

# TRINITY FINE ART

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## **Flemish School**

16th – 17th century

*The Temptation of St. Anthony (after Martin Schongauer)*

Oil on panel, 82.6 x 58.5 cm



This painted panel is based on an engraving by Martin Schongauer of the *Temptation of St. Anthony* dated *c.* 1470–3. The scene, from the *Life of St. Anthony* written by St. Athanasius in the 4th century, shows the saint levitating in the sky, attacked by nine repugnant, hybrid demons.

The devilish imagination so typical of northern European culture is expressed in full here in a catalogue of monstrous aberrations inspired by the animal kingdom, with a repulsive repertoire of tusks, horns, claws, suckers, beaks, trunks, reptilian wings, scales and scaly skin all rendered with a bristly, vibrant touch. The demons attack the saintly hermit by resorting to various kinds of physical violence, clawing at him, tugging at his clothing and threatening him with sticks. He in contrast, remains impervious and untroubled in the centre of this maelstrom of demonic fury, his books still solidly attached to his belt.



Fig. 1 - Martin Schongauer, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, engraving.

In addition to its own intrinsic artistic value, the panel is of particular importance in that it reflects a widespread practice employed in Renaissance workshops – especially, though not only, when training young apprentices – which involved copying and studying engravings or paintings, including work of a different origin or context from that of the workshop itself. In this instance the panel's interest is further increased by the fact that the same print by Schongauer was assigned to the young Michelangelo Buonarroti as an exercise while he was learning to paint in the workshop

of Domenico Ghirlandaio in 1487–9. This very panel has even been attributed to Michelangelo in the past (see below).

I was able to inspect the painting at first hand when the owner loaned it for an exhibition organised by the Fondazione Casa Buonarroti entitled *Michelangelo. Divino artista* at the Palazzo Ducale in Genoa in 2020–21. I was then able to examine the x-rays and reflectograms of the back and the front of the panel in 2022.

## A premise on Michelangelo

Every biography of Michelangelo mentions this youthful exercise. Giorgio Vasari was the first to do so: “*Since a scene by this same Alberto[Albrecht Dürer], which was engraved in copper and showed Saint Anthony being beaten by devils, had reached Florence, Michelangelo drew it with his pen in such a way that it was not recognized as his, and he painted it with colours; in order to copy the strange forms of some of the devils, he went to buy fish that had scales of unusual colours and showed so much talent in this work that he acquired from it both credit and renown*” (1550).



Fig. 2 - After Martin Schongauer, *The Temptation of St Anthony*, tempera on panel, 47 x 34.9 cm, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, TX.

Ascanio Condivi, who wrote his *Life of Michelangelo* virtually under dictation from the artist himself, expanded the tale with details in which we can perceive an echo of the voice of the ageing and jaded, yet still magnificent artist: *“And when Granacci set before him a print representing the story of St. Anthony when he is beaten by devils, the work of one Martin of Holland [...], he copied it on a wooden panel; and, having been provided by Granacci with paints and brushes, he composed it in such a way and with such differentiations that it not only aroused wonder in anyone who saw it, but it also, as some would have it, aroused jealousy in Domenico [Ghirlandaio], the most esteemed painter of that time, as was to be quite obvious later in other ways. To make the work seem less remarkable, he used to say that it had come from his workshop, as if he had had some part in it. In making this little picture, since it contained, besides the image of the saint, many strange forms and monstrosities of demons, Michelangelo worked with such diligence that he would not apply colour to any part without first consulting nature. Thus he would go off to the fish market, where he observed the shape and colouring of the fins of the fish, the colour of the eyes and every other part, and he would render them in his painting, so that by bringing it to that perfection of which he was capable, from that time he excited the admiration of the world and, as I have said, a certain envy in Ghirlandaio”* (1553). We have Condivi to thank for informing us that it was a painting on wood, because Vasari simply tells us that *“he drew it with his pen”*, failing to specify the support on which it was painted. Benedetto Varchi mentioned both biographies in his oration at Michelangelo’s funeral in 1564, while in 1568 Vasari left the paragraph unaltered, only changing “Alberto Durer” to “Martino Tedesco”.

The most amusing scene described by his biographers is that of Michelangelo as a young boy inspecting scales, fins and eyes at the fishmonger’s stall in a still hesitant search for his own artistic direction – he was later to show a total disregard for the natural – yet rising with zeal and imagination to the task set him. Even the most common river fish such as perch, carp or goby have thin and ragged fins in which tendons alternate with transparencies and scales of varying colours with iridescent nuances, all natural features hinting at the painterly solutions to which Michelangelo was to turn his hand later in his career, achieving brilliant moiré effects. The fact

that the only fish ever painted by Michelangelo, behind the Prophet Jonah on the Sistine ceiling, bears a greater resemblance to a large pike than to the biblical whale merely lends greater strength to the suggestion that he may have occasionally studied the fish in the Arno as a youngster (a suggestion first made by Clément in 1861, p. 328), although he was soon to turn to the exclusive and exhaustive study of the human figure at the expense of animals, objects and landscapes.

In the case of the *Temptation*, the fantastic iridescence of the demons was intended to symbolise the seductive and deceptive nature of Evil in accordance with a tradition dating back to Dante's description of the monstrous composite body of Geryon, which Luca Signorelli was to echo in his demons with their moiré skin in the Chapel of San Brizio in Orvieto Cathedral (1499-1505) and to which Michelangelo himself returned in his multicoloured serpent in the Garden of Eden on the Sistine ceiling (1508-12).

Another aspect of Schongauer's engraving which might have aroused his interest lies in the brusque and violent gesticulations of the demons in flight that distort their bodies into the most bizarrely contorted shapes.

On the basis of an authoritative opinion voiced by Everett Fahy and reiterated by Keith Christiansen, I would argue that Michelangelo's youthful exercise is a panel measuring 47 x 35 cm, purchased by the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas in May 2009. The group of the saint and demons does not hover above a steep and rocky shore, it soars into the air, flying over rock formations beyond which we see a seascape and a distant coastline with trees in soft shades of green. The palette used for the figures is dominated by red and black, the browns are fiery and robust, and the scaly or soft parts of the demons are iridescent and silvery, a viscous shade of pink and a slimy greenish hue.





Figs 3 & 4 - Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (and detail), oil on panel, 131 x 238 cm, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon.

I personally held in my hand and examined the panel in Florence at the time of the exhibition entitled *Giovinezza di Michelangelo* (1999-2000) before it was restored, questioning its autograph nature. In the landscape, defined as “in the style of Ghirlandaio”, both the fragile, feathery trees that curve and sway like fans and the round, compact trees conveyed by light, punctiform brush strokes have more in common with the manner of Umbrian painters, some of whom were in fact working in Florence in the circle of Pietro Perugino. When the panel was shown in Florence, it was attributed to the “Workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio” and a certain affinity was observed, particular in the handling of the rocks, with the manner of Francesco Granacci, Michelangelo’s friend and mentor in the workshop of Ghirlandaio.



Figs 5 & 6 - Jan Brueghel the Elder, *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (and detail), oil on canvas, 148 x 230 cm, Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid.

The painting was subsequently the object of an extensive diagnostic examination campaign and its surface, dulled by yellowing and discoloured layers of varnish, was cleaned. Through comparison with the engraving, the picture (painted in tempera with oily components) shows subtle variations in the composition, accompanied by an experimental range of drawing techniques. The underlying drawing reveals second thoughts, pointing to an original and creative approach on the artist's part in transposing the model rather than merely copying it.

## Unknown Flemish artist?

The panel with the *Temptation* from a private collection under discussion here displays an initial similarity with what we suggest is an autograph work by Michelangelo in their common origin, inasmuch as both are based on the same engraving by Schongauer.

Yet there are several significant differences. The panel under discussion here is larger than the Texas picture, its proportions are different (this one is more rectangular), and the wood used for the support is tough, compact oak whilst the Fort Worth picture is painted on poplar.

They also vary in their degree of loyalty to the German engraving. In the version attributed to Michelangelo the stick raised on the left emits tongues of fire while in this panel it does not, and in

this panel we can detect the lightest trace of smoke issuing from the stick raised on the right. In the Texas picture, the furthest demon in the bottom left-hand corner mauls a horn of the greenish monster who is clinging to the saint's Tau-cross staff – a gratuitously ferocious detail that is not found in the panel under discussion here.

The saint's clothing is also handled differently. In the Fort Worth picture he dons a dull ochre-coloured cloak over a dark habit, while in this painting he sports a dark beige cloak over a purplish habit. The iconography of St. Anthony Abbot does not offer any specific or consistent guidelines regarding the saint's attire, and it was only his followers, known as the Canons Regular of Saint Anthony, who adopted a uniform comprising a black tunic and mantle with a blue three-armed Tau cross sewn above the heart. These and other variations regarding the palette used for the demons (see below) suggest that the artist who painted this panel was not emulating the exercise attributed to Michelangelo but was engaging in an independent exercise or experiment of his own.

The back of the panel is marked by old damage, woodworm holes and paint stains. It was strengthened, presumably in the 20th century, by two cross-pieces with wooden dowels. Starting upper left, we see:

(a) An old red wax seal, a rectangular beaded edge with truncated corners, a five-point coronet with fleurons, and a tripartite crest with a natural eagle in the upper left-hand quarter, while the rest is impossible to decipher.

(b) A blue-edged oval label (19th century?) with ink lettering: "18/ piccola cornice/dorata (text crossed out)"

dark marks made with a felt-tip pen (unintelligible letters or numbers)

(c) An old, round red wax seal, a beaded edge, with two male nudes (heroes?), one of whom, bearded, kneels to hoist his companion's lifeless body on his shoulders. This may be *Menelaus defending the body of Patroclus* from the *Iliad*, *Ajax defending the body of Achilles* from the Homeric

legends or, albeit less likely, *The body of Gryllus being recovered from the battlefield to be brought to his father Xenophon*.



(d) A label with the number "18" crudely repeated in black, and in a fine 19th century hand: "Tavola dipinta / da / Michelangelo Buonarotti / Giulia Bianconi Venturoli per gli eredi Bianconi" ("Panel painted / by / Michelangelo Buonarotti / Giulia Bianconi Venturoli for the Bianconi heirs")

"Buonarotti" rather than "Buonarroti" was an alternative spelling used for the Florentine family's surname, with Giorgio Vasari being one of the first to do so: *"There remained his [Domenico Ghirlandaio's] pupils David and Benedetto [...] and Michelagnolo Buonarotti of Florence"*. This is how it is spelt, for instance, in the inscription MICHELANGELO BUONAROTTI on a portrait engraved (burin and etching) and printed by Angelo Marabini (Faenza 1819-92) now in the Davoli Collection in Bologna. Nothing is known of Giulia Bianconi Venturoli, although the surname Bianconi is fairly common in central Italy, from Emilia-Romagna to Lazio. An old family named Bianconi is known to have lived in Umbria, while another branch of the family enjoyed a certain renown in Bologna in the 18th and 19th centuries, its members including doctors of medicine, scientists and at least one artist, Carlo, the son of Antonio Maria Bianconi and Isabella Nelli, who was born in Bologna on 20 April 1732 and died in Milan in 1802. A painter, sculptor and architect, he was a member of the Accademia Clementina and Secretary of the Accademia di Brera in Milan. The *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* says of him: *"Architecture, especially ornamental and perspective architecture, may well have been his most authentic artistic calling, yet he was also highly skilled in decorative sculpture and in the applied arts."* His written work includes a discussion of the ancient Zulian cameo in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice which, from a purely conjectural standpoint, may suggest a link with the round seal described above inasmuch as it, too, has the aspect and format of a Classical or Neoclassical gemstone. If this conjecture is true, then the words "Bianconi heirs" would be particularly appropriate before 1875 when the family died out.

The surname Venturoli, for its part, is extremely common in Emilia-Romagna. A family member of particular renown was a highly successful architect named Angelo Venturoli, (born in Medicina, near Bologna, on 8 January 1749; died in Bologna on 7 March 1821).

(e) A round label with an inscription legible only in part: "8-45[numeral abraded]3".

Further research, particularly into the figure of Giulia Bianconi Venturoli, may reveal more specific details, but a number of points can already be firmly established: the panel's provenance was noble (crest with a five-point coronet); it was inventoried (numerals); and it underwent significant changes of ownership (artistic seal) in the 19th century, at a time when it was being directly attributed to Michelangelo on the strength of the tale in Vasari's and Condivi's biographies.

X-ray examination shows the wooden support to be basically consistent and compact.

IR reflectography shows an underlying preparatory sketch comprising a few drawn outlines and a substantial amount of dark shading to define the silhouettes and the modelling.

Examination of the painting showed the technique to be oil-based on a smooth light-coloured primer consisting of white mixed with yellow ochre to impart luminosity to pigments based on lead white, yellow ochre, pale yellow, cinnabar red, red earth, lacquer, azurite and earths.

Set against a pale sky, the sloping rocks faithfully reproduce the ridge in Schongauer's drawing in both their shape and their jagged surfaces, and the same degree of faithfulness to the original can also be seen in the forms and poses of the figures.

The phantasmagorical palette, on the other hand, is very much the artist's own invention with the saint in a purplish habit and a dark beige cloak as we have seen, while the demons glow in their visionary colours against the backdrop of a dark blue sky, the upper part of which is adorned with tiny wisps of cloud and the lower part with diaphanous clouds lightly touched by the pinkish glow of dusk. The varying textures and colours of the demons' skin highlights the artist's attempt to diversify his portrayal of horror and repugnance. The skin of the demon-fish bristling with quills is slimy and iridescent with a green and pinkish hue, his neighbour has a rough and shaggy brown coat, while the contorted members of the other bodies display shades of red and pink with green, cream and amber nuances. The monster, depicted upside down, mouth open and teeth bared ferociously, who is tugging at the saint by clawing at his stole, even has tufts of bluish hair covering his arms which end in bird-like claws. The parchment-like wings, wattles, crests, scales, suckers and horns inspired by the most repulsive beasts in the animal kingdom, such as bats, fish and

reptiles, reflect metamorphic changes in their turn, with no detail being overlooked. The devilish eyes are shiny and red with a hellish light, their bared teeth are sharp and white. The grotesque effect is amplified by the meticulous depiction of a “false face” on the buttocks of the demon bottom right, it too sporting a canny look in its froglike eyes.

The effect of ceaseless, flowing change in the colour of the bodies and limbs from one area to the other, in a metallic glow threaded with iridescent streaks, is achieved with carefully applied, minute brush strokes which are even pared down to a hair’s breadth in some of the demons’ tongues and whiskers.

Our main source for detecting individual features in the panel unique to the artist is the figure of the saint who, while reflecting Schongauer’s original in his broad, bald forehead and long forked beard, reveals certain details devised by the painter: his lively gaze beneath thick, dark eyebrows (the figure in the engraving displays a look of sad resignation), his gaunt face with its reddish cheekbones, or his beard beginning to show signs of turning white with age just below his chin.

If we look at the catalogues of the leading *romanisti*, in other words those Flemish painters who worked in Italy – the group on which all the admittedly weak clues in the picture tend to converge – then there is no shortage of potentially interesting candidates.

In the *Descent from the Cross* by Jan Gossaert, known as Mabuse (Maubeuge, 1478 – Antwerp, 1 October 1532), in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, the servant toiling at the top of the cross on the observer’s right has the same kind of head with a beard turning white at the roots; while the dark-haired soldier crouching in the foreground has a gaunt, reddish face with strong cheekbones. Mabuse adopts delicate tonal effects in other paintings, while the angel’s wings in his *St. Luke* now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna display a glowing polychromy.

In the work of Quentin Massys (Louvain, 1466 – Antwerp, 1530) it is worth pointing not so much to the grotesque heads of his old men, reminiscent of the style of Leonardo, as to a *St. Christopher* who emits an intense, almost piratical energy against a backdrop of jagged rocks compatible with the style of the panel under discussion here (Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum van Schone Kunsten); and to his renderings of *St. Jerome in His Study* in which the saint is in each instance a sharp-witted and vigilant old man – as indeed are those of the younger Marinus van Reymerswaele (Reimerswaal, c. 1490 – Goes, c. 1546). Yet a particular affinity with our St.

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Anthony can be found in an *Allegory of Astronomy* by Frans Floris (or Frans de Vriendt, Antwerp, 1517 – 1 October 1570) or a follower of his, now in a private collection. Despite the fact that the astronomer is shown in a three-quarter pose with a hat pulled down over his forehead and is thus difficult to compare with our figure, his lively gaze, his frowning eyebrows and his greying beard make him at least a distant kinsman of the troubled saint in this panel. It is worth remembering that Floris specialised in demons, reiterating the dramatic subject in his *Fall of the Rebel Angels*.

In conclusion, this picture, admirable both for its quality and its rarity, can be dated to shortly after the middle of the 16th century. The painter may have recalled the disturbing metamorphoses in the work of Hieronymus Bosch, where soft and impossible organic forms are clad in tender, fleshy meat with a troubling pseudo-naturalistic effect, and he may even have been familiar with Michelangelo's radiant moiré on the Sistine ceiling (1508–12).

The support and the handling of colour both point to the artist having learned his trade in northern Europe, presumably in Flanders, but having then travelled to Rome with his knowledge and experience, bent on mastering Italian art – not just the classic quality of its forms but also the dazzling opulence of its colours.

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