

ISSN: 2514-0612

Journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>

Carlo Crivelli: a strategy for the Marche rebirth

Author(s): Benedetta Castagna

Email: bc459@kent.ac.uk

Source: *Brief Encounters*, Vol. 5 No. 1 (July 2021), pp. 53-60.

URL: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE/article/view/250>

DOI: [10.24134/be.v5i1.250](https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v5i1.250)

© Benedetta Castagna

License (open-access): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. No warranty, express or implied, is given. Nor is any representation made that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for any actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Brief Encounters is an open access journal that supports the dissemination of knowledge to a global readership. All articles are free to read and accessible to all with no registration required. For more information please visit our journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>.

In association with

Carlo Crivelli: a strategy for the Marche rebirth

Benedetta Castagna

The Marche is a polycentric Italian region with its historic, economic and cultural peculiarities dictated by its geographical position. The works and influence of Carlo Crivelli, a Venetian painter who worked in the south of the Marche across three decades (1468-1494), spread to many cities and villages of the Marche hinterland. Since the nineteenth century, Crivelli's artworks have been housed in museums around the world; only seven cities of the Marche still preserve his works or parts of them. In this paper, I argue that these exhibitions, situated where the works were created, would benefit from a collaborative approach, which offers visitors a proposition more suited to Crivelli's work. I propose strategies that follow a place-based approach and that would increase the attractiveness of cities and villages where Crivelli's artworks are displayed.¹ I analyse two case studies that present different approaches to Crivelli's works of art: the Museum of St Francis displaying the Triptych of Montefiore dell'Aso,² and the Church of St. Martin Bishop exhibiting the Polyptych of Monte San Martino in the original location.³

In the last twenty years, the Marche has faced many challenges: reduced industrialisation, a mass movement towards big cities, the 2016 earthquakes, and the dramatic depopulation of the hinterland that followed. Small villages risk the loss of memory and cultural heritage if their inhabitants stop preserving the cultural heritage with their social and cultural impacts.⁴ As in many other countries, small towns, 'due to their size and dispersed nature', struggle to address the scope and scale of these changes.⁵ The development of a cultural strategy based on Crivelli's artworks in the Marche would enhance its

¹ Kathleen McLean, 'Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue' in *Daedalus*, 128, no. 3, (1999), pp. 83-107.

² Montefiore dell'Aso: Museum Complex of St Francis, 'Trittico di Montefiore dell'Aso' (Triptych of Montefiore dell'Aso). Original location: Church of San Francesco in Montefiore dell'Aso. Painted between 1471 and 1472.

³ Monte San Martino: St Martin Church, 'Il Polittico di Monte San Martino' (The Polyptych of Monte San Martino). Intact and in good condition. First work painted together by Carlo and Vittore Crivelli. Painted between 1476 and 1485.

⁴ Claire Colomb, 'Culture in the city, culture for the city? The political construction of the trickle-down in cultural regeneration strategies in Roubaix, France' in *The Town Planning Review*, 82, no. 1, (2011), pp. 77-98.

⁵ Neil Prowe, Rhona Pringle, and Trevor Hart, 'Matching the process to the challenge within small town regeneration' in *The Town Planning Review*, 86, no. 2, (2015), pp. 177-202.

‘symbolic potential, such as heritage and identity’,⁶ would create new attractions and would establish new forms of cooperation between municipalities linked by Crivelli’s works.

Carlo Crivelli found a thriving environment to work and live in the south of the Marche at the end of the fifteenth century. In this period, frequent conflicts among the small neighbouring *comuni* accentuated the differentiation and fragmentation of the Marche territory.⁷ In the north, the artistic and intellectual movement called *Rinascimento Urbinate*⁸ was widely respected, but Crivelli’s work in the south of the region remained largely unknown to audiences outside of the region.⁹ Commentators attribute his absence from contemporary treatises to the geographic isolation of his works, and its remoteness from the cultural centres of the 15th century.¹⁰ It was only in the 20th century that scholarship provided a full reconstruction of Crivelli’s bibliography.¹¹

Between 1468 and 1473, Crivelli painted at least seven polyptychs for the churches of Fermo, Ascoli Piceno and their surroundings.¹² The scholar Bovero argues that Crivelli met with success in both cities and villages of the Marche. At that time there was no workshop in the Marche comparable to his: records show he had been commissioned in as many as eighteen different *comuni*.^{13 14} Despite this, the great body of Crivelli’s work was unknown until the end of the eighteenth century when the art historian Lanzi discovered several of his polyptychs and triptychs. With this discovery, most of his artworks were broken up, and their parts displayed in museums around the world.¹⁵ This rapid dispersion of the artist’s works became known as the ‘Crivelli case’.¹⁶

⁶ Graeme Evans, ‘Measure for Measure: Evaluating the Evidence of Culture’s Contribution to Regeneration’ in *Urban Studies*, 42, no. 5/6, (2005), pp. 959-983.

⁷ Ronald W. Lightbown, *Carlo Crivelli* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 23-30.

⁸ During Duke Frederick of Montefeltro reign (1444-1482), Urbino was defined as the ‘capital of intellectual art’, ‘mathematical culture’ and ‘perspective civilisation’. In this period, Urbino hosted important figures such as Luciano Laurana, Paolo Uccello, Piero della Francesca, Francesco di Giorgio Martini and many others. Moreover, Urbino is the birthplace of Raphael and Bramante.

⁹ Lorenza Mochi Onori, *Raffaello e Urbino* (Milano: Electa, 2009)

¹⁰ Anna Bovero, *L’Opera Completa Del Crivelli, Classici Dell’Arte*, 80 vols (Milano: Rizzoli, 1974), p. 6.

¹¹ Martin Davies, *Carlo Crivelli, Themes and Painters in the National Gallery*, 4 vols (London: Publications Department, National Gallery, 1972), pp. 12-13.

¹² Pierluigi De Vecchi, *Itinerari Crivelleschi Nelle Marche* (Ripatransone: Maroni, 1997), pp. 17-23.

¹³ Carpegna, Pergola, Ancona, Fabriano, Matelica, Camerino, Macerata, Corridonia, Massa Fermana, Fermo, Porto San Giorgio, Monte San Martino, Montefiore dell’Aso, Force, Poggio di Bretta, Castel Trosino, Ascoli Piceno, Valle Castellana.

¹⁴ Olimpia Gobbi, ‘Il Territorio Di Crivelli E Dei Crivelleschi’, in *Itinerari Crivelleschi Nelle Marche*, ed. by Pierluigi De Vecchi (Ripatransone: Maroni, 1997), pp. 33-40.

¹⁵ Bovero, p. 7.

¹⁶ Pietro Zampetti, *Carlo Crivelli* (Firenze: Nardini Editore, 1986), pp. 19-46.

The diffusion of Crivelli's work gave him international fame. Today his works are in seventeen museums in the United States, in eight European countries, and in six Italian cities — but only seven cities and villages in the Marche still preserve them (Appendix A).¹⁷ These seven sites have the potential to show the context where the artworks were created and to highlight what inspired the most flourishing period of the artist.

The dispersion of the artworks within the Marche has two main consequences. The first is that different organisations manage the exhibitions. This causes a lack of coordination in the promotion and in the art display quality. In Ascoli Piceno, for example, three buildings managed by three different organisations display four paintings by Carlo Crivelli. A second consequence is the inconsistencies in the conceptual framework and curation (lighting, preservation, multimedia, etc.) of the works.¹⁸ There are, for example, misunderstandings between the works of the master and the ones of his brother Vittore and his followers. His disciples, called '*crivelleschi*', joined the activity of Carlo and his workshop and continued it in his style for more than twenty years after his death. While the master artworks are dispersed, the paintings of the '*crivelleschi*' are mostly held in the places for which they were originally intended. They correspond to relevant elements in the process of contextualisation. They demonstrate the great diffusion of Crivelli's style, but they also highlight the artistic superiority of the master. The misunderstanding in the expositions arises when there is no clear distinction between the works of Carlo, those of Vittore and those of others of the '*crivelleschi*'.

The polyptych of Monte San Martino is one of the few examples of Crivelli's work displayed in the original location: St Martin Church.¹⁹ Carlo and Vittore Crivelli painted for the first time together for this work. The art critic Zampetti (1951) argued that the polyptych was made by both painters because it was Carlo's 'last incomplete effort'²⁰ and many scholars supported this theory. It can be assumed that it was preserved intact in the original location because the critic attributed it to the '*crivelleschi*' and not, until

¹⁷ Maria N. Croci and Gino Troli, *Le Città Di Crivelli: Viaggio Attraverso i Luoghi e Le Opere Conservate Nelle Marche* (Ripatransone: Maroni, 1996).

¹⁸ McLean, p. 89.

¹⁹ Only another one is preserved in the original location: the Polyptych of Ascoli Piceno, preserved in the Cathedral of Sant'Emidio. The other seven Marche artworks are in different museum sites (civic art galleries, diocesan museums, town hall).

²⁰ Pietro Zampetti, *Carlo Crivelli* (Firenze: Nardini, 1986).

1950, to Carlo and Vittore. The artwork represents an economic opportunity, for tourism and cultural enhancement, especially for a small village like Monte San Martino.²¹ This village located in a remote area of the Marche is facing depopulation and a new curatorial strategy of significant impact seems to represent a challenge too complex to be faced by the sole local community.

Montefiore dell’Aso adopted a different exhibit approach. The Museum Complex of St Francis has on display the Triptych of Montefiore dell’Aso. This was a polyptych forcibly transformed into a triptych. Between 1859 and 1862 the missing panels were dispersed among different buyers, and three of the panels are lost. The original location was the nearby Church of St Francis. After the 1997 earthquake, the municipality of Montefiore dell’Aso obtained funds to restore an existing building, the convent of St Francis, into a civic cultural heritage museum. One room is dedicated to the Triptych while the others host items of rural heritage and exhibitions of the works of contemporary local artists.²² The museum aims to promote local culture and Crivelli represents one of the local characters.

Both examples show strengths and weaknesses. A collaborative approach could empower the distinctive aspects of each exhibition and compensate for some weaknesses. Viewers of Crivelli’s artworks would benefit if they were to be put in a network which would create an artistic itinerary across the Marche region, and which would increase the perception of Crivelli’s international relevance. To develop a more complete itinerary, Professor Croci proposes a virtual placement of all polyptychs spread around the world in their original location as a possible new experience.²³ The network would join forces to reach a higher level in the coordination and promotion of Crivelli’s artworks in the territory. While collaborative approaches are not the only path forward, these municipalities are more likely to gain a voice and access to external funding when arranged in a network.²⁴

Crivelli’s work is dispersed around the world, but significant examples remain in the Marche. The added value that comes from having such works in the place where they were created, and where their meanings are most powerfully felt, should not be underestimated. If local municipalities which host

²¹ According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics, in 2019 Monte San Martino had 712 inhabitants with a significant decline in the last ten years.

²² Scenography Documentation of Giancarlo Basili, the Adolfo de Carolis Museum, and the Domenico Cantatore Collection.

²³ Croci.

²⁴ Powe, Pringle and Hart, p. 181.

and exhibit these works are to gain the greatest benefit, they will need to collaborate more effectively and openly. This collaboration should include both ongoing scholarship, and new and accessible forms of curation, display and access.

Appendix A

Institutions holding works by Crivelli

United States of America

Baltimore, MD (Walters Art Gallery)
 Boston, MA (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Museum of Fine Arts)
 Cambridge, MA (Fogg Art Museum)
 Chicago, IL (Art Institute)
 Cleveland, OH (Museum of Art)
 Denver, CO (Art Museum)
 Detroit, MI (Institute of Arts)
 El Paso, TX (Museum of Art)
 Philadelphia, PA (John G. Johnson Collection)
 Honolulu, HI (Academy of Art)
 New Haven, CT (Yale University Art Gallery)
 New York, NY (Brooklyn Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art)
 Portland — OR (Art Museum)
 San Diego, CA (Fine Arts Gallery)
 Tulsa, OK (Philbrook Art Centre)
 Washington, DC (National Gallery of Art)
 Williamstown, MA (Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute)
 Worcester, MA (Museum of Art)

Europe

Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum)
 Berlin (Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz)
 Bruxelles (Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique)
 Budapest (Szépművészeti Múzeum)
 Esztragon (Keresztény Muzeum)
 Krakow (Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie)
 Frankfurt am Main (Städelsches Kunstinstitut)
 Lugano (Collezione Thyssen Bornemisza)
 Lille (Palais des des Beaux-Arts)
 London (National Gallery, Victoria and Albert Museum, Wallace Collection)
 Maastricht (Bonnetantenmuseum)
 Oxford (Ashmolean Museum)
 Paris (Musée Jacquemart-André, Musée du Louvre)
 Strasbourg (Musées de la Ville)

Italy

Bergamo (Galleria dell'Accademia Carrara)

Florence (Museo Stibbert)

Milan (Castello Sforzesco, Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Pinacoteca di Brera)

Rome (Pinacoteca Vaticana, Galleria Colonna, Museo Nazionale di Castel Sant'Angelo)

Venice (Collezione Cini, Galleria dell'Accademia)

Verona (Museo di Castelvecchio)

The Marche region

Ancona (Pinacoteca Comunale Podesti)

Ascoli Piceno (Cattedrale di Sant'Emidio, Pinacoteca civica, Museo Diocesano)

Corridonia (Museo Parrocchiale)

Macerata (Pinacoteca Civica)

Massa Fermana (Municipio)

Monte San Martino (Chiesa di San Martino)

Montefiore dell'Aso (Complesso Museale di San Francesco)

Bibliography

- Bottari, Stefano, 'Le Mostre Del Mantegna E Del Crivelli', *Arte Veneta*, (1962)
- Bovero, Anna, *L'Opera Completa Del Crivelli*, *Classici Dell'Arte*, 80 (Milano: Rizzoli, 1974)
- Colomb, Claire, 'Culture in the city, culture for the city? The political construction of the trickle-down in cultural regeneration strategies in Roubaix, France' in *The Town Planning Review*, 82, no. 1, (2011), 77-98
- Croci, Maria N. and Troli, Gino, *Le Città Di Crivelli: Viaggio Attraverso i Luoghi E Le Opere Conservate Nelle Marche*, (Ripatransone: Maroni, 1996)
- Davies, Martin, *Carlo Crivelli*, *Themes and Painters in the National Gallery*, 4 vols (London: Publications Department, National Gallery, 1972)
- De Vecchi, Pierluigi, *Itinerari Crivelleschi Nelle Marche* (Ripatransone: Maroni, 1997)
- Evans, Graeme, 'Measure for Measure: Evaluating the Evidence of Culture's Contribution to Regeneration' in *Urban Studies*, 42, no. 5/6, (2005), 959-983
- Gobbi, Olimpia, 'Il Territorio Di Crivelli E Dei Crivelleschi', in *Itinerari Crivelleschi Nelle Marche*, ed. by Pierluigi De Vecchi (Ripatransone: Maroni, 1997), 33-40
- Lightbown, Ronald W., *Carlo Crivelli* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2004)
- McLean, Kathleen, 'Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue' in *Daedalus*, 128, no. 3, (1999), 83-107
- Mochi Onori, Lorenza, *Raffaello e Urbino* (Milano: Electa, 2009)
- Prowe, Neil, Pringle, Rhona and Hart, Trevor, 'Matching the process to the challenge within small town regeneration' in *The Town Planning Review*, 86, no. 2, (2015), 177-202
- Ricci, Amico, *Memorie Storiche Delle Arti E Degli Artisti Della Marca di Ancona* (Italy: Tip. di A. Mancini, 1834)
- Zampetti, Pietro, *Carlo Crivelli* (Firenze: Nardini, 1986)