Sassetta's Madonna della Neve. An Image of Patronage

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AN ALTARPIECE THAT IS ITS OWN CHAPEL

In this chapter the Madonna della Neve's highly original construction will be studied in the context of both the original location and the specific requirements of the commission. The following information is based upon a technical examination of the altarpiece carried out during its 1998 restoration, when the present author was able to study it at close hand in the company of restorers Nicola McGregor, who took care of the polychromy, and Roberto Buda, who looked after the woodwork. We shall consider the construction of the support, the format with its undivided pictorial field, and the frame with its baldachin.

The carpentry and the painting of an altarpiece in this period constituted two separate stages of production. While in some cases the carpentry could be prepared before a painter had been hired, more often the painter himself would be appointed and would then subcontract a carpenter. In the case of the Madonna della Neve it is inconceivable that Sassetta did not make regular visits to the carpenter's workshop: he was the designer of the altarpiece and must have provided drawings of the entire structure. Indeed it will be shown that the pictorial inventions in Sassetta's Madonna della Neve altarpiece were carefully related to the woodwork, or vice versa. In fact, the first arbiters to set the price for the altarpiece upon its completion in October 1432 were asked not only to consider the painter's work but also to take into account Sassetta's expenditures for 'mercedem dicte huiusmodi tabule'. Or, in the expert's own terms, not only the panel with its figures, scenes and the work that had gone into it, but also the 'ornamento facto pro dicta tabula'. This ornement would have covered Sassetta's general design of the altarpiece, which the painter contracted out to a woodworker.

A substantial part of the 180 florins that Sassetta received in payment for his altarpiece would have been spent on the carpentry. Sassetta was friendly with one carpenter in particular in these years: in 1426, 1428 and again in 1431, he was appointed godfather to three children of Giovanni di Bartolomeo of Abbadia San Salvatore, 'maestro di legname'. Perhaps it was Giovanni di Bartolomeo who was responsible for the carpentry of the Madonna della Neve. The wooden structure will be discussed as a joint venture of Sassetta, who provided the design, and the carpenter, who executed it while Sassetta commented as he watched over the carpenter's shoulder.

The main panel consists of five vertical planks of poplar wood. These have been reinforced at the back across the entire surface by six horizontal...
poplar planks (fig. 21).\textsuperscript{162} All the planks are about 3.5 cm thick and the whole, sturdy construction is held together by a large amount of nails. These have been hammered in from the front, through the entire thickness of the support, and hammered back in from behind with a U-turn. This technique must have required quite some expertise on the part of the carpenter (usually, nails were hammered either from the front or the back, and were then beaten flat). The horizontal planks are stacked up from the bottom, each connected to its upper neighbour by three dowels. The planking at the back is original and, during the 1998 restoration, these back planks were taken off and the undarkened blank wood of their inner sides exposed. Pellicioli, who restored the altarpiece in the 1930s, had already cut through all the nails and had taken measures to counterbalance the effects of the warping of the wood (fig. 33).\textsuperscript{163} The altarpiece's singularly sturdy construction may have been necessitated by the burden of the heavy crowning wooden architectural baldachin. It could also be explained by its proximity to the Porta del Perdono and a not unfounded fear of wind, changes in temperature and humidity, also due to the bell tower wall with its giant creep along the inserted pillar of the Duomo Nuovo. Usually two simple battens at the back sufficed to keep together the panels of an altarpiece of this size. The construction of frontal vertical planks nailed to horizontal planks at the back was in any case far from unknown in Siena Cathedral: Duccio's double-sided \textit{Maestà} had been made this way, although in that case the horizontal planks at the back were much thinner.\textsuperscript{164}

The back of the altarpiece was first studied by Lilian Blauwkuip.\textsuperscript{165} She not only discovered the remarkable construction of the wooden support of the altarpiece, but also invalidated the then prevailing opinion that pinnacles would have been attached to the main panel. In fact, there is no trace at all of a system to affix an upper tier of pinnacles at the back of the Madonna della Neve. There are no nail holes, nor are there any discoloured areas. The sides of the box-frame as well as those of the wooden three-arched architecture above are not finished off at all (figs. 16, 17a, 17b, 18, 19) but are covered by a strip of wood, the nail-heads uncovered. Usually, a layer of gesso covered by a simple layer of a red or ochre pigment would be applied to the sides if they were to be exposed. Sassetta himself used even more sophisticated finishings, for example the fake porphyry on the sides of the pinnacles of the \textit{Annunciation}, now divided between Massa Marittima and New Haven (and this is in fact one of the reasons for disassociating them with the Madonna della Neve, as we shall shortly see). The box-structure of the predella is closed at the sides by two panels of bare chestnut wood, which were certain-

\textsuperscript{162} The second plank from the top is the largest and a crack down its middle should not be mistaken for a joint of two planks (this induced \textsc{Van os} 1990, p. 167 to count seven planks).
\textsuperscript{163} Due to its harness of nails and back support, the wood had made minor, nervous movements only. Pellicioli made shallow, vertical fissures at the backs of the painted planks to straighten them, filled all cracks with glue and fixed them with shaped wooden butterflies. He then re-affixed the back with screws, which were in 1998 substituted by a system of pins and lock-holes which allow for more movement.
\textsuperscript{165} \textsc{Blauwkuip} 1980.
16 (left) *Side of the carpentry of Sassetta’s Madonna della Neve.*

17a (below) *Top of the carpentry of Sassetta’s Madonna della Neve.*

17b (below) *Drawing of the top of the carpentry of Sassetta’s Madonna della Neve.*

18 (left) *Upper part of the side of the carpentry of Sassetta’s Madonna della Neve.*

19 (above) *Back of the carpentry of Sassetta’s Madonna della Neve.*
ly intended to be hidden from view.\textsuperscript{166} The top of the main panel has been left unprotected as well. To account for this situation it was suggested in the previous chapter that the altarpiece was, as it were, shrouded into the architecture of its makeshift chapel.

However, until recently a pair of pinnacles was still associated with the Madonna della Neve. In 1911 Mason Perkins discovered two pinnacles, one with the Angel Gabriel now in Massa Marittima and the other with the Virgin Annunciate now in New Haven (figs. 20, 21). Mason Perkins, followed by Pope Hennessy, suggested that they were the lateral crowning elements of the Madonna della Neve. A missing \textit{Salvator} would have gone in between the Annunciation pinnacles.\textsuperscript{167} In 1956, Zeri pointed out that this reconstruction was architecturally and stylistically incongruous and associated the Annunciation panels instead with the Arte della Lana altarpiece.\textsuperscript{168} This sug-

\textsuperscript{166} An extreme example of an altarpiece not only wider than its altar, but also with protruding elements and elaborate decorations at its sides, is Vecchietta's Spedalotto altarpiece (shortly after 1461), which was itself free-standing and probably backed by a panel supporting a canopy and curtain-rod; \textsc{paardekooper} 1996, pp. 170-176.
\textsuperscript{167} \textsc{perkins} 1911, p. 5; \textsc{idem} 1912, p. 106; \textsc{idem} 1913, p. 40; \textsc{pope hennessy} 1939, p. 27; \textsc{venturi} 1945, pp. 13-14, plate vii, esp. fig. 2, with a hypothetical reconstruction.
\textsuperscript{168} \textsc{zeri} 1956.
gestion was rightly rejected by Christiansen, who, however, subsequently reproposed a Madonna della Neve provenance. Yet Blauwkuip’s findings had already clarified the situation. The pinnacles cannot be associated with any other known work of Sassetta, and must therefore be considered as the only remnants of an altarpiece of so far unknown provenance.

The fact that the altarpiece had no pinnacles is of the utmost importance as it immediately increases the importance of this work’s place in the develop-

ment of the altarpiece. Sassetta’s Madonna della Neve is thus one of the first altarpieces to have a unified composition on an almost square, undivided pictorial field, without lateral panels or pinnacles (the main panel measures 198 x 217 cm). In Siena it would be another thirty years before Matteo di Giovanni returned to the unified composition and developed a shape of his own, the ‘round arched’ altarpiece. Sassetta’s innovation is more or less contemporary with Fra Angelico’s Annunciation for the church of San Domenico of Cortona and it brings to mind the 1434 specification for the planned altarpieces of San Lorenzo in Florence, which should be: ‘tabula quadrata et sine civoris’.

The Madonna della Neve predates Filippo Lippi’s Annunciation for Brunelleschi’s church of San Lorenzo in Florence and Fra Angelico’s San Marco altarpiece, both datable shortly before 1440. Fra Angelico’s Annalena altarpiece with Madonna and Child enthroned with six saints may be datable ante 1434. This would make it more or less contemporary with Sassetta’s in its unified pictorial field with a convincing, continuous space housing a non-narrative subject. However, given that these Florentine works are nonetheless dated slightly later, it seems that Sassetta’s experiment had no direct connection to the Florentine scene. Given our present knowledge, it is impossible to put a finger on the precise channel of influence. The character of the pala as presented by Sassetta is individual not only in its pictorial qualities, but also in the treatment of the frame. Sassetta’s very own introduction and elaboration of this novel type of altarpiece, with its skittish handling of the newly generated space of the pictorial field and the quiet introverted mood that prevails in the painting leads one to suspect that it was an individual, independent development of this form. As to the carpentry, on the tortuous way from polyptych to Renaissance-pala, the Madonna della Neve is still indebted to the gothic tradition in the wooden tripartite baldachin, even though this in itself is already more monumental and horizontal than anything made before. It should not be forgotten either that the chapella di gesso may have given the impression of an upper tier.

The discovery of a solution analogous, though not identical, to Florentine developments seems to derive both from a pictorial search for representing space convincingly, as well as from particular structural problems inherent to the situation and location in the Sienese cathedral. Though it is evidently an early manifestation of a new artistic ideal, the traditional context and location of the altarpiece are fundamental. Sassetta’s Madonna della Neve was the chronological apogee of the series of Marian altars in the Sienese cathedral, started by Duccio and continued through the complementary programme of the city patron altars, all featuring a scene from the Virgin’s life on their central panel (f.e. figs. 22, 23).

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171 First exemplified by his altarpiece of 1460 for the chapel of Saints Anthony of Padua and Bernardino of Siena in the baptistery; PAARDEKOOPER 2002, pp. 19-21, appendice nr. 10, figs. 1-3.
172 On the evolution of the rectangular picture field in altarpieces, see most recently MERZENICH 1996; RUDA 1978.
173 GARDNER VON TEUFFEL 1982; EADEM 1983.
175 As in HUBACH 1996, p. 188. For the programme of the patron-
echoed the altarpieces by Pietro Lorenzetti, Simone Martini, Bartolomeo Bulgarini and Ambrogio Lorenzetti. Firstly, the main panels of the city patron altarpieces all have similar large pictorial fields undivided by colonettes with a unified, albeit (as opposed to Sassetta) narrative composition. Secondly, they set the example of a tripartite partitioning attained by the division of the pinnacled frame in conjunction with the painted architecture. Sassetta varied the tradition and pushed the development further by omitting any of the lateral panels which still flanked the four patron saint altarpieces as well as Pietro Lorenzetti’s iconographically more related Carmine Virgin enthroned with saints. Another innovation was the straightening of the top contour of the frame, which had still been elaborately gabled in all four patronal altarpieces. The Maestà in turn offered Sassetta a lustrous example of a large undivided field with the Virgin enthroned surrounded by saints, although Sassetta was, of course, far removed from its hieratic representation of the celestial court (fig. 24). The architectonic peculiarities of the chapel of Santa Maria della Neve inspired the novel format too. The large unified pictorial space gave the much-needed optical sense of breadth in the much-restricted space of the chapel. In chapter VIII we shall see that there also existed an iconographic impulse for choosing this novel format.

altars in Siena Cathedral see a.o. NORMAN 1999, pp. 67-85 esp. 80-82; VAN OS 1988, pp. 77-89. 176 NORMAN 1999, p. 223 note 15 for a useful survey of documents relating to the original appearance of the frames of the patron-saint altarpieces.
It is above all in its frame that the *Madonna della Neve* echoes Sienese altarpieces of the early fourteenth century. A flat frame is applied to the main panel at the bottom and at the sides. The lateral parts of the frame turn inwards at 38 cm from the top of the altarpiece, to be broken off at only about two centimetres off the mitre joint by the inserted architectural wooden baldachin (plate 1, fig. 16). This kind of frame, known as a box-frame, was developed by Duccio and his circle around 1300. However, none of the fourteenth-century examples shows the mitring and horizontal continuation at the top as in the *Madonna della Neve*. Whereas Sassetta’s carpenter revived a much older Sienese tradition, he added at the same time a novel, effective, illusionistic bend, by suggesting the continuation of the frame in its upper part, thus presenting the sturdy baldachin as an interruption. The frame of Duccio’s *Maestà* has been lost and, given the lack of direct evidence, it is difficult to reach consensus over its reconstruction. White put forward the hypothesis that the *Maestà* had a box-frame. Arguing that the huge altarpiece could not have been supported by such a frame, Gardner von Teuffel suggested lateral supporting buttresses. One wonders whether these suggestions

25 (upper left)  Ugolino di Nerio (workshop), detail of polyptych
Saint Augustin the martyr, early 1320s,
tempera and gold on panel, total 134 x 208 cm,
Museo Diocesano, Pienza.

26 (above)  Sassetta, Palazzo Pubblico Madonna,
1438, tempera and gold on panel, 142.5 x 97.2 cm,
Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena, inv. nr. 325.

27 (lower left)  Lippo Memmi, Madonna dei Servi,
tempera and gold on panel, 78 x 51 cm,
Santa Maria dei Servi, Siena.
are actually mutually exclusive but, in any case, it is interesting to bear White’s suggestion in mind. Sassetta may have echoed Duccio not only in his composition and unified pictorial field, but also in his frame.\(^{178}\)

The gilded box-frame of the Madonna della Neve is embellished with a decorative pattern in red and blue glazes and punch-marks, as is also found in earlier box-frames. Sassetta would repeat a similar decorative motive in his *Madonna of Humility* for the Palazzo Pubblico of 1438, the frame of which is, in fact, almost identical in its profile to that of the Madonna della Neve (fig. 26). The shape of the Palazzo Pubblico Madonna panel and its frame are similarly inspired by early fourteenth-century Tuscan painting.\(^{179}\) The strongest analogy in this case is offered by Lippo Memmi’s Madonna del Popolo from the Sienese church of Santa Maria dei Servi, which shows a simple flat frame with glazed decorations on top of a rectangular panel with a truncated gable (fig. 27).\(^{180}\)

Sassetta effected a conscious revival of older methods of framing, while at the same time updating and refining them. Apart from the above-mentioned re-use of the box-frame and its pictorial decoration, Sassetta moreover elaborates upon a much less-studied feature of the manufacture of frames embedded in tradition: the architectural three-arched baldachin of the Madonna della Neve has an intentional curvature (figs. 17a, 17b). Gradually, the carpenter has linearly increased the thickness of the baldachin over the width of the lateral arches towards the central arch. As a result, the central arch projects five centimetres from the picture plane, to which it is again parallel, whereas the lateral arches project out only three centimetres at the sides of the main panel.

Though the deliberate projecting of frames hardly ever received any attention in the description of altarpieces, there are many precedents for this phenomenon. Just around the corner (fig. 2 nrs. 14) stood Gregorio di Cecco’s altarpiece with the Virgin of Humility of 1423 (fig. 38). Bagnoli suggested that the workshop of the sculptor, carpenter and *maestro d’intaglio* Domenico di Niccolò dei Cori was responsible for its carpentry.\(^{181}\) Its central pinnacle is crowned by a tripartite gabled canopy, which is trapezoid in cross-section. The two lateral gables gradually come forward from the sides towards the projecting central gable. The canopy thereby creates a physical, three-dimensional niche for the flat image of the Virgin. All the other gables of the altarpiece display another such device, being constructed out of two planks, the thickness of which increases from the sides towards their join in the middle. The arches thus form hoods over the saints in a very subtle way. They not only enliven the

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179 See also K. Christiansen in Christiansen, Kanter & Strehlke 1988, p. 7, though Simone Martini’s *Saint Louis of Toulouse* now in Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples is not as good an analogy as it might seem. Unlike the simple Palazzo Pubblico Madonna, it was embellished with a gable, shafts, pinnacles and a predella; Christiansen 1989, p. 268; Martindale 1988, cat. nr. 16, p. 192. Another example from the entourage of Simone Martini, though with a pointed gable, is the *Madonna della Misericordia* from Vertine, now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena; A. Bagnoli in exh. cat. Siena 1985, pp. 41-46 (cat. nr. 3).

180 Christiansen 1989, p. 268. Its format is smaller (78 x 51 cm), and the Virgin is represented in half-length. The painting is discussed by E. Avanzati in exh. cat. Siena 1985, pp. 86-87 cat. nr. 11.

structure of the altarpiece as a whole, but the curved arches also draw real space into the presentation of the saints below. By means of their gradual curvature they appear to press forward the painted figures. It is a sculptural device, which is in fact frequently encountered in niches of carved figures affixed to a wall. In the Loggia della Mercanzia, for instance, the statues of Saints Peter and Paul by Vecchietta and of three of Siena’s patron saints by Antonio Federighi are placed in Jacopo della Quercia’s tabernacles of around 1435-1437. These have crowning arches, the spandrels and cornices of which come markedly forward from the sides toward the centre (fig. 28). The niches on the pillars of the Cappella di Piazza have protruding crowning arches, though the effect is achieved in a different way (fig. 29). The arch does not come forward from the sides towards the centre here, but it increases in thickness from the bottom to the top, creating a similar effect. This part of the Cappella di Piazza was edified in the last quarter of the fourteenth century.

In an endeavour to trace the development of the projecting, curved frame we can look to late fourteenth-century Florence, where baldachin-frames existed which can be seen as precursors to the curved frame under discussion here. Giovanni del Biondo’s Cavalcanti altarpiece for Santa Maria Novella, Florence of around 1380, shows both the three main panels and the three pinnacles crowned by baldachins. These baldachins are all composed of three gabled arches based on free consoles, with the lateral arches coming forward to form a projecting structure. Jacopo di Cione in his Crucifixion altarpiece in the National Gallery, London, datable to the late 1390s, uses a massive baldachin composed of seven cusped canopies, parallel to the picture plane. Lorenzo Monaco, in his 1413 Coronation of the Virgin made for the high altar

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182 HANSEN 1987, pp. 50-53. Antonio Federighi’s statue of Saint Victor of 1459 is housed underneath an almost flat arch, far less pronounced than the others.

183 M. Cordaro, ‘Le vicende costruttive’, in BRANDI 1983, pp. 57-82, see figs. 81, 83-84. SOLBERG 1991, p. 881, also refers to these arches in connection with the device in the carpentry of one of Taddeo’s altarpieces.

184 The altarpiece is now in the Galleria dell’Accademia, Florence, inv. nr. 1890 n. 8606. CÂMMERER-GEORGE 1966, p. 183, figs. 320-327.

185 Whereas the middle one is somewhat higher and comes forward in relation to the others, the effect is essentially horizontal and
of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence, uses yet another kind of majestic, crowning baldachin. The three gabled arches, on hanging consoles which span the entire width of the undivided pictorial field, project considerably from it but are entirely parallel to it, thereby stressing the planes of panel and frame which have just been separated.\textsuperscript{186} The hefty corbelling of these baldachins makes them rather independent from the picture plane. These baldachins are reverential in nature and do little to involve the painted surface in their sculptural effect. They do, however, create a niche-like space for the altarpiece.

This space-defining function made the baldachin-frames especially useful for tight spots. On the two piers in between the three main doors of the Florentine cathedral, two altars with special images over them could be found from at least the end of the fourteenth century until their demolition in 1842. The northernmost altar was dedicated to the Virgin and a much-venerated fresco was transferred there, because the large crowds it attracted could be

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\textsuperscript{186} C\textae{}merer-\textae{}George 196\textae{}, pp. 181-182, figs. 338-c.
better accommodated in such a clamorous position in the church. It was crowned by a gilded and painted wooden tabernacle ("celum"). The altar at the other side, dedicated to the Trinity, was given a similar baldachin. Each baldachin was probably composed of five cusps, similar to the Jacopo di Cione frame discussed above. It is remarkable that in Florence also, altars positioned in tight spots, close to the church-entrance, are adorned by images crowned by elaborate baldachins, isolating the altar from the rest of the interior, just as in Abbadia Isola and in our case of the altar of Santa Maria della Neve near the Porta del Perdono of the Sienese cathedral. In Sassetta’s case, it should not be forgotten that the crowning of the altarpiece was twofold: a gypsum superstructure and an ingenious wooden frame.

We shall now concentrate on the curved frame. Most of the sturdy Florentine baldachins discussed above are parallel to the picture surface (to be called method i). The Cavalcanti altarpiece employed a different device (here called method ii), consisting of a three-arched canopy progressively protruding towards the central arch due to a slightly diagonal placement of the lateral arches. Method ii is frequently encountered in the pinnacles of altarpieces whose frames are otherwise parallel to their panels. This can for example be seen in the three pinnacles in Lorenzo di Niccolò’s Coronation of the Virgin made for San Marco in Florence and transferred to the church of San Domenico in Cortona in 1438. Sienese painters also employed this device at an early stage as, for example, in Andrea Vanni’s Crucifixion pinnacle of 1396. The above-mentioned Gregorio di Cecco also applied method ii to isolated pinnacles, as would Sano di Pietro in his Gesuati and Santa Bonda altarpieces. In pinnacles the device also seems designed to counterbalance the receding optic effect of their position high on the altarpiece. The three panels in Paolo di Giovanni Fei’s Birth of the Virgin triptych of 1381 or 1391 are crowned by three gabled arches each, the lateral ones smaller than the middle one (fig. 30). Method ii has been applied here too. However, due to a minimal bevelling of a few centimetres only, the frame does not become totally detached from the representation and starts to interact with the painted surface, making it bulge a bit and stressing the volumes of the figures and the painted architecture. This creates a peculiar optical effect.

A third and more subtle method developed in Siena, where an arch and its surmounting gable comprise two vertical planks which slightly increase in thickness from the sides towards the median join (method iii). Gregorio di Cecco and Sano di Pietro’s Gesuati-saints are all placed underneath such arches, their central pinnacles excepted. Gregorio’s adoptive father, Taddeo di Bartolo, developed this in his altarpiece for the company of Saint Michael Archangel, datable around 1405-1406, as was first noted by Solberg (fig. 31). Taddeo’s gables show a bevelling from the median join of the planks on half of the lateral arches only.
towards the sides, but the planks also decrease in thickness from the arch towards the top of the gable. Sassetta himself would use the very same device for his Arte della Lana altarpiece of 1423–25, as attested by the only remaining crowning elements, the two pinnacles with the prophets Elijah and Elisha (f.e. figs. 32a, 32b). The bevelling of the gables by Taddeo and Sassetta’s carpenters lends the frame an illusionistic relief, emphasising the corporeality of the figures below. In Taddeo’s case, the tracing of the cusped arch, executed in pastiglia, is left behind, parallel to the flat surface. Gregorio di Cecco would detach also the tracing and include it into the projecting, bevelled arches, as did Sassetta in his pinnacles of the *Annunciation*, datable to the late 1430s.

Ludwin Paardekooper and Caroline Villers triggered the present discussion. For the change of dedication of the company (now known as the Compagnia of Santa Caterina della Notte underneath the Spedale della Scala), see Gallavotti Cavallero 1985, p. 398.
We encountered the same device in the niches of the Loggia della Mercanzia and of the Cappella di Piazza. The introduction of this 'sculpted' frame in wooden altarpieces amounts to an evolution of the previous applied frame, which had served as flat surface decoration and demanded an increased skill on the part of the carpenter.

This development, the bevelling of the frame, often also entailed a different

The difference in the devices applied to the frames alone preclude the hypothesis that the prophets and the Annunciation pin-

nacles belonged to the Arte della Lana complex, as has been suggested by Zeri 1956, p. 38.
sequence in the work of carpenter and painter. Such a protruding frame would have to be applied after the main panels had been painted, instead of the previous procedure, whereby the carpenter would supply the painter with a fully prepared wooden structure, to be gessoed and painted in its entirety, including the frame. In fact, the baldachin of Sassetta's Madonna della Neve was gilded and decorated separately from the main panel, and attached only when both had been independently finished. No lipped edges can be detected at the top of the paint layer and the gesso and gold continues beneath the frame. This sequence of construction can easily be deduced from the ruinous state of the frame when the altarpiece was with the restorer Pellicioli in the 1930s (fig. 33).

Sassetta's innovation is that he combined various framing methods to achieve a deliberately illusionistic effect. For a start he used a unified, tripartite baldachin spanning an undivided pictorial field, as was first introduced by Simone Martini in his Annunciation of 1333 (fig. 22). Secondly, he increased the above-described method 11, of making a frame come forward, to span the entire width of the altarpiece, instead of spanning just the usual pinnacle, or single polyptych-panel as in Fei's instance. Sassetta broke with the compartmentalisation of the altarpiece, in the use of horizontal planks on the back, in the unified composition and in the monumental baldachin-frame which, with a slight curve, spanned the entire width. The lateral arches of the Madonna della Neve gradually come forward (a tapering of circa 2.4 centimetres) towards the central arch, which is parallel to the picture plane. The space taken by the Virgin and Child, angels and saints thereby seems to bulge forward, pulled along by the frame, while the figures also acquire an enhanced corporality, looming forward into the real space of the beholder. With enthraling subtleness, Sassetta's frame lends real space to his painting and thus the spectator is involved in its realm.

The frame therefore joins forces with the painter's composition and the

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194 SHEARMAN 1988, esp. pp. 10-78 discusses the tendency in Renaissance art to engage the spectator in 'a shared space', as he dubs it.
representation of his figures in an effort to create a convincing space, an illusion of continuation of the viewer's own space. In fact, tucked into a tiny corner of the cathedral, wedged between the entrance, the Campanile and a pillar, the chapel of the Virgin of the Snow was almost made up of the altarpiece and its plaster superstructure alone. It is an altarpiece which creates its own space, which is its own chapel. Its figures respond to their surroundings in the cathedral. It was the first altarpiece that a visitor would come across when he entered the cathedral through the Porta del Perdono coming from the city centre and therefore, even more poignantly, also the last he would see upon leaving the cathedral by the same door. The visitor is immediately introduced to the Virgin by the pointing Baptist, the Holy Child welcomes him with his look, his gesture and his scroll and he is presented by Paul with the apostle's Letter to the Romans. When the devoted visitor approached the altar, crossing Turino di Matteo's grave, he was not only met but embraced by this vision of the Virgin of the Snow.

195 See also VAN OS 1990, p. 174.
Polychromed wood, height circa 169 and 168 cm. Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena.