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HANGINGS, CURTAINS, AND SHUTTERS OF SIXTEENTH-CENTURY LOMBARD ALTARPIECES

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THE purpose of this study requires a definition of terms to be used as well as the limits of the area to be considered. Although the fact that many Renaissance altarpieces were covered with curtains, covers, and shutters is well known to art historians, this aspect still lacks a specific bibliography. During the course of my research, it immediately became clear that one must understand the various ways that were devised to cover and protect altarpieces. Take, for example, the principal type considered here: the case of shutters. These paintings were carried out on rigid supports using tempera low in fat content (known as *tempera magra* or by the older term *a guazzo*). During the Renaissance, such canvases were used to cover pictures on the high altars of several churches in the dioceses of Brescia and Cremona. In an earlier study devoted to sixteenth-century Brescian painting, I tried to clarify the origins and use of these shutters which at one time, according to the oldest guidebooks of the city, as well as Carlo Ridolfi's *Maraviglie dell'arte*, covered altarpieces painted by Titian, Romanino, and Moretto.[1] As we shall see, these shutters assumed an important role in liturgical ceremonies and at the same time protected paintings from dust, light, and moisture. However, other aspects are not so clearly understood: when they first appeared and their geographical diffusion.

In the attempt to answer these questions I turned for advice to friends and colleagues, but misunderstandings mainly of a lexicographical nature immediately arose. While I was specifically interested in shutters and the related phenomenon of covers (i.e. *cortine*) consisting of painted

[1] A. Nova, 'Girolamo Romanino: Introduzione a un catalogo ragionato', research doctorate in history and criticism of the *Beni artistici e ambientali*, Ph.D. thesis (University of Milan, 1986), 72-4.

cloths that were raised and lowered to protect an altarpiece, many of the people I questioned provided me instead with valuable information on the widespread custom of covering altarpieces with curtains or hangings which were drawn apart from either side. In brief, the misunderstanding derived from the term *cortina*, or curtain, and the confusion is entirely justified because in modern parlance a curtain is understood as a loosely hung cloth. In any Italian dictionary today one reads that the *cortina* was the hanging that enclosed the bed or was placed at the entrances to rooms. However, the term sometimes had a different meaning in Vasari and other Renaissance sources where it refers to a painted linen cloth, always done *a guazzo* and, most of the time, in monochrome, which was installed on the front of altarpieces for their protection. Of course, also in the sixteenth century the word *cortina* could be used to describe a loosely hung curtain. Therefore, for the term's correct interpretation the context in which it appears always has to be taken into account.

Having clarified these terms, but before examining a few documented examples of painted covers (*cortine*) and shutters that protected some Lombard altarpieces, it seems appropriate to explain what led me at this point to present the first results of a problematic study as yet not entirely resolved. The initial stimulus was to add a few marginal notes to Joseph Braun's authoritative study on altarpieces. According to this Jesuit scholar, the shuttered altar (*Flügelaltar*) was typical of Germany, Flanders, Austria, Switzerland, and Scandinavia while it had scarce reception in Spain and southern France and was totally unknown in Italy.[2] The same belief is reiterated in Michael Baxandall's important volume on German Renaissance sculptors: 'winged retables were a north European preference not found in Italy and only rarely in Spain.'[3] However, we will see that this type of altarpiece was, in fact, rather widespread in sixteenth-century Lombardy even though the wings or shutters of these structures have long since been lost, dismembered, or simply separated from their original sites.

Another stimulus for this study arose from several problems encountered in the preliminaries for a study on the function of sacred images and how they were experienced by their Lombard public during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Although this type of enquiry is familiar to literary research, aside from a few exceptions, it is still relatively rare in the field of Italian Renaissance studies notwithstanding the appearance of new methodological approaches.[4] My intent is to approach the problem from four different aspects: the experience of the *Sacri Monti*, the mnemonic aspect of the great fresco cycles on the rood-screens (*pareti diaframma*) of churches

[2] J. Braun, *Der Christliche Altar in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Munich, 1924), ii, 345, 348, 357. See also the review by H. Dannenberg, in *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft*, 49 (1928), 48–50.

[3] M. Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1980), 66.

[4] Besides the fundamental essay by E. Castelnuovo ('Per una storia sociale dell'arte', *Paragone*, 313 [1976], 3–30); id., *Paragone*, 323 (1977), 3–34 repr. in id., *Arte, industria,*

rivoluzione: Temi di storia sociale dell'arte (Turin, 1985), 3–64, and particularly 45–50; see, among others, A. M. Mura, 'Il pubblico e la fruizione', in *Storia dell'arte italiana Einaudi*, pt. 1, vol. ii, *L'artista e il pubblico* (Turin, 1979), 265–315 esp. 287–9; H. Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter* (Berlin, 1981); H. van Os, *Sienese Altarpieces 1215–1460: Form, Content, Function*, i (Groningen, 1984; paperback edn., Groningen, 1988).

founded by the Franciscan Observants, the chapel decorations executed for eucharistic confraternities, and, finally, the liturgical use of high altarpieces. It is the last theme upon which the present study focuses.

Before taking a closer look at some Lombard examples of shuttered altarpieces (*Flügelaltäre*) that can be at least partly reconstructed as far as their iconography is concerned, the use of hangings and curtains should be briefly considered in order to explain the liturgical function of the shutters that once covered altarpieces by Titian, Romanino, and Moretto. For altarpieces of a certain prestige, hangings were an integral part of their furnishing—and not only during the Renaissance. The bibliography on this particular aspect of the Christian altar is quite vast and has grown from the debate concerning their possible functional, symbolic, or liturgical significance. For instance, Braun believed that at least in the West hangings had above all an ornamental function, thereby helping to maintain the priest's concentration during his performance of the mass (Plate 109). Of course, Braun did not allude to the hangings that covered an altarpiece, but to the cloths hung on either side which were drawn by accolytes so as to conceal the miracle of transubstantiation: the conversion of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.[5] This problem is mentioned for two reasons: first of all to emphasize the necessity of distinguishing the various kinds of hangings with which an altar was furnished—and, especially, the distinction between the cloths that covered the picture and those that hung on either side; and secondly, because in several inventories of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries these lateral hangings were referred to as *Alae* or *Vleugel*, recalling shuttered altars, or *Flügelaltäre*, as well as Vasari's phrase '*tavola con le sue ale*' used in connection with a painting by the Flemish artist, Pieter Aertsen.[6]

But to return to our main subject: it is Durandus' *Rationale divinorum officiorum* that provides the symbolic liturgical meaning of the veils or hangings used to cover altarpieces during Lent. A famous passage in the text of this medieval liturgist describes the ceremony celebrating Passion Sunday when, after a reading from the Gospel of St John, the *Sancta Sanctorum* (the eucharistic tabernacle) was concealed by a hanging. This rite is described in greater detail in the ceremonial of the pontifical court:

When, at the conclusion of the Gospel reading is said: 'but, Jesus hid himself and left the temple,' the veil prepared on top of the altar table is pulled up by the clergy of the papal chapel on ropes that pass from grooves fixed on high and thereby this veil covers up all the painted images.[7]

[5] Braun, *Der Christliche Altar*, ii, 133–47, 166–71. It is not fortuitous that the paintings that illustrate these curtains hanging at either side of the altar all belong to northern Europe: see, for instance, the *Mass of St Giles* by the anonymous painter named after the picture today in the London National Gallery (Plate 109) or the *Mass of St Gregory* by Bosch painted on the outer shutters of the *Epiphany* triptych now in the Prado, Madrid.

[6] Braun, *Der Christliche Altar*, ii, 140, 142–360; Giorgio

Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. R. Bettarini and P. Barocchi, text vol. vi (Florence, 1987), 226.

[7] *Cerimoniale*, libro 2, ch. 35: '*Cum in fine evangelii dicitur: Jesus autem abscondit se, et exivit de templo, clerici cappellae [papae] super altare velum paratum cordulis in rotis supra in altum confixis euntibus sursum trahunt et eo imagines omnes ibidem depictae cooperiuntur*' (G. Moroni, *Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastica*, xxxiv [Venice, 1845], 15).

Obviously, the text does not refer here to the cloths hanging to the side of the altar, but rather to the veil or hanging used to cover sacred images. But it is Durandus' *Rationale* which explains the symbolic significance of the ceremony. The veil symbolized the piece of precious cloth that was hung between the columns of Solomon's temple to separate the sanctuary where the Ark of the Covenant was kept from the rest of the sacred enclosure. The veil alluded to the darkness that overshadowed the human mind before Christ's Passion; before his sacrifice, the significance of holy scripture was veiled, hidden and obscure. However, just as the veil of Jerusalem's temple was torn asunder at the moment Jesus died, so were the altar hangings lowered and reopened on Holy Saturday to manifest God's Word. When the '*Gloria in excelsis*' was intoned during the mass of Holy Saturday, the veils covering the altars were removed (a practice in use until the Second Vatican Council) and hangings moved aside so that through Christ's sacrifice the truth of the Law stood revealed to human sight.[8] This is what is so eloquently represented by Raphael in his *Sistine Madonna* where the rod for the rings used to open and close the curtains is in clear view.

As is well known, the bibliography on this single detail is almost endless: sometimes it is interpreted as a purely ornamental embellishment, as a theatrical device for bringing the supernatural vision closer to the everyday world of the faithful, or even as a *Himmelsvelum* (or celestial curtain-hanging).[9] In any case, for some time, theologians have suggested that the *Sistine Madonna*'s curtains symbolize the veil hung between the columns of Solomon's temple brought into the context of Catholic ritual. According to an allegorical interpretation offered by theologians, the tear, or opening in the temple veil, formed the basis of the complex idea of *Revelatio*. Thanks to Johann Konrad Eberlein we have a history of the motive in its many phases throughout the centuries.[10]

Briefly summarizing the results of this study, the earliest datable examples were the royal hangings of imperial images (what St Ambrose called *cortinae regiae*) reproduced in the calendar illustrations of AD 354 known to us through copies. According to Eberlein, the motive of the hanging was the formal expression of ceremonial concealment by late antique and Byzantine rulers who, imitating models going back to the great asiatic monarchs of antiquity, were hidden from the view of their subjects by veils and draperies of symbolic value. This was also its meaning when the motive of the hanging appeared in the figurative art of the West and, as frequently happens with regalia and other symbols of authority, it was soon adopted as an attribute by high-ranking officials, consuls, bishops, archbishops, and saints.[11]

In the Carolingian period the motive was used in the representation of enthroned evangelists

[8] W. Durandus, *The Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments*, trans. of bk. 1 of *Rationale divinorum officiorum* (Leeds, 1843), 72–5.

[9] J. K. Eberlein, 'The Curtain in Raphael's Sistine "Madonna"', *Art Bulletin*, 65 (1983), 61–6.

[10] Id., *Apparitio regis-revelatio veritatis: Studien zur Darstellung des Vorhangs in der bildenden Kunst von der spät Antike bis zum Ende des Mittelalters* (Wiesbaden, 1982).

[11] Eberlein, 'The Curtain in Raphael's Sistine "Madonna"', 66, and see also P. L. De Vecchi, 'Ritratto di una apparizione: Appunti in margine alla Madonna Sistina', in P. Ceschi-Lavagetto (ed.), *La Madonna per San Sisto di Raffaello e la cultura piacentina della prima metà del Cinquecento*, Atti del Convegno, Piacenza, 1983 (Parma, 1985), 34–42.

presented to the faithful with curtains drawn aside so that the figure could unveil and proclaim the veracity of the holy scripture. But around the eleventh century, with the intensification of the Marian cult, the hanging became the Virgin's special attribute. Indeed, the motive of the curtain on either side of the evangelists, still in use during the twelfth century, wanes with the increasing popularity of Marian iconography. At first it appears in narrative scenes of the Annunciation, Visitation, and Nativity but subsequently the motive of the hanging was also used for the isolated figure of the Virgin and Child.[12]

Eberlein's analysis concludes with the symbolic meaning of the hanging, as the veil of the *Sancta Sanctorum* from its mention in the Old Testament to its revelation of the new faith to Christians. Whoever had a certain familiarity with patristic thought would have associated the hanging, either real or painted, with the concept of *Revelatio*.[13]

There is no doubt that Raphael was thoroughly aware of the extraordinary opportunity offered by the curtain motif, but it is equally true that the *Revelatio* idea must always have been associated with all the hangings that preceded or imitated Raphael's spectacular solution.

Indeed, the custom of covering the picture on the high altar with hangings was widespread and is a familiar detail to anyone who has consulted church inventories or who looks attentively at Renaissance paintings. It is a phenomenon found throughout Italy and among painted examples it suffices to mention Fra Angelico's San Marco altarpiece (Plate 123), the Sistine Madonna originally in Piacenza, and the altarpiece by Moretto in San Giovanni Evangelista in Brescia to which we will return further on. According to Eberlein, the painted curtain is supposed to be characteristic of northern Italy and its appearance in Raphael's work is exceptional.[14] However, if the point of using royal hangings was to suggest the idea of *Revelatio*, it should also be kept in mind that the custom of covering high altars with textiles was common throughout Italy. In this regard, mention of a few examples will suffice. The fifteenth-century inventories of Siena Cathedral record that Duccio's *Maestà* was once covered with a vermillion hanging.[15] Filippino Lippi's altarpiece for the Florentine Otto di Pratica in which the enthroned Madonna appears with four saints was protected by a blue hanging that when open was held back by white and red silk bows.[16] An important fresco by Sodoma at Monteohveto Maggiore (Plate 110) represents a church interior where a hanging gathered to the left side of the apse allows us to admire the picture on the high altar revealed to bystanders.[17] In Lombardy the painting by Civerchio, commissioned by the municipality of Crema in 1507, was covered by a coloured linen cloth '*pro conservatione*

[12] Eberlein, 'The Curtain in Raphael's Sistine "Madonna"', 66–8.

[13] Ibid. 68–75.

[14] Ibid. 75.

[15] Van Os, *Sienese Altarpieces*, i, 55.

[16] Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori*, ed. G. Milanesi, iii (Florence, 1878), 474 n. 2.

[17] The inscription beneath the fresco reads: '*Come Benedetto scomunica due religiose e le assolve poi che furono morte.*' The triptych on the high altar consists of a Madonna and Child

flanked by a female saint and a bishop saint; see E. Carli, *L'Abbazia di Monteoliveto* (Milan, 1961), 44–5, pls. 70–2 and id., *Le storie di San Benedetto a Monteoliveto Maggiore* (Milan, 1980), 144, pl. 33. For an interesting illuminated miniature pointed out to me by John Shearman in which two angels draw aside curtains used to protect an altarpiece, see F. Avril (ed.), *Dix siècles d'enluminure italienne (VI–XV siècles)*, exhibition catalogue, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Paris, 1984), 178 n. 158 (The Book of Hours of Frederick III of Aragon).

picture'. For the latter, the civic ordinance providing for it does not omit mention of the rod and iron rings necessary for '*ipsius cortine*' to function.[18]

The Civerchio document again reopens the problem of terminology. In this case, there is no doubt that the curtain cited was a coloured hanging, yet the same word was used to describe those monochrome tempera paintings that functioned as protective covers for altarpieces. Since their function was similar to that of the hangings, the semantic confusion is revelatory.

Although Cennino Cennini's treatise discloses the secrets of painting on wool and velvet, and his chapter devoted to work 'on black or blue cloth like those used for curtains' even mentions the term, from the fifteenth century onwards the word *cortina* suggests a much more complex object than a mere hanging.[19] These covers or *cortine* are frequently mentioned in documents from at least the fifteenth century onwards and here too one is confronted with a phenomenon found throughout Italy. When Neri di Bicci records in his diary the numerous 'curtains' painted for his patrons, these are to be understood as inexpensive cloths that covered the main image.[20] In northern Italy their use was just as widespread in Liguria and Lombardy. For instance, the splendid panel by Foppa and his associates in the Castle of Pavia was protected in a similar way.[21]

Sometimes the documents record rather complicated iconographies for these 'curtains'. For example, Neri di Bicci records a Tobias with the Archangel Raphael, a Mary Magdalen, a figure of Christ and 'a large Jesus' ('*uno Giesus grande*').[22] Indeed, Bicci informs us that a *cortina* could be quite large: the cover for the *Coronation of the Virgin* belonging to the Abbey of Valdambra measured approximately 2·90 × 2·50 metres.[23] Inevitably, the question arises as to how these large cloths painted *a guazzo* were removed to expose the main image.

Actually the mechanism was quite simple and is clearly illustrated in the contract published by Robert Miller in his fundamental list of documents contained in the appendix to the exhibition catalogue devoted to the Campi and artistic culture of the Cremona region during the sixteenth century. In 1572 Bernardino Campi agreed to paint in oil a picture of the *Mourning of the Dead Christ* for the monks of the Monastery of San Bartolomeo and also to buy cloth '*di far la quartina*', a

[18] The painting, *St Mark between Justice and Temperance*, was commissioned from Civerchio on 1 Oct. 1507 but the communal *Provvisione* is dated 3 Jan. 1509: '*una tela di panno lino colorato per una cortina ponenda ante dictam picturam cum virgo et annullia fereis alisque rebus necessariis pro aptatione ipsius cortine*'; see M. Marubbi, *Vincenzo Civerchio: Contributo alla cultura figurativa cremasca nel primo Cinquecento* (Milan, 1986), 149, 166.

[19] Cennino Cennini, *Il libro dell'arte*, ed. F. Brunello with a preface by L. Magagnato (Vicenza, 1971), 170–6. Cennino, besides recording the vast market and cheap price of these curtains, offers indirect testimony for the iconographic complexity of these paintings: '*poi campeggia quanto più poi, e colorisci vestimenti, visi, montagne, casamenti, e quello che a te pare . . .*' (p. 172).

[20] Neri di Bicci, *Le Ricordanze (10 marzo 1453–24 aprile 1475)*, ed. B. Santi (Pisa, 1976), p. xix.

[21] C. J. Ffoulkes and R. Maiocchi, *Vincenzo Foppa of Brescia, Founder of the Lombard School: His Life and Work* (London, 1909), 300: '*Nel antedicta spexa non è computata la copertina che anderà a torno a dicta anchona, che coprirà le figure e le reliquie. Ma ho ordinato a dicti depinctori [Foppa, Zanetto Bugatti, Bonifacio Bembo, Jacopo Vismara, and Costantino da Vaprio] debiano vedere la spexa andarà a fare la dicta copertina senza la depinctura, et però intendano da quella quello vole se li dipinga suxo, et vedano quanto potrà montare in tutto*' (Milan, 8 June 1474). In the same year, Gottardo Scotto was paid about 50 ducats, '*più di quanto contasse un polittico di misure medie*', for a '*copertinam unam magnam*' with a Crucifixion for the high altar of Milan Cathedral (see G. Romano, in *Zenale e Leonardo* [Milan, 1982], 82).

[22] Neri di Bicci, *Le Ricordanze*, 68 n. 134, 119 n. 231, 382–3 n. 717, 398 n. 745.

[23] Ibid. 371 n. 696, 399 n. 747.

lapsus or spurious rendering of the word for curtain (*cortina*). On this covering, Campi painted a crucified Christ with Mary, St John, the Magdalen, and a kneeling monk—all done 'in light and dark with a punched border around the edges and he also promises to have the beam and iron that goes at the bottom of the cloth made as well as the cord and strings to raise and lower said covering' ('*di chiaro et scuro con il suo friso stampato a torno el ornamento e più promette di far far il subio et il ferro che va a basso alla tela et corde et cidrella da levar et bassar detta coperta. . .*').[24]

The beam (*subio*) is a wooden cylinder around which the cloth was wrapped; clearly this painted linen cover was raised up and down via the roller, which was set into action by the strings connected to it; while the iron bar held the cloth straight as the curtain was lowered to cover the altarpiece. In short, this was a system not unlike modern 'roller-blinds'.

As far as I know, it is impossible to illustrate this mechanism with Renaissance examples; however there exists a comparable arrangement used to raise and lower the *Transfiguration* by Titian and his workshop, covering the fourteenth-century silver altarpiece in the church of San Salvatore in Venice. In this case, the canvas is not wrapped around the roller but is raised and lowered vertically by a system of counter weights.[25] Although the mechanism differs from that described in the Cremonese document of 1572, its importance for revealing sacred imagery has not been lost.

At this point we can finally consider some Lombard examples of *Flügelaltäre* taking as a point of departure Titian's Averoldi polyptych (Plate 111). Although rarely mentioned in Titian studies, old guide-books of Brescia relate that the work was covered by two *ante dipinte* upon which appeared the titular saints of the church: Nazarus and Celsus. The sources assigned these painted shutters to Moretto, an attribution partly accepted by modern scholars, although they are almost certainly works by Paolo da Caylina the younger.[26]

For specialists of Venetian art I would like to point out that the oldest Brescian guide, the manuscript by Bernardino Faino entitled *Catalogo delle Chiese di Brescia* states that Titian's *Resurrection* was arched in shape. This means that when the neo-classic architect Antonio Vigliani designed the new marble frame for the Averoldi polyptych, the *Resurrection* was probably cut down at the top and that the two painted shutters (*le ante*) were separated from Titian's original arrangement.[27]

[24] R. Miller 'Regesto dei documenti', in *I Campi e la cultura artistica cremonese del Cinquecento*, exhibition catalogue (Milan, 1985), 468 n. 217 (9 Oct. 1572).

[25] R. Pallucchini, *Tiziano* (Florence, 1969), i, 310.

[26] L. Anelli, *La chiesa dei santi Nazaro e Celso in Brescia* (Brescia, 1977), 19. The two covers were rightly rejected from the general catalogue of Moretto's works (P. V. Begni Redona, *Alessandro Bonvicino: Il Moretto da Brescia* [Brescia, 1988], 528–9) published after the I Tatti symposium.

[27] B. Faino, *Catalogo delle chiese di Brescia*, (Manoscritti Queriniani E. VII. 6. and E.1.10), ed. C. Boselli (Brescia, 1961), 24: '*laltar maggiore è in isola et apeso al muro nel mezo ui è la pala grande Con adornamento di legno adorato nel quali ui è nel*

mezo un quadro grande in archiuolto Con quatro altri quadri, di mano di Titian.' That the expression '*in archiuolto*' means curved is confirmed by the S. Carlo altarpiece by Francesco Giugno still *in situ* in the chapel of the same name in the church of S. Lorenzo at Brescia described by Faino as '*in archiuolto*' (ibid., 28) and which is, in fact, curved (*centinata*). According to recent technical analyses, the central panel of the Averoldi polyptych was not reduced in size at a later date: it seems that an examination of the pigments found on the top of the panel confirms that its original shape was rectangular (see E. Lucchesi Ragni, 'La vicenda del polittico' in B. Passamani (ed.), *Il polittico Averoldi di Tiziano restaurato* [Brescia, 1991], 93).

Therefore Romanino's Sant' Alessandro polyptych (Plate 113), painted three years later, faithfully records the original shape of the Averoldi altarpiece. Also the Sant' Alessandro polyptych was once a *Flügelaltar* with an Annunciation on its exterior and an Adoration of the Magi visible when the shutters were open.[28] Although this Annunciation is lost, the two temperas attributed by Cavalcaselle to Callisto Piazza and today in the Brescian church of San Clemente (Plate 112) testify to the popularity of this subject on the outer faces of altar shutters. These paintings (each measuring 197 × 90 cm.) would have been too small to function as organ shutters.[29]

Regarding the shutters of the altarpiece formerly in Sant' Alessandro, it is interesting to point out the so-called typological rapport between the iconography of the external paintings and the subject of the main panel within. The painting of the Annunciation on the outside with either the Nativity or the Adoration of the Magi within was very widespread in northern European painting. Among the typical examples are Lochner's altarpiece in Cologne Cathedral, Roger van der Weyden's Bladelin altarpiece in Berlin, and Hugo van der Goes' Portinari triptych in the Uffizi.

In Brescia shutters were used to cover not only polyptychs but also large altarpieces consisting of a single unit. According to Ridolfi, Romanino's San Francesco altarpiece (Plate 114) painted between 1516 and 1517 was covered by two movable tempera paintings:

ne' due portelli, che la ricoprono appare il Serafico Santo, che si sposa alla povertà, e sotto il Vescovo d'Assisi, che predica al popolo l'indulgenza della Madonna degli Angeli, & il Pontefice dormiente à cui il Santo stilla dal costato il sangue in un calice, & in altra parte discaccia dalla Città d'Arezzo molti Demoni sotto mostruose forme, significando le discordie, che vertivano in que' tempi trà la fattione Guelfa e Gibellina . . .[30]

[on the two shutters that cover it appear the seraphic saint marrying Poverty and, beneath, the bishop of Assisi preaching to the people imploring indulgence of the Madonna of the Angels, and the dreaming pope holding a vial into which the saint drops blood from his rib, and on the other side the expulsion of monstrous demons from Arezzo signifying the discord of those times between the Guelph and Ghibelline factions . . .]

In this case, the two lost shutters represented the titular of the church instead of an Annunciation.

The final Brescian example (Plate 115), the painting for the high altar of San Giovanni Evangelista by Moretto, again uses the motive of the painted curtains used in Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*. But here I am more interested in pointing out how difficult it is to attempt a reconstruction of these dismembered ensembles.

One reads in two eighteenth-century Brescian guidebooks that this altarpiece was originally

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[28] F. Maccarinelli, *Le glorie di Brescia, 1747–1751*, ed. C. Boselli (Brescia, 1959), 154.

[29] G. Panazza in collaboration with A. Damiani and B. Passamani, *Mostra di Girolamo Romanino* (Brescia, 1965), 204.

[30] C. Ridolfi, *Le maraviglie dell'arte ovvero le vite degli illustri pittori veneti e dello stato*, ed. D. von Hadeln, i (Berlin, 1914), 268.

covered by two tempera paintings (Plate 116) representing the two Sts John that still hang on the walls of the presbytery of this church.[31] However, modern scholars have preferred to identify these with the external coverings of the organ that was originally adorned by two enormous tempera paintings by Moretto illustrating episodes from the life of the Baptist and that today also are kept in the presbytery of the same church.[32] However, it has not been noticed before that these outer shutters representing the two Sts John are distinctly smaller in size than that of the organ shutters: each shutter of the two saints is 43 cm. shorter and 71 cm. narrower than the organ cover of San Giovanni Evangelista. In short, this pair of paintings comprise an all-over width of 1·42 m. less than the organ and therefore they originally may very well have constituted the shutters for the altarpiece just as the eighteenth-century guidebooks claim. In any case, it is not my intention to strain the meaning of the evidence: in fact, the two shutters consisting of the two saints are notably larger in size than the San Giovanni altarpiece and could therefore have been intended for a different destination than that proposed here.[33] It is, however, important to draw attention to two problems. First of all, the need to establish credible measurements because a difference of 10 or 15 cm. more or less could either invalidate or confirm any proposed reconstruction of such ensembles.[34] Secondly, the possibility must be considered either of a switch

[31] Maccarinelli, *Le glorie di Brescia*, 116, and F. Paglia, *Il giardino della pittura*, ed. C. Boselli, i (Brescia, 1967), 250.

[32] Begni Redona, *Alessandro Bonvicino*, 300–3, catalogue No. 61.

[33] The S. Giovanni Evangelista altarpiece measures 308 × 205 cm., while the two covers with the Baptist and John the Evangelist each measure 400 × 160 cm.; G. Gombosi, *Moretto da Brescia* (Basle, 1943), 95. Clearly, the two covers are much larger than the altarpiece, however it cannot be ruled out that they were also supposed to cover part of the magnificent frame. According to Faino (*Catalogo delle chiese di Brescia*, fo. 158ᵛ) the organ of S. Giovanni was protected by covers painted by Bonvicino: '*Cose stupende, di dentro vi è dipinto in una Sto Giovanni Evangelista sedendo che scrive, nelaltra S. Gio Batta pur sedendo con un libro. Al di fuori da una parte è sto Giov. Battista nel deserto con gli farisei, nelaltra quanto il detto sto di età di sette anni prese la benedizione dal padre.*' This explains how the two pairs of covers were associated with the organ of S. Giovanni. However, Faino's account is confused since the covers he described as being on the inside should be on the outside and vice versa. Furthermore, as indicated by the text, the dimensions do not correspond because the two inside covers (the *Baptist Taking Leave of his Parents* and the *Saint Preaching on the Banks of the River Jordan*) measure 443 × 231 cm. each (Begni Redona, *Alessandro Bonvicino*, 113). My doubts concerning the original function of the two Sts John is based on the measurements given in Gombosi's monograph cited above: according to the new monograph by Begni Redona (*Alessandro Bonvicino*, 300) published after my lecture at I Tatti, the dimensions would really be 432 × 203 cm. each.

In this case, the difference in size between these covers and the organ shutters would come to only 11 cm. in height and 28 cm. in width for each cover. But this only confirms what I have said in the text and in n. 34 below, i.e. the need for absolutely reliable measurements.

[34] In this regard, it is worth pointing out the two shutters by Moretto now in the Escorial representing the *Eritrean Sibyl* and the *Prophet Isaiah*. According to V. Guazzoni (*Moretto: Il tema sacro*, [Brescia, 1981], 34 n. 11) originally the two shutters could have flanked the *Massacre of the Innocents* painted by the same artist for one of the side altars of S. Giovanni Evangelista in Brescia because the inscriptions on the tablets shown by the Sibyl ('*Morte proprio mortuos suscitabit*') and by the prophet ('*Livore eius sanati sumus*') would be well suited to the theme of the picture in which the *Massacre* is dominated by the Christ Child holding the Cross. It seems that this scholar conceived of a sort of triptych 'a Serliana' since the height of these panels corresponds to that of the *Massacre* excluding the curved top. Actually, besides the different supports (the *Massacre* is a panel transferred to canvas, while both Escorial shutters were painted directly on to canvas), it seems to me that the two inscriptions, and especially that of the prophet with its allusion to the bruises on Christ's body, are more suitable to a *Lamentation* such as that in Washington (see also the doubts expressed by Begni Redona, *Alessandro Bonvicino*, 259). The difference in height between the Escorial shutters (163 cm.) and the Washington picture (175·8 cm.) is only 13 cm. Also in this case, however, I do not want to force the evidence available: because the measurements given by the catalogues for the Escorial shutters renders it impossible that they ever

or of a confusion between organ and altar shutters. The two categories are very alike: one is dealing with very large canvases carried out *a guazzo*, painted with the same subjects because usually organ shutters were also decorated either with the church's titular saints or with the Annunciation.

However, when confronted with shutters smaller in size, such as those with the beautiful saints in monochrome by Civerchio now in the Museo Civico of Crema (Plate 117), there can be no doubt of how these were originally used.[35] Therefore, it seems clear that the subjects used on outer faces of some Lombard altar shutters must have been consistent and repetitious: sometimes there was a preference for the Annunciation and sometimes for one or more saints to whom the church was dedicated. If we keep in mind that such paintings could also have been monochrome or coloured with a pale range of tones, one is forcibly reminded of the liturgical significance of the great Flemish prototypes.

In Baldinucci's *Vocabolario toscano dell'arte del disegno* one reads:

Diconsi quasi sportelli, propriamente tra' Pittori, gli sportelli delle tavole e quadri, fatti per coprire esse tavole e quadri, ad effetto di difender le pitture dalla polvere, e tanto più dall'arie umide: che però furono sempre usati assai ne' Paesi bassi; ornandogli con belle pitture, non solo di figure appartenenti alle storie dipinte ne' quadri o tavole; ma ancora d'armi, d'imprese, e simili. Il Vasari nella edizione seconda, P. 3. a carta 859, gli chiama anche alie, & ale.[36]

[Among painters, these shutters for panels and pictures are almost always called shutters made to cover these panels and pictures so as to protect the paintings from dust and, even more, from moist air: these, however, were always much used in the Netherlands [and] were adorned with beautiful paintings not only of figures belonging to scenes on pictures or panels, but also with coat of arms, devices, and the like. Vasari in the second edition calls them shutters or wings.]

Of course these shutters were supposed to protect the painting from dust, light, and moisture, but their choice of subject-matter also reveals their liturgical use. As in the transalpine lands, in Lombardy the organs and altarpieces furnished with shutters were closed during the week or in periods of penance; the images were revealed to the congregation only on feast-days and special celebrations. The choice of the Annunciation does not need elaborate justification since its day always occurs during Lent and is the only feast celebrated during this period of penance. Also figures of saints were appropriate subjects as demonstrated not only by the Flemish examples but also by Moretto's two covers (see above; Plate 116) whether they were shutters for an organ or for an altarpiece. The mystic lamb stresses a penitential message and function: as an attribute of the evangelist it assumes an apocalyptic guise as a symbol of redemption; while in hands of the Baptist, it alludes to Christ's sacrifice. However, during the solemnities of Holy Saturday the

belonged to the same complex as the Washington *Lamentation*. Here again, one needs to be able to rely on a rigorous and consistent system of measurement. Unfortunately, it is well known that such systems vary according to institution.

[35] *SS Pantaleon and Roch*, Crema, Museo Civico, inv. 212–

13, tempera on canvas, 192 × 100 cm.; Marubbi, *Vincenzo Civerchio*, 104–5.

[36] F. Baldinucci, *Vocabolario toscano dell'arte del disegno* (Florence, 1681), anastatic reprint, ed. S. Parodi (Florence, 1976), 127.

shutters revealed either the *Virgin in Majesty*, also painted by Moretto, or the organ pipes at the moment when the congregation sang out the '*Gloria in excelsis Deo*'.

Once the existence of shuttered altarpieces in Lombardy has been demonstrated, many problems still remain to be solved. Above all, the possible prototypes need identification. Granted that the portable triptych was quite diffused and belonged to a different category, the shuttered altarpiece was not unknown in Italy: it suffices to consult Garrison's catalogue of Romanesque painting or to mention Margaritone's panel at Santa Maria delle Vertighe at Monte San Savino, or even the later archaistic revival of an Antonio da Viterbo or Fra Angelico's tabernacle for the linen drapers.[37] Yet one cannot help seeing the greater affinity to transalpine models which is partly due to the rather imposing size of the Lombard examples that often exceeded 3 m. in height and 4 m. in width. Perhaps it is not fortuitous that the period of its greatest diffusion in Lombard territory coincides or, better, follows in the wake of the great season enjoyed by the folding altar (*Wandelaltar*) in Germanic lands: from Pacher at Sankt Wolfgang to the elder Holbein at Augsburg, from Baldung Grien at Freiburg and to Grünewald at Colmar.

Another open question concerns the exact time and place of the phenomenon's origin, as well as its diffusion in the region. The answer to this must without doubt be sought in the synodal decrees of the single dioceses starting with Brescia, where the phenomenon is most visible. However, this is an area of research not without pitfalls because, as is well known, there existed then considerable liberty in liturgical usage. Local traditions were defended, as in the case of the small city of Monza. Although only 15 km. from Milan, this town tenaciously refused to adopt the Ambrosian rite, preferring their own based on that of the patriarchate of Aquileia. Even such a determined man as St Carlo Borromeo had to give up here as far as his proposed reforms were concerned.[38] As if this was not enough, certain religious orders and even some monasteries enjoyed specific privileges and exemptions in the liturgical field.[39]

Another line of enquiry consists of identifying the few surviving shutters and the more numerous examples cited in the sources. However, it is not easy to decide, for example, if Correggio's shutters in Naples were the covers for a tabernacle or for a small altarpiece.[40] On the

[37] E. B. Garrison, *Italian Romanesque Panel Painting* (Florence, 1949), 96, 109, 132 n. 348. For Margaritone, see H. Hager, *Die Anfänge des italienischen Altarbildes* (Munich, 1962), 103–8. For Antonio da Viterbo and other Viterbo painters, see I. Faldi, *Pittori viterbesi di cinque secoli* (Rome, 1970), ill. 40–4, 142–3.

[38] A. A. King, *Liturgies of the Primatial Sees* (London, New York, Toronto, 1957), 309.

[39] Ibid. 325, 340.

[40] On Correggio's shutters, see F. Bologna, 'Ritrovamenti di due tele del Correggio', *Paragone*, 91 (1957), 9–25; and C. Gould, *The Paintings of Correggio* (London, 1976), 231–2. Altarpiece shutters are also documented in Friuli and the Veneto. At Venzone, Pordenone painted the now lost shutters for a wooden altar in the church of S. Maria dell'Ospedale

commissioned in 1527 and finished in 1534; C. Furlan, *Il Pordenone* (Milan, 1988), 330. In addition, there is the following passage from the Bassano text, kindly transcribed for me by Professor Michelangelo Muraro from the manuscript in his collection (34ʳ):

Adì 7 otobrio 1546
Recevé mio fradel Zuanbatista da sier Jacopo di Andriati da Paderno lire quindese et soldi sei in oro, cioè un fiorin et un ongaro, per conto et parte de il depenzer le portelle che sara la sua palla che li ò fatto, ditto oro val   L. 15 s.6

Adì ultimo marzo 1547
Recevi io Jacomo da sier Ieronimo Vesentin lire tredese et soldi dui conto de ditte portelle, videlicet   L. 13 s.2

basis of written sources and misled by Tommaseo's dictionary, for a time I toyed with the idea that the lost *Annunciation* and *Lamentation* by Franciabigio and Andrea del Sarto were painted to protect altarpieces in the Santissima Annunziata in Florence and that they might have been shutters resembling those used in Lombardy because according to Vasari:

Avendo essi addunque tolta una stanza alla piazza del Grano, condussero molte opere di compagnia, una delle quali furono le cortine che cuoprono le tavole dell'altar maggiore de' Servi . . . nella quali tele dipinsero, in quella che è volta verso il coro una Nostra Donna annunziata, e nell'altra che è dinanzi, un Cristo diposto di croce, simile a quello che è nella tavola che quivi era di mano di Filippo e di Pietro Perugino.[41]

[having then taken a room on the piazza del Grano, they collaborated in numerous works, among which were the curtains that covered the panels on the high altar of the Servites . . . on these canvases they painted an Our Lady on the one facing the choir, and on the other one, opposite, a Christ deposed from the Cross, similar to that on the panel painted here by the hand of Filippo [Filippino Lippi] and of Pietro Perugino.]

According to Tommaseo and Bellini, curtain (*cortina*) meant not merely the hanging of veils set in front of temple sanctuaries, but also those objects: 'that cover the panels of the high altar, or shutters'.[42] The source cited by the dictionary is Vasari, and the words literally derive from the passage concerning the curtains of the Santissima Annunziata. In other words, for Tommaseo and Bellini, the *Annunciation* and *Lamentation* painted by Sarto and Franciabigio were shutters; an interpretation also rendered feasible by Baldinucci's *Vocabolario Toscano* where *cortina* is cross-referenced with *Alia* and from the latter to *Portelli*.[43] None the less, Vasari's phrase can probably be interpreted in a different way and the payments published by Shearman in his monograph on Andrea del Sarto speak, with a significant lexicographical distinction, of 'veils and curtains' ('*vele e cortine*').[44] The amount disbursed for a work of this kind was really quite considerable: 17 *fiorini d'oro larghi* equal to 119 *lire* and the payments confirm that both panels were protected by hangings (the *vele* of the document) as well as covers (*cortine*) possibly painted in monochrome that were lowered and raised to protect and reveal the altarpiece by Filippino and Perugino. This is an interpretation confirmed by the *Vocabolario della Crusca* which does not commit Tommaseo's error.

The phenomenon of shutters painted in *tempera magra* used for the protection of altarpieces seems to have been limited, or at least was more widespread, within the area of northern Italy. However, it remains to be seen why this kind of picture was eventually abandoned. Also here we

Adì primo setembre 1547
Recevì io Jacomo da reverendo missier pre' Francesco capellan in Paderno lire tredese per conto di ditte portelle, quali mi mandò sier Jacomo de Canil, videlicet   L. 13 s.o

Adì 26 zenaro 1548
Recevì io Jacomo dal Ponte adì ditto lire tredese et soldi otto per conto de ditte portelle da sier Liberal Moresin, quando le fu a tor   L. 13 s.8

For above, see now: M. Muraro, *Il Libro Secondo di Francesco e Jacopo dal Ponte* (Bassano, 1992), 111.
[41] Vasari, *Le vite*, text vol. iv (Florence, 1976), 344–5.
[42] N. Tommaseo and B. Bellini, *Nuovo dizionario della lingua italiana*, i, pt. 2 (Turin, 1865), 1770.
[43] Baldinucci, *Vocabolario toscano*, 41, 7, 127.
[44] J. Shearman, *Andrea del Sarto*, ii (Oxford, 1965), 316, 388.

remain in the field of hypotheses. However, the solution probably rests with diocesan statutes of a Giberti in Verona, whose example was followed by St Carlo Borromeo in his celebrated *Instructiones*. According to these dispositions, the tabernacle housing the Holy Sacrament must always be located on the high altar according to Roman custom (*'more romano'*). Apparently before the Council of Trent, it was possible to reserve the eucharist on the side of the Gospel (*'in pariete more germanico'*), but once it was moved to the high altar, the increasing richness and complexity of the tabernacle would probably have impeded the opening of large shutters.[45]

Preserved in those churches protected by liturgical privileges such as San Francesco in Brescia was, shutters finally disappeared with the Napoleonic suppression and once their ritual function had ceased the restoration did not make the effort of seeing to their return. Probably most of these canvases, considered of little value, were left to rot away in attics. Yet with their disappearance we have lost an important element of the original altarpieces as well as an aspect of religious experience familiar to Renaissance public life.

[45] Braun, *Der Christliche Altar*, 590–1, 639.

109. Master of St Giles, *The Mass of St Giles*, panel, 61·6×45·7 cm. London, National Gallery, No. 4681.

110. Sodoma, *St Benedict Excommunicates Two Monks and Posthumously Absolves Them* (detail), 1505–8, fresco. Monteoliveto Maggiore, Chiostro Grande.

111. Titian, Averoldi altarpiece, 1522, panel, *Resurrection* (278 × 122 cm.)
upper side panels (79 × 65 cm. each), lower side panels (170 × 65 cm.
each). Brescia, Santi Nazaro e Celso.

112. Callisto Piazza, *Annunciation*, canvas, 197×90 cm. each section.
Brescia, San Clemente.

113. Girolamo Romanino, *Sant' Alessandro* altarpiece, panel, *Nativity* (260·8 × 115·6 cm.), upper side panels (74·3 × 64·8 cm. each), lower side panels (158·8 × 64·8 cm.). London, National Gallery, No. 297.
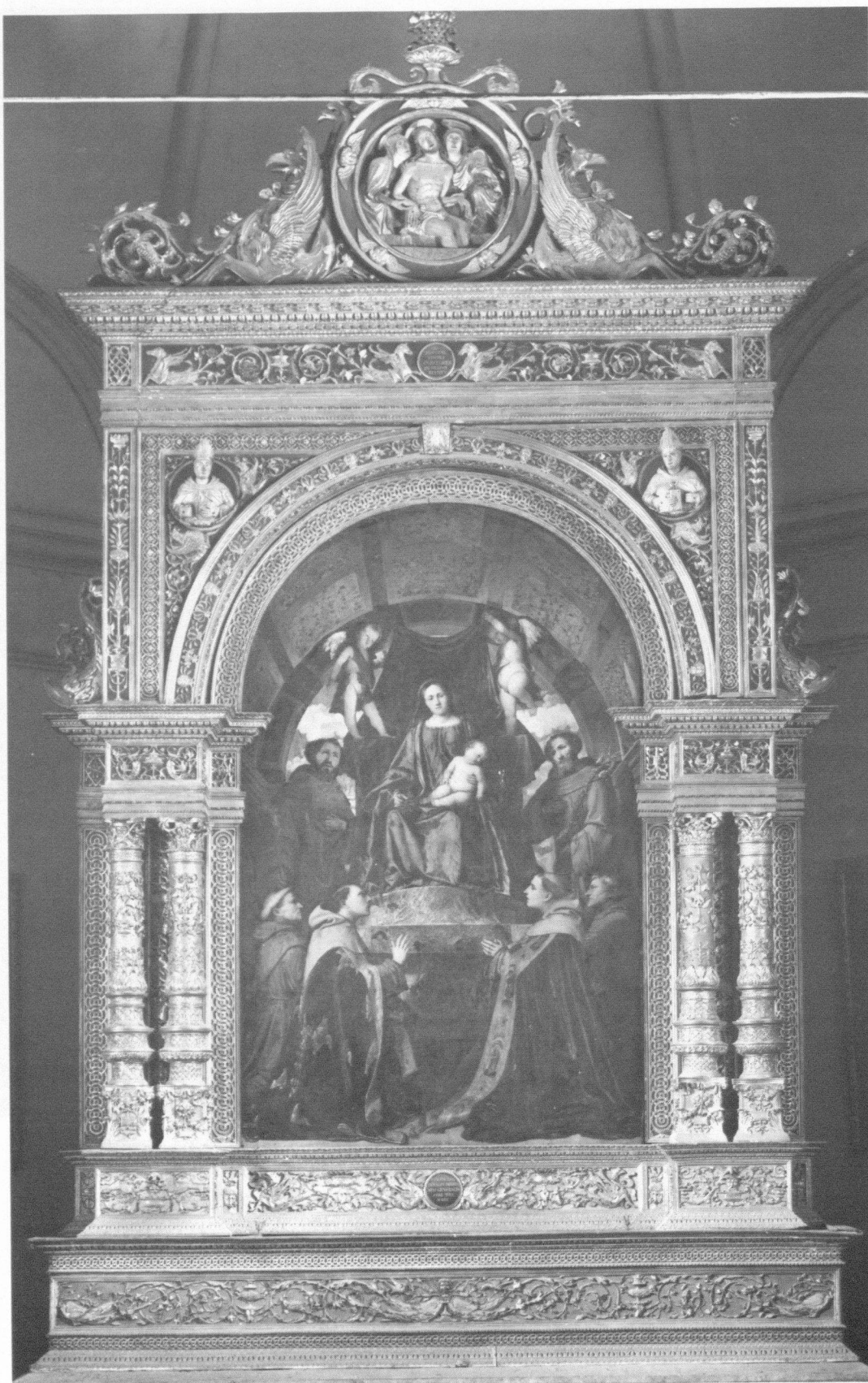
114. Girolamo Romanino, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, panel,
324 × 191·5 cm. Brescia, San Francesco.
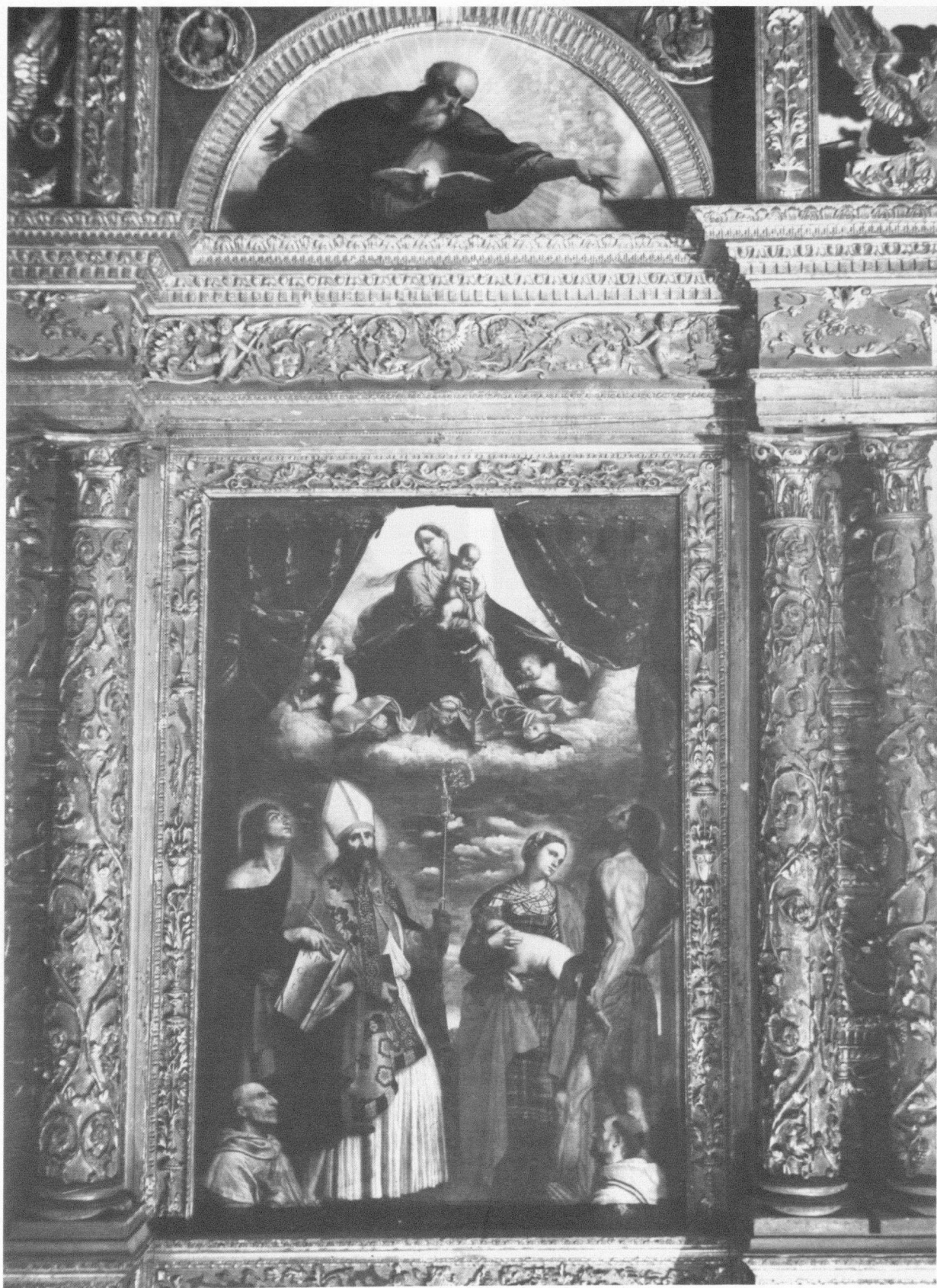
115. Alessandro Moretto, *Madonna and Child in Glory with Saints*, panel,
313 × 209 cm. Brescia, San Giovanni Evangelista.

116. Alessandro Moretto, *SS John the Evangelist and John the Baptist*, canvas,
432 × 231 cm. Brescia, San Giovanni Evangelista, presbytery.

117. Vincenzo Civerchio, *SS Pantaleon and Roch*, canvas, 192 × 100 cm.
each. Crema, Museo Civico (after Marubbi).

123. Fra Angelico, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints*, panel, 220 × 227 cm. Florence, Museo di San Marco.