the Noble Gaffarino Strada, son of the late Musso, and the heirs of his brother Ruffino. It reveals Gaffarino’s intention to modify the Chapel of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, recorded as having been expressly built by the then deceased Agnese Stanga, mother of Antonia Barbò. When Bishop Speciano visited it in 1600 the Chapel was recorded as “satis ampla et picturis ornata”.⁶

³ M. Marubbi, *Una revisione delle presenze bembesche in S. Agostino a Cremona sulla soglia dell’Osservanza e oltre*, in *Società, cultura, luoghi al tempo di Ambrogio da Calepio*, Acts of the Conference edited by M. Mencaroni Zoppetti and E. Gennaro, Bergamo 2005, pp. 280-281. On Agnese: I. Stanga, *La famiglia Stanga di Cremona*, Milan 1895, Plate IV.

⁴ M. Tanzi, *Arcigoticissimo Bembo. Bonifacio in Sant’Agostino e in Duomo a Cremona*, Milan 2011, pp. 30-31; L. Bellingeri, *Cremona e il gotico ‘perduto’: il caso di Sant’Agostino*, in ‘Prospettiva’, 83-84, 1996, p. 158, nota 43; E. Filippini, “*Ad maximum ornamentum ecclesie fundaverunt capellam et altarem*”. *Le élites cittadine cremonesi e gli ordini mendicanti (secoli XIII-XV)*, in *Famiglie e spazi sacri nella Lombardia del Rinascimento*, edited by L. Arcangeli, G. Chittolini, F. Del Tredici, E. Rossetti, Milan 2015, pp. 66, 81-82.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ibidem*; see also *Artisti, committenti, opere e luoghi. Arte e architettura a Cremona negli atti dei notai (1440-1468)*, edited by V. Leoni and M. Visioli, Pisa 2012, pp. 130-131, n. 338; E. Chittò, *Note per la storia del convento di Sant’Agostino di Cremona e i rapporti con l’Osservanza di Lombardia*, in ‘Insula Fulcheria’, XLIII, 2013, pp. 175-176;

Thus, an important ambience, for a certain length of time dedicated to the Marian cult, was then dedicated instead to Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, a new great saint of the Order and the most highly regarded after Saint Augustine, just a few years after his canonisation in 1446. His importance, in iconographic choices, is underlined by the position of the Saint from the Marche within the ancona as a whole: in fact he appears directly to the right of the Virgin (to the left for the onlooker). The two patron saints of medicine, on the other hand - to whom the donor's family were particularly devoted at least after 1399 - are portrayed on the opposite side. If the date of Antonia Barbò Strada's will (23rd July 1458) could be taken as the *terminus post quem* for the execution of the altarpiece, I believe that a more probable chronology would coincide with the inauguration of the Chapel under its new name of the Chapel of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, in 1545.

As for the question of the authorship of the three Ala Ponzone panels, it has been extensively analysed since it became the object of discussion for almost a century and a half, and it is worthwhile to record the various positions in a bibliographical footnote.⁷ To summarise, however, from the original three

Eadem, *Il convento di Sant'Agostino di Cremona in una fonte bergamasca del Seicento*, in 'Bollettino Storico Cremonese', XIX, 2013-2014, p. 289.

⁷ The first to attribute the work to Bonifacio Bembo were J. A. Crowe and G. B. Cavalcaselle in *A History of Painting in North Italy* [1871], edited by T. Borenius, I-III, London 1912, III, pp. 330-331, note 2. At the start of the 20th century, a guide book to the city refers to the work as "Venetian School" (*Guida di Cremona illustrata*, Cremona 1903, p. 46, n. 160-162); while Bonifacio's name was reiterated by Adolfo Venturi, *Storia dell'arte italiana*, VII, I, Milan 1911, p. 288. Pietro Toesca, *La pittura e la miniatura nella Lombardia. Dai più antichi monumenti alla metà del Quattrocento*, Milan 1912, pp. 572-576, figs. 474-475, changed the attribution to that of Bonifacio's brother, Benedetto, on the basis of analogies with works in the Castle of Torchiara: the altarpiece, signed and dated 1462 (now in the Castello Sforzesco, inv. 556), whose "Cremona triptych dates to a considerably earlier period"; and the decoration of the *Camera d'Oro*, executed between 1460 and 1463 (the attribution to Benedetto was made by C. Ricci, *Castello di Torrechiara. La Sala d'Oro*, in 'Arte italiana decorativa e industriale', III, 1894, pp. 7-9). Mario Salmi, *Un nuovo Benedetto Bembo in 'Dedalo'*, VII, 1926-1927, pp. 43-50, accepts the paternity of Benedetto for the panels, which, however, he dated later than the altarpiece - passed into the collection of Elia Volpi in Palazzo Davanzati in Florence - and also assigned to his hand, the *Flight into Egypt* in San Michele in Cremona. Alfredo Puerari, *La Pinacoteca di Cremona*, Firenze 1951, pp. 46-47, nn. 59-61, dates the panels to 1470-1475; they were shown to the public in 1958 in the exhibition organised by Longhi on *Arte lombarda dai Visconti agli Sforza* after restoration by Mauro Pelliccioli: for F. Mazzini (in *Arte lombarda dai Visconti agli Sforza*, exhibition catalogue, Milan 1958, pp. 86-87, nn. 263-265) they should be dated at least a decade after 1462. M. L. Ferrari, *Corollari bembeschi* [1971], in *Studi di Storia dell'arte*, edited by A. Boschetto, Florence 1979, pp. 183-194, sustains that Benedetto was the author of the frescoes in the small chapel of the Castle of Monticelli d'Ongina, attributed at the time of the rediscovery to Bonifacio. It is my charge to point out how, in the everything but homogeneous corpus of works given to Benedetto at that time, only the signed ancona in the Castello Sforzesco can really be assigned to him, together with a *Madonna of Humility and music-playing Angels now in the Museo Lia in La Spezia* (inv. 230) and a *Madonna and Child enthroned with Angels* in the Museo Canonico in Verona (inv. D3); the other paintings are not his (M. Tanzi, *Un capolavoro cremonese negli Stati Uniti*, in 'Provincia Nuova', XVI, 1986, I, pp. 12-13; Idem, *Ipotesi per Paolo Antonio de Scazoli. Aspetti della pittura cremonese nel secondo Quattrocento*, in 'Itinerari', V, 1988, pp. 94-101; Idem, *Fra Quattro e Cinquecento: un crocevia culturale al centro della valle Padana*, in *Pittura a Cremona dal Romanico al Settecento*, edited by M. Gregori, Cinisello Balsamo 1990, pp. 13-18). In excluding the three panels, certain that they cannot be attributed to Benedetto, I shall recall some rather hazardous attributions: I was uncertain between Francesco Tacconi and Bonifacio Bembo, because, up to 1992, I still could not precisely define the physiognomy of Bonifacio's style. Meanwhile, illustrious connoisseurs continue to attribute the heterogeneous nucleus of works to Benedetto Bembo (M. Natale *La pittura in Lombardia nel secondo Quattrocento*, in *La pittura in Italia. Il Quattrocento*, Milan 1987, I, p. 83; M. Boskovits, in *Arte in Lombardia tra Gotico e Rinascimento*, exhibition catalogue, Milan 1988, p. 182); only Sandrina Bandera Bistoletti (*Il Tardogotico: 1370-1470*, in *Pittura a Cremona* cit., pp. 12, 236-237; cfr. and M. Gregori, *Introduzione*, ivi, p. XIII) grasped my reluctance and proposed the label of "Workshop of the Bembo", with a cautious leaning towards the name of Girolamo Bembo and the possible Augustinian provenance. Pinin Brambilla Barcilon restored the paintings at the beginning of the 1990s (Cfr. *supra*, note 3) together with the *Madonna and Child enthroned and Two Angels in the Pinacoteca* (inv. 30); in 1992, I identified this latter as the panel executed by Bonifacio Bembo in 1464-1467 for the high altar of the Cathedral in Cremona. Thus I was able to emerge from the *impasse* of attribution and to look at the three panels in a different light (M. Tanzi, in L. Bellingeri, M. Tanzi, *Bonifacio Bembo dalla Cattedrale al Museo di Cremona*, Brescia 1992, p. 39, n. 7). While still unable to definitively find a name for their author, I referred them to the "Cremona Master", adding them to the homogeneous nucleus which included a good part of the frescoes in Monticelli d'Ongina, the *Flight into Egypt* of San Michele in Cremona, the small Acton triptych in Florence, (inv. XLVIII. A.11.), attributed to Bonifacio by Roberto Longhi ("*Me pinxit*" *La restituzione di un trittico d'arte cremonese*

Marco Tanzi, *Two panels for a Cremonese Altarpiece*, Torino, 2017



attributions, we are now left with just two: the first, in the wake of Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle attributes the work to Bonifacio Bembo, and the second, which I myself warmly sustained in recent years, refers to another member of the painter's family from Cremona, author of the frescoes in the *Camera d'Oro* (the "Golden Room") of Torchiara, and of part of those of the Pallavicino Castle of Monticelli d'Ongina artist, which I called "the Master of Monticelli" and suggested that he could be identified with Girolamo, the former's only brother whose *oeuvre* lacks a firm foundation. The attribution to Benedetto Bembo has now been definitely abandoned. This attribution was originally made in 1912 by Pietro Toesca and accompanied the three panels in the second room of the museum set up in the Post Second World War period by Alfredo Puerari. This was how I first encountered the

circa il 1460 (Bonifacio Bembo)[1928], in *"Me pinxit" e Quesiti caravaggeschi. 1928-1934*, Florence 1968, p. 66); highlighting the analogies between this group and the frescoes in Torchiara. In the same year, 1992, Andrea De Marchi, *Gentile da Fabriano. Un viaggio nella pittura italiana alla fine del gotico*, Milan 1992, p. 107, note 10, gives his account of Bonifacio Bembo, attributing the three panels to him. In the following years, I reiterated my position in various occasions (M. Tanzi, in *Galleria Nazionale di Parma. Catalogo delle opere dall'Antico al Cinquecento*, edited by L. Fornari Schianchi, Milano 1997, pp. 94-95, n. 90; Idem, in *Museo d'Arte Antica del Castello Sforzesco. Pinacoteca*. Vol. 1, Milan 1997, pp. 114-121, n. 58; Idem, in *Il Gotico a Piacenza. Maestri e botteghe tra Emilia e Lombardia*, exhibition catalogue, edited by P. Ceschi Lavagetto and A. Gigli, Milan 1998, pp. 190-192, n. 37; Idem, *Riflessioni sul Quattrocento a Cremona*, in *Studi e bibliografie 6*, 'Annali della Biblioteca Statale e Libreria Civica di Cremona', LII, 2000, pp. 151-158), adding other works to the group – the monochrome green earth paintings formerly at Monticelli, in the National Gallery of Parma, (inv. 1535/1-5); the *antelle* of a small triptych in a private collection in Turin; the *Nativity* formerly in the Frascione Collection – which are significantly close to the *Camera d'Oro*. We can discern here, if not one precise hand, at least the unifying presence of the same workshop, clearly related to the Bembo style: I baptised the author the 'Master of Monticelli', and suggested that, in him, we may find the only brother for whom we lack a sure basis on which to found his *oeuvre*, that is to say Girolamo. The first to assign the authorship of the *Camera d'oro* and the three panels *tout court* to 'Girolamo Bembo' in 1994 was P. P. Mendogni in *La camera d'oro e gli altri affreschi*, in G. Capelli, P. P. Mendogni, *Il Castello di Torchiara. Storia, architettura, dipinti*, Parma 1994, pp. 111-126; while for Gianni Romano, *Vincenzo Foppa: gli anni di formazione* [2003], in *Rinascimento in Lombardia. Foppa, Zenale, Leonardo, Bramantino*, Milan 2011, p. 68, the Master of Monticelli is the author of the Cremona paintings: he dates them to the seventies, in a context articulated between Lombardy and Liguria, a context still missing many component pieces. Mario Marubbi began to study the question of the Bembo with oscillating attributions of the Ala Ponzone panels: in 1997 he referred them to the 'Circle of the Bembo' (M. Marubbi, *I Bembo e la cultura artistica cremonese nella seconda metà del Quattrocento*, in *Cremona – Museo Civico Ala Ponzone. Origine e Collezioni*, edited by V. Guazzoni, Cremona 1997, p. 82); the following year, they are "maybe [by] Ambrogio Bembo" (M. Marubbi, *La cappella di Carlo Pallavicino a Monticelli d'Ongina*, in *L'Oro e la Porpora. Le arti a Lodi nel tempo del vescovo Pallavicino (1456-1497)*, exhibition catalogue, edited by M. Marubbi, Cinisello Balsamo 2003); in the new catalogue of the Pinacoteca, of 2004, he turns to the 'Master of Monticelli (Bonifacio Bembo?)' (M. Marubbi, in *La Pinacoteca* cit., pp. 173-176, n. 50); in 2005 he alternates between 'A painter in the manner of the Bembo' (M. Marubbi, *Una revisione* cit., pp. 280-281) to 'Ambience of Bonifacio Bembo (the Master of Monticelli)' (M. Marubbi, in *Immagine e mistero. Il sole il libro il giglio. Iconografia di san Nicola da Tolentino nell'arte italiana al XIV al XX secolo*, exhibition catalogue, edited by M. Giannatiempo López, Milan 2005, p. 48, n. 12). His most recent point of arrival is 'Bonifacio Bembo' (M. Marubbi, *Pittori, opere e committenze dall'apogeo dell'età viscontea alla fine della signoria sforzesca*, in *Storia di Cremona. Il Quattrocento. Cremona nel Ducato di Milano (1395-1535)*, edited by G. Chittolini, Azzano San Paolo 2008, p. 312; however, on pp. 316-317, the frescoes of Monticelli are assigned to the 'Master of Monticelli (Girolamo Bembo?)'; Idem, in *Arte lombarda* cit., pp. 290-291, n. IV.13). For Marubbi the three panels are elements of an *ancona* commissioned by Agnese Stanga in 1426 for the altar of the *Madonna delle Grazie* in Sant'Agostino in Cremona. Paola Castellini, *Per i Bembo pittori. Nuove ipotesi di ricerca*, in 'Bollettino Storico Cremonese', x, 2003, p. 114, accepts in part my reconstruction of the Master of Monticelli. In 2004, she cautiously suggested that, given the importance accorded to the pictorial complex of Nicola da Tolentino, a solution to the problem of their original location, still in Sant'Agostino, could be in the Chapel dedicated in 1454 to the Saint from the Marches, which, during the visit of Bishop Speciano in 1600, was revealed to be the patron saint of the Strada: at the time I was unaware that the Chapel of the *Madonna delle Grazie* was destined, in 1554, to change its denomination and become the Chapel of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino: (M. Tanzi, *Bonifacio Bembo massacrato (ovvero le disavventure della Storia dell'arte)*, in 'Prospettiva', 115-116, 2004, pp. 128, 134, notes 12 and 73; Idem, *Arcigoticissimo* cit., 2011, pp. 47-50; Idem, in *"quelle carte"* cit., pp. 82-85, n. 10, with some further additions to the Master's *oeuvre*). P. Castellini, *Affreschi bembeschi nella pieve di Santa Maria a Quinzano d'Oglio*, in *Il più dolce lavorare che sia. Mélanges en l'honneur de Mauro Natale*, edited by F. Elsig, N. Etienne, G. Extermann, Cinisello Balsamo 2009, p. 223, finds a likeness between the face of *Saint George* and the portrait of a donor in an interesting mural painting in the Parish Church of the Nativity of the Virgin at Quinzano d'Oglio, which she attributed to a 'Painter in the manner of the Bembo (Girolamo Bembo?)' because of the similarities, which she believed to have discovered, with the already cited *Madonna and Child enthroned with two Angels* in Cremona (on which, cfr. M. Tanzi *Arcigoticissimo* cit., pp. 89-129).

Marco Tanzi, *Two panels for a Cremonese Altarpiece*, Torino, 2017



works, when I was still a boy, and how they continued to be recognised for most of the 20th century, until I raised doubts about it in the 1980s.

The very high quality and remarkable state of conservation of the two fragments compared to the long standing disastrous state of repair and the wear of the three Cremona panels, must lead to a radical rethinking of a problem that, although looked at from numerous angles over three decades, now demands new solutions, especially in relation to the extraordinary cycle of frescoes on the far wall of the Church of Saint Omobono in Cremona. The exceptional discovery, made at the turn of the millennium, of these frescoes of almost overpowering beauty (though unfinished for some unknown reason), has not yet benefited from adequate research: not only from the stylistic point of view, but above all from that of their remarkable quality and the way they may be said to be pictorially *à la page*. Other scholars have already drawn their own conclusions about them, but, in the past, I felt unable to share them for various reasons: the moment has now come to do so, paying tribute to the authors of those proposals, underlining, it hardly needs to be said, the importance of this decorative cycle not only for figurative art in Cremona in the mid-15th century, but for the destiny of the greatest *Tardogotico* art in Valpadana.⁸ Though fragmentary, the decoration is very beautiful: at the centre is portrayed a *Madonna and Child enthroned between an armoured Saint and Saint Omobono presenting the Donor* (fig. 6); to the left may be seen an element of architecture, perhaps a rostrum, with part of the upper area missing, with two Saints at the sides, portrayed on a bigger scale than the characters in civilian dress at their feet (the legs of the one on the left may be observed, while the figure on the right appears to be a Bishop, perhaps Egidio); finally, on the far right, the scene is too severely damaged to be interpreted with any certainty. There are strong Gothic connotations in the throne but also a marked graphicness in the portraits and the diluted influence of Michelino or, rather, the falling folds of the Virgin's robe more closely recall the sculpture of Jacopino da Tradate – and a splendid horse which has nothing to lose in comparison with Pisanello's heraldic cavalcades. Masonry works in the Church, carried out under Filippo Bellintendo, date from 1449: a suitable *terminus post quem* for the fresco decoration, which may also be substantiated by other factors.⁹ In 1455, a certain Master Giovanni Antonio executed a gonfalon for the Consortium of Saint Omobono, while, the following year, a certain Battista Muson was employed in painting a work on panel to be placed above the arch of Saint Omobono.¹⁰ The frescoes in the choir should probably be dated to a period closer to these pictorial decorations, around the mid-sixties: their immediate influence was inherited by the Augustinian triptych. It is the excellent condition of the two newly discovered small panels that allows us to appreciate those specific characteristics of technique and execution that could not be adequately analysed in the severely damaged panels in the Ala Ponzone Collection. While bearing in mind the diversity of the supports, a comparison between some of the faces in the mural painting in Cremona and those of the Virgin and the donor, reveals an identical layer of paint with that of Saints Cosmas and Damian: close photographic comparisons will speak much louder than words in this respect (figs. 7, 8, 9 e 10).

⁸ I have illustrated part of the decoration in M. Tanzi, *Bonifacio Bembo* cit., p. 123, figs. 11-12, 15, 19; cfr. also G. Voltini, in *La Pinacoteca* cit., 2004, p. 168, where a dating of 1445-1450 is proposed which, however, seems to me to be a little early. At first M. Marubbi, *ivi*, pp. 162, 176, retained that it was strictly connected with the Master of Monticelli, author of the three panels in the Pinacoteca (inv. 27-29). Subsequently, (M. Marubbi, *Pittori, opere e committenze dall'apogeo dell'età viscontea alla fine della signoria sforztesca*, in *Storia di Cremona. Il Quattrocento. Cremona nel Ducato di Milano (1395-1535)*, edited by G. Chittolini, Azzano San Paolo 2008, pp. 310-312), he assigned it totally, together with the three panels, to Bonifacio's *oeuvre*, discovering in it "some opening towards the cosmopolitan ambience of Borso" and "a precocious awareness of the revolution brought about by Vincenzo Foppa in revelation (of form) through strength of light", with the *Madonna* who reflects "some interest in the *Muses* by Belfiore, and, in particular, with the *Thalia* of Michele Panonio".

⁹ G. Voltini, *La prima chiesa di Sant'Omobono: architettura e fonti storiche*, in *Omobono. La figura del santo nell'iconografia – secoli XIII-XIX*, exhibition catalogue, edited by P. Bonometti, Cinisello Balsamo 1999, p. 138.

¹⁰ L. Bellingeri, *Per una storia delle raccolte*, in *Devozione e carità. Il patrimonio artistico delle Istituzioni Pubbliche di Assistenza e Beneficenza di Cremona*, edited by L. Bellingeri, 'Annali della Biblioteca Statale e Libreria Civica di Cremona', LIII, 2001, pp. 45-47.

It seems very likely that, in the wake of these impressive works, Bonifacio Bembo was caught up in a whirlwind of prestigious commissions far from Cremona: firstly in the Cathedral of Reggio Emilia, then, at the Duke's command, in Pavia to restore the big hall of the Castle and, after that, in Milan in the Arengo Court.¹¹ Speaking of Bonifacio, and laying aside all polemics for the moment, while gathering all possible good will, I do not believe that one should lightly discard (as has so often been the case) the fundamental problem of the *Madonna and Child enthroned with two angels*, in the Cremona Pinacoteca (inv. 30) (fig. 11), executed for the main altar of the Cathedral, and of Her blue mantle, executed by Boccaccio Boccaccino nel 1507.¹² At least, one should not do so without taking into account the burden of scientific proof that is both substantiated and convincing. It is an obstacle as crucial as it is inescapable to which, after a quarter of a century, I have still not yet received on the part of those who disagree with my opinion, answers that are minimally satisfactory, as to the precise merit of the proposal: I do not believe, honestly, that it is admissible to try to get away with "it is a question of an honest (or rather modest) painting by Girolamo Bembo with the mantle repainted at the beginning of the 19th century (and not certainly by Boccaccio Boccaccino) at the time the acquisition of the panel by the Marquis Ala Ponzone".¹³ An affirmation that, apart from showing a lack of common sense, demonstrates an unfortunate disregard for the correct application of the working instruments and methodology of an art historian, failing to use a critical eye, the principal resource of the connoisseur. As I have repeated many times before, and am sorry to do again, panel n°30 of the Pinacoteca constitutes an exceptional rarity for many reasons, in that the stylistic and documentary data, together with the results of technical analysis and the restoration undertaken by Pinin Brambilla Barillon at the beginning of the 1990s, all converge to demand, rather than suggest, a certain attribution. These elements most clearly affirm that that the painting was executed and *reconzato* (repaired) by Bonifacio Bembo in the 1470s for the high altar of the Cathedral, which was subject to two significant restorations, the first in 1507 by Boccaccio Boccaccino and the second in 1571 by Giulio Campi: this is the only certain work by Bonifacio Bembo and refusing to believe this is tantamount to burying one's head in the sand. Anyone wishing to tackle the Bembo question cannot simply bypass it with banal and/or specious statements or, even worse, get by with a *boutade*: this is neither the time nor the place for joking: on the contrary, mature, serious and sound answers are called for, substantiated by all the necessary evidence.

On closing this parenthesis, consequently, numerous others arise: the *Altarpiece of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino*, now attributed to Bonifacio Bembo and gravitating around the year 1454, is accompanied, inevitably, by several quite serious interrogatives, to which it is not so easy to give satisfactory answers. We were referring to mantles. Well, the *Madonna and Child enthroned with Angels and a Donor* n. 27, that at the centre of the now recomposed altarpiece, unlike that of n.30 the subject of the Boccaccino restoration (fig. 12), has a much more recently restored cloak, of much lower quality, despite appearances (fig. 13). It is a sort of heavy, arabesque-patterned caparison, with no sense of volume or depth, rendered flat by the hand of a superficial artist who was primarily concerned with

¹¹ The first to speak of these enterprises was Bonifacio himself in the well known letter addressed to Francesco Sforza at the turn of the 'Fifties ("model of human dignity" for R. Longhi, "Me pinxit" cit., p. 63) published by da F. Sacchi, *Notizie pittoriche cremonesi*, Cremona 1872, pp. 212-213; M. Caffi, *Di alcuni Maestri di arte nel secolo XV in Milano poco noti o male indicati*, in 'Archivio Storico Lombardo', v, 1878, pp. 83-85. For Bonifacio's activity in Reggio, documented in 1453 and 1456, see S. Buganza, *Intorno a Baldassarre d'Este e al suo soggiorno lombardo*, in 'Solchi', ix, 1-3, 2006, pp. 38-39, note 48. For his convocation on the part of the Duke to Pavia and the restoration of the rooms of the Castle, see instead: M. Caffi, *Il Castello di Pavia*, in 'Archivio Storico Lombardo', iii, 1876, pp. 551-553; F. Malaguzzi Valeri, *Pittori lombardi del Quattrocento*, Milan 1902, p. 99; for the cycle of the Arengo Court: F. Caglioti, *Francesco Sforza e il Filelfo, Bonifacio Bembo e "compagni": nove prosopopee inedite per il ciclo di antichi eroi ed eroine nella corte ducale dell'Arengo di Milano (1456-61 circa)*, in 'Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz', xxxviii, 2/3, 1994, pp. 183-217.

¹² L. Bellingeri, M. Tanzi, *Bonifacio Bembo* cit., pp. 5-23; M. Tanzi, *Bonifacio Bembo* cit., pp. 110-134; Idem, *Arcigoticissimo* cit., pp. 89-129.

¹³ M. Marubbi, in *Arte lombarda* cit., pp. 290-291, n. iv.13.



creating an exterior decorative effect with floral motifs *painted* on the reapplied gold that remained neither worked, nor engraved nor even punched.

Then there is another interrogative. How may the attribution to Bonifacio Bembo of the Augustinian altarpiece be conciliated with the badly damaged decoration of the *Camera d'Oro* at Torchiara, executed between 1460 and 1463, for an important patron like Pier Maria Rossi? Formerly in the pay of the last Visconti Filippo Maria, Rossi, who came from Parma, had given substantial military aid to Francesco Sforza, from the time that this latter re-conquered the former Visconti territories. Rossi is, indeed, an example of the cultural wealth of the great feudatory lords of Central and Northern Italy; like all the élite of the Visconti circle, he loved exterior signs of power and luxury, but he was also able to design his own image and power according to a strategy in accord with rising new authorities.¹⁴ He was Count of Berceto and Corniglio, Marquis of San Secondo, Lord of numerous castles in territories to the right bank of the Po River, such as Roccabianca and Torchiara, nominated *padre della patria* (father of the Nation) in Parma in 1447.

His mother, Giovanna Cavalcabò from Cremona, (daughter of the powerful Ugolino Lord of Cremona), who had married Pietro Rossi, Lord of Parma, played a not unimportant role in spreading the Bembo culture within the Rossi lands. Thanks to a legacy left to her and recorded on the 2nd of May 1447, Giovanna became the patroness of the Chapel founded by her father in the Church of Saint Augustine in Cremona.¹⁵ Although independent from the Duchy of Milan, the Parma territory was culturally tied to the dominion of the Sforza family, thanks also to the tie between the Rossi and the Cavalcabò.¹⁶ In 1443, in Parma, she commissioned the sculptor and painter Giovanni da Roma – active in Cremona in the Church of Saint Anthony Abbot and in the Ducal Chapel in Saint Augustine – to execute the decoration of the Chapel, no longer extant, that was dedicated to the Holy Cross (*Santa Croce*), built by her husband Pietro Rossi in the Church of Saint Anthony Abbot in Parma in memory of the pilgrimage to the Holy Land undertaken in 1413 with Niccolò III d'Este.¹⁷ Thanks to available descriptions, we can imagine that the mural decorations were a fantastic combination typical of Lombard gold grounds, in their splendour not unlike the Chapel of Saint Augustine in Cremona, resplendent with shiny applications in silvery tin.¹⁸ If we now allow the Cremonese altarpiece to be part of Bembo's *oeuvre*, we must not, however, exclude – and here we open up another path of research which will require further critical study – the stylistic judgements that, for over a century, associated it with the (originally splendid) decoration executed for Rossi. The irreparable damage in the majority of the areas with figures, including the portraits of Pier Maria Rossi (fig. 14) and Bianca Pellegrini d'Arluno (fig. 16), on the vault and in the lunettes in the walls, makes it particularly difficult to express sound critical opinions; nevertheless, certain areas of pictorial surface appear to be comparatively better preserved: those where the *putti* play instruments (figs. 18, 19) and, above all, the parts painted in greenish earth in the window splays on the East wall. The portrait of *Virgil* in the left splay (fig. 20) is remarkably close, in its definition of features, to that of the two patron saints of Medicine, with whom they share, moreover, not a few physiognomic traits, worthy of Morellian critique.

We know, from the afore-cited documents, that in her will dated May 12th 1426, Agnese Stanga ordered the erection of the Chapel of the Madonna delle Grazie and the decoration of the altar with a multi-panelled ancona “ad similitudinem et formam tabule existentis ad altare sancti Augustini

¹⁴ G. Zanichelli, *La committenza dei Rossi: immagini di potere fra sacro e profano*, in *Le signorie dei Rossi di Parma tra XIV e XVI secolo*, edited by L. Arcangeli and M. Gentile, Florence 2007, pp. 187-212.

¹⁵ M. Tanzi, *Arcigoticissimo* cit., pp. 35-54.

¹⁶ G. Bertini, *Center and Periphery. Art patronage in Renaissance Piacenza and Parma*, in *Artistic Center of the Italian Renaissance. The Court cities of Northern Italy. Milan, Parma, Piacenza, Mantua, Ferrara, Bologna, Urbino, Pesaro and Rimini*, edited by Ch. M. Rosenberg, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 72-83.

¹⁷ G. Zanichelli, *I conti e il minio: codici miniati dei Rossi, 1325-1482*, Parma 1996, p. 64; Eadem, *La committenza dei Rossi* cit., pp. 187-212.

¹⁸ M. Tanzi, *Arcigoticissimo* cit., pp. 58-59.



constructi in dicta ecclesia". The Lady from Cremona managed to have this completed within a relatively short span of time, namely six years, as the recorded plaque originally testified, although it no longer exists. It was dated October 1432, and clearly registered the completion of the building on the part of Agnese, widow of Gaffarino Barbò, in execution of the last will and testament of her father, Francesco Stanga. Instead, it appears likely that she did not manage to have the 'tabulam' completed although she had provided detailed dispositions of an iconographical nature, with the choice of all the saints to figure in the main painting, the predella and the pilasters. It is important, therefore, to highlight that the work taken as a model in the Convention of 1426 was the five-panel altarpiece executed in 1397 for the altar dedicated to Saint Augustine in the same temple of the eremitani, for the brothers Tommaso and Lucchino Zoanni, by Antonio De Carro, a painter from Piacenza, one of the leading masters of Gothic Art in the Po Valley, from the beginning of the 15th century up to around 1420.¹⁹ The production of the artist from Piacenza, and, in particular, the structure of the seven-panel altarpiece in the Musée des Arts décoratifs in Paris (inv. PE 80; 575), formerly in the *Church of Santa Franca* at Pittolo, near Piacenza, enable us to relatively easily imagine the structure of the ancona commissioned by Agnese Stagna for her Chapel.²⁰

As I said, however, I do not believe that the commission was carried out and the problem turns up again concerning the delays in the change of dedication of the Chapel of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, after his canonisation in 1446 and the real inauguration of the Chapel in 1454, under the probable patronage of Agnese's daughter, Antonia Barbò Strada. Here we are on shakier ground because there is no precise documentation to sustain us, but it becomes almost obvious to think that, if two saints foreseen in the dispositions of 1426 remain (George and Nicholas), the possibility arises of a change in iconography for the other protagonists of the ancona. The structure of this latter, however, is still that of a five-panel ancona: we do not know if decorated pilasters and a predella existed although it seems quite a likely hypothesis. Moreover, the Gothic sense of verticality of the overall work, is guaranteed in the central panel, as we have observed, by dimensions which were originally much narrower than the present ones (fig. 22).

A final reflection is called for regarding the person portrayed kneeling at the foot of the throne, in devoted contemplation and adoration of the Virgin (fig. 23). Given the documented history of the Chapel, the range of choice could include both Francesco Stanga, father of Agnese, and Gaffarino Barbò, Agnese's husband and Antonia's father; or, indeed, even Musso Strada, the latter's spouse. I still feel, however, that given his importance in erecting the building and continual references to him in the documents, and in the plaque that recorded the erection of the Chapel, executed according to his explicit will and thanks to his money, our principal candidate for the kneeling donor must still be Francesco Stanga himself.²¹

The attribution to Bonifacio Bembo has also been expressed, in a manner entirely independent of this author, by Andrea De Marchi.

¹⁹ L. Bellingeri, *Cremona e il gotico «perduto»* cit., pp. 148, 157, notes 35-39, fig. 12; it seems likely that the fragmentary panel at the time in a private collection in Parma portraying *Saint Augustine and Two Angels*, was the central panel of the Cremonese altarpiece (the painting appeared recently in the Viennese auction of Dorotheum on the 19th April 2016, Lot n. 3). I have attributed a fresco to De Carro, only partially conserved, with an *Archangel* on the pilaster which connects the *cantoria* to the small senatorial square in Cremona Cathedral. (M. Tanzi, *San Michele piacentino*, in 'Mondo Padano', 8th November 1997, p. 28).

²⁰ L. Gorni, "Antonius De Carro Pinxit": *documenti e proposte per la pittura tardogotica piacentina*, in 'Arte Cristiana', LXXXIII, 771, 1995, pp. 115-430, fig. 1

²¹ On Francesco see I. Stanga, *La famiglia Stanga* cit., tav. IV.





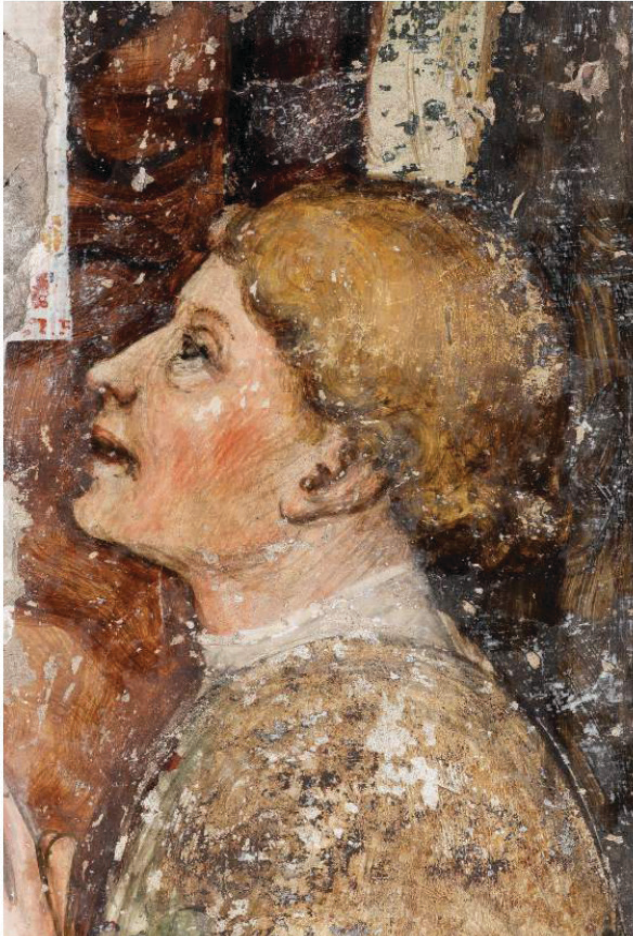
7. Bonifacio Bembo, *Madonna and Child enthroned between an armored Saint and Saint Omobono presenting the Donor* (detail), 1455-1460 circa. Cremona, Sant'Omobono.



8. Bonifacio Bembo, *Saint Cosmas* (detail), 1454 -1460 circa. Private collection.

Marco Tanzi, *Two panels for a Cremonese Altarpiece*, Torino, 2017





9. Bonifacio Bembo, *Madonna and Child enthroned between an armored Saint and Saint Omobono presenting the Donor* (detail), 1455-1460 circa. Cremona, Sant'Omobono.



10. Bonifacio Bembo, *Saint Damian* (detail), 1454-1460 circa. Private collection.

Marco Tanzi, *Two panels for a Cremonese Altarpiece*, Torino, 2017





22: Hypothetical reconstruction of the *Altarpiece of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino*, 1454-1460 circa. Cremona, Museo Civico «Ala Ponzone»; private collection (formerly Cremona, Sant'Agostino, Chapel of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino).

Marco Tanzi, *Two panels for a Cremonese Altarpiece*, Torino, 2017



Bonifacio Bembo | *Altarpiece of St. Nicholas of Tolentino*

c. 1454 - 1460

Medium: Tempera on panel



Museo Civico Ala Ponzone
Cremona, Italy

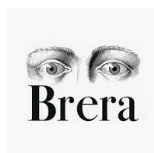


Bonifacio Bembo | *Portrait of Francesco Sforza*

c. 1460

Medium: Tempera on panel

Dimensions: 15^{3/4} x 12^{1/8} inches | 40 x 30.5 cm



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