

ART ESSAY

A New York museum
has purchased one of
the most valuable
paintings in the world:
a Madonna and Child
by Duccio

By Lucy Gordan

The Last Duccio

On November 10, 2004, the director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, **Philippe de Montebello**, took the art world by surprise when he announced the purchase of **Duccio di Buoninsegna's** *Stroganoff Madonna* for about 45 million dollars — the highest price ever paid by the museum for a single artwork. An early Renaissance masterpiece, this small (c. 10.2 x 8 inches) painting, in tempera and gold on wood, shows the Madonna and Child behind an inlaid parapet.

This "last known Duccio still in private hands" is named after its first recorded owner, Russian Count **Grigorii Stroganoff**, who died in Rome in 1910. His heirs donated some of the Count's vast art collection, assembled in a *palazzo* on Via Sistina in Rome, to The Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia, and sold most of the rest — but not this painting — at auction. According to art critic **Paul Jeromack**, The Met bought the painting from the wealthy Stoclet family of Belgium through Christie's. **Aldolphe Stoclet** had purchased it from the Stroganoffs in 1923 and it remained in the Stoclet family after his death in 1949.

The *Madonna and Child*, "originally the centre of a tabernacle, the wings of which have long disappeared," had first been offered "to the Getty (Museum)" but the offer was "turned down" as "too expensive." The Met's biggest competitor for the panel seems to have been the Louvre in Paris which, like the Met, owned no works by the founder of Siennese painting.

"One of the great single acquisitions of the last half century," di Montebello explained, "the *Stroganoff Madonna* fills in a gap in the Museum's Renaissance collection that even we never expected to close. It will become one of the Met's signature works. From now on visitors will be able follow the entire trajectory of European painting from its beginnings to the present."

Together with **Giotto** (1267?-1337), **Duccio** (probably born in Siena in 1255; active by 1278; probably died 1319) is one of the two principal founders of European painting. Both artists explored how art could involve the viewer's experience of the everyday world without losing a sense of the sacred.

Deeply influenced by Giotto's fresco cycle of *The Life of St. Francis* in Assisi after a visit there, Duccio perfected the art of medieval Italy in the Byzantine tradition before breaking away to give his figures more volume, an epic sense of scale, emotion, and a bold simplicity. His works, all of them religious, are extremely rare. Only a dozen or so are known.

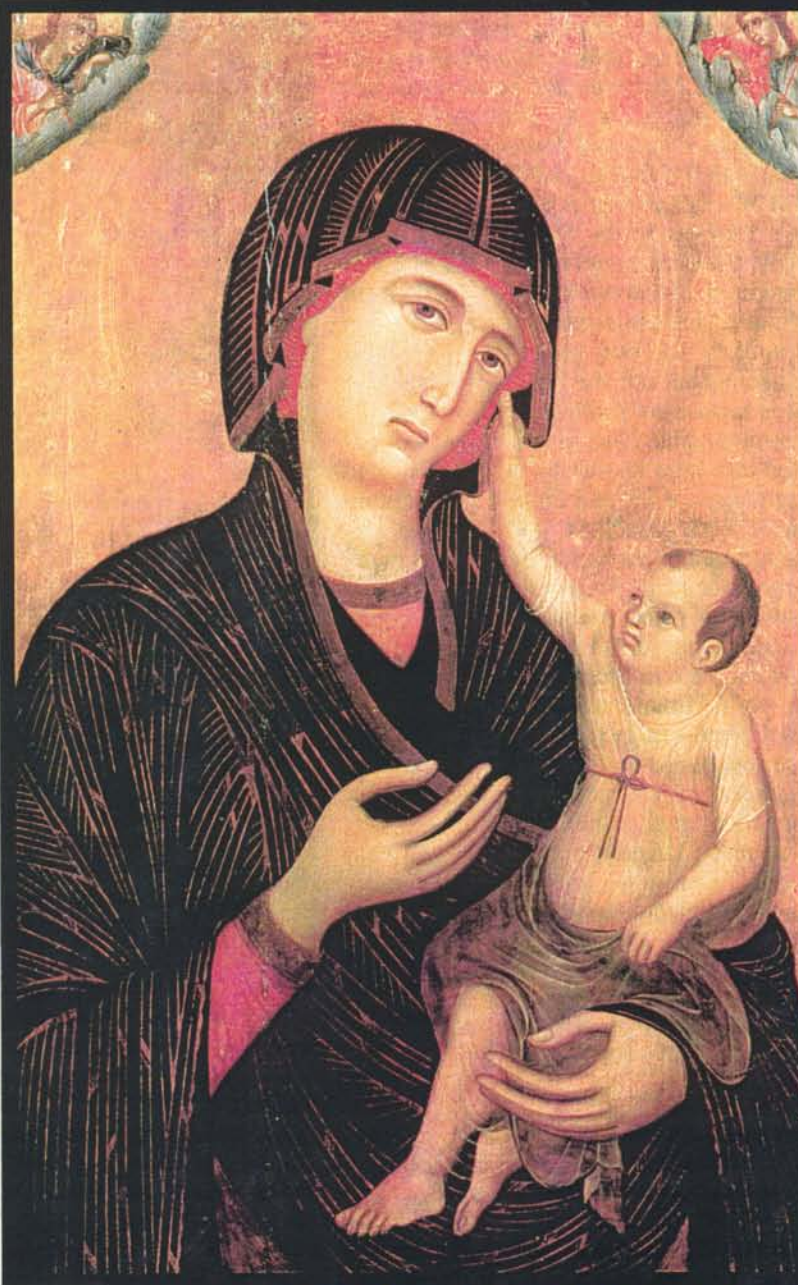
His earliest surviving work (1280) is the *Crevoles Madonna*, now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Siena.

Most famous of all is his altarpiece, the *Maestà*, now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Siena. Made for the cathedral of Siena, it's the only work he signed.

In fact, most of the paintings by this founder of the Siennese school in non-Italian museums (National



Opposite, Duccio di Buoninsegna's *Madonna and Child*, tempera and gold on wood, with original, engaged frame, just purchased by Philippe de Montebello (right), director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (above)



Madonna di Crevoles, Museum of the Cathedral of Siena



Gallery in London, National Gallery in Washington, D.C., Frick Collection in New York City, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid, Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, Kunstmuseum in Berne, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts)

are fragments from this great and complex altarpiece, which counts almost 60 separate narrative scenes. These were cut apart and dispersed in the 18th century.

Unlike the *Maestà*, this *Madonna* is a complete, independent work, not a fragment of a larger one. Two candle burns along the bottom of the original frame prove that this picture was intended for private devotion. Painted around 1300, the *Stroganoff Madonna* marks the transition between Medieval and Renaissance image-making and is the opening page of the most glorious chapter of Duccio's art, which culminates in his *Maestà* (1308-1311), a milestone of Western art that is comparable only to Giotto's frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, which were completed in 1305 or 1306.

Though well-known to specialists from photographs, Duccio's painting had not been seen publicly for two generations. A color reproduction (but not the original, although it had been tentatively promised), was displayed at the monographic Duccio exhibition, the first ever for this little-known artist, "Duccio and the Beginnings of Sienese Painting," held from October 4, 2003-March 14, 2004, in Siena.

The most eloquent appraisal of this extraordinary work came a century ago. On seeing the original in its public debut at the milestone 1904 exhibition of Sienese painting at the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, Mary Logan, wife of the world-famous art historian and dealer Bernard Berenson, exclaimed: "Perhaps the most perfect work [in the exhibition] is the little *Madonna* of Duccio belonging to Count Gregory Stroganoff, which, small though it is, offers so much majesty, dignity, and profound sentiment. Taken alone, it is worth all the other paintings exhibited under the name of Duccio."

On view since December 21, 2004, in its new home in the Met's European Painting Galleries, Duccio's painting is so special that it merits its own \$20 entrance fee.

Epilogue: Unlike great pictures held in most European countries, the *Stroganoff Madonna* was miraculously free of export problems. The Met's press release declaring it to be "the last known Duccio still in private hands" is not entirely accurate. "There is still one more Duccio in private hands — a Crucifixion in a private collection in Siena," wrote Paul Jeromack. "But it is safe to say it cannot be legally exported."

Lucy Gordan, an American, lives in Rome.



Duccio's *Maestà*, with enlargements, from the Museum of the Cathedral of Siena, Italy

