



1 Florence, S. Pietro in Monticelli, Crucifix (Detail).

## A GIOTTESQUE CROSS IN SAN PIETRO IN MONTICELLI

*by Bruce Cole*

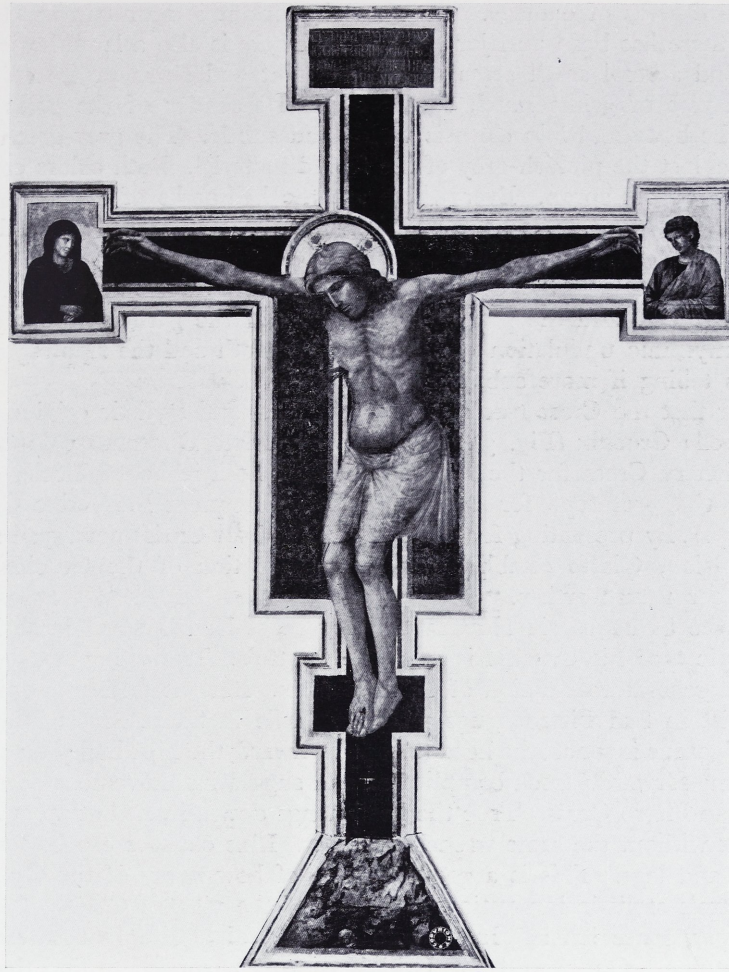
In a traffic-clogged street in the dull Florentine suburbs on the south side of the Arno towards Scandicci stands the church of San Pietro in Monticelli, a not terribly interesting structure of the Quattrocento.<sup>1</sup> On the whole, it is sad to report, its decoration does not rise to a much higher level. A small Baroque bust of a saint above an outside door and a black terracotta Pietà group over the main altar, attract the spectator's attention but do not hold it for very long.

It is only on the right wall near the altar that the eye comes to rest on an interesting object. For here in the darkness hangs a neglected Florentine Crucifix of the early Trecento (Figs. 1

<sup>1</sup> See: Firenze e dintorni (= Guida d'Italia del Touring Club Italiano), Milan, 1964, p. 455.



2 Florence, S. Pietro in Monticelli, Crucifix.



3 Giotto, Crucifix. Florence, S. Maria Novella.

and 2).<sup>2</sup> Although damaged and battered, the Cross is a rare and interesting example from that almost magical period when the influence of the mature Giotto permeated all the Arno city.

The Cross itself has been rather badly mutilated. There can be no doubt that originally it was furnished with a cimasa, lateral terminals and a base, but these are all gone. It seems very likely that the apron was quite a bit wider, extending at least several centimeters more on each side. At either side of the bottom of the apron one can just make out the lines of the original joining of the apron to the lower cross. These joins were at an angle of forty-five degrees. Thus all the wood surrounding the actual cross from the bottom join of the apron panel down, is a later addition.<sup>3</sup>

There is some repainting but fortunately it has not affected the Crucifix in a major way. The wood of the cross is smeared and heavily gone over. The inscription appears repainted, as do the crown of thorns and the blood.

<sup>2</sup> I know only two published references to the Cross: *loc. cit.* („scuola giottesca“), and *Guido Carocci*, *I dintorni di Firenze*, II, Florence, 1907, p. 338 („scuola di Giotto“).

<sup>3</sup> Originally the Cross must have been very like the one by the Corsi Master follower in Oberlin (Fig. 4).

There are several areas of damage. The most important is found in the lower left cheek of Christ, where there has been a major paint loss. There is also a large horizontal crack just below the chin and several small areas of flaking paint and abrasion are evident elsewhere.

Through the layers of grime much of the original splendor of the cross is still visible. The tonality of the body and loin cloth is varied and subtle. The grey-green flesh of Christ tells beautifully against the pinkish-grey of the folded material. Both colors contrast markedly with the deep red of the apron. Everywhere are the hallmarks of a good colorist at work. The gentle modulation of color and the addition of white skillfully define and give substance to the body and the cloth.

Without doubt the artist of the Crucifix had a marvelous decorative sense. The crisp, delicate tooling of the halo and the pattern on the hem of the garment are the most obvious devices but the rhythmic undulation of the waves of cloth and the rippling silhouette of the figure are just as telling if more subtle.

It is quite clear that the Cross traces its compositional and stylistic origins back to Giotto's Santa Maria Novella Crucifix (Fig. 3). This important late Duecento painting was not only the most revolutionary Cross for the Italian Trecento, both iconographically and stylistically, but it served as the prototype for almost all the subsequent Florentine Crucifixes of the fourteenth century.<sup>4</sup> By presenting for the first time a dead Christ portrayed in the most uncompromising illusion, Giotto established a new conception of the Crucifixion and an inescapable model for future artists.

The image of the Santa Maria Novella painting must have loomed large in our painter's mind for in generic type his Crucifix is very like Giotto's. The swing of the arms, torso and legs all follow the general articulation of Giotto's work. But the feeling is quite different, for the body of Christ in San Pietro hangs passively while in Santa Maria Novella it occupies space in a most vigorous manner: the head hangs downward, the hips bump up against the cross, and the knees come forward. Such complicated and suggestive movement does not play much of a role in the San Pietro Cross. True the head hangs down, indeed at an even sharper angle than Giotto's, but without the same wrenching effect. Like changes can be found in the position of the torso and legs. This is a good example of how many of the Giotteschi take and then modify Giotto's stylistic innovations. Instead of the vibrant Christ of the earlier Cross the figure is limper, more iconic. In a sense its spirit is quite Duecentesque in spite of its up-to-date costume.<sup>5</sup> One would not, I think, be very surprised to find that this artist had studied with a master who was trained before Giotto burst upon the Florentine scene.

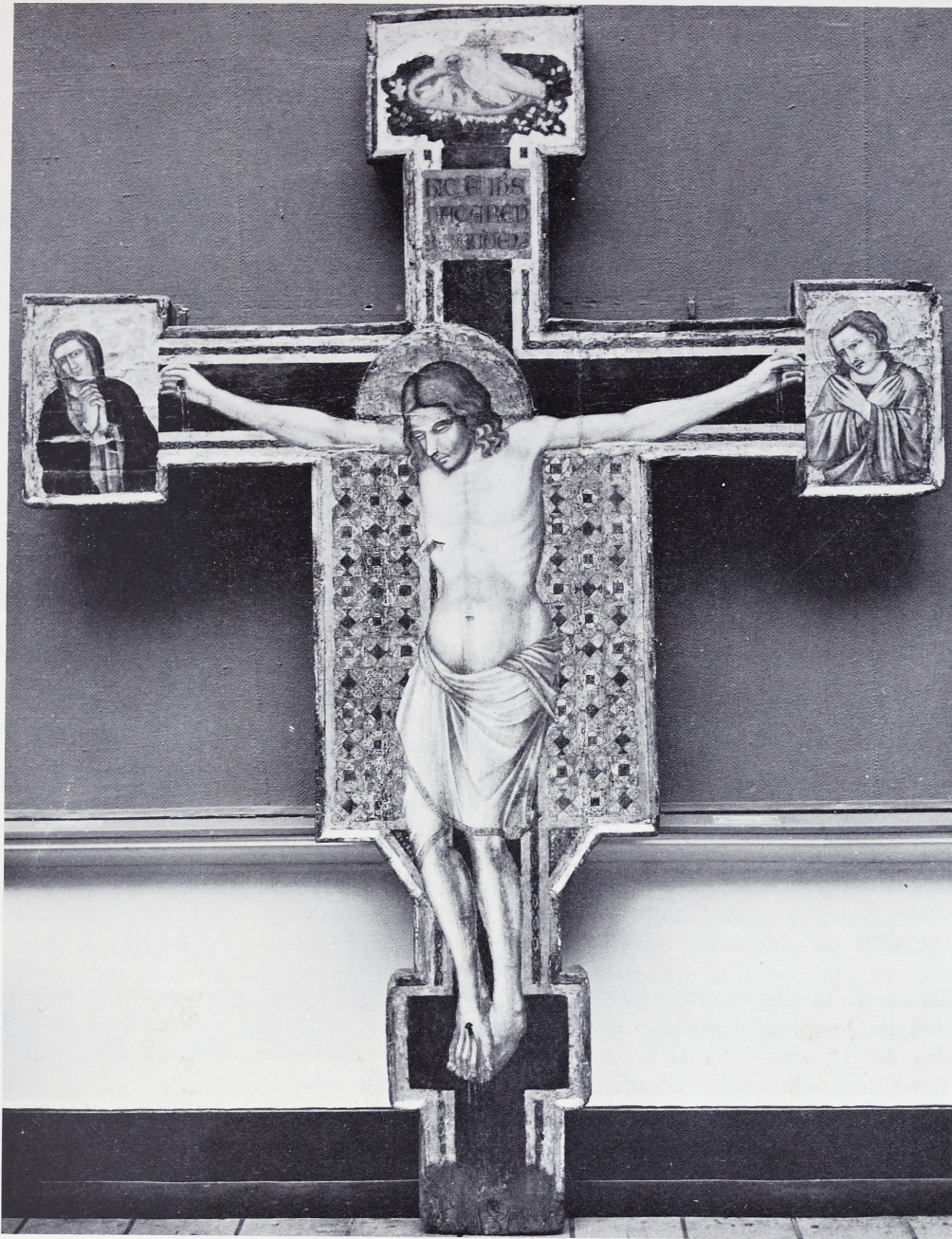
A more precise stylistic ambient for the Cross can be defined by contrasting it with a work by another artist deeply indebted to Giotto. This minor but interesting figure, a follower of the Corsi Crucifix Master, is well represented by a large cross in the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin (Fig. 4).<sup>6</sup>

Here too the influence of Giotto is powerfully felt. The taut arms and swelling hips, to mention just two of the more obvious areas, stand as silent testimony to Giotto's impact. One glance at the Oberlin face brings to mind the Santa Maria Novella painting, but wide gaps appear as well, for at Oberlin there are visible many of the same types of stylistic change seen

<sup>4</sup> See *Evelyn Sandberg-Valalà*, *La croce dipinta italiana e l'iconografia della passione*, Verona, 1929, Vol. II, pp. 891-906, for a survey of painted crosses after 1300.

<sup>5</sup> Quite a few painters of the early Florentine Trecento manifested similar tendencies. See, for example, much of the work of Jacopo del Casentino (*Offner*, *Corpus*, Sec. III, Vol. II, Pt. II, 1930) or the Santa Cecilia Master (*ibid.*, Sec. III, Vol. I, 1931).

<sup>6</sup> For the Oberlin Cross see *Offner*, *Corpus*, Sec. III, Vol. VI (1956), p. 26; *Wolfgang Stechow*, *Catalogue of European and American Paintings and Sculpture in the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin*, 1967, p. 79; *Peter Beye*, *Ein unbekanntes Florentiner Kruzifix*, in: *Pantheon*, 25, 1967, pp. 5-11. I would like to thank Drs. *Irene Hueck* and *Klara Steinweg* for their help with this article.



4 Oberlin (Ohio), Oberlin College, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Crucifix.

between Giotto's cross and the one in San Pietro in Monticelli. There are exaggerations and understatements, comprehension and misunderstandings; all the usual features found when lesser artists imitate great ones.

Generically the Oberlin and San Pietro Crosses are in the same tradition. They are both by followers of Giotto's style working in Florence during the first thirty or so years of the Trecento. But one can find closer ties between the two works. The particular elongation and sinuosity of the bodies and the facial features are alike. The basic schematization of the loin cloth is also much the same in the two. However, the greatest similarity between them is found not in the particulars but in a general tendency to coarsen those features which are splendidly articulated in the prototype. The face and its features, the hair, the lower legs and especially the feet have a rudeness and vigor very different from the taut gracefulness of the Santa Maria Novella painting. Some of this very same sort of exaggeration can be found in other Giotteschi and, curiously enough, it often works to the advantage of the artist.

There are also certain particulars which connect the two paintings in a closer manner. The sharp and elongated nose and deep eyesockets are very much alike. So is the construction of the torso and ribs. Though these similarities are interesting they are not strong enough to allow the assertion that the artist of the Oberlin Cross was also responsible for the San Pietro painting, for the cumulative effect of the various parts produces some notable differences between the Crucifixes. The Oberlin Christ is more nimble, less monumental. The figure in San Pietro is less finely articulated and not as firmly placed in space. These are not enormous discrepancies but they are of the type which prohibit the attribution of two works to the same hand.

The Cross in San Pietro in Monticelli is clearly based on the great prototype in Santa Maria Novella. It is by a man close to the master of the Oberlin painting but not by that artist himself. The artist responsible for the Crucifix was working during those exciting decades which saw the triumph of Giotto's style in Florence. But neither he, nor the follower of the Corsi master, nor most of the other Giotteschi, simply copied the Master's style. From it they took what they wanted and what they could understand. That which they did not desire or comprehend they left behind. Thus the importance of the San Pietro Cross lies not only in the interesting formal aspects it displays, but also in its graphic documentation of a period caught in the grasp of new and vexing stylistic changes.

#### RIASSUNTO

Nella chiesa di San Pietro a Monticelli, nei dintorni di Firenze, si conserva in stato di abbandono un Crocifisso degli inizi del Trecento. L'autore attribuisce il dipinto al cerchio del Maestro del Crocifisso Corsi e ne mette in rilievo l'importanza come un documento dello stile fiorentino nelle prime decadi del quattordicesimo secolo.

Photo Credits:

*Bazzechi, Florence: Figs. 1, 2. — Anderson: Fig. 3. — Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College: Fig. 4.*