Staging St Lucy’s story as an ancient tragedy.
Time and duration in the Altarpiece of St Lucy by Lorenzo Lotto

Giuseppe Capriotti, Macerata

The aim of this paper is to analyze the presence of symbols of time and the singular narrative strategies used by the Venetian painter Lorenzo Lotto in the Altarpiece of St Lucy (fig. 1), preserved in the Civic Art Gallery of Jesi, in the Marche Region, in Italy. These two aspects make the altarpiece an interesting theoretical object, since the painter seems to propose a sophisticated reflection on time, duration and storytelling through the narration of St Lucy’s story.

1. The Altarpiece of St Lucy from the commission to the museum

The story about the commission and realization of the Altarpiece of St Lucy by Lorenzo Lotto is known to us thanks to the documents published in 1980 by Giovanni Annibaldi. The work was commissioned to the painter in 1523 by the richest confraternity of Jesi, the scola of St Lucy, owner of the third altar a cornu Evangeli of the Franciscan church of St Florian, whose members used to run a hospital located on the same square of the church. Lorenzo Lotto agreed to realize...

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1 In this essay I have further developed and analyzed some considerations already present in Capriotti 2009. Some ideas were also presented at the annual meeting of the Sixteenth Century Society & Conference, 22–25 October 2015, Vancouver, Canada, with a paper entitled Narrating to reflect upon time. Narrative strategies of the Altarpiece of St. Lucy by Lorenzo Lotto.

2 Annibaldi 1980.
Fig. 1: Lorenzo Lotto, Altarpiece of St Lucy, Jesi, Italy, Civic Art Galery; from: Wikimedia Commons <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lotto_pala_di_santa_lucia_00.jpg> (04.09.2017).
the wooden altarpiece following a drawing previously presented to the confraternity, and to deliver the work within two years, sending it to the beach of Case Bruciate, today Marina di Montemarciano, ancient access to the sea of the town of Jesi. The painter also agreed to personally place the altarpiece in the chapel in Jesi\(^3\). Since he had already missed the two-year deadline, in 1528 the confraternity assigned the same commission to the artist Giuliano Presutti da Fano; however, the deal with this painter was never closed. In 1531 Lotto asked the scola to finish paying the amount agreed in 1523 in order to complete the altarpiece and, in 1532, the work was finally delivered, as it is documented by the date and signature drawn by the artist on the left of the main panel: *L. Lotus 1532*.

The integrity of the altarpiece, composed of a main panel and a *predella*, was most likely tampered during the renewal of St Florian church in 1742. The three scenes of the *predella*, detached in occasion of the relocation of the altarpiece on a new altar, were moved to the top floor of the annexed convent, where they remained until 1870, when the complex lost its religious function. In December of the same year the compartments were moved to a room adjacent to the church and then stolen; they were retrieved only in 1878 and then restored in 1891. In 1908, together with all movable state property, the altarpiece was placed on the ground floor of the former convent of St Florian, while in 1949 was transported in the new Civic Art Gallery staged at Palazzo della Signoria\(^4\). The compartments of the *predella* were restored in 1891 by Luigi Bartolucci, while the entire work was cleaned up in 1953 in occasion of Lotto’s exhibition at Palazzo Ducale in Venice; the work was again restored in 1979 under the direction of Giovanni Urbani, and again in 1994 and 2009 by Francesca Pappagallo\(^5\). Since 1981 the main panel, that is, the *St Lucy*  

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\(^3\) For the original position of the chapel within the old complex of St Florian, see the reconstruction proposed by Cortesi Bosco 1996, based on a 17th century *descriptio*.  
\(^4\) See Annibaldi 1980, 148. The material history of this work was analyzed again by Romina Quarchioni in an entry in Garibaldi – Villa 2011, 120–133.  
\(^5\) The results of the 1979 restoration works have been published by Cordaro 1981. For later restorations see the entry by Romina Quarchioni in Garibaldi – Villa 2011, 120–133.
In front of the Judge, and the three compartments of the predella (St Lucy at St Agatha’s grave, St Lucy convicted and St Lucy dragged by the oxen) have been on display in Pianetti Palace (current location of the Civic Art Gallery), reinstating, even though without the frame, its original integrity.

A compartment portraying St Lucy on the stake was found in 1905 by Cesare Annibaldi, who interpreted it as the fourth episode of the predella. During the last century, the existence of this compartment has created some uncertainty as to the original structure of the altarpiece. The compartment was passed on through testamentary donation to the bishop of Jesi in 1941 and it was then donated by the latter to the Civic Art Gallery, where it is still on display today. At the exhibition Lorenzo Lotto nelle Marche. Il suo tempo, il suo influsso, held in Ancona in 1981, this scene was displayed, together with the main panel and the other compartments, as a copy, perhaps from the 17th century, of the last portion of the predella. A little later, however, Francesca Cortesi Bosco showed with convincing evidence the inconsistencies of a narrative system including this fourth compartment and proposed “the hypothesis that the little panel draws its origin, indirectly, from a creation by Lorenzo Lotto, perhaps only a sketch, given as an alternative to the third compartment in case they preferred the epilogue of the story.”

Reasonably dating Lucy’s stake back to the 19th century, Loretta Mozzoni recently considered the

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6 The new space of the Pinacoteca (Palazzo Pianetti) was inaugurated on 5th December 1981. Mozzoni – Paoletti 2001, 9.
7 A copy of the third compartment and the St Lucy at the stake were owned (at the start of the 20th century) by Pierino Acqua from Jesi. See Annibaldi 1905, 35–36, n.1.
8 Annibaldi 1980, 147, n. 34. The author points out also the presence of a copy of the third compartment of the predella, as a further proof supporting the hypothesis that the two compartments were originally part of a copy of the entire predella of the altarpiece. However, Loretta Mozzoni specifies that the copy of the third compartment (currently preserved in the Diocesan museum of Jesi) dates back to the 17th century, while the St Lucy at the stake “must be placed at the start of the 19th century” (Mozzoni – Paoletti 1996, 103).
10 Cortesi Bosco 1984, 65.
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compartment as completely unrelated to Lotto’s narration\textsuperscript{11}. In occasion of the exhibition \textit{Lorenzo Lotto. Il genio inquieto del Rinascimento}, held between 1997 and 1999 in Washington, Bergamo and Paris, Peter Humfrey suggested to interpret \textit{Lucy’s stake} as a panel realized after the reconstruction of the church of St Florian and the dismem-berment of the complex\textsuperscript{12}.

The analysis of the narrative system of the altarpiece will clarify that the decision not to represent the culmination of the saint’s story answers a planned and deliberate narrative choice, intrinsically linked to the debate on contemporary theater, in particular tragic theatre. To fully understand the narrative strategies employed by the painter, we must start from a brief analysis of the literary and iconographic sources behind the artist’s work.

2. Literary source and iconographic precedents in the Adriatic area

The text used as reference by Lorenzo Lotto to stage events of St Lucy’s life is definitely the \textit{Legenda aurea} by the Dominican friar Jacopo da Varazze, written in the 13\textsuperscript{th} century and based on a rich hagiographic tradition in Greek and Latin\textsuperscript{13}. The legend of St Lucy from Syracuse was passed on to us through various works from different ages, starting from the Greek \textit{martyrion}, written in the 5\textsuperscript{th} century, and the Latin \textit{passio}, written between the end of the 5\textsuperscript{th} and the start of the 6\textsuperscript{th} century\textsuperscript{14}. Summarizing this substantial literary tradition, Jacopo da Varazze presents the saint as a meaningful embodiment of the values of the perfect Christian, praising her choice of virginity (and, thus, her refusal of marriage), her renounce of earthly goods and her unshakeable faith. As for the legends of other saints, also in this case Jacopo da Varazze provides the artists with a proper outline which they can follow in absolute freedom, highlighting or overlook-
ing some parts of the events. Many cycle of paintings realized between the Middle Ages and the Modern Era follow, in more or less details, the account of the saint’s story written by Jacopo da Varazze.

In the Adriatic basin, the cult and iconography of St Lucy were extraordinarily successful, in particular in the Veneto dominions and in the cities that had business relations with Venice\textsuperscript{15}. The remains of

\textsuperscript{15} Narrative cycles with stories of St Lucy are present in Offida (14th century frescoes in the church of S. Maria della Rocca), in Padova (frescoes by Altichiero in St George oratory), in Pasian di Prato (14th century frescoes in the church of St Catherine), in Serra San Quirico (series by Pasqualino Rossi in the church of St Lucy).
the saint arrived in Venice from Constantinople, following the 1204 crusade, and they were kept and worshipped in St Lucy monastery (demolished in order to make room for the Santa Lucia Train Station)\textsuperscript{16}. It is also important to highlight the fortune, in this geographical area, of the type of hagiographic altarpiece, showing the saint in the middle and the stories of her life on the sides. One of the first examples of this kind is the \textit{Polyptych of St Lucy} (fig. 2), realized by Paolo Veneziano around 1340–1350 for the Benedictine church of Jurandvor, on the island of Krk, in Croatia\textsuperscript{17}, followed by the \textit{Polyptych of St Lucy} (fig. 3 and 4), attributed to Jacobello del Fiore and realized by 1420 for the church of St Lucy in Fermo\textsuperscript{18}, and the \textit{Altarpiece of St Lucy} (fig. 5), dated 1462 by Quirizio da Murano, painted for the town of Rovigo\textsuperscript{19}. In these paintings the hagiographical episodes, surely selected through the \textit{Legenda aurea}, are basically the same: in Jurandvor they are eight (Lucy at St Agatha’s grave, Lucy handing out her dowry, Lucy in front of the judge, Lucy dragged to the brothel, Lucy on the stake, Lucy stabbed at her throat, the last communion of the saint, the miracles at the grave of the saint), in Fermo there are again eight (Lucy at St Agatha’s grave, Lucy handing out her dowry, Lucy in front of the judge, Lucy dragged to the brothel, Lucy on the stake, Lucy stabbed at her throat, the last communion of the saint, the funeral of the saint), while in Rovigo they are only six (Lucy at St Agatha’s grave, Lucy in front of the judge, Lucy dragged to the brothel, Lucy on the stake, Lucy stabbed at her throat, the last communion of the saint)\textsuperscript{20}

The articulate story of the saint is thus summarized in various scenes, presenting one \textit{myththeme} at a time\textsuperscript{21}, choosing a “sequential” narrative system that goes from left to right, from top to bottom, really clear

\textsuperscript{16} Zorzi 1984, 231–232. In the city of Venice the relics of the saint have been repeatedly moved to different churches.
\textsuperscript{17} This work is currently preserved in Palazzo della Cancelleria Vescovile of the city. See Muraro 1969, 141–142 e Humfrey 1993, 38–39.
\textsuperscript{18} This work is currently preserved in the local Civic Art Gallery. See Capriotti 2012.
\textsuperscript{19} This work is currently preserved in the Accademia dei Concordi of the city. See the entry by Mauro Lucco in Fantelli – Lucco 1985, 28–29 e Humfrey 1993, 165–166.
\textsuperscript{20} The close correspondence between the episodes was revealed by Christiansen 1987, 127–128.
\textsuperscript{21} See Lévi-Strauss 1966, 231–261.
Fig. 3: Jacobello del Fiore, Polyptych of St Lucy, Fermo, Pinacoteca Civica; from: Capriotti 2012, 64.
Fig. 4: Jacobello del Fiore, Polyptych of St Lucy, Fermo, Pinacoteca Civica; from: Capriotti 2012, 65.
and easy to read\textsuperscript{22}. In all those cases the sequence starts from the choice of virginity to end up with the martyrdom, the funeral and, in Jurandvor polyptych, the miracles at the grave. This way the story of the saint is narrated in its entirety.

Although it is difficult to find out whether this rich hagiographical tradition was actually part of Lorenzo Lotto’s visual heritage, the comparison with the Jesi altarpiece shows the originality of the narrative choices carried out by the artist, starting from the first compartment of the \textit{predella}.

\textsuperscript{22} On this traditional way to represent the time of the story, see Corrain 1987, 45. More in general see Pinelli – Gualandi 2008.
Fig. 6: Lorenzo Lotto, Altarpiece of St Lucy (First compartment of predella). Jesi, Italy, Civic Art Gallery; from Wikimedia Commons <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/70/Lotto,_pala_di_santa_lucia_predella.jpg> (31.08.2016).

3. The first compartment of the predella

In the altarpiece of Jesi the story of Lucy starts in the first compartment on the left (fig. 6). As narrated by Jacopo da Varazze, Lucy goes with her mother Eutichia, who suffered from vaginal hemorrhage, to St Agatha’s grave in Catania, which in the painting is portrayed as an evocative church space dominated by light. The light, unrivaled protagonist of the scene, it is not a casual detail, since Jacopo da Varazze in the *incipit* of his account on the saint from Syracuse states:

Lucy comes from luce. Indeed, light is beautiful to watch [...]; it spreads out without losing its purity, regardless of how sordid the places it reaches are; its rays are always straight [...]. This means that the compliance of the name is due to the fact that the holy virgin Lucy shines with the purity of her unblemished virginity [...].

In introducing the viewer to Lucy’s story, Lotto tries to convey through the image a first fundamental trait of the saint’s character, depicted by Jacopo as the personification of divine light. In this case, the luminous *incipit* of the medieval legend perfectly corresponds to the altarpiece, which, in the first compartment of the *predella*, once again evokes the light in the glow of the oil laps hanging from the 

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23 Da Varazze 1995, 34. This correspondence was underlined also by Peter Humfrey, in Brown – Humfrey – Lucco 1998, 180.
ceiling. Lotto seems to wink to the observers, inviting them to meditate on an object, a source of light, often presented as the iconographic attribute of the saint who, in some cases, carries a lamp in her hand\textsuperscript{24}.

In the space of the church, in which there are three altarpieces\textsuperscript{25}, Lorenzo Lotto simultaneously narrates four time segments, in which the protagonists occur more than once. The painter, therefore, is using the ancient technique of “continuous narrative”\textsuperscript{26}. Since this is the staging of a true time paradox, Lotto solves the risk of an erroneous reading of the image using a “vector graphic” that guides the eye of the reader, that is, making Lucy identifiable thanks to her characteristic yellow dress and Eutichia through her white robe\textsuperscript{27}. Furthermore, the painter uses the traditional western reading direction from left to right.

On the left the priest, assisted by his altar boy, officiates mass turning his back to the faithful, just as they did before the Second Vatican Council. Two candles are lit on the altar, which the altar boy will put off with the object placed in the foreground on the left: a rod ending with a hollow inverted cone, sometimes still used to dampen candles. Among the crowd of worshipers, two women emerge from the twilight, Lucy and Eutichia, attending the celebration of mass kneeling and with woven hands. Their faces are evidently facing each other: they are talking. The subject of their dialogue, revealed by the \textit{Legenda Aurea}, is the faith on daily Gospel reading, that is the tale of the woman affected by a blood disease, who is healed by the touch of Jesus’ garment\textsuperscript{28}. Lucy asks her mother to believe in the Gospel and suggests her to go and touch the grave of St Agatha, in order to

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\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{24} On the lamp as an attribute of the saint see Amore – Celletti 1966, 252.
\item\textsuperscript{25} The three altarpieces have been identified as a \textit{Resurrection}, a \textit{Madonna with child in glory and saints} and one \textit{San Cristopher}. See the entry by Peter Humfrey, in Brown – Humfrey – Lucco 1998, 181. Besides portraying realistically the inside of an early 16th century church, Lotto, through those altarpieces and the simulacrum of the saint, reaffirms the legitimacy of the cult of images, condemned as idolatry by the Lutherans. In general, on the religious view of Lorenzo Lotto, see Firpo 2001.
\item\textsuperscript{26} Andrews 1995 and Andrews 2009.
\item\textsuperscript{27} On the need for a “vector graphic” in the “simultaneous narration” see Corrain 1987, 61.
\item\textsuperscript{28} Mt 9, 19-22; Mc 5, 25-34; Lc 8, 43-48.
\end{itemize}
recover from her hemorrhage, just as the evangelical hemorrhaging woman was healed touching the garment of the Messiah.

In the background, in the middle, there is a recess hosting St Agatha’s grave. The grave, on which we find the writing SEPVLCRVM SANCTE AGATE, is surrounded by burning candles and many ex voto are hanging from the ceiling. Eutichia, portrayed from the back, wrapped in a white shroud, is praying before the statue of the saint from Catania, while Lucia has fallen into a deep sleep, during which St Agatha announces that the complete healing of her mother actually happened thanks to her faith. On the right, Lucy communicates to her mother her decision to give up the marriage and to donate her dowry to the poor. From the Legenda Aurea we learn that Eutichia at first did not agree with her daughter’s decision and would rather die than see her family fortune squandered. Lotto suggests to the viewer the gap between these two positions, depicting the two women while they perform discordant gestures with their hands, which in iconography mean dispute, debate. Lucy’s choice, however, is already anticipated by the position of her body, now turned toward the chapel on the right, where the backstory and the first section of the predella end. In this chapel it is presented an episode which, according to Jacopo da Varazze, takes place not in Catania, but in Syracuse, when the two women have already returned home, that is, the gift of the dowry to the poor, Lucy’s charity. Perhaps in order to visually convey the immediacy and determination of the woman’s choice, Lotto shoots ahead of the story and sets, in the same space, an action which, according to the medieval tale, takes place at a later time and in a different city (in a different time and space).

29 In this case, the artist gives us a realistic view of the details of popular religiosity in the practice of the ex voto, which was seen as a tangible sign of contact with the divine sphere. Similarly, Lotto also reaffirms the usefulness of this practice, questioned by Protestants. For Catholics in fact the ex voto responds to the need of putting on display one’s relationship with the holy and the need to make “public” a “private” miracle. See Frugoni 1993. More generally, the work underlines the validity of the cult of saints and of the pilgrimage to the tombs of the martyrs that Luther’s followers had instead questioned.


The four moments of the story, fragmented inside the same ecclesiastical environment, find a connection through a further paradoxical narrative device: the fractious relationship between the two dogs. At the center of space, in fact, a black dog is playing with a white cloth, while a white dog on the right is running to reach it. Rather than a simple syntactic conjunction, it is probably a real action that travels on a time level parallel to the main story, uniting, in the foreground, the space-time coordinates\(^{32}\).

Recovering the potentialities of the ancient technique of “continuous narrative”, which Sandro Botticelli had already used very well in the Sistine Chapel\(^ {33}\), Lorenzo Lotto guides the viewer through the symbolic passage from the shadows of Eutichia’s lack of faith to the light of faith and charity of Lucy.

![Fig. 7: Lorenzo Lotto, Altarpiece of St Lucy (Second compartment of predella), Jesi, Italy, Civic Art Gallery; from Wikimedia Commons <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/70/Lotto_pala_di_santa_lucia_predella.jpg> (31.08.2016).](image)

4. Suspended time in the second compartment of the predella

The narration of Lucy’s story goes on in the next compartment of the predella (fig. 7). Lucy has been taken to court by her boyfriend because the girl, as a Christian, has given her dowry to the poor. In

\(^{32}\) On the value of syntactic conjunction in painting, see Calabrese 1987, 24.

\(^{33}\) The extraordinary narrative skills of Botticelli have been highlighted by De Vecchi 2004.
front of the magistrate Paschasius, assisted by two pairs of wise men, Lucy and her boyfriend, both portrayed with a periwinkles crown, symbol of fidelity\textsuperscript{34}, are having an argument and are pointing fingers at each other. Paschasius is holding his cane, but he is calm and listens to the reasons of both parties.

At this point the time of narration is interrupted at the green, knotted curtain\textsuperscript{35}, to start again in the main panel. The fact that the artist suspended there the time of narration is attested, as well as by the curtain, also by a “vector graphic” that guides the viewer’s reading, that

\textsuperscript{34} See Levi d’Ancona 1977, 302–303.
\textsuperscript{35} The knot on the curtain has been interpreted as a symbolic allusion to Lucy’s chastity. See the proposal by Loretta Mozzoni, in Mozzoni – Paoletti 2001, 62.
is, a symbol painted in the drape of the predella and on the floor of the main panel. As rightly noted by Francesca Cortesi Bosco, the “sign introduced by Lotto consists, schematically, of a plank with small weights, part of the balance wheel of a clock, of the axis of the balance wheel itself and of a wheel”\textsuperscript{36} (fig. 8). More precisely, it is a stylized representation of the machinery of an escapement clock\textsuperscript{37}, an amazing medieval invention\textsuperscript{38}, which had made “measurable” an abstract, mysterious and undefinable entity such as time\textsuperscript{39}. In a more realistic fashion and with all its components, the escapement clock is portrayed for example in *Triumph of Time* (fig. 9), attributed to Jacopo del Sellaio (1480–90)\textsuperscript{40} and *St Augustine in his study* (fig. 10) by Botticelli (1480)\textsuperscript{41}. In Jesi, Lorenzo Lotto was in a close relationship with Pieramore, the multi-talented Jesi apprentice of Domenico Indivini from San Severino Marche. Pieramore, in addition to being the author of the wooden frame for the *Deposition* painted by Lotto for the brotherhood of the Good Jesus in Jesi\textsuperscript{42}, was also the maintainer of the mechanical city clock: he was therefore a clock technician\textsuperscript{43}. It is also interesting to point out that Lotto does not simply paint a clock, but rather its internal working mechanism of a clock escapement, and right in that moment he is building a reading frame, a temporal structure, that addresses the viewer towards a new, not contiguous, narrative segment. The story interrupted by the curtain and the clock continues in the main panel\textsuperscript{44}.

\textsuperscript{36} Cortesi Bosco 1984, 63, n. 16.
\textsuperscript{37} On the working principles of the escapement clock, see Bruton 1980, 31–45; Landes 1984, fig. 5.
\textsuperscript{38} See Frugoni 2001, 88–91.
\textsuperscript{39} Time has been the focus of constant reflection since the rise of philosophical speculation. See Barberi – Martini 1993. On the different concepts of time that have passed through western thought see Abbagnano 1998, 1075–1081.
\textsuperscript{40} The *Triumph of Time* of Bandini Museum in Fiesole is part of the current of the illustrations of Petrarca’s *Trionfi*. See D’Apuzzo 2006, 161–174.
\textsuperscript{42} See Anselmi 1890, 207 and the entry by Loretta Mozzoni in Villa 2011, 62–71.
\textsuperscript{43} See Annibaldi 1878, 25.
\textsuperscript{44} Lotto had carried out a first test of these narrative strategies in the first compartment of the predella (now at the Ermitage) of the *Trasfigurazione* of Recanati. In this painting the artist portrayed first Jesus leading the Apostles toward Mount Tabor, then Jesus with his hands raised with the Apostles on Mount Tabor. The story continues in the main panel with the proper *Trasfigurazione*. See the entries by Mauro Minardi in Villa 2011, 106–111.
5. The main panel: the choice of a “pregnant moment”

Going against the consolidated 15th century tradition from Veneto, Lorenzo Lotto in the main panel does not represent a still image of the saint or a holy conversation; instead he chooses to occupy the whole picture with a proper dramatic scene, that is, Lucy’s debate with the Judge (fig. 11), which is the direct progression of the predella: we are indeed exactly in the same space, a city portico, just slightly
later. The “continuous narrative” of the first compartment of the predella, which summarized four episodes in one single space, in the main panel turns into a dramatic explosion, where the same space at the start of the second compartment of the predella (before the curtain) is magnified, thus becoming the setting of the moment of maximum tension of the story. This episode is appointed by the painter as the paradigmatic action, the “pregnant moment”, able to evoke the backstory and the outcome of the narration and to summarize
it\textsuperscript{45}. Trying to find the best way to represent this exemplar story, Lotto chooses to focus the attention of the viewer on a single fragment of time, the one with the “highest exponent”, that is, the maximum dramatic potential of the whole story\textsuperscript{46}. He therefore realizes a dizzying zoom on a frame that can summarize the whole story: the debate between Lucy and the judge.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Lotto_pala_di_santa_lucia_00.jpg}
\caption{Lorenzo Lotto, Altarpiece of St Lucy (Main Panel), Jesi, Italy, Civic Art Galery; from Wikimedia Commons \url{https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Lucia_davanti_al_giudice#/media/File:Lotto_pala_di_santa_lucia_00.jpg} (31.08.2016).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{45} See Calabrese 1987, 28. On the concept of “pregnant moment”, typical of painting, which unlike poetry would not otherwise be able to provide a narration with a time duration in a diachronic development, see Lessing 2007, 63, 71, 76. On Lessing precedents see Grassi 1972.

\textsuperscript{46} On the focus on the highest exponent in painting, see Eco 1987, 7–17.
Fig. 12: Lorenzo Lotto, Lucy’s debate with the Judge, Paris, Louvre; from Pouncey 1965, 22–23.

The scene, in effect, sums up in a single visual moment three dramatic moments of a long dialogue recounted in the *Legenda Aurea*: Paschasius asks the accused to make a sacrifice to the pagan idols, but she says that her sacrifices are only for God, visiting the poor and providing for their needs; Paschasius then accuses her of having squandered her inheritance and of speaking like a prostitute, but Lucy claims to be a virgin and chaste and, therefore (like all those in her
condition), to be the temple of the Holy Spirit; Paschasius, in order to make her lose the Holy Spirit, calls the procurers of the city to bring her to the brothel, so that the virgin can be offered to the wishes of the people; the saint, thanks to the Holy Spirit, becomes completely still.

In order to translate the court dispute into an image, which takes the form of dialectical contrast between two opposing positions, Lotto resorts to intensified gestures. The comparison with the drawing in the Louvre (presented by Philip Pouncey as a copy derived from a preliminary drawing for St Lucy[47] and later identified by Francesca Cortesi Bosco as a cardboard copy that Lotto had submitted in 1532 to the scola of St Lucy in Jesi[48]) is quite enlightening for understanding the transition from a first compositional idea to the solution later adopted in the altarpiece, which turns out to be much more exciting, dramatic and full of details (fig. 12).

While in the drawing Lucy makes the coded gesture of testimony (a hand on her chest, the other with the palm facing up[49]), in the altarpiece the virgin rises imperiously her index finger to express the iron will of God[50]: she is in fact pointing to the Holy Spirit, claiming she is its temple, as a chaste woman and a virgin. With this gesture Lucy responds to Paschasius’s allegations, who is pointing his cane at her; in the meantime also the assistants of the judge begin to fidget (unlike their calm attitude showed in the previous scene). In the drawing the group of bystanders on the right, some of them wearing a strange oriental headdress, is immobile. In the painting, however,
in addition to the three procurers who are trying to drag Lucy to the brothel, we see an excited crowd of men who would like to satisfy their cravings. A middle-aged man in an orange dress is trying to stop the men, opening his arms, while in the crowd you can see Lucy’s boyfriend, still crowned with periwinkles, and a character wearing sandals, dressed as a friar, who is staring intensely at the observer. It is a theatrical device, often used by painters of the Renaissance to attract the viewer’s attention in the painting, just like some of the characters in a theater play, interacting directly with the viewer, are able to stimulate the curiosity and attention of the onlookers. As observed by Omar Calabrese, the gaze “establishes synchronicity between the painted scene and the reader. A look directed toward the point of view of the scene, indeed, looks back while is being looked at, thus ensuring a present time corresponding to the moment of observation.”

The two children, who in the drawing burst into the scene from the left, in the painting become a pair composed of a child, who wants to run toward Lucy, holding out his arms to her, and of a black nurse (the only woman in the scene besides Lucy), who instead is trying to hold him back. This is undoubtedly an amazing display of mastery, which allows the painter to play not only on the contrast between the brown skin of the nurse and the white skin of the child, but also on the contrast between the color of the skin of the nurse, her pearl earring and her white cap. Furthermore, Lotto seems to want to establish a comparison between the two opposite conditions of Lucy and the child, between immobility and mobility: while the first, motionless in the crowd, is uselessly pulled by the procurers, the second, who would like to move, is held back by the nurse. With

51 As rightly proposed by Augusto Gentili, the face of the character in the foreground trying to drag Lucy to the brothel hides a portrait of his friend Bartolomeo Carpan, goldsmith from Treviso that was reported and interrogated. In the altarpiece Lotto has some fun painting him among the evil characters. See Gentili 1988, 40.
52 Francesca Cortesi Bosco observed that the same character is portrayed in the Polyptych of Ponteranica (Bergamo), as St Paul. See Cortesi Bosco 1984, 66.
53 Calabrese 1987, 40.
54 According to Elizabeth McGrath the black woman is not simply the representation of a house servant. According to western tradition the 13th of December, festival of St Lucy,
the insertion of these figures on the right, Lotto tries to emphasize the sense of immobility and heaviness of Lucy and to resolve the paradox of conveying stillness on a surface (that of the painting) that is static by nature.

In addition to the carpet in the drawing, which in the painting becomes a staircase, a further replacement turns out to be quite significant. The two large glass eyes which, in the drawing, open up under the porch, have disappeared and, in the central arch of the painting, over a door, we can see a stone idol, which has an important symbolic value. It is undoubtedly the divinity to whom, according to Pascha-

is the shortest and darkest day of the year, which, before the reformation of the Gregorian calendar, used to coincide with the winter solstice. Inserting the black woman, Lotto accentuated the passage to the light, implicit in the name of Lucy. For further details on the interpretation of the black woman as "guardian of the door of solstice", described as a child in the Saturnalia by Macrobio, see McGrath 2007.

55 Young Kim 2013, 12–15.
sius, Lucy should offer her burnt offerings: it is thus a pagan simulacrum. As it has rightly been proposed, the idol is Saturn\textsuperscript{56}, characterized by its unique attributes and eloquent gestures (fig. 13).

Since the Roman god Saturn is equivalent to the Greek god Kronos, the time, Lotto added this detail on purpose to further introduce the problem of temporality in the image. Kronos is usually represented with a sickle, which he used to castrate his father Uranos, the sky. Thanks to this attribute, in Rome, Saturn acquires a major agrarian function: he taught men the cultivation of the soil and is therefore the guardian of agriculture; there were also the Saturnalia festivals dedicated to him, during which he was also invoked as guardian of the crops\textsuperscript{57}.

However, in the Middle Ages this meaning is reversed and, as a planet, Saturn takes on a sinister value: soon associated with deadly events, Saturn becomes responsible for floods, famines and disasters; also, those who are subjected to Saturn have a melancholic nature\textsuperscript{58}. Popular beliefs deem it as the most evil among the planets, guardian of a criminal time, and its iconography, which overlaps with that of Father Time, is developed, in particular, in the famous iconographic series of the triumph of Time derived by Petrarch’s \textit{Triumphs}. Saturn is frequently depicted as a bearded man, often old, equipped with hourglass, scythe (sometimes a hoe, or a spade)\textsuperscript{59}. In the painting by Lotto, the deity is represented while holding a big scythe, more precisely, a plow, reminiscent of his ancient agricultural function, and he has a drape blown up by the wind, which perhaps symbolizes the speed of passing time. With his right hand he is holding an object difficult to identify, and it looks like he wants to imperiously throw it at Lucy\textsuperscript{60}. Saturn makes the gesture of Zeus, with whom, since the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{56} Mozzoni – Paoletti 1996, 116.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Sabbatucci 1988, 343–355.
\item \textsuperscript{58} On this issue see Klibansky – Panofsky – Saxl 1983.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Panofsky 1975, 88–134.
\item \textsuperscript{60} According to Loretta Mozzoni it is an hourglass. See Mozzoni – Paoletti 1996, 116. It is possible that the object is simply a bunch of wheat ears, such as the one held by Saturn in the astrological vault of the Villa Farnesina in Rome.
\end{itemize}
ancient world, he has been sharing gestures and, in some cases, also attributes.

By staging the contrast between Saturn and Lucy, the painter probably wanted to suggest that in the Christian calendar St Lucy took the place that Saturn had in the Roman calendar: celebrations for St Lucy, as a matter of fact, take place on the 13th of December, replacing more or less the Roman Saturnalia, which used to be held between the 17th and the 23rd of the same month. This way, probably, the painter intended also to contrast the transience of human time, personified by Saturn, and the eternity of the divine time, represented by Lucy. If the dual representation of the clock, painted in the predella and in the main panel, works like a real “syntactic conjunction” in the time of narrative fiction, the idol of Saturn on the porch, guardian of a criminal time (replaced by the choices of Lucy), personifies the particular characteristics of “human time”, fleeting and transitory, in comparison to the “divine time” defended by Lucy.

5. The unfinished story: the duration of the torture

The story of Lucy resumes in the predella below, beyond the curtain (fig. 7). It is still the same space (the same town loggia) and the same time of the dispute. Paschasius, even angrier than before, is pulling his cane; Lucy, who is still pointing at the Holy Spirit, has already been tied to a thousand pairs of oxen that, however, are not able to move her, and continue their efforts in the last portion of the predella. The centuria of the judge, whose banner carries the writing S.P.Q.R. / (PA) SCASIUS / XC HO (MI) NES, has already reversed its course. Although space and time are exactly the same as the main panel, a detail in the second portion of the second compartment is significantly changed. The idol of Saturn, present in the main panel, has been replaced with a deity or a naked female personification, leaning against a tree trunk and bathed in a twilight that makes it

61 See Barette 1997, 1078–1089.
difficult to identify (fig. 14). In this way, Lotto may have intended to emphasize the change occurred between the panel and the *predella*.

![Fig. 14: Detail of fig. 7.](image)

Rather than identifying the idol with the negative image of Lua\(^62\), female equivalent of Saturn, that in Rome used to personify humiliation and does not seem to have an iconography anyway\(^63\), the simulacrum, from the context of the story, seems to have a positive value. Perhaps it is the emblem of the new time established by Lucy’s victory and somehow it mirrors St Agatha’s statue, which, in the first compartment of the *predella*, had overseen Eutichia’s healing and the saint’s life choice\(^64\).

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\(^{62}\) As proposed by Mozzoni – Paoletti 1996, 116.

\(^{63}\) Sabbatucci 1988, 347.

\(^{64}\) The presence of many symbols or symbolic allusions is probably linked to the historical moment Lotto was living from a professional point of view: the altarpiece was realized while the painter was working on the cardboards for the choir of Bergamo, using a cryptic language, rich of emblematic solutions, unprecedented and unexpected (on the symbolic language of the choir, see Cortesi Bosco 1987 e Zanchi 1997); in the same period the artist, thanks to his clients from Bergamo, but also to the clergy of the church of the Saints John and Paul, where he was staying at in Venice (Firpo 2001, 71–85), goes back to reflecting over the value of symbolic language that he had already used and
In the third compartment of the predella (fig. 15), the last episode goes beyond the painted space, as if to convey the interminable length of the useless attempt to torture. While in the first compartment Lotto stages a fast paged action through the “continuous narrative” and in the main panel he represents the suspended time of a “pregnant moment”, in the last portion of the story, the painter tries instead to convey to the observer a sense of endless duration.

Contrary to the painters from the Adriatic area who preceded him, Lotto in fact chooses not to close the story, not to represent all the vexations that Paschasius, according to the Legenda Aurea, orders to be carried out on the body of the virgin (that is, the intervention of the wizards, the urine bath, the stake, the dagger in the throat), nor the final scene of the last communion of the saint. Most likely the painter does not close the legend because it is confident that, in the era in which he lives, all observers (mostly devotees of the scola of Jesi entitled to the saint) know the life of the martyr. The story may have been intentionally left open ad libitum, so that all the devotees could complete with their own memory, during the intimate personal

experimented in his relations with Bernardo de’ Rossi from Treviso (Gentili 1985, 76–93).
meditation, the story of the saint. But beyond that, there may be other reasons.

7. Time in painting and the debate on tragic theatre

Doing an extreme synthesis, Lotto condenses the private life of the saint (rejection of the marriage and distribution of the dowry) in the first section of the predella, he magnifies the scene of the dispute with the judge in the central panel, giving utmost importance to a single “pregnant moment”, and then ends the story with the row of oxen seeking to shift the motionless Lucy in the rest of the altarpiece, without telling the “tragic” epilogue of her story.

What might be the reasons for these unprecedented narrative strategies?

We do not know whether Lotto, in his Venetian period, was directly touched by the debate on Aristotle’s Poetics, that was known thanks to the Medieval Latin translation by William of Moerbeke and the comments of Averroes, published in Latin in 1481 and then in 1515; moreover, a famous Latin translation by Giorgio Valla was published in 1498, relaunching a new discovery of the Poetics, which was republished in Greek in 1508 among the Rhetores graeci by Aldo Manuzio in Venice and then in a new Latin translation by Alessandro de’ Pazzi in 1536. However, it is undeniable, as shown by Paola Mastrocola, that Aristotle’s ideas on poetry circulated already at the start of the 16th century, perhaps even at the end of the 15th century. Aristotelian ideas are present in the dedication to pope Leone X of the Sofonisba by Gian Giorgio Trissimo (written between 1514 and 1515, but published in 1524) and the one to Clemente VII of the Iphigenia in Tauris by Alessandro Pazzi (1524). See Mastrocola 1998, 15–27. On the diffusion of the Aristotelian text see also Bionda 2001.

65 On the important issue of the public of hagiography, also in painting, see Golinelli 2000.
67 Aristotelian ideas are present in the dedication to pope Leone X of the Sofonisba by Gian Giorgio Trissimo (written between 1514 and 1515, but published in 1524) and the one to Clemente VII of the Iphigenia in Tauris by Alessandro Pazzi (1524). See Mastrocola 1998, 15–27. On the diffusion of the Aristotelian text see also Bionda 2001.
three unities of classical tragedy (of time, place and action)\(^68\); he excludes from the view of the theater scene every brutal action or bloody epilogue\(^69\); he proposes the “mimetic” depiction of a single action that has the utmost dramatic tension in order to cause a “catharsis” in the observer\(^70\). The painter could also have come into contact with these ideas because of his documented relationships with artists linked to theater and set design, as Sebastiano Serlio and Jacopo Sansovino\(^71\). Indeed, it has been repeatedly pointed out how the painter often refers to theatrical devices of *sacre rappresentazioni*, especially in the coeval frescoes of Trescore\(^72\). The use of the portico, the square and the city seems to refer to a theatrical setting\(^73\), as well as the curtain separating the episodes in the second compartment of the *predella* seems a reminder of a theater curtain temporarily closed and knotted. Even the inclusion of the symbols of time, such as the clock and Saturn, find direct comparisons with contemporary theater\(^74\), especially with the prologue of the *Anconitana* by Ruzzante\(^75\), in which the personification of Time invites the viewers to be careful and then sits on the scene to watch the show\(^76\).

Lotto seems therefore to stage the story of Lucy as a theater director who invents new narrative strategies, referring perhaps to Aristotle, but carefully guiding the viewer’s gaze through different “vector graphic” and symbols of time.

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73 See Zorzi 1979.
74 Furthermore, Lotto lives in a moment when the problem of time violently enters Italian theatre. See Angelici 1986, 73–77.
75 The *Anconitana*, as well as many other works by Ruzzante, was written having in mind a Venetian audience. From 1520 to 1526 the author regularly goes to Venice, every year. See Padoan 1980.
76 Ruzzante 1967, 777. 1460–1461.
Summary

The aim of this paper is to analyze the presence of symbols of time and the singular narrative strategies used by Lorenzo Lotto in the *Altarpiece of St. Lucy*, preserved in the Civic Gallery of Jesi, in Italy. These two aspects transform the altarpiece in an interesting theoretical object, since the painter seems to propose a sophisticated reflection on time.

The altarpiece is composed by three compartments of the *predella* and a main panel. To represent the flow of time, the story of St. Lucy is fragmented into several sequences, placed on the altarpiece in a very singular manner: the painter interrupts the tale in the middle of the second compartment of the *predella*, inserting a theatre curtain and a clock, as a sign of time, to advise the observer that he must now continue reading the image in the main panel, where he puts again the same clock and an idol of Saturn; then the painter continues the tale in the same compartment of the *predella*, beyond the curtain, carrying on the same episode in the last compartment to convey a sense of duration; he concentrates the story’s background in the first compartment of the *predella*, telling four episodes in a single location using the ongoing narrative, but then he stretches one episode along the two last compartments, without closing the human story of the saint, that remains suspended in time, and without showing violence in the altarpiece.

These singular narrative strategies and the use of symbols of time, as the clocks and the idol of Saturn, indicate maybe that the artist is meditating on the convenience of using in painting the unity of time, space and action, entering the Venetian debate on theatre, fostered by the re-reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. 
Giuseppe Capriotti is Assistant Professor of Early Modern Art History at University of Macerata (Italy), where he teaches History of Images, Artistic Geography and Iconography and Iconology. After an interdisciplinary thesis in History of Religion – Early Modern Art History (2000), he won a scholarship for a PhD at University of Macerata (2000-2003), during which he studied at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris under the direction of Daniel Arasse and Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux. He gave seminars at Université Pierre-Mandès-France of Grenoble (France) and at University of Zagreb (Croatia). He was (January-April 2016) visiting professor at University of Split (Croatia). He published several articles and books on anti-Jewish and anti-Turkish painting, on the fortune of Greek mythology in art (in particular on the fortune of Ovid’s Metamorphosis) and on the connection between texts, images and mystical visions. He published Lo scorpione sul petto. Iconografia antiebraica tra XV e XVI secolo alla periferia dello Stato Pontificio (Roma, Gangemi, 2014), L’alibi del mito. Un’altra autobiografia di Benvenuto Cellini (Genova, Il melangolo, 2013) and the anastatic reprint of the Trasformazioni by Lodovico Dolce, with the xylographs by Giovanni Antonio Rusconi (Ancona, Affinità elettive 2013).

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