

Medieval | Renaissance: A Dialogue on Early Italian Painting

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Featuring Italian paintings from the late-thirteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries, *Medieval | Renaissance* is an exhibition that invites viewers to contemplate boundaries. Through well-selected comparisons between medieval and Renaissance objects, professor-curators Dr. John Lansdowne and Dr. Stephanie Leone explore the divide between the two periods and reveal the limitations of historical categories.

The exhibition unfolds across two main galleries, featuring objects from the Francione Collection in Florence. In the first room, the curators use a group of religious paintings to explore how devotion dictates both subject matter and ways of looking. Two images of Christ, one medieval and one early modern, offer distinct conceptions of the sacred body. The medieval object, a late-thirteenth-century *Croce dipinta*, hangs alone in a small room which the viewer can access through a Gothic arch-shaped entryway. Evocative of a European chapel, the architectural framing spotlights



View of the *Croce dipinta* in the first gallery of *Medieval | Renaissance*. Photograph courtesy John Lansdowne.

the work's original function as an object made for worship. The artist of the *Croce dipinta* renders Christ's body in modular forms, inviting the viewer's eyes to explore the figure limb by limb. In contrast, an anatomically correct sixteenth-century *Risen Christ* (Circle of Perugino, ca. 1500) blesses the viewer from a contrapposto stance in the second gallery. Seen in succession, these two depictions of Christ—made by artists working almost three centuries apart—trace the shift from the fragmentation of the medieval image to the naturalism of the early modern figure. The curators, however, resist a simple before-and-after narrative. In the wall labels, they note that the *Croce dipinta*'s insistence on Christ's suffering was already a radical innovation for its time.

Medieval | Renaissance explores a second boundary: the divide between church and home. Curators present a *Birth Salver* (Giovanni di ser Giovanni Guidi, 1486) flat on a low plinth, encouraging visitors to look down into it as Renaissance viewers would have done at home. Displayed uncovered, the object invites close looking and supports the curators' claim that it merits fine-art status, while also demonstrating how objects shaped domestic ritual. Yet as the



Installation view of second gallery with *Risen Christ* at back left. Photograph courtesy John Lansdowne.

curators argue, the divide between domestic and sacred space was far from absolute in Renaissance Italy. Piero di Cosimo's *Madonna*, which responds to the clergy's encouragement to display pictures of saints in the home, was likely intended for a chamber in a Florentine palace. The curators keep the panel in its period frame, a classically inspired architectural façade with capitals, an entablature, and a frieze. This decision resists the museum's tendency to detach images from their contexts, allowing the viewer to see the work how it should have been seen in its own time.

The strength of this exhibition is its unique transparency about the curatorial process. Specialists in their fields, Lansdowne and Leone each sign the wall labels for their respective periods with their initials, inviting viewers to recognize that "Medieval" and "Renaissance" are categories largely constructed by art historians.¹ The show's most persuasive claim is not that one period replaces another, but that the museum itself is where that boundary is staged.

¹ The exhibition design supports this: the deep blue walls of the first room intensify the gold ground of the religious artworks, while a pinkish-grey wall color softens the second space, allowing works like the relief of *Hannibal Carthaginensis* (late fifteenth century) to breathe.