

The Frick Collection: Detail Report



The Temptation of Christ on the Mountain

Duccio di Buoninsegna (Italian, ca. 1255–ca. 1319)

Date 1308–11

Medium Tempera on poplar panel

Dimensions 17 x 18 1/8 in. (43.2 x 46 cm)

Credit Line Purchased by The Frick Collection, 1927

Accession Number 1927.1.35

Not On View

Commentary The Temptation of Christ is one of a series of panels illustrating the life of Christ painted for the Maestà, a huge double-sided altarpiece commissioned for the high altar of Siena Cathedral. The importance of this monumental work for the history of Sienese painting can scarcely be exaggerated. The front of the complex altarpiece, now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena, consists of an enthroned Madonna and Child flanked by orderly rows of saints and angels, with half-length figures of Apostles above them and pinnacle scenes depicting the death and glorification of the Virgin; below is a predella narrating events from the birth and infancy of Christ. On the back of the altar were other small panels illustrating the life and Passion of Christ. For two hundred years Duccio's Maestà remained in its post of honor, influencing generations of artists in Siena, but thereafter it suffered a series of vicissitudes, and eventually partial dismemberment. Although more than fifty panels have survived, most of them in Siena, several of the smaller panels have been dispersed or lost. The original arrangement of the panels on the altarpiece and the question of what part assistants played in executing this radically innovative work are problems that may never be resolved. But Duccio himself must have been the guiding genius who designed the novel range of settings and compositions and who infused the familiar subjects with new drama and emotion. In the Frick panel, a majestically towering Christ is shown rejecting the devil, who offers Him "all the kingdoms of the world" if Christ will worship him (Matthew 4:8–11). Duccio retains medieval conventions in depicting the figures as large and the spurned kingdoms as small, thus suggesting a scale of values rather than naturalistic proportions. Yet the story is presented in terms that are immediately meaningful. Christ expresses a sorrowful solemnity, and the cities in the foreground — packed with turrets, domes, and crenellations — vividly evoke the festive colors and crowded hill-sites of Siena. Source: Art in The Frick Collection: Paintings, Sculpture, Decorative Arts, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996.

Collection History Duomo of Siena, probably until the nineteenth century. Probably Sigg. Dini FF. Giuseppe e Marziale, Colle Alto, Val d'Elsa, near Siena. C. Fairfax Murray (?). Robert H. Benson, London. Purchased with the entire Benson collection by Duveen Brothers in 1927. Frick, 1927. Source: Paintings in The Frick Collection: French, Italian and Spanish. Volume II. New York: The Frick Collection, 1968.