

Duccio de Buoninsegna

(active 1278–1319, artist of the Sienese School)

The Virgin and Child with Saints Dominic and Aurea

painted c.1300, egg tempera on wood, central panel $24\frac{1}{8} \times 15\frac{3}{8}$ in (62 × 38cm); wings $17\frac{3}{4} \times 8\frac{1}{8}$ in (44 × 20cm), $17\frac{3}{4} \times 7$ in (44 × 17.5cm)

This tabernacle by Duccio was painted in egg tempera. After walls and parchment, wood was the most important support for medieval painting. It was readily available, easy to cut and carve, and the final object was as substantial as the metalwork, sculpture, or even architecture which it was sometimes intended to imitate.

The uneven surface of the wood was first covered by preparatory layers of gesso, which is made of gypsum mixed to a thick paste with animal glue. The gesso was applied with a slice and then with a brush all over the wooden structure, beginning with the rougher *gesso grosso*, and finishing with the smooth *gesso sottile*. To ensure that the gesso adhered well, the wood was sized and sometimes strips of linen applied to cover any knots or joints. When it was finished, the ground was brilliantly white, rather thick and polished to an ivory-like smoothness. These qualities were important for the final effect of the painting.

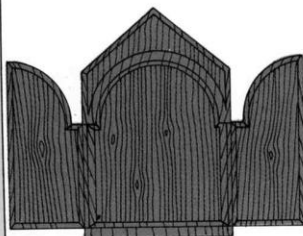
A careful drawing was executed on this ground, first in charcoal and then in black paint. The main outlines were incised into the gesso. Design changes were difficult after this.

The gilded areas were prepared with several

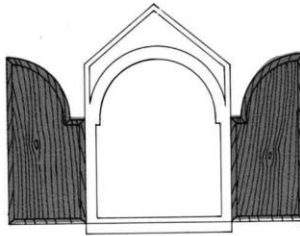
coats of red bole. It provided a slightly elastic underlayer for the subsequent burnishing and decoration of the gold and its colour gave the gold a rich, warm tone. The gold leaf was made to adhere with egg white and burnished until it was 'dark from its own brilliance'.

Painting, beginning with drapery and then flesh, was the final stage in this orderly sequence. The pigments were ground with water on a porphyry slab and the egg yolk was added as they were used. Each colour was treated individually, and mixtures, except for white, were generally avoided. In modelling the form, a series of pre-mixed tones, ranging from dark to light for each pigment, was used in strict sequence.

The painter kept methodically to the tonal sequence and worked with small, hatching brushstrokes which followed the form being described. The rapid drying of tempera paint was an advantage because one stroke could be painted over the next almost immediately. However, this meant that the artist had to rely on the network of brushstrokes to achieve blended tonal transitions and it was difficult for the artist or his assistants to make adjustments at any stage in the procedure. Thus tempera painting needed discipline and method.



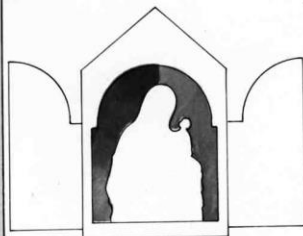
1. Painters and carpenters were organized in different guilds. A carpenter would have completed the bare wooden structure to order and delivered it to Duccio's shop.



2. Faults in the wood were corrected and often a layer of linen was put over the entire structure. This was then covered with up to eight coats of gesso.



3. The gesso layer was scraped and polished smooth, and the design then defined in paint. Contours and major drapery folds were incised with a metal point.



4. Up to six coats of red bole bound with egg white were brushed on and gold applied leaf by leaf. The gold was burnished and designs inscribed or punched onto it.



5. Drapery painting was completed before flesh painting began. All flesh areas were underpainted in one or two coats of green earth and lead white. The green earth was intended to be left uncovered in the shadows.



6. The flesh colours were finally painted in and details reinforced in black and sinoper. Gold lines were applied on top of the drapery by adhering scraps of gold to a sticky oil mordant.