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Agata Anna Chrzanowska

Narrative fresco and ritual: Filippo Lippi, Domenico Ghirlandaio and performative properties of the religious art in Quattrocento Florence

ABSTRACT

The present study analyses Filippo Lippi's frescoes in the main chapel of the Prato cathedral and Domenico Ghirlandaio's decoration of the Tornabuoni chapel in Santa Maria Novella in Florence. It focuses on the relationship between the frescoes and the ritual practices of the period, in particular, the religious spectacle. The aim of the research is to analyse the little-known and somewhat elusive relations between the two chapel decorations and other public expressions of devotional culture, such as the religious spectacles performed in the city during religious festivities.

Chapter 1 provides a necessary theoretical and historiographical background to the work, while chapter 2 examines the performative production of Florence. It locates the tradition of religious plays within the context of the fifteenth-century devotion and analyses a sample of texts of *sacre rappresentazioni*. Chapter 3 provides archival evidence of the involvement of Florentine artists, including the two at the centre of this research, with the social and cultural world of the lay confraternities. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the two fresco decorations. The iconographic analysis allows us to recognize the hagiographic and philosophical sources of the paintings. The study shows the influence of Renaissance culture on the sacred iconography, and the introduction of new themes to the sacred narratives, such as Ficino's idea of *prisca theologia*. Finally, the study discusses the relationship between the frescoes and the drama and asks questions about the relationship between the decorations and the ritual.

The argument of the thesis is that the visual elements coming from the religious spectacles penetrated to the Florentine narrative paintings thanks to the personal exchange between both environments. Moreover, the study suggests that these inserts were meaningful and allowed the frescoes to become part of the ritual of intercession. Finally, the research shows in which ways the ruling elite participated to the cultural life of the city and used its visual aspects in order to promote their values and to obtain political consent.

Narrative Fresco and Ritual: Filippo Lippi, Domenico Ghirlandaio and the Performative Properties of Religious Art in Quattrocento *Florence*

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of PhD

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Florence, © Fondo Edifici di Culto, Ministro dell'Interno.

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List of abbreviations

ASF	Archivio di Stato di Firenze
ASP	Archivio di Stato di Prato
BNCF	Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze

Declarations

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

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Introduction

During the Middle Ages and until the times of the Counter-reformation, mural painting constituted a major expressive medium of religious art in the Christian tradition. Well into the fifteenth century, the walls of churches and chapels displayed in front of the believers the stories from the Old and the New Testament, these known from *Apocrypha*, as well as the lives of the patron saints and of the Virgin Mary. The fortune of the medium seems to depend on the relatively low cost of the decorations, combined with the short time needed for their execution, and their didactic character. In fact, scholars have often explained the presence of painted narratives within the sacred space of a church by the necessity to teach the content of the Bible to illiterates. Thus, narrative cycles have been considered similar in character to the *Biblia pauperum* and, as such, an efficient tool to give visual form to the content of the holy texts. While this interpretation persists in modern art historical scholarship[1], new investigations have started to uncover the relationship between the fresco decorations and the medieval theology and devotion[2].

The analytical approach, which asks questions about the place of the narrative fresco decorations within the Christian cult can be successfully adapted to the research into the Florentine painting of the fifteenth century. The relationship between fresco cycles and devotional life of the Christian communities can be further examined and evaluated. If it is true that the narrative cycles did not become objects of worship or candle lighting as famous icons did, it is also true that they partook in the complex process of defining the sacred space of a sanctuary. Thus, it is worth posing the set of questions that concern the

[1] E. Borsook, *The Mural Painters of Tuscany. From Cimabue to Andrea del Sarto*, Oxford, 1980. Borsook states in the introduction to the volume: "The arrival of the great Tuscan mural schemes was influenced by three factors: (1) the widespread building activity sponsored by Church and Comune; (2) the new humane approach of clerical teaching on the one hand, and the new desire for fame and splendour on the part of the laity on the other; and (3) the repair and imitation of the Early Christian mural schemes at Rome." and further: "The murals commissioned for these new buildings satisfied diverse needs: to instruct, to admonish, to exalt, and to decorate."

[2] *Shaping Sacred Space and Institutional Identity in Romanesque Mural Painting. Essays in Honour of Otto Demus*, ed. T. E. A. Dale, J. Mitchell, London, 2004; R. Maniura, *Ex Votos, Art and Pious Performance*, „Oxford Art Journal", 32, 3/2009, pp. 409-425.

nature of the relationship between frescoes and devotion. This kind of analysis would represent the core of the present study. The importance of the questions proposed here is confirmed by a widespread presence of the narrative frescoes in the holy space of medieval churches. Moreover, the flourishing of the genre under the patronage of the mendicant orders in medieval Italy strengthens the validity of an investigation into the relationship between narrative decorations and the devotional culture.

In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy, Tuscan painters became skillful interpreters of the tradition of narrative fresco painting. Giotto's decoration in Assisi and his narrative cycles in the Florentine church of Santa Croce, in the Bardi and Peruzzi chapels, became the point of reference for the following generations of painters specialized in the medium of fresco. Between 1332 and 1338 Taddeo Gaddi (1300 ca-1366), who was Giotto's pupil, frescoed the Baroncelli chapel, located few steps away from his master's work in Santa Croce. His son, Agnolo Gaddi (1350 ca-1396) continued the work in the same church and frescoed the choir of the Basilica with the stories of *Inventio Crucis* (1380 ca). During the following decade, he would also go to Prato to decorate the chapel of the Holy Belt in the local Cathedral (1392-1395) with a cycle of frescoes.

Fifteenth-century artists would inherit the visual tradition of the narrative painting from their predecessors. The fourteenth-century interest in the representation of human behaviour and emotions, and the fascination with *trompe l'oeil* and illusion would constitute an important equipment of Quattrocento masters. However, during the Quattrocento the pictorial style would undergo a deep transition, which was brought about by the new humanistic and early Renaissance culture. In fact, the distinguishing feature of fifteenth-century Italian art lays in its heterogeneous character, which unites many different, often opposite traditions. In the artistic production of Masolino, Masaccio, Paolo Uccello, Fra Angelico, Benozzo Gozzoli, Filippo Lippi, Piero della Francesca and Domenico Ghirlandaio, the artists known for their seminal contributions to the development of the visual language of narrative fresco cycles, one can find elements inspired by various styles and cultural environments. The physical solidity of Masaccio's figures testifies the heritage of the material concreteness introduced by Giotto. The elegance of the international gothic style can be found

in Gozzoli's highly decorative compositions and it is also traceable in Lippi's visual language. Finally, Ghirlandaio's fascination with the antiquity and frequent inserts of classical motives into his paintings testify the endurance of the ideal of a true revival of the classical models. At the same time, Ghirlandaio's interest in detailed imitation of the visual richness of the Florentine everyday life, explains the influence of Netherlandish art and its detailed, naturalistic style. Therefore, it is possible to distinguish various cultural traditions that converged in the artistic production of the Florentine painters of this period. Local tradition and innovations elaborated in the city, such as the introduction of linear perspective, would coexist with the elements imported from abroad, such as the international gothic style or the Netherlandish admiration of detail. At the same time, the revival of the classical art would result in frequent quotations of the motives taken from Roman sculpture and architecture.

This thesis focuses on two important figures for the process of development of the fifteenth-century narrative fresco painting, i.e. Filippo Lippi and Domenico Ghirlandaio. Their artistic production illustrates the evolution of the tradition between the 1450s and 1490s. The analysis of their works can clarify the modalities of adaptation of diverse traditions and stylistic novelties in the Florentine art of the period. The two artists represent key figures for an investigation interested in the relationship between the fresco painting, Florentine ritual and tradition of religious plays. Filippo Lippi, in fact, is well known for his close relationship with the Carmine church in Florence, the place where the Ascension feast took place. Filippo was orphaned of his father, a Florentine butcher, when he was still a very young age. Thus, he grew up in the Carmelite convent and became a monk there at the age of approximately fifteen. Lippi's origins and formation by the Carmelites resulted in a strong relationship between the artist and the Florentine devotional tradition. Previous research into his religious painting demonstrated the importance of the Carmelite tradition for his artistic production[3]. Among different activities in the convent, as painter and monk, Lippi partook also in the organization of the Ascension spectacle, organized every year to celebrate the relevant feast day. This participation leads to further

[3] M. Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi. The Carmelite Painter*, New Haven, 1999.

questions regarding the influence of the local devotional tradition on Lippi's religious art. During his career, Lippi executed the mural decoration in the main chapel of the cathedral in Prato (1452-1466) and the wall decoration of the apse of the cathedral in Spoleto (1466-1469). Thanks to an attentive construction of the narrative structure, the mural decoration in Prato constitutes a representative example for an analysis focused on the relationship between the narrative frescoes and the narrative techniques adopted in the devotion of the period. Moreover, Lippi's innovations in terms of the spatial representation in the Prato murals encourage an in-depth analysis of the frescoes, of their meaning and importance for the local community. Previous scholarship recognizes the innovative and creative character of the spatial organization of the lowest tier of the decoration[4]. In fact, Lippi's ability in the creation of illusory spaces, which cross the boundaries of the physical world, constitutes an important contribution to the development of illusory techniques in the Italian painting of the period. Contemporary to Piero della Francesca's cycle of the *Inventio Crucis* in the Franciscan church in Arezzo (1452-1466), Lippi's murals in Prato pose questions about the meaning and consequences of the introduction of perspective illusion into the religious narrative frescoes. Why were the artists and the commissioners attracted by the perspective device? Did perspective change the narrative modalities of the painting? Why was it accepted and adopted by the religious painters of the period? What was the relationship between the narratives painted on the churches' walls and the sacred stories transmitted in other media, such as religious drama for instance? What is the relationship between paintings and the local devotional and ritual culture?

Domenico Ghirlandaio belongs to the younger generation of Florentine artists. He was born in 1449, 43 years after Filippo Lippi. For him, many of the achievements introduced to painting in the previous decades, such as linear perspective, no longer constituted a novelty. Just like Lippi, however, Ghirlandaio

[4] E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi and the Murals for Prato Cathedral*, "Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz", 19, 1/1975, pp. 1-148; J. Ruda, *Fra Filippo Lippi. Life and Work with a Complete Catalogue*, London, 1993, pp. 258-292; L. Marin, *Filippo Lippi a Prato*, in Idem, *Opacità della pittura. Saggi sulla rappresentazione nel Quattrocento*, Firenze, 2012, pp. 210-238 (first edition: Idem, *Opacité de la peinture. Essais sur la représentation au Quattrocento*, Paris, 2006).

grew up as an active participant of the Florentine cultural and religious life. In a mutated political situation, in Florence controlled by the Medici, Ghirlandaio built his successful career and became one of the most renowned artists of the ruling family *entourage*. His frescoes in the Tornabuoni chapel represent the peak of the display of the Medicean control in the public sphere of the city. The comparison of the cycle with Lippi's frescoes in Prato allows an analysis of the strategy that the Medicean faction applied towards Florentine tradition to promote their cultural values and to gain a wider consent from the citizens. The Tornabuoni frescoes strike for the detailed style of the representation, precise perspective construction of the scenes, and the particular choice to represent the sacred narratives on the contemporary backdrops. Moreover, the artist included into the decoration figures coming from different cultural contexts, namely the biblical characters, members of the Tornabuoni family and the figures inspired by the classical art. It would be important to investigate into the meaning of these stylistic solutions and into the iconography of the cycles. Do the portraits of the members of the Tornabuoni family and the Medicean circle of intellectuals represent only the *gravitas* of the *consorteria*? What is the meaning of the inscriptions, which introduce the motive of the golden age? Why were the sacred stories narrated as taking place in contemporary Florence? What was the influence of the use of perspective and illusion on the meaning of the images?

Aby Warburg explained the presence of the portraiture in the frescoes painted by Ghirlandaio in the Sassetti chapel by connecting the practice with the Florentine tradition of installing in various churches of the town the wax *voti*, three-dimensional effigies of the donors, dressed in their own cloths and bearing their likeness[5]. According to Warburg, therefore, the painted portraits enacted the ritual of intercession, similarly to the *voti* that were supposed to guarantee the heavenly protection and everlasting advocacy for the patrons' souls. Warburg's analysis represents an excellent starting point for a study interested in the relationship between the fresco decorations and ritual practices in fifteenth-century Florence. In order to critically approach the issue, the narratives

[5] A. Warburg, *The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie*, in Idem, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contribution to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, Los Angeles, 1999, pp. 189-191.

painted on churches' walls are compared with the sacred stories present in the Florentine ritual and transmitted by other media. During the fifteenth century biblical tales were part of the private devotion. They were narrated in the texts such as the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*. These were recalled by preachers during sermons, and, at the same, they were staged in the churches and in the squares of the city on the occasion of various religious festivities. Religious spectacles constituted an important part of the Florentine devotional tradition with which both Lippi and Ghirlandaio were well acquainted. Lippi was directly involved in the preparation of the Ascension spectacle in the Carmine. Ghirlandaio, member of the Florentine confraternity of San Paolo, son of a Florentine shopkeeper, was an active participant of the devotional culture of the city. The artist lived in the period of Medicean influence on the Florentine ritual, therefore the analysis of his frescoes, compared with Lippi's murals in Prato, will allow a better understanding of the modalities and aims of Medicean control over the Florentine devotion.

In order to analyse the dialogue between the fresco decorations and the devotional culture of fifteenth-century Florence, Lippi's murals in Prato and Ghirlandaio's decoration in the Tornabuoni chapel will be interpreted in the light of the tradition of religious spectacles. In order to achieve this goal in the first instance the thesis will consider two seminal aspects of the Florentine religious dramas, which are (1) the place of the theatrical tradition within the Florentine devotion and ritual; (2) the modalities of personal exchange between the religious confraternities and the artists, and the artistic patronage of these pious sodalities. The considerations regarding these two problems will constitute an introduction to the analysis of the fresco paintings. The examination of the place occupied by the religious narratives in the Florentine devotional culture, will provide the data regarding the narrative patterns of the sacred stories, which circulated at the time, disseminated through various media such as preaching, texts for private devotion and religious dramas. The study will describe the vibrant festive activity of Florentines who celebrated the main religious celebrations with performances staged inside the local churches. The present investigation will describe not only the form, narrative qualities and organizational aspects of the plays but it will also approach the question of the public's approach to these events. The study will raise queries about the ritual qualities of the religious performances and about the

place of the sacred narratives in the religiosity of the period. This investigation will allow the further comparison between staged and painted narratives and will offer a context for the analysis of Lippi and Ghirlandaio's frescoes. In order to establish possible contact points between the world of the religious drama and the Florentine painters, the investigation will describe the relationship between the artistic circles of the city and the world of the religious confraternities which organized the performances. This kind of analysis will provide historical data, which will shed light on the contact points between the two environments. If one wants to define the channels through which the elements of the theatrical production penetrated into the Florentine painting, archival research can offer precious information about the artists' participation into the organization of the spectacles. In fact, both Filippo Lippi and Domenico Ghirlandaio emerge to be well acquainted with the devotional activities of the Florentine confraternities. In order to describe their relationship with the Florentine religious performances, Lippi and Ghirlandaio's involvement in the activity of the confraternities will be described in the wider contexts of the Florentine religious life. The study will look at on the confraternities as centres of artistic commissions, their relationship with the artisan environment of the city and the place of visual communication in the devotion promoted by these pious sodalities. It will be shown that during the fifteenth century the confraternities played seminal part in the Florentine ritual. They organized the celebration of the main religious festivities and took care of the spiritual life of their members. At the same time the confraternities became places where the social life of the neighbourhood took place. As such, they got involved in local politics and were affected by the Medicean interference in their government. The relationship between the Medici and the confraternities will result crucial for the understanding of Ghirlandaio's participation into the activity of the Florentine sodalities. The study will analyse Domenico's career and his relationship with the Medicean circle of commissioners on the one hand and with the Confraternity of San Paolo on the other. This kind of enquiry will show to what extent religious, devotional, political and social aspects met and coexisted in the Florentine artistic enterprises.

From the methodological point of view, this analysis remains strongly inspired by Warburg's *Kulturwissenschaft* and the anthropological approach to the

historical and art historical research into the Renaissance culture, exposed in Richard Trexler's studies on the Florentine Renaissance. This investigation will put in dialogue different forms of expression of fifteenth-century religious culture, such as the preaching, spectacles and paintings, and analyse them in a wider social and political context of the period. According to Trexler, social life in fifteenth-century Florence was steeped with the ritual and its various forms of expression were characterized by strong ritual values. In this way warfare, relationship between the citizens and their governors, contacts with the foreigners, friendship and love between the Florentines found their expression in an established set of meaningful gestures, phrases and behaviours. The ritual, therefore, laid at the basis of the social communication between the members of the community[6]. The aim of this study will be to locate the Florentine religious spectacles and the narrative fresco cycles on this dense map of the local ritual, and to describe and critically analyse their meaning as expressions of social communication between the citizens. This kind of analysis will not only make possible a better understanding of the relationship between the religious performances and the narrative painting, but it will also allow a new reading of the fresco decorations in question. Thanks to such a contextualized reading will emerge hitherto hidden notions, which link Ghirlandaio's decoration with the current philosophical debates and prove the existence of strong influence of the Medicean circle of humanists on the program of the frescoes.

The study starts (chapter 1) with a literary review, which locates the research in the context of the previous investigations into the religious narrative painting, Lippi and Ghirlandaio's artistic activity, Florentine ritual, devotional culture, and religious drama. The chapter exposes in detail the methodological bases of the study, defines its aims and purposes.

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of the narrative patterns of fifteenth-century devotional literature and investigates into the importance of visual cognition for the religious experience. Further, it examines the performative production in the city. The study focuses on documentary sources providing information on the spectators' response to the dramas. Finally, a sample of texts of *sacre*

[6] R. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, New York, 1980, pp. xvii-211.

rappresentazioni is examined with a particular emphasis on the dramas' framing structure.

Chapter 3 focuses on the relationship between the Florentine confraternities, responsible for the organization of the religious spectacles in the city and the Florentine artistic environment. The first part of the chapter describes, with reference to some hitherto unpublished documents, different aspects of the confraternal patronage. Further, the study focuses on artists' participation in the activities of the pious sodalities. Particular attention is given to the importance of artists' contributions for the execution of stage design and staging machineries for the religious spectacles. Given the persistence in the modern historiography of the myth of Brunelleschi's authorship of the hoisting machinery for the Annunciation spectacle, the study offers a critical consideration of the problem. Brunelleschi's involvement in the preparation of the staging machinery for the feast remains doubtful. The myth of his authorship, built on Vasari's *Vite* confirms, however, the existence of a vivid exchange between the organizers of the spectacles and the artistic circles of the city. Finally, the analysis focuses on the relationship of Filippo Lippi and Domenico Ghirlandaio with the confraternal dimension of the Florentine life and their acquaintance with religious drama. The comparison of the two biographies testifies the profound changes in the Florentine culture occurred between the 1450s and the 1480s.

Chapter 4 offers an analysis of Lippi's murals in Prato. The investigation starts with a short account of the history of the commission. Subsequently, it focuses on the narrative technique used by Lippi, and analyses the spatial organization of the scenes. The particularity of the decoration lays in the application of the continuous narrative device into the scenes characterized by a strong tendency to spatial unity. Benozzo Gozzoli's frescoes in San Gimignano constitutes a significant context for Lippi's frescoes and a comparison of the two decorations allows a better understanding of the innovations introduced to the cycles by the Carmelite monk. The enquiry continues with an investigation of the iconography of the cycle, and considerations on the illusory and immersive elements of the scenes of the lowest tier of the decoration. Finally, the chapter focuses on the analysis of the meaning of the decoration. It contextualizes the presence of the narrative images in the area of main altar and

interprets the fresco cycles as an expression of the ritual of intercession. Subsequently, the enquiry focuses on the relationship between Lippi's decoration and spectacles.

Chapter 5 regards Ghirlandaio's frescoes in the Tornabuoni chapel in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. The study departs from an iconographic analysis of the cycle. It investigates the meaning of the figures clearly inspired by the classical art, whose presence remained hitherto cryptic. It is shown that the frescoes are strongly inspired by the Neoplatonic ideas that circulated at the time among the Medicean circle of intellectuals. Subsequently, symbolical elements of the decoration are identified. The analysis of the iconography brings to an enquiry into intercessory functions of the frescoes and their agent qualities. The research puts the decoration in the context of Florentine ritual tradition under the Medicean rule. This analytical approach allows a better understanding of the modalities applied by the Medici and their circle during the 1480s to promote their culture and to acquire a wider consent for their rule among the members of the Florentine society. The study demonstrates that the ruling family used religious fresco painting and religious spectacles to convey themes and ideas germane to their cultural policy. At the same time, the family promoted the devotion rooted in the local religious tradition, flourished under the spiritual patronage of Giovanni Dominici and Antonio Pierozzi. In this way, the analysis ends with a reflection on the Medicean participation in the Florentine culture. It shows that the rulers elaborated and recalled the elements of the local tradition and interwove in it new, humanistic and intellectual elements. The promotion of the new ideas stood for the consolidation of the Medicean rule over the city.

This study hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between the monumental fresco painting and the religious spectacle in fifteenth-century Florence. It tries to ask what facilitated the dialogue between both media. This is why the enquiry focuses on the analysis of narrative modalities applied to the fresco painting and the religious spectacle. A comparison between the literary and the pictorial means used for the composition of the narratives in both media, brings to the fore the features of the religious storytelling of the period. This research will ask questions about the devotional functions of the

narratives. Finally, the enquiry into the Medicean patronage over fresco decorations and religious festivities will demonstrate the importance of the storytelling for the diffusion of new cultural values of the ruling class. In this way, staged and painted narratives will be located on the devotional, social and artistic background of fifteenth-century Florentine culture.

Chapter 1
Literary Review and Methodology

In the past thirty years art history has challenged its own boundaries, and redefined its object of study and methods of analysis. This process has concerned the study of medieval and Renaissance art as well. In the 1960s the philosophical hermeneutics and the reception aesthetics, promoted in the German academia by Hans Georg Gadamer[1] and Hans Rober Jauß[2], resulted in a gradual crisis of the positivistic research methods. The aesthetics theories allowed the development of the new approaches to the artistic production of the past centuries. It started to become clear that the self-referential study of paintings, sculptures and architecture, pursued with the approach of the connoisseur interested in dating, attributions and style, did not exhaust the richness and complexity of the research questions posed by the historical material[3]. As a consequence, the understanding and interpretation of a work of art had to be placed in the wider cultural context of its execution. The contextualization made possible a further elaboration of an interdisciplinary approach, which would analyse the art at the crossroad with devotion, politics and sociology. Moreover, a broadened methodological approach confirmed the value of the interdisciplinary research which compares the visual arts with other media such as literature and spectacle.

The present study is based on such a broadened interpretation of two fresco cycles, executed by two Florentine artists, Filippo Lippi and Domenico Ghirlandaio, during the second half of the fifteenth century. The choice to interpret the mural decorations in the context of the devotional culture of the period and to analyse the relationship between the sacred narratives staged during the religious performances and those painted on the walls in the churches, ends up in taking into consideration different aspects of the cultural life of fifteenth-century Florence. This study puts together the mural painting, religious spectacle, devotion and civic ritual. Moreover, it interprets these

[1] H. G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen, 1960.
[2] H. R. Jauß, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft*, Konstanz, 1967.
[3] H. Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, Chicago, 1987.

phenomena in the context of the Medicean domination of the Florentine artistic and social scene.

A study of this kind refers to these research currents which give example of an interdisciplinary approach to the art historical investigation. It may seem that today such methodology would become generally accepted in the scholarship, nevertheless its settling in the European academia has not been immediate. A true forerunner of a contextualized interpretations of Renaissance painting was undoubtedly Aby Warburg and his *Kulturwissenschaft* developed from the beginning of the twentieth-century. Warburg's investigations focus on the reconstruction of the cultural background, religious and social conditions, which artists had to confront. His legacy remains particularly important for the present study because of the prominent place occupied by Domenico Ghirlandaio's artistic production in the wide panorama of Warburg's scholarly interests. In 1901 the scholar delivered three lectures on Ghirlandaio and his circle[4], which brought to the publication of his papers *The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie* (1902)[5] and *Francesco Sassetti's Last Injunctions to His Sons* (1907)[6]. It seems that Ghirlandaio's frescoes constituted for Warburg a perfect departure point for the analysis of the social function of painting in Medicean Florence. In *The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie* the scholar interprets the portraiture included into the fresco decoration of the Sassetti Chapel in Santa Trinita in Florence as similar in their functions to the ex-votos and claims the existence of ritual and religious values in narrative fresco cycles. Warburg compares the effigies of the Medicean entourage to the wax statues that populated the interiors of the Florentine churches at the time. He links the use of ex-votos with the superstitious character of Etruscans, the predecessors of the fifteenth-century Florentines and claims that the beliefs in the agency of the *voti* persisted deep into

[4] E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography*, London, 1970, p. 344.

[5] A. Warburg, *Bildniskunst und Florentinisches Bürgertum. Domenico Ghirlandaio in S. Trinita: die Bildnisse des Lorenzo de Medici und seiner Angehorigen*, Leipzig, 1902. Republished in Idem, *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike: Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der europäischen Renaissance*, ed. G. Bing, F. Rougemont, Leipzig, 1932, pp. 89-126. English translation in Idem, *The Art of Portraiture and Florentine Bourgeoisie*, in Idem, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity. Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, transl. D. Britt, Los Angeles, 1999, pp. 184-221.

[6] A. Warburg, *Francesco Sassettis letztwillige Verfügung*, in *Kunstwissenschaftliche Beiträge August Schmarsow gewidmet*, Leipizg, 1907, pp. 170-177. English translation in Idem, *Francesco Sassetti's Last Injunctions to His Sons*, in Idem, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, op. cit., pp. 222-264.

the seventeenth century. Warburg compares the portraits in the Sassetti chapel with the wax figures in the Florentine churches on the basis of close resemblance of both effigies to their donors. The *voti* were, in fact, life size figures, they were dressed in the cloths of the commissioner and were exposed in the church already during his life. Strongly inspired by the German idealism and by Burckhardt's interpretation of the Florentine Renaissance as a "birthplace of modern, confident, urban, mercantile civilization[7]", Warburg's interpretation still provides historical arguments demonstrating the involvement of the Florentine ruling class in the continuation of the tradition of ex-votos. Thus, Warburg became a point of reference for the scholars interested in the study of anthropological aspects of Renaissance art, cultural history and interdisciplinary research, which builds bridges between various expressive forms of fifteenth-century culture[8]. His highly interdisciplinary research opened the way for the future development of the cultural studies on the one hand, and the anthropology of art on the other. Warburg's observation on the existence of a strong relationship between the Florentine art, religious, devotional and dramatic culture of the city constitute a starting point for the present research. His intuitions about the ritual value of the monumental fresco cycles, will be further developed in the present study, reinforced by an investigation of the visual aspects of the fifteenth-century devotion, analysis of the texts of the *sacre rappresentazioni* and archival research into the relationship between the Florentine artistic circles and the local confraternities.

It seems that the rise of interest of the art historians in the cultural, social and anthropological aspects of the visual culture of Western civilization was facilitated and followed by a similar attention paid by historians in their investigations into the medieval and early modern societies. In the field of Florentine Renaissance history an approach, which includes the social and the anthropological context of the subject matter into the historical enquiry, was represented by Richard Trexler in his studies on the rituals of the early modern society. His ground-breaking monograph *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*,

[7] A. Warburg, *The Art of Portraiture*, op. cit., p. 187.

[8] G. Careri, *Aby Warburg: Rituel, Pathosformel et forme intermédiaire*, "L'Homme", 165/2003, *Image et Anthropologie*, pp. 41-76; M. Allan, N. Bassiri, C. Imbert, *Aby Warburg, between Kant and Boas: from Aesthetics to the Anthropology of Images*, "Qui Parle", 16, 1/2006, pp. 1-45.

published in 1980, remains one of most interesting investigations into the social and ritual dimension of life in Italian city states between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. From the methodological point of view, the theoretical pattern for the anthropological enquiry into ritual and devotion of Western societies was elaborated on the basis of Émile Durkheim's *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie*[9]. Although this work analyses the social aspects of the sacred in the Australian tribal populations, historians of the European civilization adopted Durkheim's terminology. Durkheim, and those who follow the same sociological interpretation, define the sacred in terms of its relationship to the community, and see in it the realm of the projections of human needs and desires[10]. The usefulness of Durkheim's approach for the study of the societies of the Italian Renaissance is proved by the two major enquiries into the civic ritual of early modern Italy, such as the above-mentioned Trexler's *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* and Edward Muir's *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice*[11]. Both studies illustrate the social value of the civic ritual, and present the sphere of the public life in a Renaissance city as a space of dialogue between the citizens, their rulers and the holy protectors of the community. Trexler in his *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* interpreted the various manifestations of the social communication of the period in light of ritual culture of the city. The study shed light on the ritual aspects of basic social bonds, such as friendship and family, and investigated into the role of the different social groups, such as children, youths or the plebs. The scholar focuses not only on the relationships between the members of the Florentine society, but also on their communication with the external world, visitors, foreigners and enemies. Moreover, it investigates into the meaning of the liminal conditions of a society, such as during periods of social and political crisis. In this way, Trexler critically describes the Florentine social panorama and underlines the persistence and importance of ritual for the performance of power and the dialogue between the citizens. From this point of view, Trexler's attention towards the ritual dimention of the Florentine social life remains seminal for the present investigation. In fact, the analysis of the two

[9] É. Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie*, Paris, 1912.
[10] L. Sozzi, *Riflessioni preliminari sul sacro*, in *Il sacro nel Rinascimento*, Firenze 2002, pp. 11-17.
[11] R. C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, New York, 1980; E. Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice*, Princeton, 1981.

fresco cycles offered in the present study will try to describe the ritual value of fresco decorations and reconstruct the meaning of the use of artistic works in the sacred space of a church. In order to provide such an analysis, the study will link Durkheim's sociological key of interpretation with the questions concerning the perception of the sacred space and time. In this sense, Durkheim's point of view is accompanied by the hermeneutic perspective theorized by Mircea Eliade. In his *Le sacré et le profane*[12] Eliade focuses on the notions of space, time and hierophany. The scholar attributes to the sacred space the quality of being strongly oriented towards a particular direction, or organized around a fixed point, a centre. The sacred space has its *umbilicus mundi* and the *axis mundi*, which make possible the connection between the heaven and the earth. It is neither homogeneous, nor continuous, as it is marked by hierophany, namely the manifestation of the sacred. Similarly, the sacred time has for Eliade a strongly heterogeneous character. The sacred time is circular and rhythmical. The ritual constitutes an essential element of the continuous returns, characteristic for the sacred dimension of time. According to Eliade, the restoration and the renovation of the sacred is realised through the festivity. In fact, the feast has the power to re-actualize the holy event, which belongs to the mythical past. In this way, the ritual reintegrates the myth into the ordinary temporal dimension; it renovates and restores the primordial world order. Hence, the sacred time is recoverable and repeatable.

The questions of use and functioning of the image within the space of a church invites to critically consider the phenomenon of spectator's beliefs in agency of images and human response to them. In fact, this query lays at the centre of many recent studies interested in the problem of the presence of the visual representation in the Christian devotion. These studies, however, focus mainly on single devotional images, worshipped by the believers in the churches, chapels or shrines, or on the devotional objects used in the private devotion[13]. In fact, the devotional practices and gestures of worship are considered to be a direct

[12] M. Eliade, *Le sacré et le profane*, Paris, 1956.

[13] M. Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, New Haven, 2013; O. Niccoli, *Vedere con gli occhi del cuore: alle origini del potere delle immagini*, Roma, 2011; M. Bacci, «Pro remedio animae». *Imagini sacre e pratiche devozionali in Italia centrale (secoli XIII e XIV)*, Pisa, 2000; R. C. Trexler, *Florentine Religious Experience: the Sacred Image*, "Studies in the Renaissance", 19/1972, pp. 7-41.

connection between religious images and the beliefs in their agent qualities. Practices such as candle lighting, the temporary unveiling of the holy representation, carrying of the images in processions or ex-voto offerings have attracted the interest of art historians working at the intersection of art and religion. In turn, the apparent lack of a direct connection between worship and narrative fresco cycles has made them overlook this genre. As a result, monumental fresco cycles were not analysed as an expression of the devotional culture of the period, if not for their didactic purposes. They are usually understood as *Biblia pauperum*, and considered exclusively as a display of the sacred narratives in front of the illiterate public. For this reason, they rarely became an object of study in the context of the devotional and ritual culture of medieval and Renaissance societies. In this way, the scholarship neglected and underestimated the relationship between the narrative fresco decorations and the civic ritual of the Italian city-states. Nevertheless, the existence of such a connection is proved by the studies that interpret the monumental fresco decoration in the context of the ritual tradition of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy. Jean Cadogan's enquiry into the meaning of the decoration in the Chapel of the Holy Belt in the Prato cathedral[14], demonstrates that the monumental fresco decorations were involved in a complex network of meanings, related to local identity, ritual, and political struggle between the competing centres of power, both religious and secular. In turn, Patricia Simons' study on the Tornabuoni chapel suggests the dependence of the decoration on the religiosity of the period. The scholar distinguishes three aspects of the fifteenth-century Florentine devotional tradition: "Eucharistic", namely the rise of the veneration of the Eucharist, "inward", namely the importance of an internalised religious experience, and "imitative", namely the tendency to imitate the examples of pious behaviour coming from a virtuous model[15]. Simons argues that some elements of Ghirlandaio's frescoes, such as the tendency to depict the members of the family as participants of the sacred events, recall these tendencies. Nevertheless, she stresses that a better understanding of the relationship between the decoration

[14] J. Cadogan, *The Chapel of the Holy Belt in Prato: Piety and Politics in Fourteenth-Century Tuscany*, "Artibus et Historiae", 30, 60/2009, pp. 107-137.

[15] P. Simons, *Portraiture and Patronage in Quattrocento Florence with Special Reference to the Tornaquinci and Their Chapel in S. Maria Novella*, PhD dissertation, University of Melbourne, 1985, pp. 80-100.

and the religiosity of the period requires an investigation of cultural historians into the devotional attitudes of the period[16]. The present study, therefore, will offer such an analysis of Lippi's and Ghirlandaio's fresco decorations in a wider context of devotional, and ritual culture of the period, and the tradition of religious plays. The comparative study of the works by the two artists, Lippi's murals in Prato and Ghirlandaio's decoration in Santa Maria Novella, should provide new findings on the development of monumental fresco tradition in Florence during the second half of the fifteenth-century. Lippi, 17 years younger than Cosimo il Vecchio, started his artistic career when the *Pater Patriae* was already very clear on his project of establishing a dynastic rule of his family over the Florentine Republic. Raised in the Oltrarno, as the son of a butcher, and a member of the Carmelite convent since a very young age, Lippi knew very well the local festive tradition and actively participated in the organization of the Ascension spectacle in the Carmine. Ghirlandaio, born in the same year as Lorenzo il Magnifico, achieved the success on the Florentine artistic stage thanks to his direct relationship with the Medicean circle of commissioners. A member of the *Compagnia di San Paolo*, where he probably met Lorenzo himself, son of a Florentine artisan and shopkeeper, Ghirlandaio was very well acquainted with the Florentine ritual and devotion, dominated by the Medicean faction. Both artists gained their fame as masters of the monumental fresco painting and during their artistic activity, they executed the narrative fresco cycles, which contributed in a significant way to the development of the Tuscan tradition of wall painting. A comparison between the works of the two artists allows for a study of the Medicean policy towards the ritual, religious and artistic activity of the Florentines. Therefore, the present study will not only propose an interdisciplinary enquiry into the iconography of the two fresco decorations, which will focus on the relationship between the painting and the tradition of religious spectacle, but it will also provide new information on the relationship between the artists and their commissioners, the Medicean circle of intellectuals and the Florentine society.

The importance of Filippo Lippi for the fifteenth century tradition has been stressed by various scholars who, from the beginning of the twentieth century,

[16] Ivi, p. 80.

started to inquire about the artistic production of the Carmelite monk. The researches by George Puldelko, Mary Pittaluga, Henriette Mendelsohn, Paolo Caioli, Giuseppe Marchini and Eve Borsook[17] represent a milestone for the historical enquiry into Lippi's *oeuvre*. The achievements of these scholars allowed the establishment a chronological order for his paintings and made possible new attributions and dating.

The studies confirm the chief importance of Lippi's frescoes in Prato for the development of the Tuscan tradition of the narrative fresco painting. Lippi's innovative solutions for the creation of the spatial order of the scenes together with the technical innovations introduced in the execution of the frescoes, were seen as a model by the future generations of painters[18]. The most significant contribution to our understanding of the history of the commission and of the process of the realisation of the frescoes remains Eve Borsook's study *Fra Filippo Lippi and the Murals for Prato Cathedral* published in 1975[19]. The enquiry is based on the scholar's archival research and offers an analysis of the documents related to the commission. It reconstructs the subsequent phases of the works over the chapel decoration, and explains, with the help of the archival material, the unusual duration of Lippi's engagement in Prato, caused by continuous problems with funding and with the structure of the walls of the chapel.

The studies from the beginning of the last century laid the basis for two recent monographs on Lippi: Jeffrey Ruda's *Fra Filippo Lippi. Life and Work with a Complete Catalogue*, and Megan Holmes' *Fra Filippo Lippi. The Carmelite Painter*[20]. Ruda's study offers a comprehensive historical report on Lippi's artistic career, with a complete catalogue of the works of art attributed to the monk-painter. In his study, the scholar focuses on the chronological reconstruction of Lippi's *oeuvre*, and on the stylistic analysis of Lippi's paintings. As a consequence, the

[17] H. Mendelsohn, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, Berlin, 1909; G. Pudelko, *The Early Work of Fra Filippo Lippi*, "The Art Bulletin", 18/1936, pp. 104-112; Idem, *Per la datazione delle opere di Fra Filippo Lippi*, "Rivista d'Arte", Series 2, Year 8, 1/1936, pp. 45-76; M. Pittaluga, *Filippo Lippi*, Firenze, 1949; P. Caioli, *Un altro sguardo sulla vita di fra Filippo Lippi*, "Carmelus", 5/1958, pp. 30-72; G. Marchini, *Filippo Lippi*, Milano, 1975; *Idem*, *La vetrata e il suo restauro*, in *Fra Filippo Lippi nel Duomo di Prato*, "Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz", 19, 1/1975, pp. 181-196.

[18] G. Marchini, *Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., pp. 99-102.

[19] E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi and the Murals for Prato Cathedral*, in *Fra Filippo Lippi nel Duomo di Prato*, op. cit., pp. 1-148.

[20] J. Ruda, *Fra Filippo Lippi. Life and Work with a Complete Catalogue*, London, 1993; M. Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi. The Carmelite Painter*, New Haven, 1999.

choice to prepare an exhaustive monograph forced the author to limit the interpretative ambitions of the study. The questions of patronage and the relationship between Lippi's paintings and the social and religious life of fifteenth-century Florence occupy only a limited place in the monograph. Conversely, Megan Holmes brings the social context of Lippi's activity at the centre of the attention by interpreting Lippi's artistic production in light of his religious education in the Carmelite order. Lippi's paintings, put in a broadened interpretative context, reveal explicit references to the Carmelite devotional practices. In particular, Holmes' analysis reveals the relationship between Lippi's paintings and the Ascension spectacle, organized in the Carmine. While describing the impact of the performance on Lippi's production, the scholar offers numerous examples of the artists' direct inspirations in spectacle. The visual details coming from the Ascension *festa* reappear in the visualizations of the mysteries of the faith in many of Lippi's paintings (see chapter 3, paragraph 2).

Despite the revaluation of Lippi's production in the studies by Eve Borsook, Jeffrey Ruda and Megan Holmes, Lippi still remains in the shadow of the "intellectual" masters of the early fifteenth-century, such as Donatello, Masaccio, Fra Angelico or Andrea del Castagno. Therefore, it is worth to offer an in-depth analysis of a chosen work of art, asking questions related to its social and religious context, and enquiry into the questions of patronage and relationship between Lippi and the main Florentine commissioners of his time.

The critical fortune of Lippi's artistic production appears similar to Domenico Ghirlandaio's fate in modern scholarship. Already Vasari, through Ghirlandaio's biography, decided on the interpretative directions for the future research interested in the artist's activity. Vasari, who wanted to stress Ghirlandaio's success in the medium of the monumental fresco painting, recalled a fictive dialogue between Domenico and his brother Davide, in which the former is reported saying:

> Lascia lavorare a me, e tu provedi: ché ora che io ho cominciato a conoscere il modo di quest'arte, mi duole che non mi sia

> allogato a dipingere a storie il circuito di tutte le mura della città di Fiorenza[21].

Vasari's view on Ghirlandaio as a storyteller and chronicler of the Laurentian Florence, persists in the modern historiography. Ghirlandaio's detailed style, frequent recurrence to the genre of portraiture, both as independent painting, or as an insert into the religious narratives, reinforces this interpretative tendency. Therefore, despite his relationship with the Medicean commissioners, and the connection with Michelangelo, Ghirlandaio was for long time considered a secondary actor on the Laurentian artistic stage. The first monographs dedicated to him, which partly continue on Vasari's interpretation, come from the beginning of the twentieth century. These contributions by Henri Hauvette and Gerald Davies[22], laid the ground for the future research into the artist's *oeuvre*. An important turn in the critical evaluation of Ghirlandaio's artistic production is Patricia Simons' PhD *Portraiture and Patronage in Quattrocento Florence with Special Reference to the Tornaquinci and Their Chapel in S. Maria Novella* (University of Melbourne, 1985). This study proves the importance of the decoration for the construction of the patrons' public imagery and puts the portraiture, included into the cycles, in a wider social, religious and historical context of Florence under the rule of Lorenzo il Magnifico. Important monographs on Ghirlandaio and on the Tornabuoni chapel appeared later on. These are Ronald Kecks' *Domenico Ghirlandaio und die Malerei der Florentiner Renaissance*, Jean Cadogan's *Domenico Ghirlandaio: Artist and Artisan* and Josef Schmid's 'Et pro remedio animae et pro memoria': *bürgerliche "*repraesentatio*" in der Cappella Tornabuoni in S. Maria Novella*[23]. The monographs by Kecks and Cadogan provide the full catalogue of paintings attributed to Ghirlandaio, and facilitate the access to significant amount of archival materials regarding the artist, his family and his artistic commissions. In turn, Schimid's study focuses on Ghirlandaio's frescoes in the

[21] G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. R. Bettarini, vol. 3, Firenze, 1971, p. 491.
[22] H. Hauvette, *Ghirladaio*, Paris, 1908; G. S. Davies, *Ghirlandaio*, London, 1909.
[23] R. Kecks, *Domenico Ghirlandaio und die Malerei der Florentiner Renaissance*, München, 2000; J. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio: Artist and Artisan*, New Haven, 2001; J. Schmid, Et pro remedio animae et pro memoria: *bürgeliche "rappresentatio" in der Cappella Tornabuoni in S. Maria Novella*, München, 2002.

Tornabuoni chapel and, similarly to Patricia Simons, investigates the role and significance of the portraiture introduced into the frescoes. In his study, Schmid locates the commission for the decoration of the chapel in the context of the medieval tradition of the foundations of private chapels in mendicant churches[24]. Thus, he underlines the devotional and social importance of the frescoes, synthetically characterized as done *pro remedio animae et pro memoria*.

These studies brought to a revaluation of Ghirlandaio's relevance in the artistic panorama of Florence under Lorenzo's rule. Ghirlandaio's artistic achievements cannot be reduced, in fact, to the mere role of a chronicler of the Florentine history. At the same time, the recent research proves that the semantic complexity of Ghirlandaio's fresco cycles should not be underestimated and that his highly detailed style, together with the contemporary inserts present in the sacred narratives refer to the devotional and the social life of the painter's times. Moreover, Cadogan's recent article *An* "Huomo di Chonto"*: reconsidering the social status of Domenico Ghirlandaio and his family*[25] focusing on the social aspects of Ghirlandaio's biography, and proving his ambition of gaining a privileged position among the Florentine society, invites a further analysis of the artists' relationship with the environment of Lorenzo il Magnifico. Ghirlandaio's direct contacts with the Medicean circle of commissioners was undoubtedly crucial for the realization of his aspirations (see chapter 3, paragraph 3), and the cultural context of the Laurentian age sheds new light on the meanings hidden in the Tornabuoni frescoes (chapter 5, paragraph 2).

Further analysis of the social and cultural context of Lippi and Ghirlandaio's artistic activity lay at the centre of the present study. The enquiry into the public imaginary in fifteenth-century Florence, questions regarding the patterns of the visual representation of the sacred narratives, and the investigation into the use of images and civic devotion for political purposes constitute the chief aim of this research. The visual material, which is the object of the study, was created in the context of the Medicean domination of the Florentine culture and rituals. Thus, the problem of the relationship between the

[24] J. Schmid, Et pro remedio animae, op. cit., pp. 23-26.
[25] J. Cadogan, *An* "Huomo di Chonto"*: reconsidering the social status of Domenico Ghirlandaio and his family*, "Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte", 77.2014, 1, pp. 27-46.

Medici and the Florentine civic and religious festivities emerges inevitably as a meaningful background for the analysis.

The influence of the Medici family, and the families directly related to them by the rules of the patronage system, on the Florentine politics, religiosity, ritual and society remains one of the most significant features of the Florentine culture since the time of Cosimo il Vecchio (1389-1464). The modalities of the Medicean participation to and the influence on the public life of the city, has often become an object of enquiry. While the historians focused on the political aspects of the Medici's influence, the art historians investigated into the strategies of their artistic patronage and the relationship between arts, politics and the religiosity of fifteenth-century Florence. The ground-breaking study in the field was undoubtedly Martin Wackernagel's *Der Lebensraum des Künstlers in der Florentinischen Renaissance. Aufgaben und Auftraggeber, Werkstatt und Kunstmarkt*, published in 1938 and translated into English in 1981 by Alison Luchs[26]. This study enquired into the various aspects of the patronage in fifteenth-century Florence. It investigated the commissions coming from the Florentine patrons, analysed the cultural and the social aspects of the commissioners' activity, and investigated into the functioning of the artists' workshops. Seminal for Wackernagel's study was his close interest not only in the most significant commissions occurred in the fifteenth-century, such as the completion of the works over the cathedral or the renovation of the main churches of the city, such as San Lorenzo. The scholar investigated into the commissions for the artefacts of the most varied nature, such as the panel paintings for the public and the private devotion, the household decorations, or even the banners and the vestments. In this way, the study paved the way for future investigations into the artistic, social, economic and political dimension of the Florentine patronage. Seminal in this sense is Gombrich's article *The Early Medici as Patrons of Art: a Survey of Primary Sources*[27], which offers a review of the fifteenth-century texts on the subject of the artistic taste of the Florentine rulers. The 1990s brought further important contributions to the field,

[26] M. Wackernagel, *Der Lebensraum des Künstlers in der Florentinischen Renaissance. Aufgaben und Auftraggeber, Werkstatt und Kunstmarkt*, Lepzig, 1938; Idem, *The World of the Florentine Renaissance Artist. Projects and Patrons, Workshop and Art Market*, transl. A. Luchs, Princeton, 1981.

[27] E. H. Gombrich, *The Early Medici as Patrons of Art: a Survey of Primary Sources*, in *Italian Renaissance Studies. A tribute to the late Cecilia M. Ady*, ed. E. F. Jacob, London, 1960, pp. 279-311.

such as the exhibition *Le tems revient*, *'I tempo si rinuova* hosted by the Museum of the Palazzo Medici Riccardi in the spring of 1992 and curated by Paola Ventrone. The essays gathered in the exhibition catalogue[28] analyse the modalities of the Medicean participation into the Florentine festivities and the religious celebrations. The studies prove, moreover, the existence, since the time of Cosimo il Vecchio, of an ongoing campaign promoting the image of the Medici as the rightful leaders of the Florentine state. According to the scholars involved in the research for the exhibition, the supporters of the Medicean predominance engaged diverse media, from the panel painting, through the fresco decorations, until the festive performances, and with their use they promoted the message on the legitimization of the Medicean rule. The Medici not only commissioned Benozzo Gozzoli for the fresco decoration in the chapel of their palace, but also introduced the subjects related to their rule into the celebrations of St. John the Baptist's feast, tournaments and other religious and civic festivities[29]. At the same time, the Medici disseminated the coat-of-arms and the emblems (*imprese*) of the family, which expressed the augury of prosperity and duration of the lineage[30]. This particular strategy, developed already by Cosimo, would be further intensified under the rule of Lorenzo il Magnifico[31]. Therefore, it is fruitful to study the rulers' approach to the visual arts and their activity as patrons in relation to their political aspirations.

Two seminal volumes on the patronage policy of the Early Medici share this approach. *The Early Medici and their Artists*, edited by Francis Ames-Lewis[32] gathers a series of essays focused on the relationship between the members of the family and the most important artists in fifteenth-century Florence: Donatello, Filippo Lippi, Fra Angelico, Benozzo Gozzoli, Botticelli and Giuliano da Sangallo. John Paoletti's meaningful contribution to the volume *Strategies and structures of Medici artistic patronage in the fifteenth century* stresses the double aims of

[28] *Le tems revient, 'I tempo si rinuova. Feste e spettacoli nella Firenze di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, ed. P. Ventrone, Cinisello Balsamo, 1992.
[29] P. Ventrone, *Feste e spettacoli nella Firenze di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, in *Le tems revient*, op. cit., pp. 21-53.
[30] F. Cardini, *Le insegne laurenziane*, in *Le tems revient*, op. cit., pp. 55-74.
[31] *Lorenzo il Magnifico e il suo tempo*, ed. G. C. Garfagnini, Firenze, 1992; *Lorenzo de' Medici. New Perspectives. Proceedings from the International Conference Held at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, April 30-May 2, 1992*, ed. B. Toscani, New York, 1993.
[32] *The Early Medici and their Artists*, ed. F. Ames-Lewis, London, 1995.

Cosimo's strategies. On the one hand, the scale of the projects sponsored by the *Pater Patriae* corresponds to the ambitions of royal and princely patrons of the Italian *signorie*. On the other hand, the republican system of the Florentine state made Cosimo and his successor members of the community of citizens. Therefore, as Paoletti concludes, Cosimo's "artistic patronage [...] was a strategic choice allowing him to be prince and citizen at the same time[33]".

Dale Kent, in *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance. The Patron's Oeuvre*, further develops the problem of the Medici's ambiguous position among the community. The scholar dedicates a significant part of the study to the enquiry into Cosimo's participation in the Florentine culture, civic ritual, popular performances and devotional practices. Kent argues, in fact, that the Medici's strategies for the artistic patronage did not constitute political propaganda, understood as intentional and extraneous influence on the local traditions of a powerful patron who remains isolated from the rest of the society. On the opposite, the scholar claims that Cosimo's activity was the expression of his participation in the Florentine culture, and of his civic and religious engagement[34]. In light of the previous research, there is no doubt that the relationship between the community of citizens, its leaders, ideas circulating among them and the visual arts, is a very complex one. It is worth investigating further into this multi-layered intertwinement. The analysis of Lippi's and Ghirlandaio's fresco decorations, offered in the present study, is aimed at shedding light on the relationship between the patrons, the artists and the cultural dimension of the Florentine life, which includes the civic ritual, the devotional practices and the political struggle between the competing factions.

In order to interpret the fresco decoration in the contexts of the Florentine ritual culture, the present study offers a comparative enquiry of the religious narratives painted on the walls inside of the churches and these staged during the religious festivities. The study of art and spectacle together is justified not only by the fact that both media were parts of the visual culture of fifteenth-century Florence. In addition, the mural painting and the spectacles both transmitted to

[33] J. T. Paoletti, *Strategies and Structures of Medici artistic patronage in the fifteenth century*, in *The Early Medici*, op. cit., p. 36.
[34] D. Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance. The Patron's Oeuvre*, New Haven, 2000, pp. 41-42.

the Florentine audience the biblical and the apocryphal stories, such as the lives of the Saints, the life of the Virgin Mary, Jesus and the Apostles. At the same time, both media were involved in and expressed the devotion of the Florentines. It is proven by the inclusion of the spectacles into the celebrations of the most important feast days, such as the Annunciation, the Ascension, the Pentecost, or St. John the Baptist's festivity. The frescoes, on their part, were commissioned by wealthy citizens as an expression of their piety. The patrons hoped that, thanks to the investments into the holy decorations, they would guarantee the heavenly protection for the family in the earthly life and the salvation of its members after the death. Linked to the devotional tradition of the city, the sacred narratives staged during the festivities and depicted on the chapels' walls, expressed the hopes and the fears of the believers, and participated in their dialogue with the heavenly protectors.

During the fifteenth century, the religious drama became an important form of religious ritual thanks to the spectacles introduced to the celebrations of the most important festivities. The Ascension, the Annunciation, the Pentecost and St. John the Baptist's day were celebrated with the performances organized in the Florentine churches or in the space of the city. The spectacle presented to the spectators the narratives drawn from the Bible, the Golden Legend and the apocrypha, the same, which were painted on the walls of many chapels in the Florentine churches.

The painted narratives and the staged narratives, which were part of fifteenth-century Florentine visual culture, were traditionally studied separately. Despite the historical proofs of a continuous exchange between the environments organizing the spectacles and the Florentine artists (see chapter 3), the number of studies interested in a comparative research of art and spectacle is relatively small.

The first studies interested in the relationship between painting and theatre in Renaissance and Baroque Italy appeared in the 1930s and 1940s, such as Hanz Tintelnot's *Barocktheater und barocke Kunst. Die Entwicklungsgeschichte der Fest- und Theater-Dekoration in ihrem Verhältnis zur barocken Kunst*, published in 1939. This pioneering enquiry, despite its broad character, opened up new horizons for further investigations in the field. In fact, it was followed by the publication in

1944 of George Kernodle's *From Art to Theatre: Form and Convention in the Renaissance*. Kernodle investigates the relationship between art and theatre from Antiquity to the Renaissance, and one of the major contributions of his enquiry consists in proving that the exchange between both media was not unidirectional. Thus, the research interested in the problematic should not look for the influence of the spectacle on the art or vice versa. On the opposite, it should describe the constant dialogue and reciprocal influence between them.

The lesson offered by Kernodle was subsequently taken up by Pierre Francastel in his *Peinture et société. Naissance et Destruction d'un Espace Plastique de la Renaissance au Cubisme*, published in 1951. In his study, the scholar introduces the problem of a possible influence of the spectacle and the theatre on the development of linear perspective and the representation of space in painting. In this way, Francastel poses a research question which becomes one of the key queries for the scholars interested in the study of the relationship between Renaissance art and theatre. The question of the influence of the stage design on the representation of the three-dimensional space in painting and the introduction of the illusion into the Western art is dealt with by Ludovico Zorzi in his *Il teatro e la città. Saggi sulla scena italiana*, published in 1971. Later on, Zorzi curated the exhibition *Il luogo teatrale a Firenze: Brunelleschi*, *Vasari*, *Buontalenti*, *Parigi*, held in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi in 1975. The exhibition and its catalogue present seminal contributions to the knowledge of the exchange between the artistic environment of the city and the production of religious plays. In particular, the display included the wooden models of the staging machinery used during the Florentine spectacles in the fifteenth century. In this way, it made possible further investigations of the mutual influence between art and theatre. Zorzi's studies into the field concludes with the essay *Figurazione pittorica e figurazione teatrale*[35], in which the scholar further investigates the relationship between the spatial organization in painting and the Italian theatre. In this study, the scholar cites the examples of the elements of stage design introduced into the fourteenth- and the fifteenth-century art. He analyses such decorations as the frescoes in the upper basilica in Assisi and Carpaccio's *Legend of St. Ursula*. Likewise, Zorzi observes the

[35] L. Zorzi, *Figurazione pittorica e figurazione teatrale*, in *Storia dell'arte italiana. Questioni e metodi*, ed. Giovanni Previtali, vol. 1, Torino, 1979, pp. 419-462.

recurrence of certain patterns in the spatial organization of the scenes, such as the division of the action into multiple *luoghi deputati* and the constant return of the motive of a mountain in the narrative painting of the period. According to the scholar, these elements prove the importance of the inspiration coming from the stage and the stage design[36]. It seems that the spectacle offered to the painters a ready-made unit of spatial and expressive solutions, which the artists could apply into their pictorial production.

Zorzi's methodological approach, which involved a comparative study of chosen iconographic details in the paintings with the visual elements of the theatrical performances, is often used in the studies interested in the relationship between the two media. Götz Pochat applied an analogue method to his *Theater und Bildende Kunst im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance in Italien*, published in 1990. His rather broad study offers an overview on the modalities of the dialogue between art and theatre in the Italian tradition. Nevertheless, because of the long period taken into consideration and the lack of a criterion, which would narrow the range of the enquiry, his analysis remains superficial, and includes the examples of paintings inspired by the stage design and the staging machineries. Megan Holmes, instead, in the study on Lippi and the Carmelite devotion[37] recognized some of the quotations referring to the Florentine theatrical production in Lippi's devotional art. Strengthen by Lippi's strong link to the Carmelite convent of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence, responsible for the organization of the Ascension spectacle, Holmes' interpretations provided a better understanding of the influence of the theatre on the artists' panel paintings.

A similar method was applied by the most recent study interested in the dialogue between art and theatre, which is *The Spectacle of Clouds* by Alessandra Buccheri[38]. The author focuses her attention on the representations of clouds and heaven in the Italian art from the fifteenth until the mid seventeenth century. The study starts with an investigation into the Florentine tradition of the staging devices. In her enquiry, Buccheri challenges the accepted reconstructions,

[36] Ibidem, p. 426.
[37] M. Holmes, *Filippo Lippi*, op. cit..
[38] A. Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds, 1439-1650. Italian Art and Theatre*, Farnham, 2014.

attributions and dating of the cloud machinery used in the Florentine religious drama since the late fourteenth century, established mainly by the Florentine exhibition *Il luogo teatrale a Firenze*. She offers a new interpretation of Vasari's descriptions of the staging machinery and claims that the artist did not describe the devices in use at the time of Brunelleschi, but his own cloud machinery made for the Annunciation play, performed in 1566 in honour of Francesco de' Medici's wedding. Further, Buccheri analyses chosen panel and fresco paintings, where she recognizes the influence of the cloud machinery on the representation of the heavens. The scholar quotes the examples from the artistic production of Filippo Lippi, Sandro Botticelli, Francesco Botticini, but also Raphael and Correggio. Buccheri continues her study into the seventeenth century and analyses the examples of the Roman baroque art, such as the fresco decorated domes by Pietro da Cortona and Giovanni Lanfranco.

The previous research regarding the mutual influence between spectacle and art helped to identify the two main research questions that inspired the present study. Firstly, scholars recognized the importance of theatrical tradition and development of stage design for the elaboration of a new spatial organization in painting. In this way, the drama becomes important for the study of the illusion in the Renaissance art[39]. Secondly, the previous research proved, that it is possible to recognize in the fifteenth-century painting certain iconographic details inspired by the performances, such as the representation of heaven or the mandorla hoisting the Virgin Mary in the scenes of Assumption[40].

The aim of this study is to contribute to the field by analysing the narrative structures of the frescoes and of the religious dramas, and to point out the similarities in the development of the narratives between both media. In order to provide such a comparison, the study examines a sample of texts of *sacre rappresentazioni*. Furthermore, the analysis focuses on common elements of narrative frescoes and dramas, aimed at the reinforcement of the visual and

[39] L. Zorzi, *Introduzione*, in *Il luogo teatrale a Firenze: Brunelleschi, Vasari, Buontalenti, Parigi*, exhibition catalogue, ed. M. Fabbri, E. Garbero Zorzi, A. M. Petrioli Tofani, Milano, 1975, pp. 9-31; P. Francastel, *Peinture et société: naissance et destruction d'un espace plastique, de la Renaissance au cubisme*, Lyon, 1951.

[40] O. Brendel, *Origin and Meaning of the Mandorla*, "Gazette des Beaux-Arts", 21, 86/1944, pp. 5-24; A. Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds*, op. cit..

emotional effect of the representation. The study investigates into the meaning of these stylistic solutions in the dramas and in the frescoes, such as the actualization of the narration, the inclusion of contemporary characters to the sacred stories, and the use of perspective illusion in painting. In this way, the study reveals the devotional value of the painting, which participates in the ritual of intercession. Subsequently, the analysis investigates into the iconography of the Tornabuoni chapel and reveals the Neoplatonic motives included into the fresco. The research for the similar notions introduced to the religious spectacles, and influenced by the Medicean patronage over the Florentine culture confirms the thematic similarities between the fresco painting and the dramas.

While describing Ludovico Zorzi's methodology applied to his studies of relationship between art and theatre in early modern Italy, Sara Mamone states:

> […] se metodo c'è, esso è proprio nell'evidente creazione, volta a volta, degli strumenti funzionali ad un circoscritto scopo. Il metodo, che pur sappiamo ricercato, e, per necessità didattiche, a volte persino esibito, si definisce in corso d'opera, ma non ha regole fisse né a priori, tranne quelle del rigore estremo e della pluralità degli strumenti chiamati all'appello[41].

It seems, in fact, that in order to succeed in an interdisciplinary investigation into a complex net of mutual relationship between different media, it is important to apply a set of different methodological tools able to provide the answers on diverse research questions. Therefore, even if the present study remains highly inspired by Warburg's *Kulturwissenschaft* and the anthropological current in historical and art historical studies, it adopts a set of instruments, which goes beyond these two investigative methods. In this way, the archival research will provide new findings on the relationship between the Florentine confraternities and the artistic circles of the city (chapter 3). At the same time an iconographic analysis of the frescoes', which follows traditional iconological method theorized by Panosfky[42], will help in discovering the paintings' textual sources and the

[41] S. Mamone, *Dèi, Semidei, Uomini. Lo spettacolo a Firenze tra neoplatonismo e realtà borghese (XV-XVII secolo)*, Roma, 2003, p. 16.
[42] E. Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Garden City, 1955.

meaning expressed by the images. In order to answer the questions related to the meaning conferred to the frescoes by the application of linear perspective and the introduction of illusory effect of three-dimensionality, it is important to recall the studies, which analyse the pictorial composition and the significance of paintings' structural order for their meaning. A flagship investigation of this kind is Thomas Puttfarken's *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting, 1400-1800*. Puttfarken's analysis remains particularly important for the present study because of the scholars' observations on the monumental fresco paintings. In his study, the scholar recognizes the ability of the wall painting to create the illusion of the third dimension in the spectators. Puttfarken enumerates the monumental fresco decorations among the "unbounded" types of pictorial representation and he recalls Meyer Schapiro's definition of the term. In an article published in 1969[43], Schapiro recognized the birth of a defined, smooth and confined picture plane as one of the most significant revolutions in the history of Western art. Through the introduction of a bounded surface, on which pictures are composed, frame and plane became two essential elements of each painting, drawing, photograph or etching. More than a simple barrier that divided and defined the inner world of representation from the external space of the viewer, the frame functions as a device, which organizes and structures the relationship between both[44]. According to Schapiro, the development of the picture plane and the frame, allowed the formation of two different types of images, namely bounded and unbounded images. In a bounded image, the frame isolates the field of representation from the surrounding surfaces[45]. As a consequence, the picture is self-contained and the relationship between the depicted elements refers only to the objects within the frame. The result is that there is no connection between the representation and the space of the spectator. In an unbounded image, instead, the device of the frame is challenged and the image suggests unity between the representation and the space of the viewer. In this way, the unbounded images leave the spectator with a strong sense of illusion. They

[43] M. Shapiro, *On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Sign*, "Semiotica", 1/1969, pp. 225-242.
[44] T. Puttfarken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition. Theories of Visual Order in Painting 1400-1800*, New Haven, 2000, p. 21.
[45] M. Schapiro, *On Some Problems*, op. cit., p. 11.

suggest the spatial and the temporal continuity between the space of the spectator and the depicted scene, and, in this way, the unbounded images convey the sense of immediacy, which allow the spectator to engage with them[46]. The use of linear perspective in monumental fresco painting allowed the artist to experiment with the visual and semantic possibilities of the unbounded images. Thanks to the illusory effect of perspective the images acquires the ability to suggest the physical presence of the depicted characters. The represented scenes convey the impression of being staged, and in this way, the perception of a monumental fresco becomes similar to the perceptive conditions of a performance.

Based on the premises outlined in the previous part of the chapter, the present study offers an investigation into the narrative techniques of the fifteenth-century Florentine religious spectacle. With the use of the descriptions of the performances, the enquiry focuses on the public response to spectacles. Further, the study analyses the framing of the texts of chosen *sacre rappresentazioni*. Afterwards, the investigation focuses on the two fresco cycles by Lippi and Ghirlandaio. The study not only tries to indicate the elements of the paintings inspired by the tradition of holy performances. The effort is also to understand which what facilitated the dialogue of both media and what were the consequences of this exchange for the meaning of the images. In this way, the study situates itself within the research interested in the question of the semantics of illusion. Therefore, the study of the performative and illusory qualities of the Renaissance painting, does not concern only its stylistic aspects, but involves questions on the meaning of the images. The comparative study of the narrative cycles and the religious spectacle offers another occasion of a contextualized interpretation of the monumental frescoes, which enriches our knowledge on use, functioning and meaning of the images in the fifteenth-century Florentine devotion.

[46] A. Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds*, op. cit., p. 6.

Chapter 2

Devotion, Visual Perception and Florentine Religious Spectacle

> Let us sit down in the choir stall and don't let us make a noise, so as to disturb them: for the Tornabuoni are here performing a miracle play in honour of the Virgin Mary and the Baptist[1].

In his correspondence with André Jolles Aby Warburg poetically described the frescoes in the Tornabuoni chapel as a miracle play, a *sacra rappresentazione*, performed in honour of the Virgin and St. John the Baptist. In his imagination the scholar animated the figures represented in the paintings, fancied their movement, and put life in them. In this way the flow of the narration from one image to another became similar to the action of actors on stage and this animated vision deeply touched scholars' sensibility. From the historical perspective, one can say that in this brief letter Warburg recognized the presence of performative properties in Ghirlandaio's frescoes, which makes this sort of animated reception of the images possible. In fact, Warburg's intuitions invite for a critical consideration of these performative features of the images and ask for an accurate analysis of a possible relationship between the frescoes and the religious spectacles of the period. The scholar's observations on the dependence of the decoration on the production of sacred plays are reinforced by the presence in the frescoes of certain iconographic details, which suggest the influence of the spectacular practices on Ghirlandaio's decoration. These can be found in the platforms of clouds on which seat the saints in the *Assumption* and *Coronation of*

[1] E. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: an Intellectual Biography*, London, 1970, pp. 112-113. Fragment of Warburg's letter to André Jolles. Original kept in the Archive of the Warburg Institute, *Ninfa fiorentina* 1900, WIA 118. "[…] lass uns leise im Chorgestühl niedersitzen, damit sie sich nicht stören lassen: die Tornabuoni führen hier nämlich ein geistliches Schauspiel auf, zu Ehren der Jungfrau Maria und Johannes des Täufers."

the Virgin Mary (plate 37). In the fresco one sees the layers of solid, thin "shelves" of clouds, which offer support to the inhabitants of the heavenly paradise. These clouds reveal strong similarities with the cloud machinery used during the performances in the Florentine churches[2] and suggest a direct inspiration of the painter in the religious spectacles organized in the city. As it will be shown further in this chapter, the most popular scheme of stage design, used during the religious performances in the Florentine churches, included a set of platforms which gave support to angels, God the Father and Jesus. These platforms, in order to resemble clouds, were covered with *bambagia* – white cotton wool. At the same time, the representation of the heaven in the Florentine performances usually included the shining circles located behind God the Father, as to represent the stars (see chapter 3, paragraph 5). In Ghirlandaio's *Assumption* and *Coronation of the Virgin Mary* (plate 37) a similar device appear behind Jesus and the Virgin. This iconographic detail has been recognized by the art historians as an evidence of the influence of the Florentine spectacle on the religious painting[3]. Therefore, the investigation into the relationship between Ghirlandaio's frescoes in Santa Maria Novella and the Florentine religious performances seems strongly justified.

A similar impression of being in front of an "animated" scene may accompany the spectator of Lippi's *Feast of of Herod* (plate 12), painted on the walls of the main chapel of the cathedral in Prato. Convincing illusion of the third dimension conveyed by the fresco made possible an immersive perception of the painting, which shows a lively dance of Salome in front of the spectator's eyes. The illusory steps lead the spectator to the room where the banquet takes place and give the illusion of having a direct access to the space pictured in the fresco. The image offers to the viewer a strong impression of immediacy and suggests that what he looks at is an action taking place in front of his eyes.

In order to critically analyse the presence of these performative properties of the monumental fresco paintings and their relationship with the Florentine religious drama, this chapter will investigate the Florentine devotional tradition. It focuses on the analysis of certain devotional texts and describes the dramatic dimension of the Florentine devotional life, for the purpose of providing

[2] A. Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds, 1439-1650. Italian Art and Theatre*, Farnham, 2014, pp. 60-61.
[3] M. Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi. The Carmelite Painter*, New Haven, 1999, pp. 165-167.

some historical information about the place and features of the devotional narratives, which circulated at that time between the Florentine believers. Such an analysis will bring out the visual and performative qualities of devotional texts popular in the period. Further, the enquiry into the texts of the Florentine *sacre rappresentazioni* will provide the data and information necessary for the further investigation of the relationship between Lippi and Ghirlandaio's frescoes and the narratives staged during the performances (chapters 4 and 5).

The Florentine festivities celebrated with great spectacles organized in the churches, and the later *sacre rappresentazioni*, were expressions of a flourishing ritual aimed at the reinforcement of social bonds between citizens, the legitimization of the republican government and its institutions and the securement of heavenly protection over the state[4]. Religious spectacle was an expression of the religious *imaginatio* of fifteenth-century Florentines. Thus, the analysis of the narrative techniques used in the composition of the dramas and an enquiry into the features of the staging systems allows a better understanding of the visual aspects of Florentine devotion in general. On the other hand, sacred drama, through the activity of the members of the Medici family and their circle in the field of Florentine ritual, became one important element of the process of the establishment of the Medicean domination over the town and the insurance of wide support from the community. Therefore, research into the relationship between the spectacle and the city will allow a further examination of the modalities used by the Medici to influence Florentine tradition and the meaning of the message promoted by the rulers.

The devotional life of fifteenth-century Florence reflected the tendencies and the problems raised by the religious climate of contemporary Italy, strongly affected by the memory of the events of the past century, namely the institutional crisis of the Church caused by the schism and the Black Death, which decimated the European population from 1348 onwards, and was still a recurring threat in 1400. The crisis, both institutional and demographic, nourished the diffusion of various penitential and devotional movements, often influenced by apocalyptic

[4] R. C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, London, 1980, pp. 1-8.

prophetism[5]. This particular spiritual climate gave birth to numerous pious movements and inspired the activity of various reformers of the Church. At the beginning of the century pious crowds joined *Bianchi*'s processions and the penitential movement promoted by Manfredi da Vercelli. At the same time, Vincent Ferrer undertook his preaching activity and Ludovico Barbo, Raimondo da Capua and Giovanni Dominici promoted the observance reform of the monastic communities. Civic devotion, as a part of ritual of the Italian city-states, increased in importance and became seminal in the construction of local identities and in the exercise of power. The weakness of the papacy as a centre of theological discussion resulted in the proliferation of many different initiatives directed towards the spiritual rebirth of the Church. The message sent by zealous reformists had its effect. Their activity was accepted by the societies of the Italian cities, and Florence was no exception. Crowds of Florentines gathered in the city squares to listen to San Bernardino da Siena, while Giovanni Dominici and Antonino Pierozzi became, for a long time, true points of reference in the religious life of the city.

Florentine devotion in the fifteenth century was characterized by a strong interest in moral and educational subjects, as demonstrated by the popularity of Dominici's and Pierozzi's edificatory texts, such as *La regola del governo di cura famigliare* by the former, and *L'Opera a ben vivere* by the latter. Moral subjects, however, were expressed in a form that was highly sensitive to the visual and sensorial aspects of religious experience. Various devotional practices, such as prayers, lauds or religious spectacles were aimed at providing a strong visual and sensorial impression to the believers. The preaching of San Bernardino da Siena is the most studied example of this tendency and Lina Bolzoni's analysis of the visual "maps" of Bernardino's sermons supports the existence of strong links between the rhetoric of devotional literature and the contemporary understanding of cognitive processes and the functioning of memory[6]. Nevertheless, further examinations of the visual experience in fifteenth-century devotion has to be undertaken. The present chapter will offer an insight into the visual aspects of

[5] R. Rusconi, *L'attesa della fine. Crisi della società, profezia ed Apocalisse in Italia al tempo del grande scisma d'Occidente (1378-1417)*, Roma, 1979.
[6] L. Bolzoni, *The Web of Images. Vernacular Preaching from its Origins to St Bernardino da Siena*, Aldershot, 2004.

fifteenth-century devotional texts circulating in Florence, to focus subsequently on religious spectacle. It will be important to place sacred drama in the context of civic devotion in fifteenth-century Florence. Finally, an analysis of the chosen texts of Florentine religious spectacles will constitute an enquiry into the narrative techniques of fifteenth-century drama.

Visual *imaginatio* of fifteenth-century devotion

Contemporary research on the devotional art of the fourteenth and fifteenth century has investigated the relationship between texts and artefacts. Yet, so far, scholarship has focussed on objects of private devotion[7] or on gestures of worship, such as candle lighting, temporary unveiling of the icons, kissing or touching of the holy images[8]. Also the questions on the influence of the theology on the decorations of the medieval churches became an object of scholarly investigation[9]. Both these issues should be further investigated, with the reference to different geographical areas and diverse local traditions. Moreover, scholarly investigations should not exclude the narrative mural decorations from the study of the relationship between art and devotion.

Medieval theology dedicated great attention to the problem of vision and research into the nature of sight acquired a central role. Medieval understanding of the functioning of human brain was inherited from antiquity. The theories of visual perception were subsequently reinterpreted in the theological key by the

[7] Cf. among recent studies, *Treasures of Heaven. Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. M. Bagnoli, H. A. Klein, C. G. Mann, New Haven, 2010; R. Bartal, Ducitur et reducitur. *Passion Devotion and Mental Motion in an Illuminated* Meditationes Vitae Christi *manuscript (Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 410)*, in *Visual Constructs of Jerusalem*, ed. B. Kühnel, G. Noga-Banai, H. Vorholt, Turnhout, 2014, pp. 369-379; M. Morse, *The Arts of Domestic Devotion in Renaissance Italy. The Case of Venice*, PhD dissertation, University of Maryland, 2006; V. M. Schmidt, *Painted Piety. Panel Paintings for Personal Devotion in Tuscany, 1250 – 1400*, Firenze, 2005; U. L. Betka, *Marian Images and Laudesi Devotion in Late Medieval Italy, ca 1260-1350*, PhD dissertation, University of Melbourne, 2001; *Visions of Holiness. Art and Devotion in Renaissance Italy*, ed. A. Ladis, S. Zuraw, Athens, 2001; K. L. Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen. Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages*, Princeton, 2000.

[8] M. Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, New Haven, 2013; D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago, 1991.

[9] *The Mind's Eye. Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. J. F. Hamburger, A.-M. Bouché, Princeton, 2006; *Shaping Sacred Space and Institutional Identity in Romanesque Mural Painting. Essays in Honour of Otto Demus*, ed. T. E. A. Dale, J. Mitchell, London, 2004.

fathers of medieval philosophy, for example Grosseteste, Bacon and Aquinas[10]. For Aquinas, because of the dependence of the visual experience upon light, to which the theologian ascribed both physical and spiritual qualities, sight had "a special dignity":

> The reason, in fact, why we employ 'light' and other words referring to vision in matters concerning the intellect is that the sense of sight has a special dignity; it is more spiritual and more subtle than any other sense. This is evident in two ways. First, from the object of sight. For objects fall under sight in virtue of properties which earthly bodies have in common with the heavenly bodies. [...] Hence, from the very nature of the object it would appear that sight is the highest of the senses; with hearing nearest to it, and the others still more remote from its dignity[11].

The value attributed to sight depended on the fact that it was the only sense whose function did not consist in receiving the material qualities of objects. Touch, taste and smell acquired the physical properties of matter, such as bitterness, dryness, roughness and so on. Sight, instead, received the likeness of the perceived objects by the eye in a form causing knowledge:

> The same point will appear if we consider the way in which the sense of sight is exercised. In the other senses what is spiritual in their exercise is always accompanied by a material change. I mean by 'material change' what happens when a quality is received by a subject according to the material mode of the subject's own existence, as e.g. when anything is cooled, or heated, or moved about in space; whereas by a 'spiritual

[10] G. Federici Vescovini, *Le teorie della luce e della visione ottica dal XI al XV secolo. Studi sulla prospettiva medievale e altri saggi*, Perugia, 2006.

[11] T. Aquinas, *Sentencia libri De anima*, Book 2, Lectio 14, par. 417, transl. K. Foster, O.P., S. Humphries, O.P., New Haven, 1951, p. 132: "Quod autem lumine, et his quae ad visum pertinent, utamur in rebus intellectualibus, contingit ex nobilitate sensus visus, qui est spiritualior et subtilior inter omnes sensus. Quod patet ex duobus. Primo quidem ex suo obiecto. Nam aliqua cadunt sub visu, secundum proprietates in quibus communicant inferiora corpora cum caelestibus: [...]. Unde ex ipsa natura obiecti, apparet quod visus est altior inter sensus, et auditus propinquior ei, et alii sensus magis remoti."

> change' I mean, here, what happens when the likeness of an object is received in the sense-organ, or in the medium between object and organ, as a form, causing knowledge, and not merely as a form in matter. For there is a difference between the mode of being which a sensible form has in the senses and that which it has in the thing sensed. Now in the case of touching and tasting (which is a kind of touching) it is clear that a material change occurs: the organ itself grows hot or cold by contact with a hot or cold object; there is not merely a spiritual change. So too the exercise of smell involves a sort of vaporous exhalation; and that of sound involves movement in space. But seeing involves only a spiritual change-hence its maximum spirituality; with hearing as the next in this order. These two senses are therefore the most spiritual, and are the only ones under our control. Hence the use we make of what refers to them — and especially of what refers to sight — in speaking of intellectual objects and operations.[12]

The spiritual properties of light, understood as both a physical and a divine quality, suggested a parallel between visual and spiritual cognition. As a consequence, the ontological distance between the externalized and the internalized visual experiences was significantly shortened. For the medieval theologists, both actions, i.e., to receive a vision or to perceive the likeness of the external world, were based on the same qualities and rules of sensorial cognition.

At the same time, thanks to the inheritance of classical rhetoric, mental images played an important role as an educational tool of the *ars memorativa*.

[12] T. Aquinas, *Sentencia libri De anima*, Book 2, Lectio 14, par. 418, op. cit., p. 133: "Secundo apparet quod sensus visus est spiritualior, ex modo immutationis. Nam in quolibet alio sensu non est immutatio spiritualis, sine naturali. Dico autem immutationem naturalem prout qualitas recipitur in patiente secundum esse naturae, sicut cum aliquid infrigidatur vel calefit aut movetur secundum locum. Immutatio vero spiritualis est secundum quod species recipitur in organo sensus aut in medio per modum intentionis, et non per modum naturalis formae. Non enim sic recipitur species sensibilis in sensu secundum illud esse quod habet in re sensibili. Patet autem quod in tactu, et gustu, qui est tactus quidam, fit alteratio naturalis; calefit enim et infrigidatur aliquid per contactum calidi et frigidi, et non fit immutatio spiritualis tantum. Similiter autem immutatio odoris fit cum quadam fumali evaporatione: immutatio autem soni, cum motu locali. Sed in immutatione visus est sola immutatio spiritualis: unde patet, quod visus inter omnes sensus est spiritualior, et post hunc auditus. Et propter hoc hi duo sensus sunt maxime spirituales, et soli disciplinabiles; et his quae ad eos pertinent, utimur in intellectualibus, et praecipue his quae pertinent ad visum."

Through the medieval manuals on rhetoric, mnemonic schemes based on mental images passed to the *ars predicandi* and started to be widely used by preachers in the composition of sermons. The wide use of *ekphrasis*, namely the verbal descriptions of images that were supposed to evoke vivid representations in the listener's or reader's mind, became a distinctive feature of late medieval devotional writings[13]. It was used not only by the mendicant preachers and in the texts engaged with private devotion, such as the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, but also appeared in writings strongly influenced by prophetic and visionary spirit. The relationship between the *ars memorativa* and fifteenth-century practices of meditation, prayer or preaching is directly proven by some of the authors of fifteenth-century manuals of mnemonic techniques, who explicitly defined the utility of their craft for the devotional life of the readers, as in an anonymous treaty entitled *De memoria artificiali adipiscenda tractatus* from around 1480.

> I have decided to imprint and seal in your mind, by means of artificial memory, the order of the blessed meditations, so that you will then be able to use the same method in such a way that your memory will be steeped in knowledge of all the sacred texts. [...] Indeed, our invention is not only addressed to the usefulness of the mind but also, and even more, to the saving of devoted souls and to their spiritual consolation, to which I would like to conduct you not by means of fairy tales and vain phantasms, but by means of devotional images and sacred stories[14].

It is clear that the author of the treaty considered mental images a useful tool for the memorization of sacred narratives. According to the writer, the acquaintance with the devotional images and sacred stories led to the spiritual

[13] M. Carruthers, *Moving Images in the Mind's Eye*, in *The Mind's Eye. Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. A.-M. Bouché, J. F. Hamburger, Princeton, 2006, pp. 290-293.

[14] *De memoria artificiali adipiscenda tractatus*, quoted by L. Bolzoni, *Web of Images*, op. cit., p. 158. "artificiali memoria sanctarum meditationum ordinem menti imprimere ac sigilare vestre decrevi, ut etiam ritu eodem omnium sacrarum litterarum eruditionem memoriter imbibere valeatis [...] Inventio enim nostra [adtinet] ad utilitatem non solum mentis verum magis ad animarum devotarum salute et spiritualem consolationem, cum non per fabulas et vana phantasmata discurrere velim sed per devotas imagines et ystorias divinarum lectionum". See also: R. A. Pack, Artes memorativae *in a Venetian Manuscript*, "Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age", 50/1983, pp. 257-300 (the text is on pp. 265-300).

growth of the faithful. In fact, the art of memory was widely used, especially in Dominican circles, as a useful educational tool in the study of the Bible and Psalms[15]. Among different mnemonic schemes and techniques, the method of the "architectural mnemonic" described in the *Rethorica ad Herennium* achieved the biggest success during the Middle Ages. It was discussed already in the 1240s in Albertus Magnus's *De bono*, commented by Thomas Aquinas in the second part of his *Summa Theologiae*. Subsequently, the knowledge of the text passed to the university curricula and was popularized by the Dominicans and the Franciscans. The scheme of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* was based on two elements: *notae* or *imagines*, namely mnemonic signs, which stand for the things one wanted to remember, and *loci*, which were the imaginary places where the *imagines* were located. The student of the *ars memorativa* was supposed to imagine the objects in the locations and arrange them in order. Subsequently, he would recall in his mind all the *loci* from start to finish, then backwards, or starting in the middle, in order to recollect the objects one by one. The backgrounds were supposed to be well lit, not too big, but not too small neither and they soon started to be compared with a theatrical stage[16]. The images used in these mental schemes were supposed to be created according to the rule of association. Further, as the fantasy was believed to impress the mind, bizarre images were considered particularly suitable for the purpose. They were supposed to strengthen the mnemonic effect of the exercise. Images that were emotionally resonant were particularly important for theoreticians of the mnemonic techniques. The results of these fantastic combinations could be truly creative, as illustrated by an example from the *Rethorica ad Herennium* creatively interpreted by Albertus Magnus:

> we place in our memory 'a sick man in bed who is a figure of the deceased, and we place the defendant standing by the bed, holding in his right hand a cup, in his left hand tablets, and a physician standing upright holding the testicles of a ram,' so that certainly in the cup should be the memory-cue of the

[15] M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge, 2008, p. 193.
[16] Ivi, p. 90.

> poison which he drank, and the tablets should be the memory-cue of the will which he signed, and in the physician may be figured the accusor and by the testicles the witness and accessories, and by the ram the defence against matter being adjudicated[17].

The process of recollection consisted in a "virtual tour" through the *loci*, and thus intrinsically involved displacement of the student's thought through the imaginative space. Consequently, it extended in time. The process of recollection had a temporal dimension because it also made past experiences present in the form of reminiscence. The recollection, in fact, corresponded to a re-enactment of the past, which involved the judgement, imagination and emotions of the student of the *ars memorativa*[18]. During the late Middle Ages the scheme became particularly popular thanks to its didactic qualities and passed from university and monastic training to manuals on writing sermons as well as devotional practices. The scheme was easily adaptable into different religious genres, because of the similarities between the process of recollection and the practice of meditation.

One of the key texts, which reflects the reception of the *ars memorativa* in the devotional literature was the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, a highly popular composition from the fourteenth century, first composed in Latin and soon translated into the vernacular. It was traditionally attributed to St. Bonaventura, but today is considered to be composed by a Franciscan friar from San Gimignano, Giovanni de' Cauli. The text was meant to be used in private devotion by pious readers, who, with the help of detailed descriptions, would build in their minds mental pictures of the Passion and suffering of Christ.

> Et lui [Pilato] vedendo che gli piaceva el suo decto con opera compiute subito fece spogliare il dolce Giesu et nel la corte a una Colonna lo fece leghare nudo in presentia di tucti, peroché

[17] Albertus Magnus, *De bono*, IV. ii. a. 2. English translation in M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, op. cit., p. 174: "reponemus in memoria "aegrotum in lecto, qui est defuncti figura et reum ponemus astare lecto, dextra poculum, sinistra tabulas tenentem et medicum astantem tenentem testiculos arientos," ut scilicet in poculo sit memoria veneni, quod propinavit et in tabulis memoria haereditatis sit, quas subscripsit, et in medico figura sit accusatoris et in testiculis figura testium consciorum et in ariete defensio contra reum in iudicio."

[18] M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, op. cit., p. 76.

> s'andava dalla piazza al pretorio et dal pretorio alla corte, et chiamando li crudeli carnefici commandò che aspramente fusse flagellato, acioché la rabia inextinguibile della secta de cani giudei si satiasse et non cercassono poi la morte, perché Pilato non lo voleva dannare a morte. Allhora gli carnefici per comandamento di Pilato con grande impeto et furia spogliando Giesu a modo di lupi rapaci lo tirorono alla corte [c]ome scelerati pieni d'errore. *Quello el quale era spetioso sopra gli figluoli degl'huomini al presente sta nudo dinanzi al conspecto della pagana gente a petitione et compiacimeto del'indiavolati giudei.* Essendo denudate quelle braccia benedecte, discoperte quelle gambe pretiose, mostrando Giesu tucte le sue carni pretiose et sancte, *prima* pigliarono le braccia et torcendole di drieto la colonna con corde grosse et dure legarono quelle mani tanto tenere. *Da poi* legarono gli piedi stringendogli con grandissima violentia contra la colonna di pietra. Pensi tu che dicesse 'Non fate così forte'. Pensi tu che s'adirasse contro di loro. Non diceva alcuna cosa ma alcuna volta con quelli occhi luminosi riguardava quelli volendo illuminare il suo core acioché non si perdessono. […] *Subito che* fu legato alcuni di quelli più robusti hebbono apparechiato flagelli crudelissimi et distendendo le braccia con tucta sua possanza sopra Giesu con grande furia el flagellorono[19].

The compositional scheme of the text would become a recurrent pattern for other devotional compositions of the period. The text employed a detailed description, which helped the reader to construct in his mind a vivid, plastic and precise image of the event. The meticulous account of the action, clearly marking the subsequent phases of gestures and movements with the adverbs "prima", "da poi", "subito che" and the actualization of the episode through the introduction of the present tense ("Quello el quale […] sta nudo dinanzi al […]."), made of the text a peculiar guide, which leads the reader through the described scene. The mental image that was conjured in the reader's mind was evoked during every single reading. Thus, it acquired the dimension of a present event, as the vision of the

[19] Giovanni de' Cauli [attr.], *Incominciano le divote meditazioni sopra la Passione del nostro Signore […]*, BNCF, Magl. 15.3.108, f. 40 r.

narrated events was recreated simultaneously with the reader's meditation. We can trace the popularity of this narrative scheme in other devotional texts that were seminal in fifteenth-century Florence, such as the *Revelations* of St. Bridget of Sweden and the preaching of San Bernardino di Siena.

St. Bridget's *Revelations*, which were an extremely popular devotional text in fifteenth-century Italy, are situated in a long prophetic tradition of the late Middle Ages, from Elizabeth of Hungary (d. 1231) to Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-80) and Margery Kempe (1373-c. 1438), from Joachim of Fiore (c. 1130-1202) to Jean de Roquetaillade (d. 1366). Late medieval tradition counted numerous personalities, who, with the power of the word, drew heavenly images of the transcendent realms. Tradition says that St. Bridget's prophetic activity started after a vision she had in 1349, in which Christ asked her to go to Rome and promised her that she would assist the pope's return to the capital of Christianity[20]. From that moment until her death in 1373 the Saint became one of the most influential advocates of the pope's return to Italy. Bridget became Christ's *sponsa et canale* (bride and channel). She was considered a mediator of God's words. Her visions had wide European circulation already during her lifetime. They were edited after her death and distributed in the years immediately after.

The principal feature of Bridget's writings is the moral character of the texts. The *Revelationes* focus on the ethical motivations of human behaviour and this approach remains a common feature of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century female prophecy. In fact, during the fourteenth century the edificatory nature of female prophecy marked a significant shift in the prophetic literature of the period. Female prophets tended to abandon speculative and exegetic subjects and to emphasise the problem of moral teaching and the intellectual improvement of the faithful. The *Revelations* gained a great and swift success, due not only to the content of the text but to its form. Thanks to the use of very plastic and concrete language, the message of the prophecies became accessible not only to the members of the clergy but also to the aristocracy, the middle classes and even, thanks to translations into the vernacular, to simple craftsmen and the elite of the

[20] A. Vauchez, *Santi, profeti e visionari. Il soprannaturale nel medioevo*, Bologna, 2000, p. 132.

rural world[21]. A frequent exploitation of the visual force of language is, in fact, one of the main features of Saint Bridget's writings. Repeatedly, in numerous visions, Bridget drew with her words vivid images and scenes known from the Bible and the Apocrypha. These descriptions are often written in first-person narration and are frequently narrated by Jesus or the Virgin Mary themselves. One of the examples of great attention given to the visual qualities of the *Revelations* is the description of the *Deposition*, a vision Bridget had in 1340, which is contained in chapter 21 of book 2:

> Mary spoke: "You should reflect on five things, my daughter. *First*, how every limb in my Son's body grew stiff and cold at his death and how the blood that flowed from his wounds as he was suffering dried up and clung to each limb. *Second*, how his heart was pierced so bitterly and mercilessly that the man speared it until the lance hit a rib, and both parts of the heart were on the lance. *Third*, reflect on how he was taken down from the cross! The two men who took him down from the cross made use of three stepladders: *one* reached to his feet, *the second* just below his armpits and arms, *the third* to the middle of his body. *The first* man got up and held him by the middle. *The second*, getting up on another ladder, *first* pulled a nail out of one arm, *then* moved the ladder and pulled the nail from the other hand. The nails extended through the crossbeam. The man who had been holding up the weight of the body then went down as slowly and carefully as he could, while the other man got up on the stepladder that went to the feet and pulled out the nails from the feet. When he was lowered to the ground, one of them held the body by the head and the other by the feet. I, his mother, held him about the waist. And so the three of us carried him to a rock that I had covered with a clean sheet and in that we wrapped his body. I did not sew the sheet together, because I knew that he would not decay in the grave. [...]".[22]

[21] A. Vauchez, *Santi, profeti e visionari*, op. cit., p. 135.
[22] Bridget of Sweden, *The Revelations, Book 2*, vol. 1, op. cit., p. 229.

The attention paid to descriptive details is definitely a distinctive feature of Bridget's style. These particulars were supposed to facilitate the worshippers' contemplation of the Passion. In fact, similarly to the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, the text was made to serve as a guide for meditation and it seems to lead the reader's imagination through the narrated event. The description succeeded in constructing a vivid mental image of the scene. It followed a very logical scheme and did not omit any particular from the action. First, three ladders are leaned against the cross, then the body is taken down from the instrument of torture. Step by step, nail by nail, Christ's corpse is detached from it and wrapped in a sheet. The vivid image of the biblical event in the believer's mind had the power of stirring up emotional reactions, feelings of compassion and attachment. Moreover, with every re-reading the action of the deposition was re-enacted, and happened again in the mind's eye of the believer.

Rooted in the fourteenth-century political situation, the cult of St. Bridget and her writings continued to spread into the fifteenth century, and the Italian states became one of the first countries to receive and popularize the figure of the prophetess. The success of the saint led to the diffusion of her cult also in the Tuscan cities. Through the worship of the saint new types of iconographic representation, deeply rooted in Bridget's writings, were disseminated, and through the rhetorical force of her visions, her texts imposed a new type of devotion, which was receptive to the use of mental images. Translations of the *Revelations* into the vernacular languages appeared soon after the completion of the corpus[23] and its Italian version was one of the first to circulate. It was made in

[23] The first edition of *Liber celestis Reuelacionum* was prepared to be offered to Gregory XI in the matter of the canonisation of the Swedish princess in 1377. In that year the pope formed a commission, which had to investigate Bridget's holiness. It was composed of five Cardinals, one Archbishop, three *Magistri* and Alfonso of Jaén. But in the same year Gregory XI died and the procedure had to be started once again from the beginning. Urban VI received once again some copies of Bridget's writings to distribute between the members of the new, larger commission. These where probably the first manuscripts containing the text at that time. In December 1378 the corpus of the *Revelations* consisted of the *Prologus Magister Matthiae* and seven books of the *Revelations*. The oldest surviving manuscript containing this version of the text is kept in the Biblioteka Narodowa in Warsaw, MS 3310, datable to ca 1377. Other remaining manuscripts, all produced in Naples, are: New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M. 498 (datable to 1377/78) and Palermo, Biblioteca centrale della regione Siciliana, MS IV. G. 2. (datable between 1379-1391). The first Italian translation into a vernacular language datable to 1399, preserved in the Biblioteca dell'Accademia degli Intronati in Siena (I. V. 25/26) is, therefore, proof of the early reception of Bridget's writings also in non-Latin speaking circles. See more: H. Ali, *The manuscripts of Revelaciones S. Birgittae*, in *Santa Brigida, Napoli, l'Italia*, op. cit., pp. 153-160; D. Pezzini, *Il primo volgarizzamento italiano delle rivelazioni e degli altri scritti*

Siena in 1399[24], while the English versions of the *Revelations* were edited only around 1420 (British Library, MS Cotton Claudius B.i) and 1430-40 (British Library, MS Cotton Julius F.ii). The first Italian translation into the vernacular is preserved today in the Biblioteca dell'Accademia degli Intronati in Siena (manuscript I.V.25/26). The manuscript, divided into two volumes, contains a full version of *Revelations*, all the major and minor works of the Swedish saint. The history of the commission of the manuscript, which we can reconstruct thanks to the colophons of both volumes, provides interesting information on the reception of the cult of St. Bridget and of the particular religious imagery expressed by her writings in Tuscany and the circle of St. Caterina of Siena. The two volumes of the *Revelations* were commissioned by Ser Cristofano di Gano Guidini, in 1399 oblate at the Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala, where he was notary since 1384[25] and by Meio di Jacomo, a pious Sienese man who died during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land[26]. Direct contacts between Guidini and Caterina Benincasa are evidenced by Cristofano's *Memorie*[27].

Guidini's biography constitutes a particularly interesting account on the devotional life in Tuscany at the turn of the century. During the plague of 1390 Guidini lost his wife and six of his seven children, marking a deep rupture in his life. Soon after the plague his only surviving child, his eight-year-old daughter Nadda, received her dowry and was entrusted to the Sienese convent of Saints Abbondio and Abbondanzio. On 14th August 1391 Guidini himself abandoned his house and moved to the Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala. He donated a

di S. Brigida: il codice I.V.25/26 della Biblioteca degli Intronati di Siena (1399), in *Santa Brigida, Napoli, l'Italia*, op. cit., pp. 61-73.

[24] D. Pezzini, *Il primo volgarizzamento italiano*, op.cit., pp. 62-65.

[25] S. Foà, *Guidini, Cristoforo (Cristofano)*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 61, Roma, 2003, pp. 250-252.

[26] The colophon at the end of the first volume states: "Questo libro è de la compagnia de la Vergine Maria di Siena. El quale fece scrivare Ser Cristofano di Gano notaio dello spedale de suoi denari e di quegli do Meio di Jacomo che andò al sepolcro per non tornare. Nel mccclxxxxviiij. Pregate Dio per loro. Amen." That which closes the second volume says: "Iesus. Questo libro è de la compagnia de la Vergine Maria di Siena, posta nello spedale di sancta Maria della Scala: E fecelo fare Ser Cristofano di Gano da Siena, frate notaio del detto spedale. Pregate Dio per lui." They are quoted by Domenico Pezzini in his paper *Il primo volgarizzamento* […], op.cit., p. 63.

[27] The manuscript of Guidini's *Memorie* is preserved in the Archivio di Stato di Siena. A section of it was published by Carlo Milanesi, *Ricordi di Cristofano Guidini*, "Archivio storico italiano", 4/1843, pp. 27-47. As we learn from Guidini's biography, he became active in St. Caterina's circle around 1370. In 1378 his name is quoted in Urban VI's bull among Caterina's disciples to whom the pope gave the right to choose their own priest, in order to get the indulgence *in articulo mortis*. [27] S. Foà, *Guidini, Cristoforo*, op.cit., p. 251.

significant part of his belongings to the hospital, and became an oblate performing the functions of the chancellor and the rector's vicar[28]. Guidini became author of the *Memorie*, a typical example of a family memoir, and after 1391 he started to compose his religious texts. He translated Catherine's *Dialogo della divina provvidenza* into Latin and in 1404 wrote the so-called *Libro di laudi*, a collection of legends of saints written in *ottava rima*[29]. The example of Guidini, his life, his involvement in the reception of St. Bridget's writings in Siena, his relationship with St. Catherine and engagement in the religious life of the city as an author of religious texts, all amount to demonstrating an overall coherence and interdependence between different religious phenomena in fifteenth-century Tuscany.

It was not only Siena, but also Florence that became an important centre for the early reception of St. Bridget's thought in Italy. Bridget was a close friend to Niccolò Acciaiuoli, the founder of the Certosa del Galluzzo, and his brother, Angelo Acciaiuoli, was a Dominican friar at Santa Maria Novella. The Florentine monastery, called "Paradiso" and set up at Santa Maria del Paradiso in the Pian di Ripoli by Antonio degli Alberti, was approved by the Republic in 1397. It was the only Bridgetine institution to be founded in Tuscany and the third anywhere outside Sweden[30]. Therefore, we can understand that the cult of the saint in Florence was actively promoted by the circle of Domenican Observants and, in particular, by their leader Giovanni Dominici, who was personally involved in the institutional organization of the Paradiso[31]. A direct proof of the importance of the reception of St. Bridget's thought in the Florentine devotional tradition are also Dominici's *laude*, which repeat certain iconographic motives known from the *Revelations*. In Dominici's Nativity *lauda*, for example, one can find the motive of

[28] Ibidem.

[29] The manuscript of *Libro dei Laudi* is preserved in Biblioteca comunale di Rieti (Mss., G. III.3). The only published part is the one regarding St. Francis in M. Faloci Pulignani, *Lauda di san Francesco composta da ser Cristofano di Gano G. da Siena*, "Miscellanea francescana", 4/1889, pp. 129-132.

[30] N. B. Debby, *Saint Birgitta of Sweden in Florentine Art*, in *The Birgittine Experience. Papers from the Birgitta Conference in Stockholm 2011*, ed. M. Åkestam, R. Anderson, C. Gejrot, Stockholm, 2013, pp. 171, 185-186.

[31] Ivi, p. 181.

the painless birth of the Child, known from and popularized by Bridget's vision of the nativity[32].

In fact, parallel to their circulation, Bridget's visions became inspirations for the iconography of certain Christological scenes, such as the nativity[33]. This direct reception of Bridget's prophecies and the transformation of the text into an image was facilitated by the style of her writings and by the wide use of *ekphrasis*, which allowed the reader to visualize the described action in the mind. During the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries *ekphrasis* became a particularly popular feature of religious and devotional literature. A pious Florentine would come across it not only while reading St. Bridget's *Revelations* or *Meditationes Vitae Christi*. In fact, the rhetorical force of *ekphrasis* and its classical pedigree stretching back to the most famous treatises on the *ars memorativa*, such as *Rhetorica at Herennium*, made of it a powerful tool in the hands of the late medieval preachers. San Bernardino di Siena, whose sermons always attracted large crowds of listeners, and who influenced the *ars praedicandi* for years to come, became one of the most creative interpreters of the visual qualities of language. Bernardino's sermons provide a better understanding of the visual *imaginatio* of fifteenth-century Florentine devotion.

San Bernardino's preaching was conceived for a vast public who filled Franciscan churches or public squares. As contemporary eyewitness accounts recount, his style was interpreted by the listeners as a novelty, and it became a model for the following generations of preachers. In 1460 in Padua Giacomo della Marca praised Bernardino for "diversi e molti belli gesti e modi" and claimed that "Se mai doppo niuno ha voluto ben predicare ha tolto lo stillo, la forma, de questo glorioxo santo[34]".

Bernardino, however, was not a true reformer of the *ars praedicandi* but rather a skilful reformer of the *sermo modernus*, codified already in the course of

[32] Ivi, p. 183; B. Bruni, *Il Beato Giovanni Dominici autore delle più belle laude del Quattrocento*, "Memorie Domenicane" 19/1956, pp. 17-24: "Dì, Maria dolce, con quanto disìo / Miravi il tuo figliuol, Cristo mio Dio / Quando tu il partoristi senza pena / La prima cosa, credo, che facesti / Tu l'adorasti, o di grazia piena […]."

[33] N. B. Debby, *The Images of Saint Birgitta of Sweden in Santa Maria Novella in Florence*, "Renaissance Studies", 26/2004, pp. 509-518; Idem, *Saint Birgitta of Sweden in Florentine Art*, op. cit., pp. 170-189.

[34] C. Delcorno, *Due prediche volgari di Iacopo della Marca recitate a Padova nel 1460*, "Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti", Anno accademico 1969-1970, vol. 128, Classe di scienze morali, lettere ed arti, Venezia, 1970, pp. 178-180.

the thirteenth century[35]. One of the seminal features of the monk's preachings was, in fact, his particular sensibility towards the performative qualities of language and the use of rhetoric aimed at the creation of vivid mental images in his listeners' minds. Moreover, Bernardino's innovation consisted in a significant simplification of the sermons' compositional models. The medieval repertory of possible schemes for sermon writers was contained in the manuals of the *ars praedicandi*, which became the starting point for the activity of the Sienese preacher. Bernardino, however, did not use the collections' most complex rhetorical devices. He repeatedly used the compositional scheme constructed around an introductory verse divided into three parts. The three parts of the verse introduced the three sections into which the sermon was further divided[36]. This basic composition fitted particularly well with the mnemonic models of the *ars memorativa*. Thanks to the consecutive divisions of the speech, Bernardino could build multiple images in the minds of his listeners, organizing their knowledge and memory, the *lignum vitae*, the cherub or the circle of fortune[37].

Bernardino's visual sensibility, and a frequent recurrence in his preaching of concrete images taken from the everyday life of his listeners depended also on the saint's interest in problematics related to the moral issues of common experience. Subjects such as marital ethics, female behaviour, the place of women in society and in the family, the education of youths, the ethics of trade and business or the question of the personal relation with the divine, were all placed at the centre of Bernardino's teaching, which constituted a significant novelty in the panorama of fifteenth-century sermon writing. In this way, known in the early years of his career as a skilful exegete of St. John's *Apocalypse*, in the later period Bernardino distanced himself from the visionary and prophetic currents of fifteenth-century devotion. Even if he never completely abandoned the references to the language and the symbols of the *Apocalypse*[38], he gradually introduced into his sermons the subjects that directly concerned his public. The rapprochement between the preacher and his listeners was reinforced by the

[35] C. Delcorno, *Introduzione* in Bernardino da Siena, *Prediche volgari sul Campo di Siena 1427*, ed. C. Delcorno, vol. 1, Milano, 1989, p. 23.
[36] Ivi, pp. 25-26.
[37] L. Bolzoni, *The Web of Images*, op. cit., pp. 124-135, 152-166.
[38] C. Delcorno, *Introduzione*, op. cit., p. 25.

direct and plastic language of Bernardino's speeches. Thus, Bernardino's sermons often included elements of theatrical performance. His words were accompanied by facial grimaces and gestures, recalling the behaviour of the public. We can quote multiple examples that attest to Bernardino's attention to the visual aspects of his performances, such as his comment on the refusal of the position of the bishop of Siena, offered to him in 1427.

> S'io ci fussi venuto come voi volavate ch'io venisse, cioè per vostro vescovo, elli mi sarebbe stata serrata la metà della bocca. Vedi, così; così sarei stato, che non arei potuto parlare se non colla bocca chiusa.[39]

The words were followed by an image – the grimace of a "taped" mouth.

Bernardino's repeated use of the multiple visual schemes known from the *ars memorativa*, or to the paintings well known among the members of his public, which were carefully studied by Lina Bolzoni[40], testify to the importance of mental images in the communicative practices of the period. Bolzoni's analysis, however, does not exhaust the topic completely, as it pays little attention to fragments of Bernardino's sermons in which one finds vivid images of contemporary life, given as *exempla* and exciting the listeners' imaginations. An example of this kind can be found in the sermon on the disdain of this world from the cycle delivered in Florence during Holy Week in 1425.

> Ma per farvi capire tutti e quattro questi prati, è necessario dare un nome a uno di voi cui faccio la spiegazione e che egli mi risponda. Poniamo che egli abbia nome Gioioso? Ma sì! Gioioso mio, andiamocene sul monte Morello. Non ti rincresca, perché lassù io ti voglio mostrare che si vede fino alla Marina e a Firenze e alter terre e parecchie alter belle cose. Or dunque andiamo, eccoci sul monte. Ora, comincia a guardare Firenze. La vedi tu? Sì? Bene.
>
> Il primo prato fiorito. Che cosa vedi? Vedo una casa bella, nobile, d'un grande cittadino ricco di averi e di grande

[39] Bernardino da Siena, *Prediche volgari*, op. cit., p. 525.
[40] L. Bolzoni, *The Web of Images*, op.cit..

> posizione. È un grande mercante. La casa è tutta piena di roba e di mercanzia. Che altro vi vedi? Vi vedo una bella donna, con molti bei figlioli che paiono le canne dell'organo di S. Croce, e famigli, fantesche, schiave, servitori, molte faccende, lettere da ogni parte, faccende di ogni rispetto. E c'è un periodo buono. I granai sono pieni e così le dispense, e ha gran numero di armenti tra il bestiame. La casa è a punto, senza che gli manchi nulla, pulita, dipinta ed ornata, con belle camere, eccetera. Gioioso mio, che dice il mondo di quest'uomo? Dice che è beato chi possiede queste cose. Ora sta a vedere. Che vedi? Vedo la morte che vi si è attaccata; vedo morire il figlio maggiore. Che vedi d'altro? Vedo i figli morire tutti, vedo lui malato, vedo che la roba comincia ad essere rubata. Che non lo sai? Lo vedo morto, la roba tutta sbaragliata, i fattori che amministrano male, la moglie che se ne esce di senno e a chi deve dare dice che deve avere e ogni cosa va in fumo. Ora vedi la beatitudine del mondo com'è?[41]

Bernardino introduced this detailed description of the house of a wealthy Florentine merchant into the double frame of the sermon. The preacher built up the first frame upon a verse from the Psalm 89 and identified four meadows to which a person seduced by the material world might be compared: the meadow of greatness, the meadow of enjoyment, the meadow of delight and the meadow of satiety. Subsequently, to explain the meaning of these four meadows, Bernardino introduced the device of a dialogue with one of his listeners, a certain Gioioso. He framed the conversation with an image of the two of them overlooking Florence from the Monte Morello. The motif of a mountain returns with a certain frequency in other sermons. In the preaching analysed above, it became a starting point for a virtual tour of a rich merchant's residency. Gioioso looks into the house, notices all the richness and wealth of the family, but he soon realizes that the material goods do not protect the merchant from distress and misfortunes. He sees the death of the merchant's son, then his own illness and, finally, the loss of all his wealth. After witnessing the unhappy end of the

[41] Bernardino da Siena, *Il disprezzo di questo mondo*, in Idem, *Prediche della settimana santa: Firenze 1425*, ed. M. Bartoli, Milano, 1995, pp. 129-130.

merchant's prosperity, Gioioso continues his tour. He sees the merchant's ship destroyed by a storm. Then, he observes a group of tradesmen robbed during their business travel and, finally, he gives his last inquisitive glance into another wealthy Florentine household to see an argument between a rich husband and his wife. The dialogic form of the text and the displacement of its protagonist in space, together with the detailed style of the descriptions, make the sermon a particularly interesting text. It further corroborates the interweavement of the techniques of the art of memory with the devotional texts and the practice of the spiritual meditation. The text shows many similarities with the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, and the visions of St. Bridget, analysed before. All three examples refer to a narrative scheme that sharply marks the temporal sequence of events. First, then, afterwards – the adverbs organize the scene and lead the listener's imagination through the event. San Bernardino, moreover, directly refers to the visual experience: "Che cosa vedi?", "Che vedi?", "Ora vedi la beatitudine del mondo com'è!". The verb "to see" is used by the preacher with reference to his listeners' imagination. To see meant to imagine, to form a mental image of the described situation in one's imagination. "To see", however, meant also "to understand": "Now you see/understand, what the bliss of this world is". Again, the sermon corroborates the importance of the sense of sight for the contemporary understanding of the cognitive processes.

The examples analysed above attest to the high esteem accorded to visual experience in fourteenth- and fifteenth- century devotional texts, and evidence the regular recurrence of powerful descriptive techniques to stimulate the formation of mental images in the reader's or listener's imagination. These images were characterized by high plasticity and attention to detail. Formed during a prayer or a meditation, the mental images developed over time, "happened" in front of the mind's eye of the faithful listener or reader. Furthermore, the didactic benefits of mental images resulted in the great proliferation of devotional writings that appealed to the mnemonic properties of the imagination. In this way, the didactic quality of the internalized visual experience became important for the development of religious drama, which from the late fourteenth century occupied

an important place during the religious festivities of the Italian city-states[42]. Feo Belcari, a prominent composer of texts for religious spectacles, in the opening of the *Rappresentazione di Abramo and Isaak*, staged in the church of Cestello in 1449 and dedicated to Giovanni de' Medici (Cosimo il Vecchio's son), confirmed the mnemonic and devotional value of the sensorial (visual and auditory) experience of the spectacle.

> L'occhio si dice ch'è la prima porta
> per la qual l'intelletto intende e gusta:
> la seconda è l'udir con voce scorta,
> che fa la mente nostra essere robusta:
> però vedrete ed udirete in sorta
> recitare una storia santa e giusta;
> ma se volete intender tal Misterio
> state divoti e con buon desiderio.[43]

In the introduction, Belcari stresses the fact that the spectacle would make the "holy and right story" perceptible for the senses, namely, sight and hearing. These two faculties represent the first two "gates" of the human mind. The text suggests that sensorial cognition remains indispensable for the understanding of sacred stories, but it constitutes only the first stage of the pious practice of watching a *sacra rappresentazione*. In fact, in order to understand in depth the mystery represented on the stage, the attention of the viewers has to be followed by the desire (*desiderio*) and their contemplative attitude (*stare divoti*). Thus, what Belcari recalls here is the same cognitive scheme used in private devotional practices, such as the meditation on Christ's Passion. In the case of the spectacle, the stage offers the visual stimulus that in private meditation is provided by the verbal description of the holy stories. Here, just as during a prayer, the sensorial impressions received by the viewer have to be then contemplated and piously reflected upon. As already discussed above, the practices of meditation based on the contemplation of verbal descriptions of holy events

[42] P. Ventrone, *Lo Spettacolo religioso a Firenze nel Quattrocento*, Milano, 2008, pp. 83-85.
[43] F. Belcari, *La rappresentazione di Abramo ed Isaac*, in *Sacre Rappresentazioni del Quattrocento*, ed. L. Banfi, Torino, 1968, p. 41.

depended extensively on the schemes known from the *ars memorativa*. Thus, through the mediation of private devotional practices, the art of memory constitutes an indirect pattern for the religious spectacle of the period. The theatrical performances visualized the biblical narratives in a scenically rich form, often introducing elements of marvel, such as the fire-works or complex scenic machines. Thus, they represented an efficient tool capable of exerting strong visual impact on the spectators' minds. Moreover, every spectacle functioned as a re-enactment of a biblical story and in this way conveyed a strong sense of immediacy. It made the holy events present for the public, and distorted the temporal distance between the spectators and the representation. Finally, the perception of each spectacle was marked by the spectator's emotions, wonder, fear, joy or astonishment, which further reinforced the final effect of the performance. These aspects of theatrical representations made the *sacra rappresentazione* an important didactic tool, as they efficiently helped the viewers to memorize the biblical narratives staged during the festivities. Nevertheless, as Belcari emphasises, participation in spectacles had a devotional dimension too, and the sensorial perception of the narratives was supposed to stimulate a deeper meditation on the theological truths conveyed by them. In this way, religious spectacle constitutes yet another devotional practice of the period highly dependant on the internalized visual experience, which served the contemplation of sacred events.

Religious spectacle and the city

The functions of religious drama in fifteenth-century Florence were, however, not limited to its devotional and didactic values. Spectacle partook in the ritual dimension of civic life, and, in this way, got involved in the dialogue between the citizens and their governors, and between the community and their heavenly protectors. Religious spectacles were included into the celebrations of the most important religious and civic festivities. This is how the spectacle became constitutive of the discourse of power, and fell under the influence of the group that dominated Florentine ritual over the course of the century. In fact, it is not surprising that religious drama flourished under Medicean rule. From the time of

Cosimo il Vecchio, the spectacles started to express not only the devotion of the city, but also the rulers' dominancy over the Florentine *sacra*. Heavenly and terrestrial authority seemed to work together for the community's prosperity and security.

The civic ritual of fifteenth-century Florence consisted of ceremonies and festivities in continuous evolution, aimed at the protection, reinforcement and honouring of the community. Religious dramas, staged during the main feasts on the city streets and in its main churches, were an important expression of Florentine self-identity and its relationship with the sphere of the sacred. Moreover, ritual represented domination over the *contado*, and reflected the dynamics and the changeable balance between different factions and groups of citizens.

From the beginnings of the fifteenth century religious drama started to occupy the urban spaces of Florence as it began to be included into the celebrations of the main festivities of the town: St. John the Baptist's day, Epiphany, Annunciation, Ascension and Pentecost. Because of their ephemeral character, lack of a stable structure where the spectacles were staged, and their strong dependence on the religious festivities, it is not possible to talk about a religious "theatre" in fifteenth-century Florence. Terms like "spectacle", "drama", and "performance" are more suitable for the description of these performative activities. Nevertheless, with the passing of time, the spectacles acquired many characteristics of the modern theatre. They were organized by the confraternities, which focused their activity on the production of plays for the religious festivities. The performances followed a script, which was sometimes written by a professional poet. They were meant for a public, which gathered on the occasion in the churches or in the city squares where the stage and the space for the public were clearly divided. Therefore, the spectacles' production of the period carried some theatrical features, while the history of the religious performance is not completely separated from the development of theatre in Renaissance Italy[44].

[44] On the relationship between the religious spectacle in fifteenth-century Florence and the rebirth of the classical theatre, see P. Ventrone, *Lo spettacolo religioso*, op. cit.; Idem, *Gli araldi della commedia. Teatro a Firenze nel Rinascimento*, Ospedaletto, 1993.

The first records of the theatrical nature of Florentine ritual come from the 1390s. The earliest is the description of the Magi pageant, which passed through the city on 6th January 1389 [1390 *stile moderno*]:

> A dì vi di gennaio si fe' in Firenze una solenne e magnia festa alla chiesa de' frati di santo Marco de' santi Magi e della stella. I Magi andorono per tutta la città molto orevolemente vestiti et con cavagli et co' molte novità. I' re Rode istette a santo Giovanni i' su 'n uno palco molto bene adornato con sua gente. E passando da santo Giovanni, salirono i' su palco dov'era Erode e quivi disputorono del fanciullo che andavano ad adorare – e promettendo di tornare a Erode. E fatta l'offerta i Magi al bambino, e non tornando ad Erode, Erode gli perseguitò e fe' uccidere molti fanciulli contrafatti in braccio alle madri e balie. Et con questo finì la sera la festa ale 23 ore[45].

Already in 1390, therefore, the Epiphany was celebrated with a procession of the Magi and with a representation of the slaughter of the innocents staged in front of the Baptistery. This early source suggests a certain amount of concreteness in the representation of the babies killed on Herod's order with the use of dolls, or "fake children".

The second testimony is the description of the Ascension spectacle in the Carmine, included by Franco Sacchetti into one of his *novelle*:

> Questo frate tenea opinione che quando il nostro Signore andò in cielo che n'andasse così veloce e ratto come avete udito. Uno mio amico veggendo il dì dell'Ascensione all'ordine de' frati del Carmine di Firenze, che ne faceano festa, il nostro Signore su per una corda andare in su verso il tetto, e andando molto adagio, dicendo uno:
>
> - E' va sì adagio che non giungnerà oggi al tetto.
>
> E quel disse:

[45] *Diario d'anonimo dal 1381 al 1401*, BNCF, Panciatichi 158, f. 157v, 6 gennaio 1389 [1390 stile moderno], ed. R. Hatfield, *The Compagnia de' Magi*, "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", 33/1970, pp. 144; *Nuovo corpus di sacre rappresentazioni fiorentine del Quattrocento*, ed. N. Newbigin, Bologna, 1983, p. 185.

- Se non andò più ratto, egli è ancor tra via[46].

The source is important not only because of its early date, that is around 1390s, but also because it mentions the hoisting machinery, which would be characteristic for all three Feste d'Oltrarno, namely the Ascension, the Annunciation and the Pentecost.

The Florentine festivities were organized by the respective confraternities: Compagnia de' Magi in San Marco, Compagnia della Nunziata in San Felice in Piazza, Compagnia di Sant'Agnese in the Carmine church, and Compagnia dello Spirito Santo e delle Laude, called del Piccione, in Santo Spirito. During the fifteenth century the theatrical activity of the city prospered significantly, which is demonstrated not only by an increased number of accounts of the spectacles, but also by a significant rise in the citizens' involvement in the life of the confraternities, which were responsible for the organization of the festivals. The number of Florentine confraternities active between 1250 and 1449 could be indicative here: between 1250 and 1349 forty-five of them can be traced. In the following century, between 1350 and 1449 this number rose to sixty[47]. Abundant archival documentation concerning the activity of the confraternities directly involved in the production of the religious plays made possible a reconstruction of the development of the performances during the century[48]. The performances owed their success to the emotional impact on the public and the engagement of the spectators with the stories. This effect was obtained by the recurrent actualizations of the narratives and by the introduction to the spectacles of the element of marvel, thanks to the use of complex staging machinery, as in the case of the spectacles in the Oltrarno churches.

The *Feste d'Oltrarno* shared, in fact, a similar staging schema. The documents related to their organization show a gradual development of the staging machinery from a more simple to a more complex one, achieved between the 1420s and the end of the century. The Oltrarno spectacles included the Annunciation, staged in San Felice in Piazza on 25th March, the Ascension in Santa

[46] F. Sacchetti, *Novella LXXII*, in Idem, *Il trecentonovelle*, ed. E. Faccioli, Torino, 1970, pp. 186-188.
[47] J. Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence*, Oxford, 1994, p. 39.
[48] N. Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno. Plays in Churches in Fifteenth-century Florence*, 2 vols, Firenze, 1996.

Maria del Carmine forty days after the Resurrection, and the Pentecost in Santo Spirito church ten days after that. These three spectacles formed the core of the religious performances in Florence. The staging machineries for all three performances consisted of wooden structures moved by different ropes and cogwheels, which allowed the actors playing the parts of the angels and Jesus to move between the levels of the stage that represented heaven (suspended under the roof) and earth (located on the rood screen). With the use of the hoisting system the Archangel Gabriel came down from the heavens to annunciate God's will to the Virgin Mary. During the Ascension spectacle, instead, a similar system was used to hoist Jesus to the heavens, while during the Pentecost performance it served the Holy Spirit to descend on the disciples.

It seems that a great impulse for the development of the staging devices used during the spectacles was the Council of Florence in 1439. Paola Ventrone hypothesized a direct Medicean involvement in the organization of the performances staged for the participants of the assembly. According to Ventrone, the rulers' commitment would result in the construction of a new staging machinery by Brunelleschi himself, and in the staging of a text deriving from Feo Belcari's *Rappresentazione della Annunciazione*[49]. Furthermore, these modifications would be aimed at the dissemination of the unionist ideas, promoted by the Council[50]. Ventrone based her interpretation on a new study of the manuscripts containing the most comprehensive description of the Annunciation and the Ascension spectacles, namely the report of Abraham of Suzdal, who attended these two performances as a participant of the council. The scholar claims that the celebrations related to the Council took place neither in the San Felice in Piazza, nor in the Santissima Annunziata as had been understood in previous readings of the source, but in St. Mark's church[51]. The location would further corroborate Cosimo's financial and political involvement in the council, which served the reinforcement of his domination over the town. The spatial

[49] *Il luogo teatrale a Firenze. Brunelleschi, Vasari, Buontalenti, Parigi*, ed. M. Fabbri, E. Garbero Zorzi, A. M. Petrioli Tofani, Milano, 1975, p. 57, note 1.8.

[50] P. Ventrone, *La propaganda unionista negli spettacoli fiorentini per il concilio del 1439*, in *La stella e la porpora. Il corteo di Benozzo e l'enigma del Virgilio Riccardiano. Atti del convegno di studi*, ed. G. Lazzi, G. Wolf, Firenze, 2009, pp. 44-47.

[51] Ivi, on the location in Santissima Annunziata see also N. Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno*, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 7-9; *Il luogo teatrale a Firenze*, op. cit., pp. 55-57.

organization of both, the Annunciation and the Ascension spectacles would take up the previous schemes known from the Oltrarno churches, with the *tramezzo* used as the stage and the *cielo* suspended under the roof with the mobile circles of lights surrounding the heavens. What seems to differ between the usual staging of the Annunciation in the Oltrarno and the performance on the occasion of the council was the localisation of the heaven not above the *tramezzo*, but above the entrance door. In this way the creators of stage design could take advantage of the longitude of the main nave, and the final effect of marvel produced by the drama would be stronger. The spectacle would start on the *tramezzo*, with the scene of the prophets and the Sibyls announcing the arrival of the Saviour. Then, the heavens were lit up and the Archangel Gabriel, passing above the spectators' heads, would fly from God the Father to the Virgin's room on the *tramezzo*. After the dialogue between the two the angel went back to the heavens and the Holy Spirit, represented as a glow of fire, would fall on the Virgin[52].

Abraham wrote as follows:

> In questo luogo in alto è allestito un trono, e sul trono siede un uomo maestoso, adornato da una corona. Si vede del tutto la somiglianza del Padre, e nella mano sinistra tiene il Vangelo. E attorno a lui, e accanto ai suoi piedi, [c'è] una moltitudine di bambini piccoli: si reggono in modo ingegnoso come immagine delle forze celesti. Attorno a quel trono e fra quei fanciulli, intorno al Padre, stanno più di trecento lumini, e questo loro ingegno è meraviglioso assai. E tutto questo ingegno sta sotto cortine[53].

[52] P. Ventrone, *La propaganda unionista*, op. cit., pp. 35-41.

[53] As the critical edition of the source has not been published yet, I quote here the fragments used by Ventrone in Idem, *La propaganda unionista*, op. cit., p. 35. The translation of the source is based on the scholar's latest study of the manuscripts and remains today the most accurate version of this precious account. The critical history of the sources seems complex. It was first published by Alexander Wesselofsky in the Parisian "Russische Revue" in 1887. Subsequently, Alessandro D'Ancona included the first Italian translation of Abraham's account into the second edition of his *Origini del Teatro Italiano*. The Russian manuscripts have been studied by Kazakova, who offered a complete census of the manuscripts in 1979. Ventrone's recent Italian translation would be based on a new analysis of these manuscripts, however it has not been entirely published yet, and it is not certain if the publication would contain the critical edition of the source in the language of its composition, or only its full Italian translation. See: A. Popov, *Starejšisja polemičeskaja russkija sočinenija vjzvannyia florentijskim soborom*, in *Istorico-literaturnyi obzor drevne-russkich polemičeskich sočinenij protiv Latinjan (XI-XV vv.)*, Moskva, 1875, pp. 399-406; N. S. Tikhonravov, *Novyi otryvok iz putevych zapisok Suzdal'skago Episkopa Avraamija (1439)*, "Vestink obščestva drevne-russkago

According to the account of a foreign guest, marvel and wonder were important components of the visual effect produced by the spectacle. The bishop underlined a close resemblance between the represented figures and what they stood for. Therefore, it seems that the public did not have difficulties in grasping the actual and concrete character of the representations. The performances, in fact, put on stage the events related to the most profound mysteries of the faith. Thanks to the spectacles, these theologically complex narrations were visualized in a form that represented the interventions of the heavens, the hierophanies, in the everyday context of a contemporary spectator. The angel, represented by an actor, truly appeared to descend from the heavens and talked to the Virgin, who sat in her humble room. The body of the actor offered a material dimension to the angelic being. The use of the hoisting machinery removed all the metaphoric meaning of Gabriel's visit to the Virgin, and allowed a concrete and physically tangible representation of the angel's displacement between heaven and Mary's dwelling. If we trust Abraham's account, the dialogue between the two was characterized by everyday register of the speech.

> Vattene, garzone, che non ti veda Giuseppe nella mia capanna a parlare con me, o ti taglierà la testa con l'ascia; e, ti prego, vattene presto, altrimenti caccerà anche me da casa sua[54].

In some way, the mystery of the annunciation lost its metaphorical and spiritual dimension, and was showed to the public as an apparently historical event that had happened in the biblical past.

The Ascension spectacle, usually staged in the Carmine and organized by the Compagnia di Sant'Agnese, was based on a spatial scheme similar to the

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iskusstva pri Moskovskom publicnom mezee", 3, 11-12/1876, pp. 37-42; A. Wesselofsky, *Italienische Mysterien in einem russischen Reisebericht des XV. Jahrhunderts: Brief an Herrn Prof. D'Ancona*, "Russische Revue", 10/1877, pp. 425-441; A. D'Ancona, *Origini del teatro italiano. Libri tre con due appendici sulla rappresentazione drammatica nel contado toscano e sul teatro mantovano nel sec. XVI*, vol. 1, Torino, 1891, pp. 246-250; N. A. Kazankova, *«Iskohoždenie» Avraamija Suzdalàskogo. (Spiski i redakcii)*, "Trudy otdela Drevnerusskoj literatury", 33/1979, pp. 55-66; Idem, *Zapadnaia Evropa v russkoi pos'mennosti XV-XVI vekov (iz istorii mezhdunarodnyckh kul'turnykh sviazei Rossii)*, Leningrad, 1980, pp. 55-63; N. Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno*, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 2-7; P. Ventrone, *Lo spettacolo religioso*, op. cit., pp. 110-114, 124-127.

[54] P. Ventrone, *Lo spettacolo religioso*, op. cit., pp. 121-122.

staging of the Annunciation, with the mountain built on the *tramezzo*, and the heavens receiving Jesus above it. The machinery used for the spectacle underwent profound modifications between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. One finds the description of the version from the 1430s in the account of Abraham of Suzdal, while Vasari's account, in the second edition of the *Vite*, where the staging *ingegno* was attributed to Il Cecca, illustrates in all likelihood the hoisting apparatus devised by the architect himself for the spectacles staged in 1566[55]. Already in its fifteenth-century version, the performance represented the Apostles, the Virgin and Mary Magdalene walking along the *tramezzo* from the *Castello*, representing Jerusalem, towards the Mount of Olives, shown in the form a wooden structure covered with the textiles, called the *Monte*. At the foot of the mountain, Christ gave the Apostles his farewell and stepped into an iron frame, which hoisted him into the heavens. Abraham of Suzdal's account and the records of the Compagnia di Sant'Agnese confirm that the scenic devices included two heavens. The first one was above the *monte*. It was a wooden cube, all painted, and closed at the beginning of the spectacle by a curtain made of the fabric stretched on the wooden frames, so-called *vele*. Just before the ascension, the heaven opened and the public could see, to their great surprise, God the Father blessing them from the Paradise. The effect of marvel was strengthened by the children representing angels, playing musical instruments, surrounded by little lights and other painted angels, who stood around the heavens. During Christ's ascension, a *nugola* descended from the *paradiso*. It was a round frame with concentric disks disposed at the rear of a supporting iron platform. On both sides of the *nugola* there were two pedestals for two living angels. Christ, after being lifted by the ropes half way through, reached the *nugola*, which brought him into the heavens. The second heaven was constructed above the main altar, under the roof of the church. It also consisted of a cube, closed by a painted textile door, which opened after the Ascension and revealed God the Father with Jesus on his lap. Around God the Father stood the children representing the cherubs and the

[55] A. Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds, 1439-1650. Italian Art and Theatre*, Farnham, 2014, pp. 32-48.

seraphs, and inside there was an ingenious construction of seven luminous circles turning around[56].

The marvellous lighting effects and the impressive hoisting machinery of Oltrarno festivities were similar to the scenic organization of the Pentecost festivity, celebrated from at least 1427 in Santo Spirito[57]. It also included a *Castello*, representing Jerusalem, where the Apostles and the Virgin gathered and were touched by the Spirit. God the Father sat above them, in the heavens, surrounded by angels and shining lights. The Holy Spirit fell from Paradise on the Apostles in the form of the rain of fire, as Richa described it:

> In mezzo alla Chiesa sopra del coro, o sia ponte, vedevasi raccomandato al tetto un cielo pieno di angioli, i quali regolatamente moveansi, ed infinita era la copia de' lumi, che parevano stelle, le quali in un baleno ora scoprivansi, ed ora si ricoprivano: gl'angioli erano fanciulli vivi d'età circa 12 anni, legati e cinti in guisa ed assicurati su certe basi, e non ostante il veloce moto, non avrebbero potuto, ancor volendo, cascare; i medesimi, oltre il moversi, si pigliavano quando era tempo l'un l'altro per mano, e dimenando le braccia pareva che ballassero mediante il girare di una mezza palla dentro la quale erano tre ghirlande di lucerne che non potevano versare, ed intorno intorno certe nuvole fatte ingegnosamente di bambagia che fingevano Nuvole, sopra delle quali nella maggiore altezza eravi l'Eterno Padre, e da un lato Cristo, circondati ambedue da angioli, che erano parimenti putti di otto anni; nel mezzo spandeva le ali una bianchissima e luminosa colomba simboleggiante il Divino Spirito, che mandava una pioggia di fuoco in maniera che il Padre Eterno, Cristo, lo Spirito Santo, gli angioli, gl'infiniti lumi e le dolcissime musiche rappresentavano il vero Paradiso, al che aggiungevasi disotto un cenacolo[58], o sivvero una sala illuminata dalle lingue di

[56] Ivi, pp. 30-39; N. Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno*, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 60-63; P. Ventrone, *Lo spettacolo religioso*, op. cit., pp. 90-92.
[57] N. Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno*, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 157-159.
[58] Newbigin, on the basis of her analysis of the structure of the old church, claims, that the Castello was not located on the *tramezzo*, which did not exist in the church, but was attached to the wall above the altar of San Giovanni delle Donne. See N. Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno*, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 162-163.

> fuoco rilucenti sopra il capo degli apostoli che sedevano con la madre di Dio, e facienti le più naturali attitudini che spesso ancora variavansi, e finalmente nel più basso, sopra d'un palco, da bravi attori si recitava la festa[59].

Richa's description is a late source, based on Vasari's account as well as on documents inaccessible today. From the account, however, we can deduce the importance of the visual effect, which appeared to the public to be similar to a dance. The motion of the actors imparted by the scenic machinery suggested the playful movements of the angels dancing in the heavens, surrounded by celestial lights. In fact, from Richa's report we can deduce the particular importance and relevance of the lighting effects and fireworks for the spectacle. They constituted the distinctive mark of the performance and provided the public with a strong visual experience, the impression of wonder and astonishment. Unfortunately, the same fireworks caused an accident in 1471 when the *festa* ended in a devastating fire which completely destroyed the old church.

The *feste d'Oltrarno* were only one part of a greater performative tradition in the city. Already at the end of the fourteenth century religious drama started to occupy the public space of Florence. The *Festa dei Magi* and the feast day of St. John the Baptist quickly became the central events in the Florentine ritual calendar. If the three spectacles described above used ingenious staging machinery and surprising lighting effects in order to impress the public and to imprint the narrated stories in the spectators' minds, the performance on 6th January turned the space of the city into the stage itself.

Richard Trexler hypothesized that the festivity in honour of the Magi originated from the patronage of Baldassare degli Ubriachi during the second half of the fourteenth century and from the influence of the analogue celebrations in Milan[60]. The central element of the early version of the performance was the parade of the Magi from San Marco church to the Baptistery, where Herod's palace was located. The exotic character of the Magi's embassy and the royal connotations of the protagonists of the *festa* contributed to the successful

[59] G. Richa, *Notizie istoriche delle chiese fiorentine*, vol. 9, Firenze 1754-1762, pp. 15-16.
[60] R. C. Trexler, *The Magi Enter Florence. The Ubriachi of Florence and Venice*, "Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History", 1/1978, pp. 127-218.

establishment of the celebrations in the Florentine calendar. Already in the late 1420s, the *Festa dei Magi* and the respective confraternity fell under Medicean protection, which on the one hand granted the financial stability of the feast, seminal for a regular organization of the spectacle, and on the other made the feast one of the expressions of Medicean domination over Florentine ritual. The spatial organization of both the parade and the spectacle changed during the course of the century. The initial schema was altered in 1428, when the parade was protracted until the Piazza della Signoria and passed in front of the Medici's private palace on the Via Larga and ended at the Baptistery[61]. After the return of Cosimo il Vecchio to Florence in 1434 the Medicean influence on the confraternity and on the feast would become ever stronger. Fra Giovanni di Carlo's description of the parade from 1468 or 1469[62] demonstrates the particular attention given to the celebrations by Piero di Cosimo. The account of the Dominican theologian proves a significant increase of the dramatic burden of the feast and a particular inclusion of the city space into the performance. The spectacle transformed the very nature of Florence, which suddenly seemed to become Jerusalem. For the purposes of the feast, the city was divided into four parts, which probably corresponded to the four districts. In three of them the Magi's tents were located, in the fourth was the palace of Herod. The palace was located in Piazza San Marco, which was the centre of Medicean patronage. It was really a sumptuous construction with Herod's throne room and three other chambers behind it, all richly decorated with gold cloths and carpentry. Inside, there were the continuous comings and goings of the king's servants, ministers and courtiers, and a similar movement was seen all around the Magi's camps.

> For, like those who lingered in that place, you would have perceived horses, warriors, and a hardly contemptible throng of servants around the tents, as well as all the provisions; enormous numbers of pack horses and mules moved about carrying caskets and cages and much baggage[63].

[61] P. Ventrone, *Lo Spettacolo religioso*, op. cit., pp. 76-78.
[62] R. Hatfield, *The Compagnia de' Magi*, op. cit., p. 117, P. Ventrone, *Lo Spettacolo religioso*, op. cit., p. 80.
[63] Fra Giovanni di Carlo, *Libri de temporibus suis* [1480-1482], Rome, Biblioteca Vaticana,Vat. lat. 5878, f. 73v. Edited and translated in fragments by R. Hatfield, *The Compagnia de'Magi*, op. cit., pp. 116, 148-151. "Nam veluti qui in eo quievissent loco, equos, armigeros, famulorumque haud

The extended description of the richness of Herod's palace offers an attempt at a faithful representation of a sumptuous royal residence. The spectacle itself started with an assembly in Piazza della Signoria. Fra Giovanni in his report stressed the remarkable resemblance between the actors and the represented characters.

> Gradually they had announced to one another the hour at which all must convene at the public buildings, as if to visit the highest magistracy - not indeed for themselves, since that would seem insulting to the royal majesty, but for the legates they had elected to send to Herod. Thus, as the appointed time arrived, all involved convened in the square of the city. They had represented as well all the optimates and leaders of the city, as if Herod had sent these in the capacity of legates in order that they might escort (the embassy of the Magi) to the king; *the conformity of which representation of the citizens to real citizens was so great that it hardly would seem believable. For they had so carved their faces and countenances in masks that they might scarcely be distinguishable from the real. And their very sons had put on their clothes, which they then used, and they had learned all of their gestures, copying each and every one of their actions and habits in an admirable way.* It was truly lovely for the real citizens who had convened at the public buildings to look upon their very selves feigned, with as much beauty and processional pomp as the regal magnificence and the most ample senate of the city, which they would proudly conduct before them[64].

contempnandum manum, circum temptoria perspexisses, preterea conmeatum omnem; equi permulti ac mulj devehebant, archulas et sarcinas et multa inpedimenta ferentes."

[64] Fra Giovanni di Carlo, *Libri de temporibus suis*, op. cit., f. 74r. Transl. R. Hatfield, *The Compania de' Magi*, op. cit., p. 116: "Jgitur ut primum indictum tempus advenit, frequentes omnes ad plateam civitatis conveniunt. Confinxerant autem optimates omnes ac civitatis primarios, quasi hos pro legatorum honore misisset Herodes, qui eos ad regem perducerent; *cuius quidem civium expressionis tanta fuit civibus veris conformitas, ut vix credibile videretur. Namque eorum facies vultusque larvis ita exculpserant, ut paulominusa veris djstarent. Siquidem eorum vestimenta, ipsimet filij sumpserant, quibus tunc utebantur, eorumque gestus omnes didicerant, singulos eorum actus et modos miro modo fingentes.* Pulchrum vero erat veros cives, qui ad publicas edes confluxerant, semet intuerj confictos, tanta spetie et procedentium pompa, ut regiam magnificentiam et amplissimum civitatis senatum, quam egregie pre se ferrent [emphasis of the author]."

The sumptuous procession departed from the square and was directed towards San Marco. The oriental character of its protagonists was not in any doubt. Legates, musicians, slaves, carriages and animals escorted the Magi, with a great parade, on their way to Herod's palace. The celebration, therefore, did not have a strong theatrical or dramatic character, but reminded one more of knightly tournaments, aimed at the display of courtly virtues and the royal authority of the protagonists. The visual richness of the celebrations and the display of royal authority made the festivity and the iconography of the Magi an efficient tool for the expression of the regal aspirations of the Medici family. Not by chance would Benozzo Gozzoli decorate the walls of the Medicean chapel in their private palace in Via Larga with the scenes of the Magi's procession (see chapters 4 and 5). Nevertheless, the distinctive feature of the feast was its strong impact on the urban space of Florence. For one day the streets of the city became the streets of Jerusalem and the citizens witnessed the arrival of the exotic kings, who would honour the infant Jesus. The spectacle moved the event, located in the biblical past, into the present, in the same way that the *feste d'Oltrarno* actualized the biblical events for the spectators gathered in the churches.

Aside from 6th January, religious spectacle entered the urban space of Florence on 24th June, the feast day of the patron saint of the community, St. John the Baptist. We do not precisely know when religious spectacle started to be included in the celebrations related to this feast day. The first accounts, which mention the *rappresentazioni* as a part of the patronal festival, come from the beginnings of the fifteenth century. They are mentioned by Gregorio Dati, in book 6 of his *Istoria di Firenze*, referring to the period between 1402 and 1404.

> Appresso per la terra così adorna, in sull'ora della terza, si fa una solenne processione di tutti i cherici e preti, monaci e frati, […] e con molte compagnie d'uomini secolari che vanno innanzi ciascuno alla regola di quella chiesa dove tale compagnia si rauna con abito d'angioli e con suoni e stromenti di ogni ragione e canti maravigliosi, facendo bellissime rappresentazioni di quelli santi e di quella solennità a cui onore fanno, andando a coppia a coppia, cantando divotissime laude.

> Partonsi da santa Maria del Fiore e vanno per la terra e quivi ritornano[65].

We do not know the exact form that these performances took, or whether they included any form of narrative spectacles at all. It is also possible that instead of a representation of a dramatic action, lauds were sung and some men wore the costumes of the saints. However, the account from 1439 by a Greek visitor to the council of Florence supports the hypothesis that spectacle had an increased importance during the celebrations of St. John the Baptist day. In the description of the feast, the Greek visitor mentioned the performances of the Archangel Michael, the Crucifixion, the parade of the Magi with the nativity, the preaching of St. Augustine, the hermits and St. George and the dragon.

> On 23rd June they put on a great procession and a popular feast, during which they perform prodigies, quasi miracles or representations of miracles. In fact, they raise dead people from death; St. Michael treads on daemons; they put a man on the cross like Christ; they represent Christ's Resurrection; they make men act like the Magi; they perform the nativity of Christ with actors, with shepherds, star, animals and manger. Then process with statues and saints' relics, images and crosses that will be worshiped. They proceed with trumpets and other musical instruments. What can one say about the fact that they make a monk represent St. Augustine? They put him at the height of 25 *braccia* and he walks up and down and preaches. They represented with mimes the bearded hermits, who walk at a height with their wooden feet: what an impressive spectacle! We saw also other statues, some of a very big size, and others that walked with a certain heaviness. What can one say about St. George who represented the miracle of the dragon? […][66].

[65] G. Dati, «*L'Istoria di Firenze» di Gregorio Dati dal 1380 al 1405 illustrata e pubblicata secondo il codice inedito stradiniano, collazionato con altri manoscritti e con la stampa del 1735*, ed. L. Pratesi, Norcia, 1904, p. 91.

[66] The critical edition of the text is in A. Pontani, *Firenze nelle fonti greche del concilio*, in *Firenze e il concilio del 1439*, ed. P. Viti, vol. 2, Firenze, 1994, pp. 798-805. The English translation is by the author, based on Pontani's Italian translation with Paola Ventrone's suggestions expressed in Idem, *Sulle feste di San Giovanni: Firenze 1454*, "Interpres", 19/2000, pp. 90-91.

This account by an anonymous Greek visitor not only further corroborates the thesis of a strong visual and emotional impact of the performances on the public, but also constitutes an important account of a viewer from a significantly different cultural background. In the Orthodox Church sacred drama was performed only in a liturgical context, and was characterized by highly symbolical features. It was staged not by the common people but by clerics rejecting the references to the earthy dimension of the viewers that were seen in holy spectacles in the West[67]. These significant cultural and theological differences between the East and the West could be the reason for the curiosity of the Greek visitor, who in his description expresses his astonishment on seeing the biblical events performed by the Florentines. "They put a man on the cross like Christ", he writes, and his account evidences his cultural otherness, based on the opposing approaches taken in Eastern and Western theology to the representation of the sacred. The Florentine spectacles were not only staged by common citizens, but they also made the biblical stories visible in a particularly literal way, often placing emphasis on naturalism. Moreover, the Greek tradition did not share with the West the practices of civic ritual. Thus, the spectacles seen with the eyes of the foreign visitor lacked the meanings related to the civic dimension of devotion[68]. The Orthodox doctrine had difficulties in accepting the practice of the Latin world on the basis of the theory of the icon, which was supposed to represent the *true* image of Christ, based on a prototype and not on the external appearance of a human being[69]. Therefore, a common person could not represent Christ, especially in a context not directly related to the liturgy. The religious drama of the West, seen from the Orthodox point of view, mistook, therefore, the ontological level of the sacred with the materiality of profane realm. It presented the scenes from the Passion with the use of animal blood that stood for the holy blood of Christ, and showed the apparent wounds of a common man as the Holy Wounds of the Saviour, from which came human redemption. The naturalism of the drama caused disintegration, disappearance of the symbolic

[67] A. Pontani, *Firenze nelle fonti greche*, op. cit., pp. 777-797.
[68] Ivi, pp.786-788.
[69] H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Chicago, 1994, pp. 149-163.

value of the represented events, persons and objects, which, if deprived from their sacred nature, were no longer worthy of worship[70].

The astonishment of the Greek spectator originated, with great probability, from the deep theological differences between the Western and the Orthodox doctrines in regards to the sacred image. However, the account also confirms the simpler, visual surprise of the viewer on seeing "an impressive spectacle", to quote his own words. The feast impressed the spectator not only because of the naturalism of the drama, unacceptable in Eastern devotion, but also because of the richness of the processions, the inclusion of the music in the celebrations and the great size of the statues that passed through the town. The feast fulfilled its aim of producing an emotional reaction in the public, namely the impression of amazement and wonder.

The number of *rappresentazioni* mentioned by the Greek spectator demonstrates the growing importance of the performative arts in ritual performed in honour of the patron saint of the city from at least 1439. Shortly thereafter, the theatrical activity of the confraternities and the performative space during the patron saint's day would be controlled and limited by the ecclesiastical authorities of the city. Already the Feast of the Magi introduced the question of Medicean influence in the sphere of Florentine religious ritual and the development of fifteenth-century spectacle. Nevertheless, the Medici were not the only ones to exercise their control over the ritual of the town. The activity of the Florentine archbishop Antonino Pierozzi, supported by Pope Eugenius IV, was decisive for the evolution of Florentine religious spectacle. The Medici and Pierozzi influenced the shape of the festivity of St. John the Baptist, as well as the activity of the Florentine confraternities that were responsible for the organization of the performances. Matteo Palmieri informs us about the reform of the feast, and from his account we deduce that in 1454 the form of the celebrations changed. The source suggests that the aim of Pierozzi, who was responsible for the

[70] A. Pontani, *Firenze nelle fonti greche*, op. cit., pp. 792-794. On the differences of the representation of Christ's passion and the Orthodox theory of the sacred image see also: H. Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mitelalter: Form und Funktion früher Bildtafeln der Passion*, Berlin, 1981; D. I. Pallas, *Die Passion und Bestattung Christi in Byzanz. Der Ritus – das Bild*, München, 1965; J. F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: the Image in Late Medieval Monastic Devotions*, "Viator", 20/1989, pp. 161-182; G. Dumeige, *L'image du Christ Verb de Dieu. Recherche sur l'Horos du II^e concile di Nicée et la tradition théologique*, "Annuarium historiae conciliorum", 20/1988, pp. 258-267.

modifications, was to separate the religious procession related to the feast, from the parade of the *edifici*[71], namely the wagons which served as the stages for the spectacles.

> Per san Giovanni 1454 si mutò forma di festa la quale era usata a farsi a dì 22 la mostra; a dì 23 la mattina la processione di compagnie, frati, preti e edifici; la sera l'offerte de' gonfaloni; e poi il dì di san Giovanni la mattina l'offerte e el dì el palio. E riordinossi in questo modo: cioè che a dì 21 si facesse la mostra. A dì 22 la mattina la processione di tutti gli edifici, e quali detto anno furono e andorono come appresso dirò. […]
>
> La sera di detti dì 22 andorono a offerere tutti gli ufici della città che in palagio si disputòno, et furono ufici quarantadue, numero di cittadini duecentottantotto. E dopo loro e sei della mercatantia co' loro capitudini.
>
> A dì 23 la mattina la processione di tutte le compagnie de' fanciulli, di disciplina, e poi regole di rati e preti con loro stendardi e barelle di reliquie et con grandissima copia di paramenti, ricchi più che altra volta si ricordi.
>
> La sera, l'offerta della Signoria, et poi XVJ gonfaloni con le compagnie, al modo usato.
>
> A dì 24 la mattina le offerte usate, cioè prima la Parte, e fu questo anno molto copiosa di cittadini, più che 730. […]
>
> La sera si corse el palio di ricco broccato al modo usato[72].

Pierozzi's reform of the festivities of St. John the Baptist seems to be parallel to his reform of the youth confraternities and of Florentine religious performances in general. Already in 1442 the bull of Eugenius IV regulated the functioning of youth confraternities and, initially, allowed only four of them to operate: the Compagnia della Natività del Signore, the Compagnia della Purificazione della Vergine, the Compagnia di San Niccolò and the Compagnia di

[71] R. C. Trexler, *The Episcopal Constitutions of Antoninus of Florence*, "Quellen und Forschungen aus Italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken", 59/1979, p. 252.

[72] Matteo Palmieri, [*Historia Fiorentina (1429-1474)*], in Firenze, BNC, codice *Magliabechiano* XXV.511, cc. 50v-51v; published in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, vol. 26, 2nd edition, Città di Castello, 1906, pp. 172-174.

San Giovanni Evangelista[73]. Control over the youths gathered in these pious associations was exercised by a secular guardian, who guaranteed the application of the rules and verified the presence of the boys during compulsory assemblies. Theatrical activity soon became an important part of the boys' occupation, as confirmed by the *Capitoli della Compagnia della Purificazione*, approved by Pierozzi in 1448. The chapters explicitly mention a spectacle on the Purification, which was supposed to be organized by the young members of the association[74]. Spectacle performed highly educative functions, not only in terms of moral edification and the teaching of biblical stories, but was also seminal for the youths in the acquisition of basic rhetorical and oratorical skills[75]. It seems that Pierozzi grasped the pedagogical force of the spectacles and their effectiveness in the education of the youths and promoted both the formation of the youth confraternities and the artistic activity of the Florentine *fanciulli* in the field of religious drama[76]. Paola Ventrone links the birth of the literary form of the *sacra rappresentazione* with this particular reform. According to the scholar, the term *sacra rappresentazione* should not be used to refer to every kind of religious spectacle from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but it indicates the particular literary form born in Florence in the mid-fifteenth century in the intellectual circle of Antonino Pierozzi[77]. In Ventrone's definition the term *"sacra rappresentazione"* refers, therefore, to the texts written to be staged by the youth confraternities. These texts followed certain compositional norms. They were written in *ottava rima*, preceded by an angel's *annunzio* and concluded with its *licenza*. The origins and fate of the *sacra rappresentazione* was, according to the scholar, limited and strictly related to Florence and the main protagonists of its religious and social life – archbishop Pierozzi and the Medicean circle of writers and commissioners: Cosimo il Vecchio, Piero di Cosimo, Lucrezia Tornabuoni and Feo Belcari. The

[73] On the youth confraternities see: K. Eisenbichler, *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael, a youth confraternity in Florence 1411-1785*, Toronto, 1998; Idem, *Angelo Poliziano e le confraternite di giovani a Firenze*, in *Poliziano nel suo tempo*, ed L. Rotondi Secchi Tarugi, Firenze, 1996, pp. 297-308.
[74] P. Ventrone, Lo *spettacolo religioso*, op. cit., pp. 143-145.
[75] Ivi, pp. 141-144; E. Garin, *Il pensiero pedagogico dello Umanesimo*, Firenze, 1958, pp. 189, 231-239.
[76] P. Ventrone, *Lo spettacolo religioso*, op. cit., pp. 279-280.
[77] Ivi, pp. 139-140.

most ancient text of this sort would be the *Rappresentazione del dì del giudicio*, written around 1444 by Antonio di Matteo di Meglio[78].

Nevertheless, the limitations of our knowledge of the texts used during religious performances at the beginnings of the fifteenth century, both in Florence and in other Italian city-states, suggest the adoption of a broader definition of the term "*sacra rappresentazione*". In fact, Nerida Newbigin, who provided the critical edition of the most ancient texts of the genre, emphasized the difference between the early and the later texts of this kind. While from the 1450s the *rappresentazioni* shared the stylistic features pointed out by Ventrone, before that date the term can be referred to every form of dialogued text adapted for a spectacle on a holy subject[79].

In the second half of the century, therefore, religious spectacle fulfilled not only ritual functions, being a part to the most important festivities, but also became an educational tool in the formation of the young generations of the faithful Florentines, where it acquired a more intimate space inside the confraternity rooms. In both cases, however, the *sacra rappresentazione* was an expression of Florentine piety, and it formed part of a contemporary understanding of the biblical stories and shaped the relationship of believers with the sphere of the sacred. As Émile Durkheim has observed "beliefs, myths, dogmas, and legends are either representations or systems of representations that express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers attributed to them, their history, and their relationship with one another as well as with profane things"[80]. The religious drama activated and re-actualized these myths in the form of a performance in front of a public. The spectacles defined and re-established the relationship between the spheres of the sacred and profane and it occurred with the use of the visual tools appropriate to the theatrical medium: scene, actors, costumes, stage design, movement, gesture and dialogues. Similarly to San Bernardino's sermons, and devotional literature used in the private devotion, such as the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* or St. Bridget's *Revelations*, in order to imprint the represented story in the spectators' minds, the *sacre rappresentazioni* relied on the

[78] Ivi, pp. 161-202.
[79] N. Newbigin, *Introduzione*, in *Nuovo corpus*, op. cit., p. XI.
[80] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, transl. K. E. Fields, New York, 1995, p. 34.

cognitive force of the visual experience. Moreover, the staging of the sacred narratives during the religious festivities, being a part of civic ritual, was an expression of the citizens' worship of their heavenly protectors, but also the representation of the relationships of power and of the social order of the community. Therefore, through an analysis of the texts of the chosen *sacre rappresentazioni*, we can understand what the visual features of the spectacles and the characteristics of the narration were. In this way we can offer an insight into the sacred *imaginatio* of fifteenth-century Florence, which may allow for a better understanding of the importance of the sacred narratives for civic ritual and Florentine devotion.

Sacre rappresentazioni and the techniques of framing

The texts of the *sacre rappresentazioni*, together with documentary sources, confirm that the religious performance was particularly efficient in engaging its spectators' senses and emotions. The *messa in scena* was, in fact, particularly effective in conveying a sense of immediacy and in making the staged story present in time and space in front of the spectator's eyes. As some of the sources show, the contemporary public approached the performances with the receptive standards that meant that they could not always distinguish between the fictional world onstage and the real world off-stage.

One of the most interesting documents, revealing the complexity of the public's understanding of theatrical convention, is the so-called *Sopravenuto di pazo* (Incursion of a madman), described by Matteo Palmieri in his account of festivities related to St. John the Baptist day in 1454. The chronicler listed in his report the *edifizi*, the decorated carts on which the spectacles took place and in the description of the *edifizio* of the *Templum Pacis*, wrote:

> 11. *Templum pacis coll'edificio della natività per fare la sua rapresentazione.*
> *Sopravenuto di pazo.*
> E avenne che, essendo l'edificio inanzi a' Signori e scavalcato Ottaviano e salito in su l'edificio sotto overo nel tempio, per cominciare la sua rapresentazione, sopragiunse un Tedesco

> pazo, che avea solo indossato una camicia molle, e a piè dell'edificio domandò: Dov'è 'l Re di Raona? Fu chi rispose: Vedilo quivi, e mostrogli Ottaviano. Lui salì in su l'edificio, molti credeano fusse di quegli avea a intervenire alla festa, e però non fu impedito. Lui prima prese l'idolo era in tetto tempio e scagliollo in piazza, e rivolto a Ottaviano, ch'era vestito d'un velluto pagonazzo broccato d'oro, richissimo vestire, el prese e fello capolevare sopra 'l popolo in piaza, poi s'appicò sopra una colonna del tempio per salire e certi fanciulli sprastavano detto tempio in forma d'agnoletti, e, qui sendo, sopragiunsono circustanti con maze aveano in mano e percotendolo gravissimamente con dificultà lo volsono a terra, donte rittosi e ingegnandosi risalire, percosso da molte mazate di sotto e di sopra fu vinto[81].

As Palmieri recalled, at the beginning of the spectacle, when the person acting as Augustus was already on stage, an insane German man invaded the space of the spectacle. After destroying the figure of an idol, he attacked the emperor and threw him off the stage. Palmieri narrated the unexpected event in a surprisingly detailed way, and from his account, we can deduce that it took the public a while to recognize the *pazzo* as a foreign element to the narration. Once on stage the man was actually able to take part in the spectacle. He asked other protagonists where the king was and, amazingly, received an answer. It is clear that at the beginning he was accepted by the spectators as a part of the performance. Only the escalation of his aggression against the actors disrupted the public's illusion that he "fitted".

This specific event may suggest that viewers of spectacle, in general, were ready to accept the presence on stage of contemporary characters who were not necessarily related to the well-known stories of the Bible, the *Golden Legend* or other sources. Palmieri's *Sopravenuto di pazo* can be compared to other accounts related to the early diffusion of the theatrical practices, which mention the public's disorientation and the difficulties in distinguishing between fiction and common experience. A quote from Benedetto Varchi's *Suocera*, which refers to the

[81] Matteo Palmieri, [*Historia Fiorentina (1429-1474)*], op. cit., p. 173.

theatrical production of a Florentine herald, Giovanbattista dell'Ottonaio, confirms this particular approach of the public towards theatrical representation:

> (...) quelle filastrocche, che facevano già venti o venticinque anni sono Nanni cieco e Messer Battista dell'Ottonajo, che duravano un'ora ogni volta che si riscontravano per la via a dir spropositi, senza conchiudere mai cosa nessuna, e le brigate stavano d'attorno a udirgli a bocca aperta, e molte volte v'entrava qualche buona persona di mezzo per mettergli d'accordo, innanzi che la cosa andasse agli Otto, pensando che dicessero daddovero[82].

It seems that the theatrical medium was particularly efficient in making the public believe in the truthfulness and plausibility of the narration. In the aesthetics theory, a successful "make believe" constitutes a basic condition for an emotional response of a viewer/reader to fiction[83]. We have already seen how the staging machinery, the lighting and the auditory effects introduced an element of marvel into the spectacles, influenced the emotional reaction of the viewers and made possible the suspension of disbelief for the spectators. Rooted in the tradition of these marvellous spectacles in Florentine churches, the *sacre rappresentazioni* continued this tendency, which was added to by the actualizations of the plots. To actualize the biblical story and to encourage its memorization by the public, the authors of the *sacre rappresentazioni* used the so-called *inframessa*, that is, they interweaved contemporary characters and events into the sacred narrations. These interruptions of biblical or hagiographical narratives were more than simple breaks in the flow of the stories. On the contrary, they were carefully inserted into the structure of the spectacle. It would be worth examining here one of the texts of a *sacra rappresentazione* that actualizes the sacred story with the use of an *inframessa*. One of them is the *Festa di Susanna*, a spectacle that narrates the Old Testament story of Susanna and the

[82] Benedetto Varchi, *La Suocera*, Act 3, sc. 7, in A. D'Ancona, *Origini del teatro italiano: libri tre: con due appendici sulla rappresentazione drammatica del contado toscano e sul teatro mantovano nel sec. XVI*, vol. 2, Torino, 1891, p. 37.

[83] D. Novitz, *Fiction, Imagination and Emotion*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 38, 3/1980, pp. 279-288; E. Schaper, *Fiction and the Suspension of Disbelief*, "The British Journal of Aesthetics", 18/1978, pp. 31-44.

Elders described in the Chapter 13 of the Book of Daniel. The texts of the *sacra rappresentazione* closely follows the Greek version from Theodotion's text, known thanks to Saint Jerome's translation[84]. As the Bible narrates, the beauty of Susanna, the pious wife of a respectful Jew, attracted the attention of two vicious, elder judges, whose desire prompted them to plan a trick against the girl. The judges hid themselves in a garden and caught Susanna while she was preparing to bathe. The elders threatened the girl with a false accusation of adultery if she did not submit to them sexually. Susanna refused and, as expected, due to the judges' unfounded testimony, she was condemned to death. However, in her moment of distress Susanna prayed to God who heard her complaint and sent Daniel to help her. The moral character of the narrative made it suitable for a *sacra rappresentazione*. To render its message even more effective the author of the *rappresentazione* actualized the text, moving its action into the present day. At the beginning of the plot, he included a scene of a conflict between two peasants from Chianti. Before the main protagonist of the story appeared in front of the public, two countrymen entered the stage to discuss their case in front of two judges. In this initial story the wicked countryman, who bribed the judges, unjustly won the case. Vice triumphed and virtue was defeated. The peasants left the stage and only then did the spectators discover that the same corrupted judges, who resolved the case, would become the protagonists of Susanna's story, trying to rape her and accuse her of adultery.

The introduction of contemporary characters rendered the performance more vivid and immediate for the public. In the later period, at the end of the fifteenth century, rustic characters would increasingly be used for comic effect in the *sacra rappresentazione*[85]. The *Festa di Susanna* remains one of the earliest texts of this theatrical genre, but the scene with the argument between the countrymen appears for the first time in the manuscript from the Biblioteca Ambrosiana (C. 35. Sup) dated 1477 ca[86]. Nevertheless, the importance of the characters from

[84] *Nuovo corpus*, op. cit., p. 137.
[85] Ivi, pp. 137-138.
[86] The most ancient of the manuscripts containing the text of this *sacra rappresentazione* is preserved in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze under the signature Conventi Soppressi MS.F.3.488. As Nerida Newbigin recalled, this manuscript entered the Fondo Magliabechiano after Peter Leopold's suppression of many Tuscan convents in early 1770s. This particular manuscript came from Camaldoli monastery ad it was copied by Lorenzo di Ser Nicolaio di Diedi. We can date it with great

everyday life is not limited to the author's desire to include comic aspects into the plot, as the *intramessa* is traditionally interpreted[87]. The *intramessa* introduces common and actual elements into the narration. In the analysed text the story of the two peasants became a link between the public and the sacred story. They introduced the spectator to the plot by presenting a well-known case from everyday life. The presence of the peasants situated the action in the present day and this structural solution made the second part of the spectacle, namely the story of Susanna, appear to the public as contemporary. The presence of the contemporary characters on stage could be compared with the intrusion of the madman described by Palmieri in his testimony. The countryman was supposed to appear to be an Everyman who entered the stage from the crowd. The peasants were understood as integral elements of the world offstage. Moreover, the unjust judgement of the innocent countryman, who did not receive any heavenly protection, is contrasted with Susanna's fate. By the juxtaposition of both stories, injustice and inequity of the terrestrial realm is opposed in the spectacle to the rightfulness of God's sentences, which always protect virtue, piety and chastity. Finally, the involvement of the wicked judges in the unjust judgement of the peasants, functioned within the plot as an indelible mark on their characters. Thanks to their participation in the initial scene, they were immediately recognized as negative protagonists of the story, and they would be subsequently opposed to the positive figures of Susanna and Daniel.

Another important feature of the text is the lack of an angel's prologue at the beginning of the *Festa di Susanna*. The presence of a prologue at the beginning of a spectacle was, in fact, a distinctive feature of the genre. In case of the *Festa di Susanna*, the absence of this introduction removed a divisive element marking a distance between the spectator and the spatial and temporal dimension of the representated fiction. The angelic *annunzio*, which traditionally opened every

precision thanks to the dates reported at the end of the two out of the twelve *rappresentazioni*: 17th February 1463 (1464 *stile moderno*) and 29th July 1465. These dates prove that the compilation of the manuscript took more than one year. It allow us, as well, to establish the *terminus ante quem* for text's composition at 1465. The version preserved in the Florentine manuscript, however, does not contain verses 1-56 describing the act of corruption of the judges. The most ancient version of this fragment is preserved in C. 35. Sup, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan dated to 1477 (ca), *Nuovo corpus di sacre rappresentazioni fiorentine*, op. cit., p. XII.

[87] Ivi, p. 137-138; P. Ventrone, *Lo spettacolo religioso*, op. cit., pp. 161-201.

spectacle, fulfilled different functions: it served to attract the public's attention; to introduce the subject of the spectacle and to explain the moral of the story, as it would happen in preaching. The angelic prologue expressed also the heavenly protection over the ritual[88]. Furthermore, as the *annunzio* and the *licenza* sharply marked both the beginning and the end of the spectacle, they constituted a sort of a frame. They divided the time dedicated by the spectator to the event from the regular course of events. In addition, this particular framing device marked the space of the stage as a place of ritual, and pointed to the distinctiveness of the event. The *annunzio* and *licenza* were, therefore, the elements that underlined the difference between the perception of the theatrical fiction and the experience of everyday life. Their lack, in the case of the *Festa di Susanna*, was a significant change in the customary structure of the performance, and it succeeded in bringing the plot closer to the spectators' common experience.

Another element used to render the narration more accessible to the public was the language and the everyday, ordinary insertions into the speech of the protagonists. Linguistic usage varied between the characters. In order to render them plausible, the dialogue of the peasants became particularly unrefined and even vulgar.

> Risponde Beco:
> Non ti de' ricordar della picchiata
> che pur l'altrier ti die' Beco del Mora?
> *(...)*
> Risponde Beco:
> Ammicca un poco, o ladroncel da forche!
>
> Risponde Tangoccio:
> Ladro se' tu, e le tuo donne porche![89]

Swear words («le tuo donne porche») made the dialogues sound rough, allowing the public to perceive it as familiar, every-day and mundane. Moreover, this unrefined way of speaking also characterized the dialogue of the two judges,

[88] Ivi, p. 191.
[89] *Nuovo corpus*, op. cit., p. 142.

the protagonists of Susanna's story. Their speeches, however, lacked swear words and more vulgar expressions, which marked the higher social level of the characters.

> *Parla il Primo Giudice:*
> Meretrice, no' ti trovamo a' piedi
> quel giovinetto, e or fai tà romori?
> Ché l'arei preso, ma egli fuggì via,
> e or non mi vuoi dir chi è si sia[90].

This rather rough language significantly contrasts with Susanna and Daniel's way of speaking, whose dialogue took on a rather poetic form.

> *Parla Susanna molto adirata e dice così:*
> *Qual cecità di mente o quale errore*
> *vi fa questa stoltizia addomandare*,
> che s'il consento, offendo el creatore,
> e s'io nol fo, mal me ne può incontrare?
> Ma l'un de' dua ho già fermo nel core:
> che prima voglio in disgrazia cascare
> di voi, ch'i' voglia a Dio tanto fallire,
> e intendo onesta vivere e morire[91].

The syntax of Susanna's speech was rendered more complex and refined from the linguistic point of view. Furthermore, it was embellished with different rhetorical figures such as rhetorical questions and enjambement. Syntax with verbs situated at the end of the phrase was often repeated. The stylistic differences between the dialogue of the countrymen, the judges and Susanna or Daniel could have suggested to the viewer the coexistence in the spectacle of the two spheres. The first, contemporary, popular one lends theatrical and comic elements to the spectacle, thus also making it more accessible to the general public. The second sphere belongs to the biblical past and to pious narration.

[90] Ivi, p. 149 [emphasis of the author].
[91] Ivi, pp. 148-149 [emphasis of the author].

Susanna and Daniel use noble, poetic language, which suggests the timeless character of the values that they represented: piety, chastity, virtue and faith in God.

References to the common experience of the public would be present in Florentine religious performances until the beginnings of the sixteenth century, and particular framing devices, suggesting a continuity between the world of the viewers offstage and the fiction represented on-stage, would become popular in the output of the Florentine poets engaged in the composition of the *sacre rappresentazioni*. Another example of this kind can be offered by the *Rappresentazione del Figliuol Prodigo* by Catellano Castellani. Going a step further than the anonymous author of the *Festa di Susanna*, Castellani directly located the action of the story in contemporary Florence. In the drama, the prodigal son becomes a Florentine *fanciullo*, who chooses a life full of delight and entertainment and decides not to obey his father.

> UNO FANCIULLO alli suoi compagni comincia e dice:
> Sozio, buon dì.
> El COMPAGNO risponde:
> Buon dì, frachetta mio.
> El PRIMO:
> Dove vai tu?
> L'ALTRO:
> Alla taverna, a spasso[92].

In this way the text overturned the traditional balance between the *inframessa* and the biblical plot, in which common, ordinary and contemporary elements were inserted into a narration located in a timeless, distant and ideal setting. Here, the contemporary dimension of the story dominated the biblical pedigree of the plot, and the moral teaching of the *rappresentazione* was directly referred to the Florentine life of Castellani's time. The sacred and the profane dimension of the narration were altered[93]. The language became highly expressive

[92] C. Castellani, *La rappresentazione del Figliuol Prodigo*, in *Sacre rappresentazioni del Quattrocento*, ed. L. Banfi, Torino, 1968, p. 273.
[93] P. Ventrone, *Lo spettacolo religioso*, op. cit., pp. 200-201.

and mimetic. Many common and dialectic forms, included in the dialogues, further strengthened the imitative character of the spectacle.

Finally, another interesting example of the techniques of framing in fifteenth-century religious drama in Florence is the early sixteenth-century *Rappresentazione di Abramo e Agar* by Giovanbattista di Cristofano dell'Ottonaio. The text, composed around 1504/1505[94], introduces a curious structure of play within a play. In fact, the spectacle starts with a *frottola* "Anton! chi chiama?", which narrates the story of a father, who brought his two sons, Antonio and Benedetto, to see a *sacra rappresentazione*. Antonio was the wicked child, Benedetto the obedient one. Before the actual text of the *rappresentazione*, Castellani introduces the two boys and their father, and presents them watching the pious drama of Abraham and Hagar. Then, the plot of the main story is presented, and when it finishes the initial protagonists return. The spectator discovers that, fortunately, witnessing the spectacle managed to correct Antonio's vicious character.

> Finita questa stanza, quel Padre con quelli due figlioli veggendo finita la festa, dice al suo figliuolo Antonio:
>
> Antonio, ha' tu udito
> Quanto egli è ben punito
> Chi va dietro al mal fare,
> E vuole altri sviare
> Al suo tristo pensiero?
>
> Ve' se il proverbio è vero
> Che ubbidir si vorrebbe:
> Chi fa quel che non debbo
> Gli aviene quel che non crede,
> E truova anche merzede
> Se umil torna a Dio.
>
> Antonio chieggendo perdono al padre, inginochiato dice cosi:

[94] P. Ventrone, *Gli araldi della commedia*, op. cit., p. 130, footnote no. 100.

Caro padre mio,
Io sono uno Ismael:
E come a Dio quel,
A voi chiego perdono [...][95].

The text ends with the closure of the contemporary plot, which framed the biblical narration.

The initial *frottola* substituted the traditional *annunzio* and *licenza*. As with the *inframessa* in the *Festa di Susanna* and the contemporary setting of the *Rappresentazione del Figliuol Prodigo*, it constituted an efficient tool with which to render the text more appealing for the public. It introduced the elements known from everyday experience and succeeded, in the same way Castellani's text did, in presenting the moral value of the biblical plot as actual and applicable to daily life.

The above quoted examples demonstrate that the main plots of religious dramas often required a framing device. As discussed, the traditional scheme included an angelic *annunzio* and a *licenza*, which would mark the beginning and the end of the theatrical experience. Nevertheless, it has been shown that the authors of the dramas would often challenge and modify the customary pattern. With the use of literary tools, they would try to challenge the framing structure of the text in order to convey a sense of immediacy. Their aim was to facilitate the public's emotional engagement with the plot and to render the narrations highly mimetic and actual. In this sense, the manipulation of the framing structures of the dramas can be compared to the parallel efforts of painters in the field of pictorial composition who tried to convey in their paintings the qualities of verisimilitude and a sense of life, even when they had to picture a biblical event. If the basic properties of a picture are the frame, the flat surface and the appearance of pictorial space behind the surface[96], Renaissance artists, with the use of linear perspective, often challenged pictorial boundaries in order to suggest

[95] Giovanbattista di Cristofano dell'Ottonaio, *La Rappresentazione di Abramo e Agar*, in *Sacre rappresentazioni dei secoli XIV, XV, XVI*, ed. A. D'Ancona, vol. 1, Firenze, 1872, pp. 36-37.
[96] T. Puttfarken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition. Theories of Visual Order in Painting 1400-1800*, New Haven, 2000, p. 20.

spatial continuity between the viewer and the pictorial world. For a Renaissance painter, "the boundary and surface were irritating obstacles, frustrating constraints[97]", as Thomas Puttfarken has rightly emphasized (see chapter 3, paragraph 2, and chapters 4 and 5). The following chapters will describe Lippi and Ghirlandaio's experiments with the potentialities of framing devices in the religious painting. One of the most famous examples in this sense may be Lippi's *Madonna and Child with Two Angels* (figure 3.18) kept today in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. In the painting the Virgin sits before the frame, which is represented here as a window. The window frames the landscape in the background, which in this way remains divided, both from the Virgin's room and from the space of the spectator. Thanks to this skillful composition the sacred figures pictured in the painting seem to share the space with the viewer, and this effect is strengthened by the glance of the little angel, who looks at the spectator and connects him with the representation. In this way the frame in the painting connects the viewer with the figures pictured in it rather than dividing both spaces. By being located behind the protagonists of the image, the frame in some way pushes them forward and locates the three figures in the spectator's room. It seems that the tendency to weaken the boundaries between the spectator and the representation, parallel in the painting and the religious spectacles of the period, rose thanks to the same cultural background shared by both media. This particular feature to actualize the sacred stories and to picture them as close and accessible for the viewer may have depended on and resulted from the current schemes of religious storytelling. In fact, the present study of the texts of the *sacra rappresentazione* suggests that the aims of writers and painters were similar. The texts analysed in the present chapter suggest that, during the second half of the fifteenth century, it was common to picture religious narratives, while at the same time collapsing the spatial and temporal boundaries between the world of the spectator and the represented fiction.

[97] Ivi, p. 21.

Chapter 3

Artists, Artisans and *Fratelli*. Confraternities, Art and Spectacles

In order to analyse and characterize the nature of the dialogue between religious performances and the visual arts in fifteenth-century Florence, it is first important to assess the personal exchange between the organizers of spectacles, i.e. the religious confraternities, and the Florentine artistic environment. The importance of such a preliminary examination results from the fact that the key protagonists of the present study, Filippo Lippi and Domenico Ghirlandaio, both took an active part in the artistic, performative and confraternal life of the city. Their relationship with the world of religious drama was shaped by the tradition of a vivid collaboration between the organizers of the religious festivities and local artists and artisans. The present chapter, therefore, will first offer a historical framework of the artists' participation in the organization of the religious plays in Florence. The analysis, based on some unpublished documents, describes the modalities of the artists' participation in the life of the Florentine confraternities, the importance of artistic commissions coming from these pious sodalities. Finally, it underlines the seminal role of artistic skills in the preparation of religious festivities and spectacles.

The *Feste d'Oltrarno*, the *Festa dei Magi* and St. John the Baptist day, described in the previous chapter, were the expression of the civic piety of the community, and their organization was entrusted to the lay confraternities, which united pious citizens in devotional and charitable activities. The confraternities were spaces for social exchange. They took care of both the spiritual and the temporal life of their members and of the community of citizens[1]. Confraternities

[1] J. Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence*, Chicago 1994, pp. 13-30. On the late medieval and early modern confraternities see also: R. F. E. Wiessman, *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence*, New York, 1982; *Studi confraternali. Orientamenti, problemi, testimonianze*, ed. M. Gazzini, Firenze, 2009; *Brotherhood and Boundaries. Fraternità e barriere*, ed. S. Pastore, A. Prosperi, N. Terpstra, Pisa, 2011; J. R. Banker, *Death in the Community. Memorialization and Confraternities in an Italian Commune in the Late Middle Ages*, Athens, 1988; N. Terpstra, *Cultures of Charity. Women, Politics, and the Reform of Poor Relief in Renaissance Italy*, Cambridge, 2013; *The Politics of Brother Kinship: Confraternities and Social Order in Early Modern Italy*, ed. N. Terpstra, Cambridge, 2000; *Early Modern Confraternities in Europe and the Americas. International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. C. Black, P. Gravestock, Aldershot, 2006; L. Polizzotto, *Children of the Promise. The Confraternity of the Purification and the Socialization of Youths in Florence*

of *Laudesi*, *Disciplinati* as well as youth confraternities guaranteed the continuity of civic ritual, proved the community's strength and confirmed the stability of the social union between its members.

At the same time, the confraternities became lively centres for the commissions of various religious artefacts, such as processional banners, private chapels, fresco decorations, devotional paintings, etc.. Documentary sources related to the activities of the confraternities reveal a vibrant artistic environment connected to the pious associations and their circles. Firstly, the artists were themselves engaged in the activities of the confraternities, and participated in their daily tasks as *fratelli*. In fact, almost every artist was a member of at least one of the sodalities, which sometimes corresponded to the activity of guilds and, later, academies, like the *Compagnia di San Luca* in Florence. But they were also members of devotional sodalities too, such as the confraternities of *laudesi* or *disciplinati*[2]. Secondly, the artists were often involved in various tasks related to the organization of festivals, such as the construction, maintenance and improvement of staging machineries, the preparation of decorative elements of stage design or the management of the confraternity itself. Finally, confraternities often commissioned artisans to execute the works of art used in their devotional activity. These are the aspects of confraternal life which will be examined in the first part of the chapter. Archival documents related to the artistic commissions of different confraternities will be introduced in the first instance. These are mainly documents preserved in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, namely, the following *fondi: Compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo*, *Corporazioni religiose soppresse dal Governo Francese*, *Corporazioni religiose soppresse dal Governo Italiano*, *Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi detta di Sant'Agnese*, *Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi e Spirito Santo detta del Piccione*, *Capitoli delle compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo*. Secondly, the chapter will analyse the participation of artists in the activities of the pious associations, and various aspects of the involvement of artists in the preparation of religious festivities will

1427-1785, Oxford, 2004; *Confraternities and Catholic Reform in Italy, France and Spain*, ed. J. P. Donnelly, M. W. Maher, Kirksville, 1999.

[2] B. Wisch, *Incorporating Images: Some Themes and Tasks for Confraternity Studies and Early Modern Visual Culture*, in *Early Modern Confraternities*, op. cit., p. 245.

be examined. Particular attention will be paid to testimonies linking the name of Filippo Brunelleschi with the projects of staging machinery for the Florentine *feste*.

The second part of the chapter will discuss the relationship of Filippo Lippi and Domenico Ghirlandaio with the Florentine confraternities. The experience of both painters will show the changes occurred in the Florentine artistic culture and the tradition of religious spectacle between the 1450s and the 1480s. It will be possible to witness these transformations by a comparison between Lippi's and Ghirlandaio's experience with the local confraternities and the tradition of sacred plays. Lippi was raised as a Carmelite friar in the convent responsible for the organization of one of the most important spectacles in the town, namely the Ascension festivity. The documents confirm his active participation in the organization of the feast[3]. In this way, his personal experience with the preparation of religious plays contrasts in part with Domenico Ghirlandaio's contacts and relationship with the Florentine confraternities. Ghirlandaio also partook in the activity of a confraternity, but it was a penitential *Compagnia di San Paolo*, which did not organize religious performances for the Florentine public. However, Ghirlandaio's art reveals the artist's inspiration and knowledge about the visual aspects of the sacred dramas staged in the city. Ghirlandaio's participation to the activities of the *Compagnia di San Paolo* introduces the problem of the Medicean influence on the Florentine ritual and devotional life. This confraternity was, in fact, at the centre of Lorenzo il Magnifico's attentions towards the pious associations active in the city. Therefore, if Lippi was directly involved in the organization of the spectacles, Ghirlandaio's involvement in the Florentine ritual was mediated through Medici's activity in the field of the Florentine devotion. In the course of the chapter it will be showed to which extent the Florentine social, devotional and artistic life was dominated by the Medici and their politics during the 1470s and the 1480s. Finally, it will be argued that the differences between Lippi and Ghirlandaio's modalities of assimilation of the tradition of holy plays in their art depended in part on the transformation of the Florentine culture under the burden of the Medicean intellectual circle. In this way

[3] ASF, Corporazioni religiose soppresse dal governo francese, 113, 192, f. 76v.

the present chapter will constitute a seminal introduction to the further analysis of the two chapel decorations, Lippi's murals in Prato and Ghirlandaio's Tornabuoni frescoes. It will explain and describe the possible channels through which the visual elements of the spectacles penetrated into the pictorial tradition and suggest the possible meaning of the performative elements introduced into the religious paintings by the Florentine artists.

The Florentine *confraternite* as centres of the artistic commissions

During the fifteenth century the Florentine *botteghe* received many important commissions from the pious sodalities active in the city for different devotional artefacts, decorations and furniture of the confraternity rooms and their private chapels. Many documentary traces are still extant of works of art related to the confraternities. Unfortunately, it is rarely possible to link the documents to remaining artefacts or architectural structures. In fact, many of them are lost or impossible to identify. Chapels were modified or demolished, objects were lost, broken or stolen. Nevertheless, surviving documents allow us to reconstruct some of the artistic endeavours pursued by these pious assemblies and understand more precisely their artistic horizons. Because of significant dispersion of the documentary sources, loss or destruction of many of the works of art that belonged to the confraternities, and frequent difficulties with the recognition of artists involved in the commissions, the study of confraternal patronage poses many obstacles for researchers, and constitutes, until today, a novelty in the art historical scholarship. For at least the past four decades, historians have been engaged in the study of lay confraternities, and tried to assess their importance for the social and cultural panorama of early modern Europe. Only in the 1990s, art historians started to investigate the visual culture of pious sodalities with an increased steadiness. During the 1960s and the 1970s, pioneering contributions to the field emphasized the relationship between the iconography of confraternal art and the relative cults promoted by the sodalities. One of them is Marilyn Aronberg Lavin's study of the altarpiece for the *Compagnia del Corpus Domini*

in Urbino, executed by Joos van Ghent, with the *predella* panels by Paolo Uccello[4]. Since the 1980s the number of scholars interested in the problematic started to increase, as studies by Jan Shepard Weisz, Peter Humphrey and Richard Mackenney prove[5]. Crucial for our understanding of the complex relationship between religious confraternities and the works of art created in their circles was the subsequent research carried out by Konrad Eisenbichler, Barbara Wisch and Diana Cole Ahl. Considering the ample documentary material available for scholars interested in this emerging field of study, the aforementioned researchers focused their investigations on selected confraternities, or on specific geographical areas. Eisenbichler offered a monograph study on the youth confraternity of the Archangel Raphael in Florence, *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael: a Youth Confraternity in Florence, 1411-1785* (Toronto 1998). The volume remains the most comprehensive analysis of different aspects of organization and activity of one of the Florentine youth sodalities. It is very relevant from an art historical point of view, as it investigates the artistic dimensions of the confraternity's activities. In fact, the study offers a comprehensive analysis of the commissions coming from the *Compagnia*. Likewise, it is important to mention studies gathered in the volumes, *Crossing the Boundaries. Cristian Piety and the Arts in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Confraternities*, edited by Konrad Eisenbichler (Kalamazoo 1991), and *Confraternities and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Italy. Ritual, Spectacle, Image*, edited by Barbara Wisch and Diane Cole Ahl (Cambridge 2000). Both publications gathered the contributions by scholars from different fields of specialization - art historians, historians, researchers interested in the Renaissance drama and musicologists. It is thanks to this broadened perspective that the interdisciplinary character of confraternity studies emerged. Both volumes proved that the works of art related to confraternity life have to be interpreted in the wider cultural and social contexts of their execution. The interpretations have to take into account the multiple factors that influenced the

[4] M. Aronberg Lavin, *The Altar of the Corpus Domini in Urbino: Paolo Uccello, Joos van Ghent, Piero della Francesca*, "Art Bulletin", 49/1967, pp. 1-24.

[5] J. S. Weisz, Pittura e Misericordia: *The Oratory of* S. Giovanni Decollato *in Rome*, Ann Arbor, 1984; D. Rosand, *Painting in* Cinquecento *Venice: Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto*, New Haven, 1982; Idem, *Titian's Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple and the* Scuola della Carità, "The Art Bulletin", 58, 1/1976, pp. 55-84; P. Humphrey, R. Mackenney, *The Venetian Trade Guilds as Patrons of Art in the Renaissance*, "The Burlington Magazine", 128/1986, pp. 317-330.

commissions, such as the devotion promoted by these pious associations, the economic possibilities of each confraternity, and the social background of their members. Moreover, the studies emphasized the potential of research into the confraternal circles of early modern Italy for the reconstruction of artists' networks, a better understanding of the mechanisms of the commissions, and the relationship between artist and patron.

If we look at Italian scholarship in the field, credit has to be given to Anna Padoa Rizzo who carried out research on artists who worked for the Florentine confraternities. She focused her attention on Benozzo Gozzoli, Cosimo and Bernardo Rosselli[6], and her studies offer an important set of information on the nature of the relationship between the artists and their commissioners, i.e. the lay confraternities. Moreover, they prove the importance of engagements coming from the sodalities for the overall artistic career of the Florentine painters.

Despite the increased interest in the field, further research on the complex and multilayered relationship between the art and world of lay confraternities is needed. So far, scholarly research on Italian early modern art focused on the artistic environments of Florence[7] and Rome[8], leaving other Italian cities in the shadows. At the same time, relatively good access to the significant amount of documents that pertain to the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries resulted in a large number of studies concerning the high Renaissance and Baroque art, leaving the fifteenth century aside. Moreover, there are still unanswered questions related to the field, such as the role of the image in the ritual practices of the confraternities, the involvement of the sodalities in the public cult of miraculous images, the influence of the confraternities on the iconography or promotion of new cults and, with them, the diffusion of new iconographical subjects. Furthermore, the problematic of patronage remains unexplored, together with lingering questions about the economic possibilities of

[6] A. Padoa Rizzo, *Cosimo e Bernardo Rosselli per la Compagnia di Sant'Andrea dei Purgatori a Firenze*, Todi, 1991, Idem, *L'attività di Benozzo Gozzoli per la compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi e Sant'Agnese (1439-1441)*, "Rivista d'arte", 43/1991, pp. 203-210.

[7] D. N. Dow, *Apostolic Iconography and Florentine Confraternities in the Age of Reform*, Farnham, 2014; K. G. Arthur, *Cult Objects and Artistic Patronage of the Fourteenth-century Flagellant Confraternity of Gesù Pellegrino*, in *Christianity and the Renaissance*, ed. T. Verdon, J. Henderson, Syracuse, 1990, pp. 336-360.

[8] N. Newbigin, B. Wisch, *Acting of Faith. The Confratrnity of the* Gonfalone *in Renaissance Rome*, Philadelphia, 2013.

confraternities, the engagement of citizens and wealthy donors in the artistic enterprises of the sodalities and their possible impact on the final form of the works of art. The problems faced in the present study regard the diffusion of narrative patterns across religious spectacle and the narrative fresco painting created by artists who took part in the confraternal life of their city. Moreover, it analyses the modalities in which patrons, rulers and commissioners used the confraternities and the art created in their circles for the promotion of their own dominance and new cultural standards. To answer these questions and to shed light on the process of acquisition and circulation of devotional art during the fifteenth century, it is necessary to gather documentary data on the artistic commissions of the confraternities.

The documentary material related to the lay confraternities in Florence is truly abundant and we can still find new evidence of varied commissions coming from the Florentine lay sodalities. An example of this kind can be the decoration of one of the cloisters of Santa Maria Novella which was commissioned in 1417 [1416 *stile fiorentino*] by the *Compagnia di Gesù Pellegrino* called *dei Caponi*. The *Compagnia di Gesù Pellegrino* was a flagellant confraternity, founded as the *Compagnia di Misericordia di San Salvatore* in January 1334. It was one of four flagellant confraternities founded in Florence during the fourteenth century, together with the *Compagnia di San Giovanni Decollato* in Santa Maria in Verzaia, the *Compagnia di Gesù Maggiore in Santa Croce*, and the *Compagnia di San Niccolò di Bari* in Santa Maria del Carmine[9]. The documents related to the first ten years of the activity of the sodality confirm that the number of the brothers gathered in the confraternity increased significantly at an early stage of their existence. While in 1336 the sodality gathered 62 men, in 1341 this number rose to about 150[10]. During the first twenty-five years of the fifteenth century the number of members did not decrease[11]. The involvement of pious Florentines in the activity of the confraternity made possible the construction of an oratory for its members in the northern part of the Santa Maria Novella convent complex. To access the

[9] J. Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, op. cit., p. 80.

[10] K. G. Arthur, *Cult Objects*, op. cit., p. 340.

[11] ASF, Compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, 903, Inventario del marzo 1421, f. 3r: "148 ciento quaranta otto veste bianche; 9 nove veste tutte nere da punizioni".

confraternity room one had to pass through a cloister, located beyond the north end of the east wing of the *Chiostro dei Morti*. In 1417 [1416 *stile fiorentino*] this cloister was decorated with a fresco representing "the story of the pilgrim", as we can learn from the documentary source preserved in the Archivio di Stato:

> + MCCCCXVI di xxviiii di marzo
> Partito vinto oggi questo dì pe[r] chapitani, proveditori, consiglieri, col chorpo della conpagnia in questa forma: tutti dacordo, quaranta quatro fave nere che nella faccia del muro del chiostro si debba fare dipingniere la storia del pellegrino, tanto bella quanto si può, secondo [c]he parla il vangielo, nella forma e modo del altre fighure chessi sono fatte[12].

The decision regarding the execution of the decoration was taken through a secret ballot between the confraternity members (the *corpo della compagnia*). The rules for the elections and the organization of each confraternity followed the regulations described in relative chapters (*capitoli*). Generally, the government of the confraternity was entrusted to the brothers, elected in a secret election or drawn by a lottery and assigned to different offices for a period of time. Each confraternity had its own organization and the name of the positions could change. The confraternities had their captains (*capitani*), superintendents (*provveditori*), advisors (*consiglieri*) but also a *camarlingo*, a *sindaco* or a *procuratore*. The flagellant confraternities, as well as those which run hospitals or offer charity to citizens, also had their nurses (*infermieri*) who assisted sick people. Differently, the youth confraternities had their adult guardians (*guardiano*) who superintended the activity of the boys gathered in the community. The appointments for these offices generally lasted a few months and the rotation of positions guaranteed a corporate character to the sodality. The ruling body, composed by the captain, superintendents and advisors, had the right to take decisions in the name of the brotherhood (*corpo della compagnia*). The captains signed contracts with artists and artisans for all types of commissions - artistic ones, as well as those related to the activity of the confraternity, the organization of the religious festivals and so

[12] ASF, Compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, 910, n.8, f. 13v.

on. The *sindaco*, instead, was responsible for the economic aspects of the brotherhood's activity. It held the properties of the confraternity and managed the payments for all the works commissioned by the sodality.

In case of the commission of the fresco for the *Compagnia di Gesù Pellegrino*, the chronicler testified that the result of the consultation was unanimous. Forty-four voters put a black bean into the box, voting "yes". The ballots in the confraternities' elections consisted generally of beans (*fave*), chick-peas (*ceci*) or balls (*palline*). A white ballot expressed a vote against the discussed decisions, the black ones a vote in favour. The ballots were put into a wooden box painted with the emblems of the confraternity and then counted in secrecy[13]. Owing to the consent of the confraternity, the commission took place and, through the subsequent payments for the works in the cloister, we learn that the artist involved in the decoration was Stefano *dipintore*.

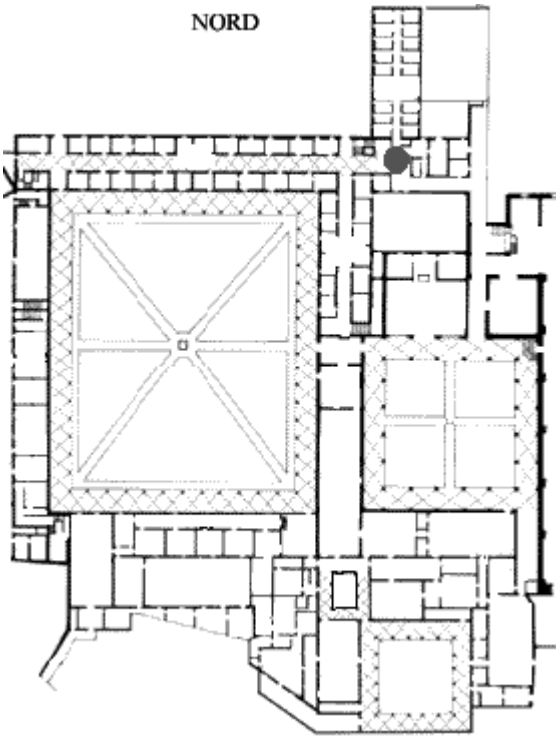


Figure 3.1: Map of the Santa Maria Novella convent.

> per chapitani, proveditori, consiglieri si stanziarono ad xxviiii di giugnio (...) a stefano dipintore soldi cinquantotto per resto di dipintura[14]

Unfortunately, these are the only things we know about the fresco. The documents are all that remained. The cloister and the confraternity room, located in the northern part of the complex (figure 3.1), do not exist today as this part of the monks' properties underwent profound modifications, which interested the area in the middle of the nineteenth century, during the works over the square of Santa Maria

[13] L. Sebregondi, *Religious Furnishings and Devotional Objects in Renaissance Florentine Confraternities*, in *Crossing the Boundaries. Christian Piety and the Arts in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Confraternities*, ed. K. Eisenbichler, Kalamazoo, 1991, pp. 147-148.

[14] ASF, Compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, 910, n. 8, f. 14r.

Novella train station[15]. Also the artists who executed the decoration remain anonymous. Even the indication of the subject matter, "the story of the pilgrim, as the Gospel narrates it and in the form, in which the other figures were done", is ambiguous. It is possible that the fresco represented the scene of Jesus meeting his disciples on the way to Emmaus, which could be possibly followed by the scene of the Supper at Emmaus. Jesus, the Pilgrim, was indeed the resurrected Saviour, who travelled to Emmaus unrecognized by his own disciples. The same iconography appeared later in a small church dedicated to *Gesù Pellegrino*, existing since 1312 at the Canto dei Preti, at the corner between via San Gallo and Via degli Arazzieri (formerly via del Cafaggio di San Marco), and restored in 1580s thanks to a commission from the Florentine Archbishop Alessandro de' Medici. The architectural structure of the new church was designed by Giovanni Antonio Dosio and the internal fresco decoration was executed by Giovanni Balducci, called Il Cosci, between 1586 and 1590. Balducci painted on the altar an image of Christ as *Salvator Mundi* with the Apostles and the Saints, and the painting was flanked by two biblical scenes, the *Journey to Emmaus* and the *Supper at Emmaus*[16] (figure 3.2). The inclusion of the scenes into the iconographical program of the decoration can be explained by the biblical text, which narrates Jesus' travel to Emmaus. According to the Bible, Christ met his disciples on the way, but they did not recognize him. The apostles thought that they simply met a pilgrim, a fellow traveller, with whom they engaged in conversation about recent events



Figure 3.2: Giovanni Balducci, called Il Cosci, *Journey to Emmaus* and *Supper at Emmaus*, 1586-1590, fresco painting, Church of Gesù Pellegrino, Florence.

[15] Some of the maps of the convent before the construction of the square can be found on the convent's website: http://www.smn.it/arte/convent.htm [last access: 17-06-2015].

[16] D. N. Dow, *Apostolic Iconography*, op. cit., pp. 23-34.

in Jerusalem. Jesus' true identity remained hidden behind the appearance of a pilgrim. The apostles travelled with him all the way and, once they arrived at the town, they offered him their hospitality. Only during the supper they recognized the true identity of their travel companion. Jesus, disguised as a pilgrim, became the patron of the confraternities, which offered charity and spiritual care to other brothers, citizens, pilgrims and travellers, who came to the city. The hypothesis that the fresco in the cloister of Santa Maria Novella represented the resurrected Christ as a pilgrim on his way to Emmaus is further corroborated by a decoration of the cover of the manuscript belonging to the confraternity, preserved in the Archivio di Stato (*Compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo*, 918, no. 34) (figure 3.3), which shows the figure of Christ wearing a pilgrim robe and holding a walking stick.



Figure 3.3: Cover of the manuscript belonging to the confraternity of *Gesù Pellegrino* in Florence with the figure of Jesus, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Compagnie religiose soppresse de Pietro Leopoldo*, 918, no. 34.

The iconography followed the biblical tale and acknowledged the strong relationship between the Supper in Emmaus and Christ's Passion and Resurrection. In 1401 Taddeo di Bartolo visualized the connection between these events, and depicted the scene of Jesus "the pilgrim" meeting the apostles on his way to Emmaus (figure 3.4) in the *predella* of the polyptych for the Santa Maria Assunta in Montepulciano. The scene became part of a cycle narrating Jesus' Passion and Resurrection. The narration depicted in the *predella* starts with Christ's arrival in Jerusalem. It then represents the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection

and ends with Jesus' arrival at Emmaus[17]. Therefore, the image of the resurrected Christ disguised as a pilgrim relates to his sufferings on the cross, and his victory over death. For the contemporary spectator, the scene of Jesus' arrival at Emmaus proved his return to life, the resurrection of his body, and gave sense to the previous narration of Christ's sufferings. In fact, Jesus' death would be meaningless without the Resurrection, and only his return to life made the Passion fruitful. In this way, the cult of *Gesù Pellegrino* constituted an intrinsic part of the cult of Christ's Passion, which was central for the devotion of the flagellant confraternity in Santa Maria Novella[18]. It seems that the image of *Gesù Pellegrino* brought together the two seminal aspects of the confraternity's activity, i.e. the promotion of the cult of Christ's Passion and Resurrection, and the focus on charity acts towards the community. In fact, the pilgrim represented a person in need of help, a traveller who sought shelter, care and hospitality. Moreover, the example of the decoration commissioned by the confraternity further corroborates the importance of the images for the diffusion of the confraternities' ideals and the relationship between the iconography developed by single groups and the devotion promoted in their activity. The importance of images and emblems in this process is also proved by the continuous presence of the confraternity sign on the vests of the brothers.



Figure 3.4: Taddeo di Bartolo, *Jesus Meeting Apostles on His Way to Emmaus*, predella panel, 1401, Santa Maria Assunta, Montepulciano.

[17] S. Symeonides, *Taddeo di Bartolo*, Siena 1965; E. Barcucci, *Il trittico dell'Assunta*, Montepulciano, 1991; R. Presenti, *La Palma e il Cingolo: gli elementi biblici e simbolici del trittico*, in *La Chiesa Cattedrale di Montepulciano*, ed. A. Marzuli, A. Piccardi, R. Pizzinelli, Montepulciano, 2005, pp. 108-111.

[18] K. G. Arthur, *Cult Objects*, op. cit., p. 340.

The documents prove that the sodalities commissioned these decorations from the artists active in the city. In the documents of the confraternity of *Gesù Pellegrino* one can find a trace of an order of ten painted figures of the pilgrim, which were probably depicted on the brothers' vests, from a painter, Michele di Giovanni *dipintore*.

> I chapitani, provveditori, consiglieri istanziarono questo dì, primo di ottobre, a Michele di Giovanni dipintore per tredici danari quatro per dieci pellegrini nuovi afatti che charlo di ser lucha gli possa paghare.[19]



Figure 3.5: Emblem of the confraternity of *Gesù Pellegrino* in Florence, late seventeenth century, relief, Lapidarium of the Museo di San Marco, Florence.

It is possible to think that the document regards the execution of the confraternity emblems on the vests of the *fratelli*. The brothers used the confraternal frocks during common rituals, processions and other celebrations. Generally, the vests of the Tuscan confraternities were similar to the Franciscan frock, made in canvas or linen, which extended until the ankles. Similar to monks' habits, the vest was tied at the waist with a simple cord. The vestment of some of the confraternities included a *buffa*, or hood, which completely covered the head and the face, leaving only two little holes for the eyes. In most cases, the emblem of the confraternity was painted, sewn or embroidered on the hood or on the back[20]. We cannot be certain if the emblem was painted directly

[19] ASF, Compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, 910, n. 8, f. 19v.
[20] Ivi, p. 346.

on the vests or, rather, first depicted on a smaller piece of cloth, then sewn into the vestment[21].The same emblem also marked the walls of the oratory and the chapel of the confraternity, which is proved by a late, seventeenth-century example preserved in the Lapidarium of the Museo di San Marco (figure 3.5).

The confraternities, in fact, not only invested part of their funds in the decoration of the spaces of their meetings, but also engaged in the masonry work aimed at the construction of their private chapels and rooms for these meetings (*tornate*). In the documents of the *Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi* in the Carmine Church, for example, we find vast documentation of the work on their own chapel dedicated to the Annunciation of the Virgin. The construction of the space, where the confraternity could pray and worship the Virgin Mary lasted from 1438 until the late 1480s. The payments allow us to name the artists responsible for the construction of the chapel. They were Bartolemeo di Stefano, his son Domenico di Bartolomeo and grand-son Francesco di Domenico di Bartolomeo, Lionardo *dipintore*, Nicola di Bartolomeo and Zanobi di Domenico[22], now impossible to identify. During the eighteenth century, the chapel underwent profound modifications. Thus, the reconstruction of its fifteenth-century aspect is now impossible.

The examples quoted above confirm a variety of furnishing, devotional objects, decorations and architectural structure, which were created by and for the religious lay confraternities in fifteenth-century Florence. The documents provide the names of the artists commissioned for the works, but very often we are unable to identify them. In fact, confraternity art was made both by anonymous authors and by recognized artists of the period such as Piero di Cosimo, Benozzo Gozzoli, Fra Angelico and others. The confraternities acquired art by different means. Some of the paintings reached the lay sodalities through donations[23], others through the fulfilment of the stipulations of a will. Sometimes the confraternities bought existing works. In other cases they commissioned new

[21] L. Sebregondi, *Arte confraternale*, in *Studi confraternali*, op. cit., p. 351.

[22] ASF, Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi detta di S. Agnese, 127, ff. 112v-124r.

[23] K. Eisenbichler, *The Acquisition of Art by a Florentine Youth Confraternity. The case of the* Arcangelo Raffaello, in *Confraternities and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Italy. Ritual, Spectacle, Image*, ed. B. Wisch, D. Cole Ahl, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 102-116.

objects[24]. The donations often regarded youth confraternities, which received various devotional objects from other confraternities after refurbishment, displacement or suppression of another sodality[25]. This is probably the case of the altarpiece for the *Compagnia dell'Arcangelo Raffaelle* by Piero di Cosimo. This particular example proves again the importance of the iconographical coherence of artistic objects for the devotion of each group. The painting by Piero di Cosimo passed to the *Compagnia* from a defunct flagellant confraternity of San Vincenzo Ferrer before the mid-sixteenth century[26]. In the inventories of 1583 and 1591[27] the painting is described as a Virgin and Child with the Saints Vincent and Jerome, while the inventories of 1690 and 1784[28] mention St. Dominic instead of St. Vincent[29]. The evidence proves that the painting was simply re-painted, and St. Vincent was transformed into St. Dominic, in order to suit the iconography of the new owners of the panel. The presence of St. Dominic may be explained by the fact that since the mid-sixteenth century the confraternity functioned next to the Dominican convent of Santa Maria Novella. Despite these iconographic changes, the traces of previous ownership are still visible on the panel. The basement of the Virgin's throne, in fact, depicts four members of the flagellant confraternity, with the typical *buffa* covering their heads, worshipping the crucified Christ.

More prestigious commissions, such as the one given to Piero di Cosimo, were facilitated by direct contact between the confraternity and the artist. This was the case of the processional *segno* decorated for the *Compagnia della Purificazione* by Fra Angelico[30]. The description is in the confraternity's inventory:

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[24] E. Schiferl, *Italian Confraternity Art Contracts: Group Consciousness and Corporate Patronage, 1400-1525*, in *Crossing the Boundaries*, op. cit., p. 122.

[25] K. Eisenbichler, *The Acquisition of Art*, op. cit., pp. 111-112.

[26] K. Eisenbichler, *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael: A Youth Confraternity in Florence, 1411-1785*, Toronto, 1998, p. 57.

[27] ASF, Compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, 155.1/3, fasc. B, "Inventario di robbe spettanti alla Compagnia dell'Agnolo Raffaello fattosi al tempo del Guardiano Ms Antº Pasci qº dì 25 d'Aprile 1583", ff. 60r-63r; Compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, 164. 36/38, ff. 8v-11v, August 1, 1591.

[28] ASF, Compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, 164.37, "Inventario de' Mobili [...]" and "Inventario degl'arredi sacri e mobili [...] 22 luglio 1784".

[29] K. Eisenbichler, *The Acquisition of Art*, op. cit., pp. 105-107; L. Venturini, *Piero di Cosimo e la pala della Compagnia di San Vincenzo*, "Paragone" 45/1994, pp. 529-533; A. Padoa Rizzo, *Cosimo Rosselli e la tavola per la Compagnia dei SS. Innocenti*, "Antichità viva", 6/1991, pp. 15-16, S. Fermor, *Piero di Cosimo: Fiction, Invention and Fantasìa*, London, 1993.

[30] D. Cole Ahl, «In corpo di compagnia». *Art and Devotion in the* Compagnia della Purificazione e di San Zanobi *of Florence*, in *Confraternities and the Visual Arts*, op. cit., pp. 58.

> Sengno, cioè il sengno nostro chon che si va a procissione, che è uno quadro di panno lino chon chornice intorno messe tutte a oro e fu dipinto per mano di Fra Giovannj ed èvj drento la fighura della Gloriosa Vergine Maria chon due cholonbe bianche sulle spalle e il Banbino in braccio e à apiè ginocchionj un fanciullo vestito di biancho e gli mette una grillanda jn chapo e dall'altro lato di detto sengno v'è il nostro protettore San Zenobio[31].

Today the *segno* is lost, and therefore, it is impossible to confirm the attribution of the standard to the Dominican friar. Nevertheless, the connections between the brotherhood and the Dominicans were very strong. The confraternity's space was in San Marco, the association operated under the direct supervision of the Dominicans, and the election of its adult guardian was controlled by the abbot of the Badia Fiorentina and by the prior of San Marco[32]. Thus, it is plausible that Fra Angelico would have been asked to decorate the *segno* for the pious *fanciulli*.

Various examples of artistic commissions for paintings, devotional objects, decorations or refurbishment of the common spaces, which relate to the Florentine confraternities, testify a strong relationship between lay sodalities and the artistic production of the city. The richness of the visual world of the confraternities is reflected in a great variety of objects used by the members of pious associations, from their robes, through the panel paintings, banners, frescoes, emblems, boxes for elections, but also seals, processional crosses, and illuminated manuscripts. All these artefacts had their own visual importance and served as a reinforcement of the identity of each group. In fact, the corporate character of the commissions coming from the confraternities, which were decided by the leading body of the brotherhood on behalf of the entire

[31] ASF, Compagnie Religiose Soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, 1646 [P. XXX.7], Libro di ricordi, 1501-25, ff. 212r-212v, published in A. Matchette, *The* Compagnia della Purificazione e di San Zanobi *in Florence. A Reconstruction of Its Residence at San Marco, 1440-1506*, in *Confraternities and the Visual Arts*, op. cit., pp. 96-97.

[32] D. Cole Ahl, «In corpo di compagnia», op. cit., p. 54.

community, suggests that the art and artistic objects served to strengthen the sodality and to promote the devotion practiced by the brothers[33].

Artists as *fratelli*

The artists were not only commissioned to produce works of art such as decorations of the confraternities' chapels, altarpieces or devotional artefacts but, very often, they also took active part in the life of the sodalities. The documents related to Florentine religious brotherhoods mention many names of artists who were active members. The relations of Lippi and Ghirlandaio to confraternity life will be discussed further in the course of this chapter, but a quick glance at the two main *laudesi* confraternities, the *Confraternità delle Laudi detta di Sant'Agnese* and the *Confraternità del Piccione*, brings to our attention numerous names of other artist-members.

The most famous of them was Neri di Bicci (1419-1491), the youngest member of the artistic dynasty of the Bicci family. His grandfather, Lorenzo di Bicci (1359-1427), was the first to establish a prosperous workshop in the town, carried on by Neri's father, Bicci di Lorenzo (1373-1452). Neri, born in 1419, started his artistic training as his father's pupil and then, one year after Bicci's death, he took over the activity in 1453. Neri's workshop gained true commercial success, and produced not only panel paintings, but also pieces of furniture and other decorative objects. Among the pupils trained in Neri's busy workshop were, for example, Francesco Botticini and Cosimo Rosselli[34].

The artist, besides his activity as the head-master of a busy artisan workshop in Florence, got directly involved in the activity of the *Sant'Agnese* confraternity. We do not know when exactly he joined the company, but there are no doubts that his relationship with the brotherhood was long lasting. In fact, Neri's father, Bicci di Lorenzo, had already been one of the captains of the

[33] E. Schiferl, *Italian Confraternity*, op. cit., pp. 121-140.

[34] E. Darrow, *Neri di Bicci and the Practice of Renaissance Devotional Painting*, in *Renaissance Art in Focus. Neri di Bicci and Devotional Painting in Italy*, ed. E. Darrow, N. Dorman, Seattle, 2004, pp. 15-16.

confraternity in 1448[35]. Also Neri became captain in 1454 and syndic in 1466[36]. The documents prove that the artist applied his skills to the task required by the confraternity, and executed various works for the Ascension *festa*[37]. Moreover, in the years of his administration of the confraternity Neri applied to this task the same entrepreneurial abilities he used in the everyday practice of his workshop[38]. The artist-captain used to mark precisely all the expenses of the brotherhood, and he differed in his meticulousness from the other brothers who occupied the same offices before and after him. Therefore, the involvement of Neri di Bicci in the management of the *Compagnia di Sant'Agnese* had great importance for the brothers. The peculiarity of Neri's skills is proven by the detailed inventory of the belongings of the confraternity that he compiled during his appointment as *sindaco* and *procuratore* in 1467[39]. The document was particularly helpful in the reconstruction of the staging machinery and costumes used during the *festa*. Neri, with the meticulousness of a merchant who knew the value of his properties and with the sensibility of an artist who could very well distinguish and mark the qualities of textiles, manuscripts and objects owned by the confraternity, described them without ignoring their colours, materials or size.

> Una tovaglia da detto legio di tafettà nero sopanata di panno lino nero franciata di giallo e fregiata di fregiuzi di biancho e suvi el segnio della Chonpagnia chon certe croci bianche di tafettà.
> […]
> *24 agnioli di charta inpastata grandi e dipinti richamente da ogni parte d'oro fine e di fini cholori e quali s'apichano a' razi di detta Istella*
> *23 serafini da uno lato e da l'altro cherubini, e quali s'apichano a' razi di detta Istella*

[35] ASF, Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi detta di S. Agnese, 99 (Entrata e Uscita segnata D), f. 3r.

[36] ASF, Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi detta di S. Agnese, 99, ff. 3r, 20r, quoted in Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 116, C. Barr, *A Renaissance Artist in the Service of a Singing Confraternity*, in *Life and Death in Fifteenth-century Florence*, ed. R. Goffen, M. Tetel, R. G. Witt, Durham, 1989, p. 108.

[37] ASF, Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi detta di S. Agnese, 98, f. 121r; 114, ff. 105v-106r.

[38] C. Barr, *A Renaissance Artist*, op. cit., p. 105-119, 216-224.

[39] ASF, Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi detta di S. Agnese, 115 (Libro Campione A, 1377-1510), ff. [1]v-[5]r, published in N. Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno*, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 530-539.

[…]

14 diedeme tonde per tenere in chapo gli Apostoli e Nostra Donna e Santa Maria Madalena e Cristo

[…]

1 Chastello di legniame dipinto pegli bisogni della festa[40]

The document lists all the pieces of stage design used during the Ascension spectacle. It mentions the painted angels, which were part of the decoration of the hoisting machinery and embellished heaven, suspended under the roof. It also lists the *castello*, i.e. the wooden structure, located during the performance on the tramezzo, which represented Jerusalem.

Bicci's inventory remains one of the most detailed reports from the fifteenth century on the properties of the Florentine confraternities. It proves Neri's skills as both artist and entrepreneur, someone who knew how to organize the functioning of a busy artisan workshop, how to control its expenses and supervise the work of a large group of people, all of which were important during his activity as a *fratello* of *Sant'Agnese*.

Moreover, from Neri's *Ricordanze*, we learn that the artist not only dealt with the administration of the confraternity of *Sant'Agnese* but also executed some of the works used during the civic festivities. In close collaboration with Giuliano da Maiano, for example, he and his pupil Giovanni d'Antonio worked on the decoration of the two *carri* for St. John the Baptist festivity in 1461 (*Ricordanza* no. 323):

MCCCCLXI

G[i]ovedì a dì 25 di giugno 1461

Quando aiutò G[i]o[vanni] a Giuliano da Maiano

Richordo chome G[i]ovanni istà mecho à 'iutato Giuliano di Nardo da Maiano legniaiuolo a lavorare alla Sapienza in su dua 'difici à fatto per·lla festa di Santo G[i]ovanni, […]. E più questo sopradetto dì fatto richordo ched io Neri gli a[i]utai a profilare 3 dolfini grandi ch'erano in sun uno 'dific[i]o di uno di più volte

[40] Ivi, pp. 531, 533, 534.

> e cholori'gli quatro segni de' Vangelisti grandi ch'erano di charta inpastata, choloriti a punto [...][41].

The document is further proof that the organization of the festivities involved not only the "minor" artists and the local artisans whose names remain anonymous today, but also well established artists from the Florentine artistic scene, as Giuliano da Maiano or Neri di Bicci, who contributed to the realization of the ephemeral festive decorations. Furthermore, these contributions prove that the artists of the period were skilled in many different artistic techniques, and dedicated themselves not only to precious materials such as marble and stone, and noble genres such as panel painting or architecture, but also to the decorations in *cartapesta*. Moreover, it evidences the importance of the commissions related to the rituals of the city and an active participation of the artists in the festive dimension of urban life.

Neri di Bicci, however, was not the only artist who actively participated in the confraternal life of the community. The documents of the major Florentine confraternities frequently mention numerous painters, sculptors, goldsmiths etc. as regular members of the sodalities or guardians of the youth confraternities. Like Neri di Bicci in the *Compagnia di Sant'Agnese*, Lorenzo di Piero *dipintore* carried out similar tasks in the Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi e Santo Spirito detta il Piccione. Lorenzo di Piero whose name appeared in the Piccione's documents was with great probability Lorenzo di Piero di Martino from the San Felice in Piazza *popolo*, identified thanks to his participation in the activities of yet another confraternity, a devotional and professional institution of heterogeneous character, the *Compagnia di San Luca*. The confraternity gathered artisans working with different artistic media: painters, sculptors, miniaturists, goldsmiths and even cloth strainers or shield decorators[42]. We do not know much about Lorenzo di Piero but from the documents of San Luca we learn that in 1476 the artist rented a house, and in 1485 he needed help from a procurator to clear a person from his

[41] Neri di Bicci, *Le ricordanze: 10 marzo 1453 - 24 aprile 1475*, ed. B. Santi, Pisa, 1976, pp. 163-164; B. Santi, *Introduzione*, in Neri di Bicci, *Le ricordanze*, op. cit., p. XXVI; C. von Fabriczy, *Giuliano da Majano*, "Jahrbuch der Königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen", 24/1903, pp. 137.

[42] D. V. Geronimus, L. A. Waldman, *Children of Mercury: New Light on the Members of the Florentine Company of St. Luke (c. 1475 - c. 1525)*, "Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz", 47, 1/2003, p. 120.

land[43]. Unfortunately there are no known documents linking his name with any kind of artefact that he could have executed - a painting, a fresco or any other work. Nevertheless, we can trace his activity in the Piccione confraternity. In 1455, 1457 and 1458, in fact, Lorenzo di Piero was paid for different minor works related to the *festa* and he was listed among the supervisors of the payments for some other commissions[44]. In 1474 he became procurator of the confraternity[45] and in 1481 one of its captains[46]. This suggests that Lorenzo was a member of the *Compagnia* for at least half a century and as such he both gave money for the expenses of the festivity and used his practical skills during the preparation of the Pentecost spectacle.

Finally, the relevance of the artist-brothers for the organization of the activities of pious sodalities is further documented by the collaboration between the *Compagnia del Piccione* represented by Lorenzo di Piero and Neri di Bicci, representing the *Compagnia di Sant'Agnese*.

> Michele di Simone della Volta e chonpagni fabri deono avere a dì 24 d'ottobre 1457 lire trentotto soldi chuatro piccioli, sono per più ferramenti e maestro del Paradiao d'achordo cho· mecho Piacito di Lucha presente Domenicho di Lorenzo stagniataio e Lorenzo di Piero dipintore, e detti danari sono per resto del maestero e ferramento detto di sopra.
> Della detta chuantità e detti fabri ànno una promessa da Neri di Bicci dipintore di paghare loro e detti danari per tutto aprile 1458 e chuando detto Neri arà paghato e sopradetti danari saranno a por chuì dappiè a chonto di detti fabri e chancellare questa partita e arassi a porre chreditore el detto Neri alla sua ragione in questo

[43] *Ivi*, p. 149; ASF, Notarile Antecosimiano, 7918 (1472-1507), f. 87r; ASF, Notarile Antecosimiano, 9872, (1484-1489), f. 70r.

[44] ASF, Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi e Santo Spirito detta il Piccione, 60, f. 25v: "A Lorenzo di Piero dipintore per biacha e cholori pagò Francesco Ugholini per la risedenza" (1455); f. 39v: "Lorenzo di Piero dipintore de' avere insino a dì 30 di maggio 1457 lire due e soldi ci<n>he e chuali prestò pe' bisogni della festa alla Chonpagnia chom'apare a entrata di Piacito di Lucha sindacho segnato B, c. 10.".

[45] ASF, Notarile Antecosimiano 7918 (1472-1507), f. 17v.

[46] ASF, Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi e Santo Spirito detta il Piccione, 2, f. 1r.

> E anchora per più sichurtà vollono detti fabri in pegnio e ferri, cioè el dificio degli Agnioli che va giù per le funi, e chuando aranno auti le dette 38 lire debono rendere alla Chonpagnia liberamente el detto dificio, e io Piacito di Lucha chome sindacho detti loro nelle mani el detto dificio a dì 27 d'ottobre 1457, fecionne richordo e detti fabri, e io Piacito sopraddetto lo vidi ischritto al libro loro giornale segnato A.
> A dì 3 di luglio 1458 el detto Neri paghò dete lire 48 soldi 4 danari 0 picioli a· detto Michele di Simone de la Volta e per lui a Lorenzo di Piero dipintore, posti a chonto di deto Neri in questo c.36[47].

As the document states, the artist-brothers secured the payments for the metal workers who executed some parts of the machinery for the *festa*. The cooperation between the two fellow confraternities, as well as the involvement of the member-artisans, well informed in Florentine craftsmanship, both prove the particular utility of artistic skills for the organization of the spectacles. Neri and Lorenzo could provide the confraternity with workers able to fulfill the needs of the brotherhood. Furthermore, the document evidences certain similarities between the machinery used for both spectacles - the Ascension and the Pentecost - which in some way allowed the exchange of ideas between the two sodalities.

Artists' participation in the preparation of the spectacles

In the same way, painters, sculptors, and architects were involved in the preparation of the religious festivities. The organization of each *festa* involved, in fact, a great number of artists and artisans of different specializations who were responsible for the execution of smaller and bigger parts of the staging decoration. The preparation of the Ascension *festa* is the best documented among the theatrical activities of fifteenth-century Florence. The accounts of the *Compagnia di Sant'Agnese* provide evidence of a widespread participation of artists in the preparation of the spectacles. Surviving documents allow to trace the payments

[47] ASF, Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi e Santo Spirito detta il Piccione, 60, f. 39v.

for different elements of the stage setting and the hoisting machinery received by numerous Florentine artists. In 1425, for example, during his work in the Brancacci chapel, Masolino da Panicale painted the *nugola* and the angels for the spectacle:

> Al nome di Dio Mccccxxv
> [...]
> A Masolino di – dipintore a dì viii di luglio lire due soldi quatro, sono per dipigniere la Nuchola e metere d'azuro e d'oro fine, per tuto
> 2 4
> A lui deto a dì deto per dipigniere gli Agnioli che girano de la Nuchola
> 4 19 - [48]



Figures 3.6 and 3.7: Maestro di Signa [attr.], Candle Bearing Angels, 1450-1460 ca, tempera on paper, canvas and cardboard, Museo Stibbert, Florence.

The angels were probably similar to the ones kept today in Stibbert Museum in Florence and attributed to Maestro di Signa[49] (figures 3.6 and 3.7).

[48] ASF, Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi detta di Sant'Agnese, 98, f. II. 81v, edited in Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 291.

[49] *Le tems revient, 'l tempo si rinuova'. Feste e spettacoli nella Firenze di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, exhibition catalogue, ed. P. Ventrone, Cinisello Balsamo, 1992, pp. 213-214.

In 1453, instead, during the works on a new *nugola*, the *Compagnia di Sant'Agnese* paid 7 lire, 6 soldi and 8 denari to Piero del Massaio for his expenses related to the project:

> Piero del Massaio dipintore de' avere per insino a questo dì, XI di Novenbre, lire sette e s. sei e d. 8 per ispese fatte nella nuova nughola fatta per la festa della Ascensione nell'anno 1453 chome apare in più partite in un quadernucc[i]o tunuto per Lionardo di Ghualtieri, sceglitore, titolate Richordanze, segnato nughola, c. 3 L. VII, s. VI, d. VIII[50].

Finally, the payments from 1467 recall the name of Simone Ferrucci, Donatello's disciple, commissioned for a decorative relief:

> 28 aprile 1467
> A Simone intagliatore che fu discepolo di Donatello lire una chontanti perchè a fe' di rilievo, chon dua palme e uno ghanbo di giglio in mezzo, cholorita e messa d'azuro e razi di stagno dorato[51]

The collaboration of Piero del Massaio with the confraternity of Sant'Agnese in the execution of the *nugola* is of particular importance if considered in light of the artist's activity in the field of cartography. In fact, Piero del Massaio is best known as the author of the maps for the Florentine codices of Plotemy's *Geography*, executed by his *bottega* between 1456 and 1472[52]. Ptolemy's *Geography* reached Florence in the first decade of fifteenth century and was

[50] ASF, Compagnie Religiose Soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, 114, f. 84r.

[51] Ivi, 100, f. 89v.

[52] More about Massaio's as cartographer: C. Elam, F. W. Kent, *Piero del Massaio: Painter, Mapmaker and Military Surveyor*, "Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz", 57, 1/2015, pp. 65-89; L. Rombai, *Cartography in the Central Italian States from 1480 to 1680*, in *The history of Cartography*, vol. 3, *Cartography in the European Renaissance*, part 1, ed. D. Woodward, Chicago, 2007, pp. 909-939; M. Levi D'Ancona, *Miniatura e miniatori a Firenze dal XIV al XVI secolo: Documenti per la storia della miniatura*, Firenze, 1962, pp. 220 –23; N. Miller, *Mapping the City: Ptolemy's Geography in the Renaissance*, in *Envisioning the City: Six Studies in Urban Cartography*, ed. D. Buisseret, Chicago, 1998, pp. 34 –74. Codices of Ptolemy's *Geography* containg Massaio's maps are: BNCF, Parigino Lat. 17542 ex 4802, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 5699 and Urb. Lat. 277.

translated into Latin by Jacopo Angeli in 1406[53], and the text had a crucial importance for the further development of mathematical studies, the discovery of linear perspective and the shift in the cartography[54]. Thus it is interesting to find an artist-mapmaker involved in the work of hoisting machinery for the Ascension festivity. The construction of the hoisting machinery for the Ascension *festa* required remarkable engineering skills and a fair understanding of mathematics. Piero del Massaio's engagement in the works already suggests the involvement of figures with knowledge of geometry and mathematics. As for engineering, historians have sometimes attributed the authorship of the staging devices for the Annunciation spectacle to Filippo Brunelleschi. The fame of the Florentine architect, touted as the most creative and innovative personality of the first half of the fifteenth century, certainly contributed to this attribution. The origins of ascribing the paternity of the staging apparatus to Brunelleschi goes back to the second edition of Giorgio Vasari's *Vite*, in which the author included the descriptions of the innovative hoisting mechanism in the lives of Filippo Brunelleschi and il Cecca. Vasari attributed to Brunelleschi the great machineries for the Annunciation festivity in San Felice in Piazza and to il Cecca the one for the Ascension spectacle in Santa Maria del Carmine. This attribution would persist into modern historiography. It will be accepted by Ludovico Zorzi in his introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition *Luogo Teatrale a Firenze* organized in 1975[55], by Paola Ventrone[56] and lately also by Gianni Cicali in his study on the fortune of the legend of the *Inventio crucis* in the Renaissance theatre in Florence[57]. Nevertheless, Vasari's account has not been accepted by all scholars. For instance, Nerida Newbigin's archival research proved that the Ascension

[53] D. E. Cosgrove, *Images of Renaissance Cosmography, 1450–1650*, in *The history of Cartography*, op. cit., p. 55.

[54] K. H. Veltman, *Ptolemy and the Origins of Linear Perspective*, in *La prospettiva rinascimentale. Codificazioni e trasgressioni*, ed. M. Dalai Emiliani, Firenze, 1980, pp. 403-407; F. Camerota, *La prospettiva del Rinascimento. Arte, architettura, scienza*, Milano, 2006, p. 86.

[55] L. Zorzi, *Introduzione*, in *Il luogo teatrale a Firenze. Brunelleschi, Vasari, Buontalenti, Parigi*, exhibition catalogue, ed. M. Fabbri, E. Garbero Zorzi, A. M. Petrioli Tofani, Milano, 1975, pp. 13-15.

[56] P. Ventrone, *Lo spettacolo religioso a Firenze nel Quattrocento*, Milano, 2008, pp. 120-122; Idem, *La propaganda unionista negli spettacoli fiorentini per il concilio del 1439*, in *La stella e la porpora. Il corteo di Benozzo e l'enigma del Virgilio Riccardiano. Atti del convegno di studi*, ed. G. Lazzi, G. Wolf, Firenze, 2009, pp. 23-47.

[57] G. Cicali, *L'*Inventio crucis *nel teatro rinascimentale fiorentino. Una leggenda tra spettacolo, antisemitismo e propaganda*, Firenze, 2012, p. 45.

machinery was in use many years before Il Cecca was born and, moreover, that there are no traces of any payments for him related to the preparation of the festivities[58]. The scholar, however, did not fully address the problems hidden in Vasari's descriptions of the machineries. The long life of Vasari's attributions overshadows our view and move our attention to the question of possible "truthfulness" of Vasari's statements. To give faith to Vasari and to assume Brunelleschi's authorship of the machineries is truly tempting. In the condition of general uncertainty and lack of documents related to the first half of the fifteenth century, the name of Brunelleschi linked with the great stage designs of Florentine festivities constitutes a certitude of great importance. Brunelleschi's authorship significantly ennobles Florentine religious spectacle and invites us to interpret the project in light of intellectual debates undertaken by the circle of Brunelleschi. This is how the source is interpreted by Paola Ventrone in her paper *La propaganda unionista negli spettacoli fiorentini per il concilio del 1439*[59] (see chapter 2, paragraph 2). As tempting as it is, Brunelleschi's authorship of staging machinery has to be approached with caution. Not only we do not possess any documents proving Brunelleschi's involvement in the preparation of the spectacles but we also have to base our interpretations on a source as complex as Vasari's *Vite*. The multilayered semantics of Vasari's seminal work have been emphasized by different scholars. Paul Barolsky's numerous articles discussed the complexity of the concept of truth, history and fiction in the *Vite*[60]. What is particularly important in Barolsky's view is the emphasis put on Vasari's craft of storytelling and the significance his "forgeries" acquired in his vision of both history and art. Read in this light, Vasari's *Vite* reveal a complex net of judgments, attributions and information whose meaning goes far beyond their literal sense. Arthur F. Iorio's interpretation of Francesco di Giorgio and Filippo Brunelleschi's lives illustrates this tendency[61]. Iorio perspicaciously analyses the comparison of Francesco di

[58] N. Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno*, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 26-27.

[59] P. Ventrone, *La propaganda unionista*, op. cit., pp. 44-47.

[60] P. Barolsky, *Fear of Fiction: The Fun of Reading Vasari*, in *Reading Vasari*, ed. A. B. Barriault, A. Ladis, N. E. Land, J. M. Wood, London, 2005, pp. 31-35; Idem, *What are we reading when we read Vasari*, "Source: Notes in the History of Art", 22/1 (2002), pp. 33-35; P. L. Rubin, *Giorgio Varsari: Art and History*, New Haven, 1995; C. Hope, *Can You Trust Vasari? [Review] P. L. Rubin, Giorgio Vasari: Art and History*, "The New York Review of Books", 5th October, 1995, pp. 10-13.

[61] A. F. Iorio, *Francesco di Giorgio and Brunelleschi*, in *Reading Vasari*, op. cit., pp. 89-99.

Giorgio Martini to Filippo Brunelleschi included in the life of the former and suggests that Vasari used the rhetorical figure of comparison to promote his own vision on the essence of the arts. In Francesco di Giorgio's life the architect was paired with Brunelleschi as, in Vasari's view, he had the same merit as Brunelleschi of "avere facilitato le cose d'architettura, e recatole più giovamento[62]". In Iorio's opinion Vasari's judgment on both Francesco di Giorgio and Brunelleschi has to be read in the context of the author's account on Leon Battista Alberti and his critics towards a rather "theoretical" approach towards the famous humanist "più che per l'opere manuali [...] conosciuto per le scritture[63]". Seen in this context Francesco di Giorgio's life proves Vasari's high esteem for engineering, practical skills, and practical creativity of architects, which are believed to be more important than the theoretical reflection characteristic of Alberti's production[64]. Similarly, the fact that Vasari introduced into the second edition of his *Vite* a detailed description of the theatrical machineries designed by Brunelleschi and Il Cecca had some significance for Vasari himself and a prominent place in the general project of the work. In the first place, the aim of the *Vite* was to ennoble the craft of the artists and argue for a high social status of the visual arts. From 1565 Giorgio Vasari and Vincenzo Borghini, his advisor in the process of re-writing the *Vite*, were involved in the preparation of the sumptuous festivities for the celebration of the wedding between Joanna of Austria and Francesco de Medici. The celebrations included the theatrical representations staged in the theatre projected by Vasari in the Salone dei Cinquecento in the Palazzo Vecchio. Therefore, in that period Vasari himself took his first steps into the field of the theatrical production and his descriptions of the previous festive tradition of Florence included in the new edition of the *Vite* prove the architect's will to depict his own activity as part of a glorious tradition[65]. According to the recent study by Alessandra Buccheri, what Vasari truly described in the *Vite* was not a fifteenth-century version of the hoisting machinery for the Ascension and Annunciation

[62] G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e archi tettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. R. Bettarini, vol. 3, Firenze, 1971, p. 386.
[63] Ivi, p. 284.
[64] A. F: Iorio, *Francesco di Giorgio*, op. cit., pp. 93-94.
[65] P. Rubin Lee, *Giorgio Vasari*, op. cit., pp. 224-225.

spectacles, but his own construction for the performances of 1565[66]. The scholar compared Abraham of Suzdal's description of the spectacles in 1439 with Vasari's account, and argued that the differences between the staging machineries depicted by the authors exclude the possibility that they both talked about the same structure. Further, Buccheri analysed both sources and presented possible reconstructions of the two staging apparatus. She claimed that they represent two different stages in the development of the Florentine tradition of cloud machinery. The fifteenth-century version of heaven consisted of a "box of Paradise", i.e. a cube suspended under the roof, and open at the bottom. Vasari's version, instead, included a dome hanging from the ceiling and a *mazzo*, a movable platform for eight angels, who revolved around Christ during his Ascension[67].

Buccheri's analysis and interpretation of Vasari's description clearly explains the artist's interest in fifteenth-century theatrical tradition. The fact that Vasari included in the second edition of his *Vite* a description of the Borghini wedding apparatus from 1565[68] further reinforces the scholars' hypothesis. If Vasari truly described his own apparatus and attributed it to Brunelleschi, the description of the machinery constitutes one of the most skillful forgeries in the *Vite*. From Vasari's description we learn that the Annunciation spectacle, whose authorship was attributed to Brunelleschi, was redone for pious Joanna of Austria during the Lent of 1566 with the use of "vecchi instrumenti e con non pochi di nuovo aggiunti[69]" and the spectacle followed the scheme very similar to its fifteenth-century version, with the scene of the dispute of the prophets in the opening of the spectacle. The realization of this spectacle forced Vasari to pursue some research on the pious drama of the past. By presenting the noble origins of the tradition, and ascribing the authorship of the machineries to Brunelleschi and Il Cecca, Vasari wanted to achieve a higher esteem for his own work. Finally, the inclusion of the descriptions of Florentine religious spectacles from the Quattrocento to the re-written version of the *Vite* has to be seen in light of the

[66] A. Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds, 1439-1650. Italian Art and Theatre*, Farnham, 2014, pp. 29-49.
[67] Ibidem.
[68] R. A. Scorza, *Vincenzo Borghini and* Invenzione*: The Florentine* Apparato *of 1565*, "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", 44/1981, p. 57; G. Vasari, *Le vite*, op. cit., vol. 6, Firenze, 1987, pp. 257-367.
[69] G. Vasari, *Le vite*, op. cit., vol. 6, p. 366.

general project undertaken by Vasari in the second edition of his work. Vasari significantly extended the number of techniques and artistic media he dealt with as his aim was to offer a wider encyclopaedic overview of past artistic production[70]. The inclusion of the theatrical medium remains coherent with this narrative.

Therefore, Brunelleschi's authorship of the Annunciation machinery can neither be confirmed nor completely excluded. It has to be stressed that we lack the documents of *Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi e dell'Annunziata e di San Silvestro* called *dell'Orciuolo*, responsible for the organization of the festivities[71]. These documents could eventually prove the payments to Brunelleschi for the staging apparatus. Moreover, the documents of the *Compagnia di Sant'Agnese*, which organized the Ascension *festa*, contradict Vasari's account as Il Cecca's name does not ever appear in them. On the other hand the complexity of the stage settings for all three festivities allow us to think that Brunelleschi's inventions introduced during the construction of the dome could have had some influence on the projects of the machinery. Worm-gear drive, cog and lantern gear or rope-receiving shafts, which were some of the important innovations introduced by the workshop of the cathedral, could all be used in the construction of heaven in both the Annunciation and the Ascension *festa* and in the design of the roping systems allowing the actors to move between the different levels of the stage. In fact, these inventions can somehow be related to the works on the completion of the cathedral in the years of Brunelleschi's tenure, which, as Gustina Scaglia persuades, were a "proving-ground for engineering inventions"[72]. It is probable that the architect himself was responsible for the rediscovery and promotion of many of the improvements used for the first time during the construction of the dome, such as the introduction of the worm-gear drive[73] to the crane he projected. However, here again it is difficult to estimate the "extent to which ancient literature or theoretical studies of contemporary

[70] P. Rubin Lee, *Giorgio Vasari*, op. cit., p. 193.
[71] N. Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 269.
[72] G. Scaglia, *Drawings of Machines for Architecture from the Early Quattrocento in Italy*, "Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians", 25, 2/1966, p.102.
[73] Ivi, p. 69.

scientists were instrumental[74]" in ascribing to Brunelleschi all of these rediscoveries. In truth, it is not possible to assign the work on the hoisting machinery to one single personality because it seems that the staging device underwent development during the first half of the century from a simple to a more elaborate structure. Already Franco Sacchetti's description of the Annunciation in the Carmine church, introduced into one of the tales of the *Trecentonovelle*, proves the existence of hoisting machinery used around 1390[75] (see chapter 2). This early structure probably evolved during the next fifty years. In light of documents related to the *Compania di Sant'Agnese* the credit for this evolution has to be given to numerous minor artisans who were, year by year, renewing the machinery and to members of the confraternity who were adding new elements and improving the plan of the stage setting for the spectacle.

Nevertheless, this opinion is not shared by all scholars. Paola Ventrone argues that the machinery used in 1439 during the performances organized for the participants of the council and described by Abraham Bishop of Suzdal was modified for the occasion by Brunelleschi on a commission from the circle of Ambrogio Traversari[76]. As mentioned above (see chapter 2, paragraph 2), Ventrone believes that the spectacles organized for the participants of the council took place in San Marco. This new location would link the event with Medicean patronage and would make possible Brunelleschi's participation in its preparations. It cannot be excluded that the Medici would commission to Brunelleschi a modernized version of the hoisting apparatus. The different spatial organization of the spectacles, which took advantage of the longitude of the main nave, suggest that the spectacles for the council were carefully organized and reconsidered. Nevertheless, the Medicean patronage over the performative activities during the council, and their will to create a meaningful spectacle, does not automatically mean that it was Brunelleschi who constructed the hoisting apparatus for the event. Ventrone's opinion, that he was the only possible author

[74] Ivi, p. 102.

[75] F. Sacchetti, *Novella 72*, in Idem, *Il trecentonovelle*, ed. E. Faccioli, Torino, 1970, pp. 186-188. For the dates see for example the introduction to Franco Sacchetti, *Il trecentonovelle*, ed. V. Marucci, Roma, 1996, pp. XIII-XIV. According to Marucci Sacchetti developed his idea for the volume around 1392-1393.

[76] P. Ventrone, *La propaganda unionista*, op. cit., pp. 44-47.

of the spectacles[77], remains a hypothesis and the lack of unambiguous documentary proofs invites us to eventually consider Brunelleschi's authorship of the hoisting machinery as still an open question.

Filippo Lippi, a *fanciullo* from the Carmine

Among the artists related to the world of religious spectacle in fifteenth-century Florence, Fra Filippo Lippi was probably the one on whom the religious drama exercised the most significant influence. This is evident once the strong links between the artist and the Carmine monastery in Florence are taken into consideration. The artist's connections with the Florentine Carmelite convent were already established during the life of his father, Tommaso di Lippo, a butcher, who owned a house on Borgo San Frediano, near the Piazza de' Nerli[78]. Tommaso himself was a member of the *Compagnia di San Frediano* and his name appears often between 1402 and 1411 in the documents of the Carmine mentioning him as a witness or an arbiter of the legal acts performed by the convent[79]. This relationship of Lippi's father with the Carmine is also proven by the care the convent provided for his widow and children after his death. In fact, Tommaso's name disappears from records in 1411 and we assume he died somewhere around that date. After his death the relationship of his two male children, Giovanni and Filippo, with the convent would become close. It is probable that the younger son entered the Carmine at the age of eight, around 1414, and became one of the Carmelite *fanciulli*. Subsequently, both brothers took their vows in the Carmine, Giovanni in 1419 and Filippo in 1421. Some scholars claimed that this care, offered to the orphans, was guaranteed by their uncle, Fra Niccolò Lippi, who was a lector at the Carmine. Nevertheless, it is not certain if this sort of familial link between Filippo and the convent ever existed[80]. In the years following the vows of Tommaso's sons, their mother continued to be involved in the life of the

[77] Ivi, p. 47.

[78] M. Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi. The Carmelite Painter*, New Haven, 1999, p. 13.

[79] ASF, Notarile antecosimiano, F 297, part 1 (Ser Filippo di Cristofano, 1401-1407), ff. 25r, 47v, 106v, 107v, 111r, 113v, 114r, 123r, 123v, 130r, 151v, 170v, 172v, 173r, 174r, 175r, 176r; ASF, Notarile antecosimiano, F 298, part 2 (Ser Filippo di Cristofano, 1408-1415), ff. 4v, 15v, 23r, 78v, 81r, 81v; J. Ruda, *Fra Filippo Lippi. Life and Work with a Complete Catalogue*, London, 1993, p. 348, no. 2.

[80] P. Caioli, *Un altro sguardo sulla vita di fra Filippo Lippi*, "Carmelus", 5/1958, pp. 32, M. Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 247, no. 40.

convent as she became a member of the *Compagnia di Sant'Agnese*. The friars offered her assistance in some small needs, such as writing a tax statement, done in 1427 by the Carmine prior[81] or renting a house in the Piazza del Carmine, which belonged to a Carmelite, Fra Albizzo de' Nerli[82]. The link between the family and the *Compagnia di Sant'Agnese* was particularly strong. Monna Antonia together with her sons soon became confraternity members. Between 1432 and 1434 Giovanni was one of the Carmelite friars in the Compagnia and also Filippo's name appears quite often in the accounts of the confraternity, as he contributed many times to the expenses for the Ascension festivity[83]. It is also possible to imagine, if young Lippi entered the convent around 1414 as *fanciullo*, that he was among the children acting as angels in the Ascension *festa*. Fanciulli were assigned to the care of one of the friars, helped in small tasks and took part in some of the religious and festive celebrations, presumably in roles as the angels, at least judging from the visual evidence[84]. Even if Lippi's early years in the convent remain obscure, it is possible to learn more about his life as a friar. In fact, in August 1452 we find Lippi listed among the "*operai festivitatum*", supervisors responsible for the organization of the *festa*.

> Item eligerunt in operaios festivitatum dicte societatis hinc ad
> per totum mensem augusti MCCCCLII:
> fratrem Filippum Tomasij
> Johannem [missing] de Ferrinis
> Dominicum Laurentii alias …
> Filippum Baldi...
> Iohannem Iacobi ricamatorem[85]

Lippi, as organizer of the spectacle, had to possess an understanding of the staging system and knowledge about the final visual effect of the performance. In fact, his consciousness of the Ascension *festa* is easily traceable in the artist's paintings.

[81] J. Ruda, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 23.
[82] M. Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 13.
[83] ASF, Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi detta di Sant'Agnese, 98, ff. 37r, 46r, 32v, 88r.
[84] M. Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 13.
[85] ASF, Corporazioni religiose soppresse dal governo francese, 113, 192, f. 76v, published in J. Ruda, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., pp. 519-520.

This has already been noticed by Megan Holmes, in her study on Lippi and the Carmelite devotion. The scholar brought our attention to some of the artist's works, which were evidently influenced by the Ascension spectacle[86]. It is worth departing from the scholar's observations on the paintings shaped by the religious drama of the period. The following investigation will ask questions regarding the semantics of the visual elements of Lippi's paintings inspired by the spectacle. In the early *Madonna and Child with Angels, Saints and Donor* painted in the 1420s (figure 3.8, Vittorio Cini Collection, Venice) two angels, who sit in front of the Madonna's throne, play the flute and violin and the motive could possibly be inspired by the true scene of children playing instruments during the *festa*. Nevertheless, musical motives are frequent in Lippi's work. In the *Maringhi Coronation* (figure 3.9), there is an angels' choir gathered on the right side of the composition. The angels look as if they are ready to start singing their lauds at any moment. They watch the coronation from their tribune. Some of them get distracted, one looks up, towards the heavens, while others look down on their fellows in the front row. Depicted with the attention towards a personalization of the behaviour, the choir truly seems like a group of youths gathered to grace with their song the festive moment of the coronation. At the same time, they are the spectators of the event, which happens in front of them. The group of saints in the foreground, instead, looks at the viewer of the painting. Thus, the scene is framed in a double frame, and it looks like a double



Figure 3.8: Filippo Lippi, *Madonna and Child with Angels, Saints and Donor*, mid- to late 1420s, tempera on panel, Vittorio Cini Collection, Venice.

[86] M. Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., pp. 164-168.

performance. The viewer first sees the saints and the angels, who themselves watch the coronation scene. The eye contact between the beholder and the participants of the event drags the spectator into the representation, engages his sight and his emotions, and makes him equally involved with the scene, as those who assist it directly. In this way, the spectator becomes a part of the holy event, and takes part in the action staged in front of him.

The same motive of a tribune and a "spectator" who assists the sacred scene and observes it from a certain distance, can be also found in Lippi's other paintings such as the *Annunciation* from the Museo Nazionale Palazzo Barberini in Rome (figure 3.10). In this painting, the artist defines the place for the audience and depicts the two donors as they would assist the sacred event. They sit behind a balustrade, which divides their space from the Virgin's room. They look firmly

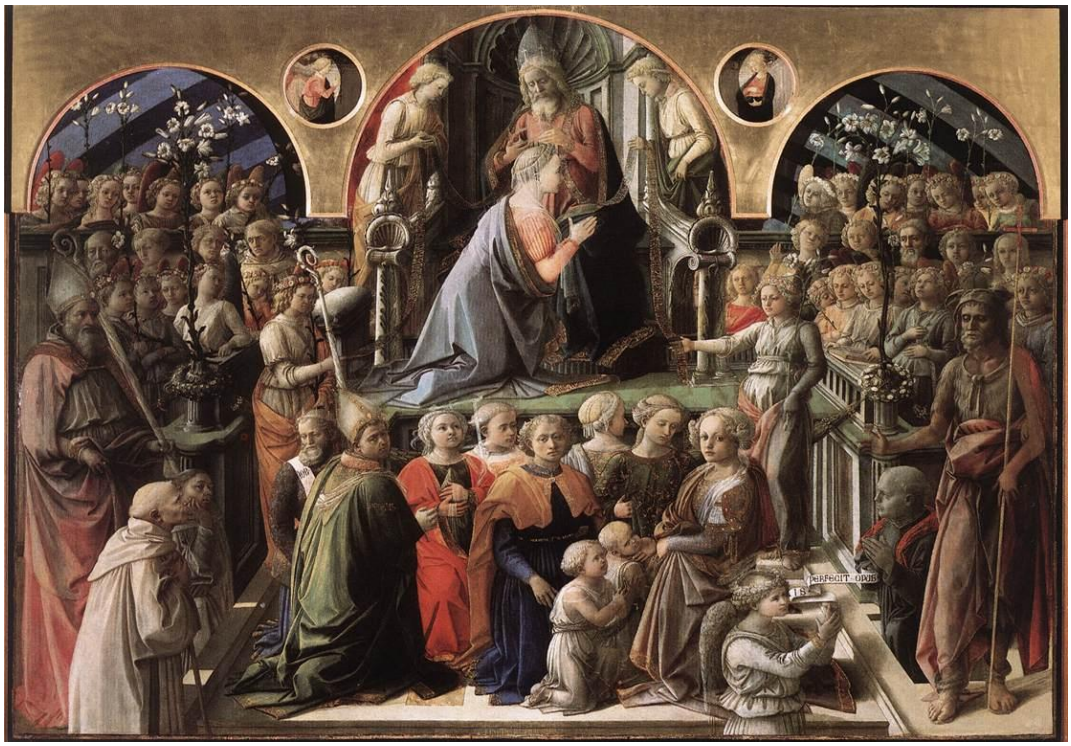


Figure 3.9: Filippo Lippi, *Coronation of the Virgin*, called *Maringhi Coronation*, 1441-1447, tempera on panel, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

ahead but the gesture of their hands expresses their devotion and attention to the mystery that unfolds in front of them. Lippi's innovative solution to include portraits of the donors in the composition as they would piously witness the miracle of the Annunciation, brings to mind religious texts of the period, which encouraged the visualization of sacred events in the believer's imagination, such

as the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (see chapter 2, paragraph 1), and claimed the spiritual benefits of this particular technique if applied to private devotion[87]. The donors portrayed by Lippi hoped to obtain heavenly protection for their earthly life and into eternity through the commission of this holy panel. By paying for the execution of the painting, they expressed their particular dedication to the *Annunziata*, and this is why they are pictured in the moment of adoration, pious meditation of the mystery of the Annunciation. In order to represent their piety, the painter visualized a common devotional practice of the period of a believer who contemplates biblical stories and visualizes them in his mind.



Figure 3.10: Filippo Lippi, *Annunciation with Two Kneeling Donors*, early 1440s, oil on panel, Museo Nazionale Palazzo Barberini, Rome.

[87] M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-century Italy. A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 45-46. Baxandall discusses the practice of the internal visualization used in the private devotion in fifteenth-century Italy by quoting a Venetian devotional text *Zardino de Oration*, published in 1494. Chapter XVI, *Chome meditare la vita di Christo*, pp. x ii v. –x. iii. r, quoted by M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, op. cit., pp. 163-164: "La quale historia acio che tu meglio la possi imprimere nella mente, e piu facilmente ogni acto de essa ti si reducha alla memoria ti sera utile e bisogno che ti fermi ne la mente lochi e persone. Come una citade, laquale sia la citade de Hierusalem, pigliando una citade laquale ti sia bene praticha. Nella quale citade tu trovi li lochi principali neliquali forono exercitati tutti li acti dela passione: come e uno palacio nelquale sia el cenaculo dove Christo fece la cena con li discipuli. Anchora la casa de Anna e la casa de Cayfas dove sia il loco dove fu menato la nocte Mise Iesu. [...] Cosi adunque havendo formate tutte queste cose nela mente, si che quivi sia posta tutta la fantasia, e entrarai nel cubiculo tuo e sola e solitaria discaciando ogni altro pensiero exteriore. Incominciarai a pensare il principio de essa passione. Incominciando come esso Misser Iesu vene in Ierusalem sopra lasino. E morosamente tu trascorrendo ogni acto pensarai afciando dimora sopra ogni acto e passo, e se tu sentirai alcuna divotione in alcuno passo ivi ti ferma: e non passare piu oltra fino che dura quella dolcecia e divotione."



Figure 3.11: Filippo Lippi, *Annunciation*, mid'1440s, oil on panel, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



Figure 3.12: Filippo Lippi, *Annunciation*, 1449-1459 ca, tempera on panel, National Gallery, London.

Lippi's inspirations in the visual world of religious drama are further corroborated by other details introduced by the artist into some of his paintings. From the accounts of the Compagnia di Sant'Agnese we learn, for example, that the wings of the angels used during the spectacles were made of peacocks' feathers. Not surprisingly, therefore, the same motive appears in Lippi's Munich *Annunciation* and the *Annunciation* from the National Gallery in London[88] (figures 3.11 and 3.12).

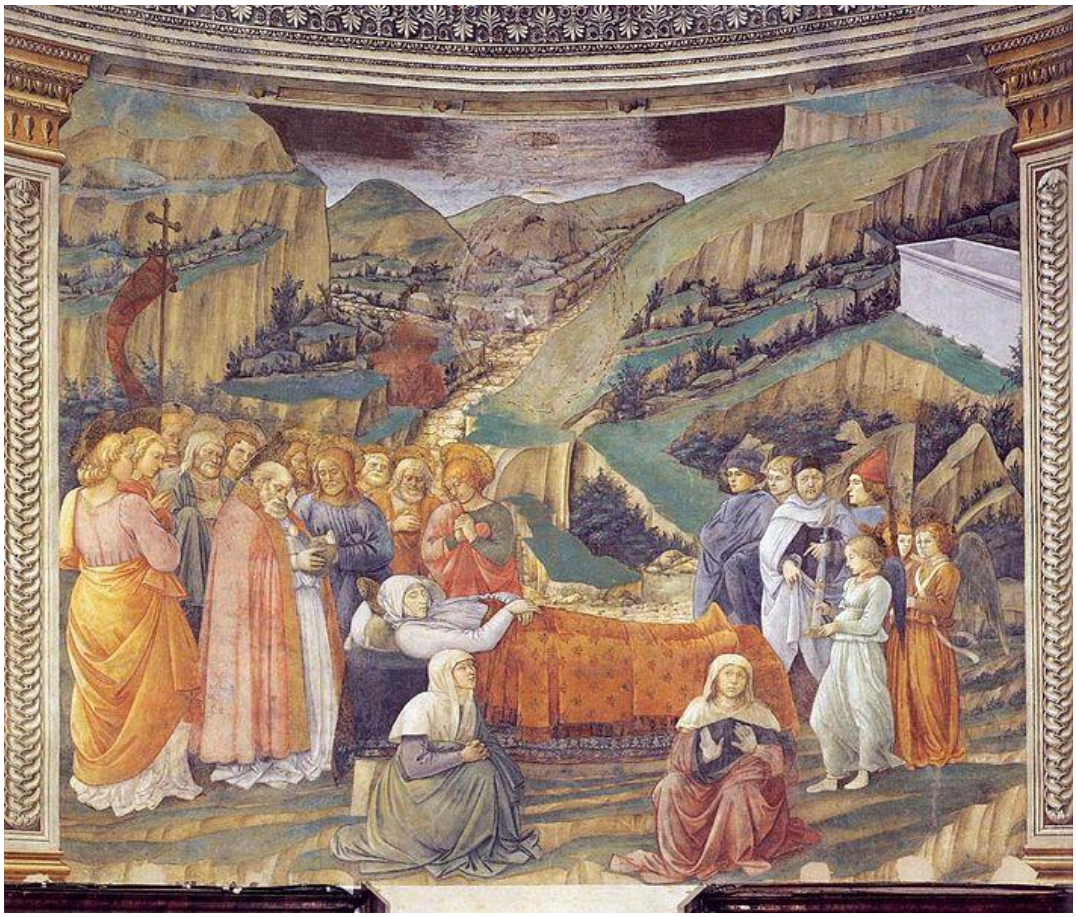


Figure 3.13: Filippo Lippi, *Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin*, 1467-1469, fresco painting, Santa Maria Assunta, Spoleto.

[88] M. Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 165.

If these visual coincidences were already noticed by scholars, a particularly curious detail from the *Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin* in Spoleto (figures 3.13 and 3.14), which suggests a relationship with the world of the religious drama, remained unnoticed so far. If one carefully examines the costumes of the candle-bearing angels, who stand on the right side of the Virgin, one can notice that their dress is nothing more than an outside outfit put on a contemporary shirt. The dress seems to be truly only an external cover of a fifteenth-century male shirt. This detail marks a certain discrepancy in the angels' design. The incongruity is easier to grasp if we compare the figures of the angels with the figures of the apostles standing on the other side of the Virgin's corpse. In fact, the costume of the apostles are designed in a way to seem truly atemporal. Vast, colorful robes cover their bodies without a view underneath any other garment. The apostles belong to the biblical world, which stays beyond the spatio-temporal borders of contemporaneity. The space of the fresco, in fact, seems to be divided into two parts, and the apostles represent the timeless one. The angels, instead, stand on the opposite side of the Virgin's bed, and next to them, there are four contemporary male figures, one of them is probably Fra Filippo himself[89]. Therefore, the ambiguity of the angels' outfit, which resembles the costumes of the Florentine *fanciulli* acting as angels during the religious festivities, marked the present-time, earthly dimension of the figures worshipping the Virgin on the right side of the fresco. Again, as in the *Annunciation* from Palazzo Barberini, the contemporary dimension of the painting is related to the



Figure 3.14: Filippo Lippi, *Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin*, detail, 1467-1469, fresco painting, Santa Maria Assunta, Spoleto.

element of piety and worship of the sacred event pictured in it. The portrayed figures display a serious attitude, as they would carefully observe and contemplate the event of which they are witnesses. Moreover, it seems that Fra Filippo indicates the Virgin's bed to the boys/angels and tries to invite them to meditate upon the mystery of her Dormition and Assumption. In this way the present time enters the sacred time of the Bible through the devotion, and the meditation upon the history of salvation. The spectacle, reflected in these representations, was one of the expressions of the contemporary piety. It seems therefore, that the allusions to the world of the religious drama conveyed to the frescoes meanings related to present time devotional attitudes.

As Megan Holmes emphasized[90], there are some more elements of the fresco, which recall the Ascension spectacle. One of them is the scene of the Assumption with the mandorla which brought Mary to heaven. The mandorla was painted *a secco* after the execution of the Dormition, painted *a fresco*. The superposition of the Assumption over the Dormition introduced the temporal aspect into the scene. First Mary died and



Figure 3.15: Filippo Lippi, *Adoration of the Child with Saints John the Baptists and Bernard of Clairvaux*, called *Adoration of* Palazzo Medici, 1455-1459 ca, tempera on panel, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

[90] M. Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 166. On the similarity between the mandorla in the scenes of the Assumption and the Florentine spectacle see: A. Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds*, op.cit., pp. 16-25; O. Brendel, *The Origin and Meaning of the Mandorla*, "Gazette des Beaux-Arts", 25, 86/1944, pp. 5-23.

afterwards the body was brought to heaven. Moreover, the mandorla represented in the painting, which transported the Virgin into paradise, looks strikingly similar to the *nuvola* used during the Ascension festivity to hoist Christ[91]. Therefore, the *Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin* in Spoleto seem to present in painted form what could be staged during a spectacle for the Assumption festivity. In this way, the frescoes referred to a ritual organized to praise and to worship the Virgin Mary. These examples are quite suggestive, as the references to religious performances link the frescos to civic ritual and worship.

The relationship between Filippo Lippi's artistic production and the visual world of the Florentine religious drama is further emphasised in the *Adoration* of Palazzo Medici (figure 3.15, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin). In the painting, behind God the Father, one can see the shining circles of the heavens which seem similar to the machinery for the Annunciation play described by Abraham of Suzdal.

> La tribuna deve raffigurare le sfere celesti, donde Dio Padre manda l'angelo Gabriele alla santa Vergine [...] Sette cerchi circondano il trono [...], e de' cerchi il più piccolo è del diametro di circa due braccia, poi ve n'è un altro più grande di due spanne, e così via, e in quelli sono poste mille lucernine d'olio accese. [...] Tutto ciò serve a rappresentare i sette cieli, la maestà celeste e l'inestinguibile luce angelica, ed ogni cosa è avviluppato dalle menzionate cortine. [...] Lassù, sulla tribuna, si vede Dio Padre circondato da più di cinquecento lampane ardenti, che girano continuamente, andando su e giù[92].

[91] M. Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 165.

[92] A. D'Ancona, *Origini del teatro italiano: libri tre: con due appendici sulla rappresentazione drammatica del contado toscano e sul teatro mantovano nel sec. XVI*, vol. 1, Torino, 1891, pp. 247-248.

On Lippi's panel one sees five circles of small lighting points around God the Father who appears from above. The Holy Spirit flies out from a group of small clouds. The motive may be inspired by an element of the heaven machinery in use during the Annunciation spectacle of 1439. From the Abraham of Suzdal's description we know that at the time the heaven, where God the Father sat, was made of a cube with an opening at its base. During the spectacle, when the heaven opened, the spectators saw God the Father and behind him a shining disk with seven circles of small lights. As Alessandra Buccheri convincingly argues[93], the construction described by the Russian Bishop, evolved during the following decades and the cube was later substituted by a mobile, wooden dome, hanging from the ceiling. This evolution is testified by the sources[94], but also by the representation of the heavens in the Florentine painting. In the *Assumption of the Virgin* by Francesco Botticini from 1475-1476 ca (figure 3.16, National Gallery, London) or Sandro Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity* from 1500 ca (figure 3.17, National Gallery, London) one finds, in fact, a circular, cone-like heaven, with shining lights and angels dancing around. They all seem inspired by the later versions of the cloud machinery, which developed during the second half of the century[95].



Figure 3.16: Francesco Botticini, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1475-1476, tempera on panel, National Gallery, London.

[93] A. Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds*, op. cit., pp. 29-51.

[94] See Vasari's description of the Annunciation and the Ascension apparatus included into the life of Filippo Brunelleschi and Il Cecca and above, paragraph 3. Buccheri argues that Vasari described his own constructions prepared for the spectacles of 1565. G. Vasari, *Le vite*, op. cit., vol. 3, pp. 188-191, 450-452.

[95] Ivi, p. 41.

The pictorial details introduced by Lippi into his art suggest the influence of spectacle on painting in fifteenth-century Florence. However, an impact, or rather an exchange between the two media, was not limited, neither in Lippi's works, nor in the production of the other artists of the period, to simple inserts into the paintings of chosen visual elements deriving from religious spectacles. In the aforementioned study by Megan Holmes the scholar summarizes her short analysis of the impact of the Ascension *festa* on Lippi's painting claiming that many of the artist's works "leave one with the powerful impression of being staged[96]", and that the characters represented in Lippi's paintings are marked by a high self-consciousness and by a strong awareness of the presence of a spectator and his glance from the outside[97]. In consequence, the artist entrusted to some of his characters the task of establishing a bond between the space of representation and the spectator. These figures, disregarding the part they had to play, searched for the public as they were more attracted by the external space, rather than by



Figure 3.17: Sandro di Mariano Filipepi, called Sandro Botticelli, *Mystical Nativity*, 1500 ca, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London.

[96] M. Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 167.
[97] Ivi, p. 167.

the events happening directly in front of them. Many examples of this kind can be found in Lippi's production and one of them is the figure of the angel holding the Infant Jesus in *Madonna and Child with Angels* (figure 3.18, Uffizi Gallery). This type of figure, which connects the inner space of the painting with the outside world of the spectator, was highly popular in Florentine religious art during the fifteenth century. Michael Baxandall links the task fulfilled by these characters with the Florentine *festaiuolo* responsible for engaging the public into the action of a spectacle during various religious festivities[98]. However, even if the iconographical details, which testify to the dialogue between art and spectacle, have been recognized, the meaning of these inserts has not been hitherto contemplated. It is argued that Lippi's effort to represent the sacred events as they would be "staged" in front of the viewer, illustrate the ongoing experimentation with the abilities of religious painting. Every painting on a holy subject was an expression of devotion and served as a tool in the dialogue between the believers and God, Virgin Mary or saints. In order to make the painting efficient in its task of an agent, Lippi recalled in it other devotional practices, such as the religious spectacle. Thanks to the performative qualities of religious paintings, the artist guaranteed spiritual benefits for the spectator who contemplated the image. In this way the perception of a holy panel became similar to the perception of a religious spectacle, and we can quote here again the fragment from Belcari's *Rappresentazione di Abramo and Isaak*, from 1449 (chapter



Figure 3.18: Filippo Lippi, *Madonna and Child with Two Angels*, 1465 ca, tempera on panel, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

2, paragraph 1).

> L'occhio si dice ch'è la prima porta
> per la qual l'intelletto intende e gusta:
> la seconda è l'udir con voce scorta,
> che fa la mente nostra essere robusta:
> però vedrete ed udirete in sorta
> recitare una storia santa e giusta;
> ma se volete intender tal Misterio
> state divoti e con buon desiderio.[99]

Lippi pictured in the images the holy mysteries, which the spectators could observe and reflect upon with devotion and pious desire, as they did while watching the spectacles. In some cases, as in the *Annunciation* from the Museo Nazionale Palazzo Barberini in Rome, in the *Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin* in Spoleto (figures 3.13 and 3.14) or in the *Maringhi Coronation* (figure 3.9), the artist included in the painting the spectators, who piously meditated upon the holy events they were looking at.

Further analysis of Lippi's murals in Prato (chapter 4) will investigate more in depth the impact of these stylistic solutions on the meaning of the religious images. Moreover, it will show how both media got involved in the discourse of power and were used by the rulers as a promotion of their leadership. In fact, in the period following the years of Lippi's artistic activity, the political situation of Florence changed significantly. During the rule of Lorenzo il Magnifico the domination of the Medicean faction over the republican government became evident and undeniable. Public ritual, imagery and devotion started to be used by the Medici rulers as a means of communication, which disseminated the message of support for the rulers. The changes in Florentine ritual, and the importance of the Medici for the social life of the city during the rule of Lorenzo il Magnifico, are attested to by the biography of Domenico Ghirlandaio. In fact, his relationship with the theatrical and the confraternal spaces of Florence depended

[99] F. Belcari, *La rappresentazione di Abramo ed Isaac*, in *Sacre rappresentazioni del Quattrocento*, ed. L. Banfi, Torino, 1968, p. 41.

on his connection with the elite of the city and the Medicean circle of commissioners.

Domenico Ghirlandaio and the Medici family: art and the religious spectacle

Domenico Ghirlandaio is yet another of the Florentine artists whose biography evidences the importance of the painters' engagement in the civic and religious life of the confraternity for their artistic career. Ghirlandaio was born in 1448 or 1449 in Florence as the eldest son of a Florentine shopkeeper or an artisan named Tommaso di Currado Bigordi. He had two brothers Davide (born in 1451/1452), and Benedetto (born in 1458) and two sisters: Alessandra (born in 1450/1451) and Dianora (born in 1454/1455)[100]. We do not know much about his early training, and different hypotheses about his initial relationship with Verrocchio, Pollaiuolo and Baldovinetti have been made[101]. Even if the early years of his career remain in darkness, between the 1470s and 1490s Ghirlandaio's workshop, run together with Davide and Benedetto, became one of the most successful and busy artistic enterprises of the city. The success of the painter brought to the establishment of an artistic dynasty, as his brothers Davide and Benedetto and his son Ridolfo carried on the activity of Domenico after his death in 1494[102]. It will be argued that the fortune of the family enterprise depended on Ghirlandaio's engagement in the civic and devotional life of the community.

The first works of art that can be attributed to Domenico come from the late 1460s and the beginning of 1470s. These are the frescoes in Sant'Andrea a Brozzi in San Donnino, near Florence, representing the *Baptism of Christ* and the *Virgin and Child Enthroned with SS. Sebastian and Julian*, executed around 1468 and 1470. Soon after, the artist painted the frescoes in the Ognissanti in Florence. These were commissioned by the Vespucci family, and represent the *Madonna della Misericorida*, *Pietà*, *Archangel Raphael* and an unidentified saint. The frescoes

[100] The tax returns mention also a brother Giovanni Battista born in 1456/1457, who disappears from the declarations in the following years. His name was given to another son, who also did not reach the adolescence. J. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio: Artist and Artisan*, New Haven-London, 2000, pp. 14-15.

[101] Ivi, pp. 23-27.

[102] A. M. Bernacchioni, *Ghirlandaio: una famiglia di pittori del Rinascimento tra Firenze e Scandicci*, Firenze, 2011.

are believed to be finished around 1472[103]. Exactly in the same period, in 1470, Ghirlandaio is listed for the first time among the members of the *Compagnia di San Paolo*[104], and the coincidence between the beginning of an independent artistic career, proved by the first direct commissions coming from the Florentine patriciate, and the initiation of this activity among the brothers of one of the confraternities, is rather significant.

The *Compagnia di San Paolo* was one of the Florentine *compagnie di notte*, which followed the most strict obedience between the confraternities of *disciplinati*. The sodality had a strong penitential character and its brothers were not involved in the organization of religious spectacles or in the singing of lauds during religious ceremonies. It does not mean, however, that the devotion promoted in the confraternity was significantly different from the spirituality of the brothers of the *laudesi*. Both types of sodalities depended on the participation of families from the neighbourhood, they offered spiritual care to their members' and involved them in different devotional practices such as participation in festivities, sermons and services of penitential character. Ghirlandaio's family was involved in the activities of the confraternity of San Paolo since 1448, when his father registered as its member[105]. Afterwards all the male members of Ghirlandaio's family entered the pious congregation and in time they assumed important roles in it. In January 1480 the Bigordi family obtained three important appointments within the confraternity. Tommaso di Currado, Domenico's father, became the confraternity's counsellor, Domenico himself became an *infermiere* and held this position during the same year and, finally, Davide assumed the office of *maestro dei novizi*[106].

Despite the frequent absences, the involvement in confraternal life became seminal for the future career of the young artist. The *Compagnia di San Paolo*, in fact, was the place where Ghirlandaio could have met Lorenzo il Magnifico, as the young Medici was also engaged in the activity of the

[103]K. Schlebusch, *Neue Dokumente zur Vespucci-Kapelle in Ognissanti und zur Familie Domenico Ghirlandaios*, "Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz", 53, 2-3/2009, p. 364.

[104] ASF, Compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, 1594, (Compagnia di San Paolo), no. 42, f. 5v, published in J. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, op. cit., p. 337.

[105] ASF, Compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, 1594, (Compagnia di San Paolo), no. 42, f. 3r, published in J. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, op. cit., p. 337.

[106] J. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, op. cit., p. 20.

brotherhood. The relationship between Lorenzo and the *Compagnia di San Paolo* seems particularly strong. Around 1470 Lorenzo de' Medici and the circle of his closest collaborators, Tommaso Soderini, Iacopo di Niccolò di Cocco Donati and Bernardo Buongirolami, got involved in the reforms of San Paolo's statutes with the aim to gather in the hands of the Medicean circle a great part of authority over the group[107]. First, Soderini was entrusted with the position of confraternity governor, and subsequently he reformed the rules of election to different offices[108]. The reforms occurred in the decisive period for the stability of Medici's power in Florence, between 1470 and 1471, and they were parallel to Magnifico's successful attempt to reform the Florentine electoral rules in order to achieve full control over the state's political system[109]. Young Ghirlandaio entered the confraternity of San Paolo exactly in this stormy period of 1470. At that time he was the 21 year old son of a middle class shopkeeper or artisan, and in following years he would become one of the most successful painters of the period, commissioned by Sixtus IV between 1475-76 to fresco the Latin Library in the Vatican and in 1477 to decorate the Chapel of Santa Fina in the collegiate church of San Gimignano. The commissions for which Ghirlandaio is most well-known came only in the 1480s and it seems that his connections with the families strictly related to the Medici, established in the previous decade, became fruitful in the next years. From 1475 he was in Rome employed by the Pope for the decoration of the library and maybe on this occasion he met, for the first time, Giovanni Tornabuoni, the manager of the Medici's bank in Rome and treasurer of Sixtus IV. Vasari recalled that in 1477 Ghirlandaio was called by Tornabuoni to work in his wife's funeral chapel in Santa Maria Sopra Minerva[110]. It is uncertain

[107] R. F. E. Weissman, *Lorenzo de' Medici and the Confraternity of San Paolo*, in *Lorenzo de' Medici. New Perspectives. Proceedings from the International Conference Held at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, April 30-May 2, 1992*, ed. B. Toscani, New York, 1993, pp. 315-329.

[108] One of seminal points in Soderini's reform was to entrust to the governor the authority to elect the officers. See more in R. F. E. Weissman, *Lorenzo de' Medici*, op. cit., pp. 320-321.

[109] Ivi, p. 318.

[110] It is uncertain if Ghirlandaio really worked for Giovanni Tornabuoni in Rome. The chapel in Santa Maria Sopra Minerva is lost and we learn only from Vasari about frescoes and an altarpiece made by Ghirlandaio. The frescoes would represent the life of the Virgin and the life of Saint John the Baptist so the iconographic program would be similar to the one in the Tornabuoni chapel in Florence. In the testament of Leonardo Tornabuoni an altarpiece dedicated for the altar of Saint John the Baptist was mentioned but we do not know it was truly coming from the chapel in Rome. The sketch

whether this commission ever existed but it is certain that at the end of the 1470s Ghirlandaio entered in contact with the Medicean circle. During the 1480s the commissions coming from Lorenzo's entourage would cement Ghirlandaio's high reputation and esteem, as confirmed by his work for families such as Sassetti (Sassetti's chapel in Santa Trinita, 1483-1485) and Tornabuoni (Tornabuoni chapel in Santa Maria Novella, 1486-90), both involved in the Medici bank. Further, Ghirlandaio was responsible for the fresco in the convent of San Marco remaining under strong Medici patronage (*The Last Supper*, ca 1480-81), the decoration of the Sala dei Gigli in the Palazzo Vecchio (1482-84) and the decoration of the Sistine Chapel (*The Calling of Peter and Andrew*, *Resurrection* and *Assumption*, portraits of popes, 1481-82)[111]. The relationship between Ghirlandaio and the Medici family remains seminal for the understanding of Ghirlandaio's works, as the ideas circulating among Lorenzo il Magnifico's intellectual circle are reflected in the artist's paintings (see chapter 5, paragraph 2)[112].

It seems that in Ghirlandaio's artistic and personal biography the year 1480 marked a decisive moment and the future success of the painter laid in Lorenzo's hands. Before that date, Ghirlandaio worked for the Vespucci family and Sixtus IV, which could have lead him to a direct contact with the Medici. Moreover, the artist already had the possibility to meet Lorenzo de' Medici on the occasion of his activity in the San Paolo confraternity. In 1480 Domenico and the other members of his family were elected to higher offices in the confraternity, which by this time was ruled by Lorenzo's retinue. In addition, in the *catasto* of the same year we find Domenico married to Costanza di Bartolomeo Nucci[113], whose family belonged to the Florentine patriciate. As rightly noticed by Jean Cadogan, Costanza's dowry indicated the existence of a significant difference between Domenico's and his wife's origins[114]. While marrying her Domenico received from her family the dowry of 1000 florins. This sum was substantially higher than the

of Francesca's funeral monument was done by Martin van Heemskerck. G. J. van der Sman, *Lorenzo e Giovanna. Vita e arte nella Firenze del Quattrocento*, Firenze, 2010, pp. 113-116.

[111] H. L. Horne, *Alessandro Filipepi, Commonly Called Sandro Botticelli*, London, 1908, pp. 74-75.

[112] V. Bonmatí Sánchez, *El humanismo renacentista florentino en las pinturas de Domenico Ghirlandaio*, "Interpres", 29/2010, pp. 192-206.

[113] M. Chiarini, *Domenico Bigordi, detto (del) Ghirlandaio*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 10, Roma, 1968, p. 452.

[114] J. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, op. cit., p. 17.

330 florins of dowry offered to Domenico's sister, Alessandra, by her father[115]. Arriving in this particular moment of the artist's career, when Ghirlandaio started to extend the network of his commissioners, the marriage can testify Ghirlandaio's aspirations to introduce himself into a higher strata of society. These efforts would be surely repaid by his success in the 1480s and 90s and a slew of continuous commissions from the Medicean circle[116].

Confraternal life and the Florentine civic tradition had a prominent place in the relationship between Ghirlandaio and the circle of the Medici. Medicean patronage over some of the Florentine confraternities was a constant element of their politics since the time of Cosimo il Vecchio. The Compagnia de' Magi and the Compagnia della Purificazione e di San Zanobi, both related to the convent of San Marco, gained significant benefit from the favourable approach of the Medici as their patrons. The refurbishment of the oratory for *Compagnia della Purificazione e di San Zanobi* was entirely paid by the "*Pater Patriae*". In the following decades, during the rule of Piero di Cosimo and Lorenzo il Magnifico, the participation of the family in confraternal life would become more intense. Lorenzo was not only a member of the *Confraternita di San Paolo* but he belonged also to the *Compagnia de' Magi*, to *Santa Maria delle Laudi detta di Sant'Agnese*, to the *Compagnia di Gesù Pellegrino*, *San Domenico* and the one dedicated to *Santa Maria della Croce al Tempio*[117]. However, he was not the only Medici involved in the confraternal life of the town. In 1481 we find Lorenzo il Popolano and Piero il Fatuo, Lorenzo's six year old son, as members of the *Santo Spirito* confraternity *del Piccione*[118].

The involvement of the Medici family in the life of the Florentine confraternities had a political meaning, but it was not limited to the question of control over possibly dangerous groups where citizens could gather and

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[115] Ibidem.

[116] J. Cadogan, *An* «Huomo di Chonto:». *Reconsidering the Social Status of Domenico Ghirlandaio and His Family*, "Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte", 1/2014, pp. 27-46.

[117] R. F. E. Weissman, *Lorenzo de' Medici*, op. cit., p. 315.

[118] ASF, Compagnia di S. Maria delle Laudi e Spirito Santo detta del Piccione, 2, f. 4r. "E piu hanno vinto che Lorenzo di Piero Francesco de Medici sia de nostri fratelli vinse questo di 14 di maggio per 43 fave nere e 1 biancha. Fu messo asente nominato per tutti e chapitani che segono al presente a libro colomba

E piu hanno vinto che Piero di Lorenzo di Piero di Chosimo de Medici sia de nostri fratelli. Vinse questo di 14 maggio per 42 fave nere e 1 biancha. Nominato per tutto il segio de chapitani che segono al presente fu messo asente a libro colomba"

organize conspiracy. Medicean participation in the activity of the confraternities allowed members of the family and the circle of their clients to take an active part in the process of shaping the devotional life of the community and, thus, to be part of the Florentine ritual. They participated in the process of defining and forming Florentine *sacra*, as asserted by Trexler[119]. The establishment and transformation of the civic and the religious ritual was another field on which the Medici exercised their power. The activity in the domain of Florentine rituality and devotion allowed them to re-connect themselves with the vernacular tradition of the city and gain the support of the lower and middle classes of Florentine society[120]. This process involved not just their participation in the devotional life of the confraternities. Some of the members of the family also composed devotional texts and, at the same time, they promoted the literary religious production of writers such as Feo Belcari, Antonia and Bernardo Pulci, and later, Castallano Castellani, who composed many devotional verses and *sacre rappresentazioni*. As a result of Medici's patronage over the devotional spectacle of the town, in 1471, during the visit to Florence of Galeazzo Sforza, the Annunciation spectacle was performed in the San Felice in Piazza church with the text of Feo Belcari. In 1486, instead, the Assumption of the Virgin was celebrated to honour the ambassador of Spain and, in 1494, the Annunciation spectacle was staged in San Felice to praise Charles VIII and his entry into Florence[121].

From the 1470s, until her death in 1482, Lucrezia Tornabuoni became depositary of the Florentine devotional tradition. Not only did she write the religious *lauda* herself, but she also supported poets who composed *sacre rappresentazioni*. Finally, together with her sister Dianora, she became dedicatee of Antonino Pierozzi's *Opera a ben vivere*. Her son, Lorenzo, composed the

[119] R. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, New York, 1980, pp.45-84. In the second chapter of his work Trexler analyses the Florentine cosmos proving how "deeply the Florentines were actually involved in making their own *sacra*", p. 84.

[120] Paolo Orvieto puts in this light Lucrezia Tornabuoni's religious production and states that Piero's wife guaranteed the support of Florentine oligarchy by linking the Medici rule with local Florentine tradition. P. Orvieto, *Lorenzo de' Medici e l'Umanesimo toscano del secondo Quattrocento*, in *Storia della letteratura italiana*, ed. E. Malato, vol. 3, Roma 1996, pp. 295-403.

[121] A. Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds*, op. cit., p. 39.

Rappresentazione di San Giovanni e Paolo, which was staged by the *Compagnia di San Giovanni Evangelista* on 17th February 1492[122].

Given the strong relationship between Ghirlandaio and the Medicean circle of commissioners, his works can be seen in the context of the religious and social climate of Lorenzo il Magnifico's rule. As will be analysed further (chapter 5), the Tornabuoni frescoes fully reflect current theological and philosophical debates and become fully intelligible only if referred to within the context of the devotional tradition of the Florentine ruling class. As it has been shown, sacred drama and civic devotion occupied a prominent place in the Florentine tradition, and the importance of spectacle for local identity constituted the basis for its dialogue with the visual arts.

[122] On Medici festivities see P. Ventrone, *Feste e spettacoli nella Firenze di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, in *Le tems revient*, op. cit., pp. 21-53.

Colour Plates



Plate 1: Filippo Lippi, *St. Mark*, vault, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.



Plate 2: Filippo Lippi, *St. Matthew*, vault, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.



Plate 3: Filippo Lippi, *St. Luke*, vault, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.



Plate 4: Filippo Lippi, *St. John the Evangelist*, vault, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.



Plate 5: Filippo Lippi, *Birth and Infancy of St. Stephen*, lunette, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.

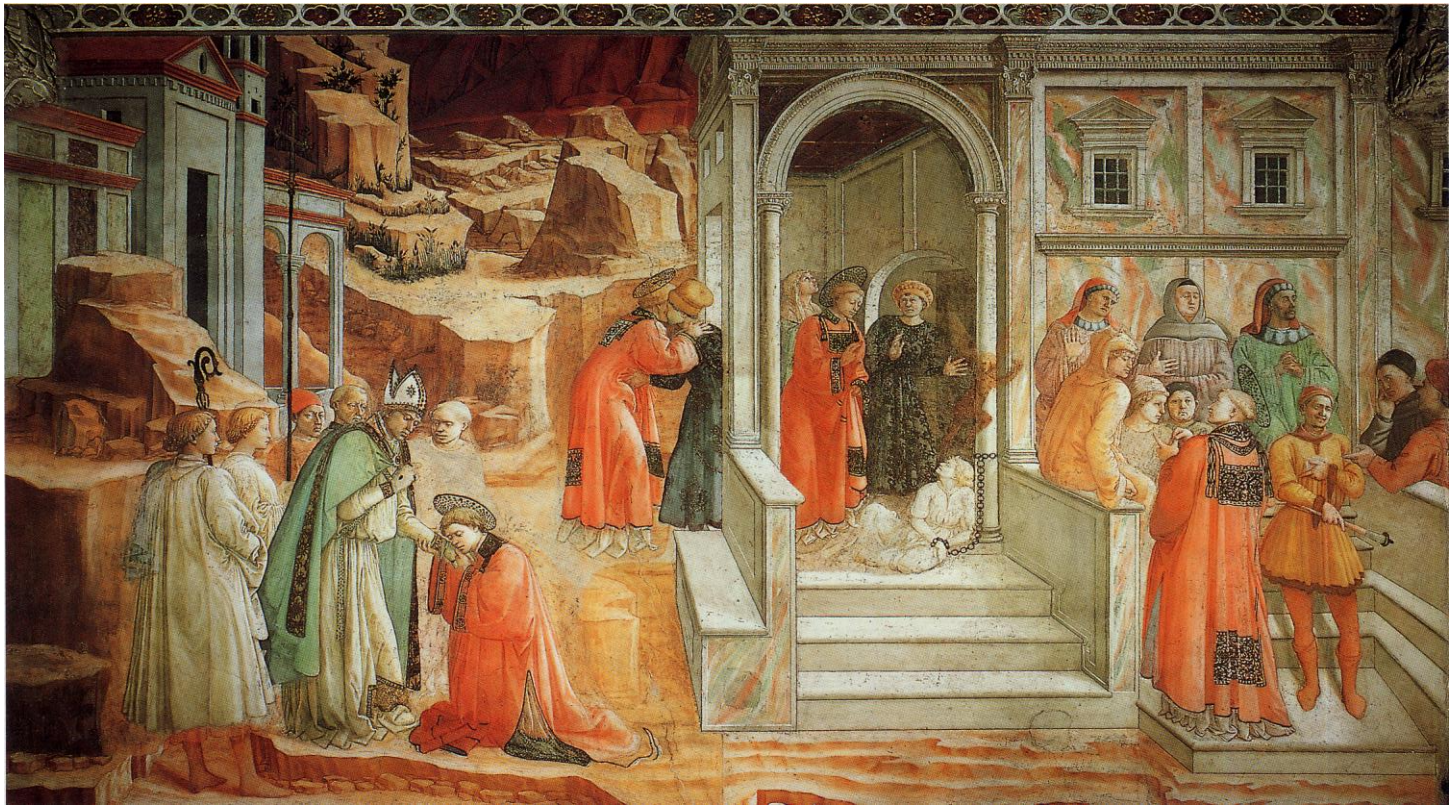


Plate 6: Filippo Lippi, *Mission of St. Stephen*, middle tier, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.



Plate 7: Filippo Lippi, *Martyrdom of St. Stephen*, altar wall, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.



Plate 8: Filippo Lippi, *Celebration of the Relics of St. Stephen*, lower tier, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.



Plate 9: Filippo Lippi, *Birth and Naming of St. John the Baptist*, lunette, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.



Plate 10: Filippo Lippi, *Mission of St. John the Baptist*, middle tier, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.



Plate 11: Filippo Lippi, *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, altar wall, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.

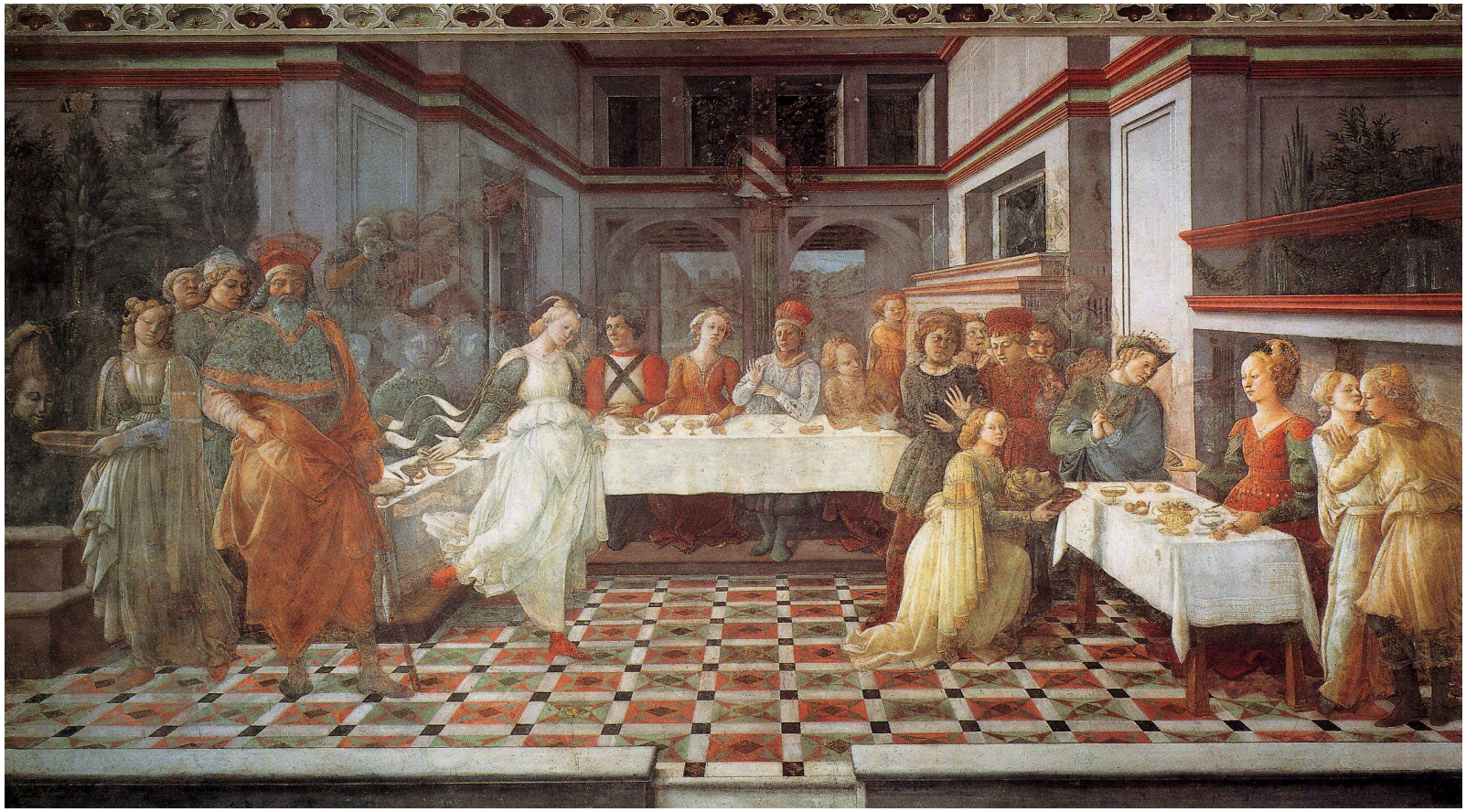


Plate 12: Filippo Lippi, *Feast of Herod*, lower tier, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.



Plate 13: Fra Diamante [attr.], *St. Albert of Trapani*, altar wall, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.



Plate 14: Fra Diamante [attr.], *St. Giovanni Gualberto*, altar wall, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.



Plate 15: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, Tornabuoni Chapel, 1485-1490, fresco paintings and stained glass windows, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 16: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Four Evangelists*, vault, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 17: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Annunciation to Zacharias*, lower tier, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 18: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Visitation*, lower tier, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

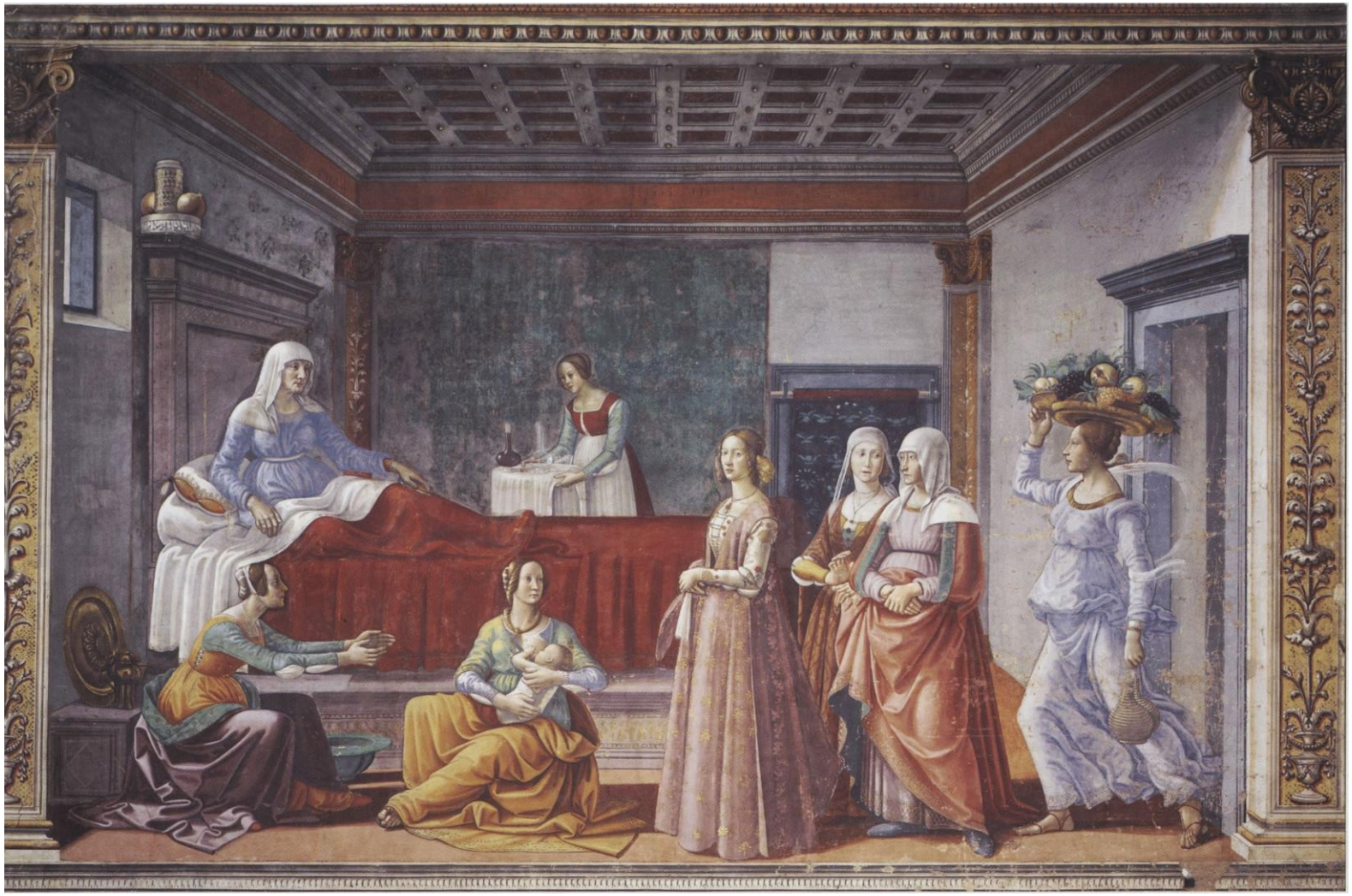


Plate 19:
Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Birth of St. John the Baptist*, second tier, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 20: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Naming of the Baptist*, second tier, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 21: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Preaching of St. John he Baptist*, third tier, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

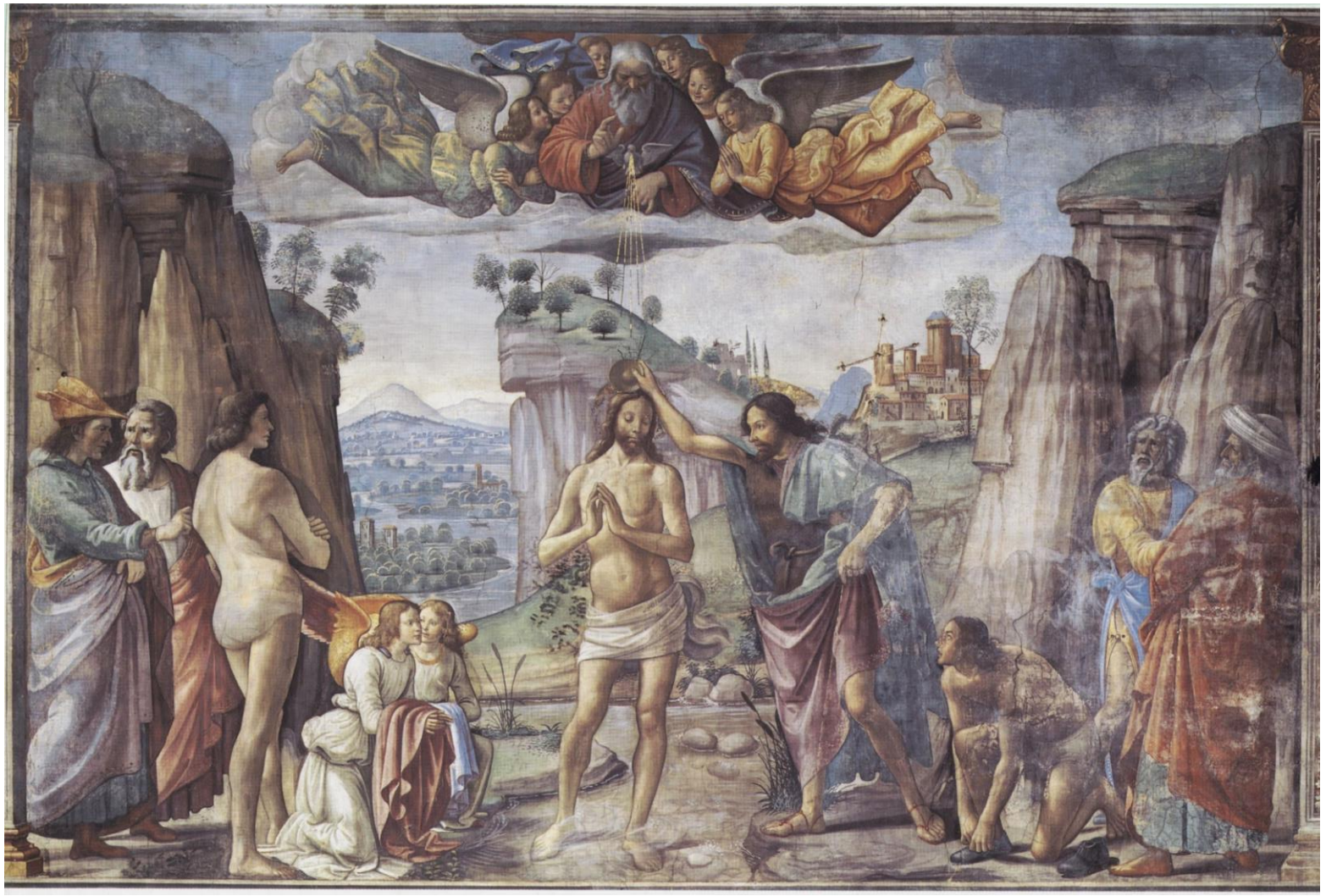


Plate 22: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Baptism of Christ*, third tier, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

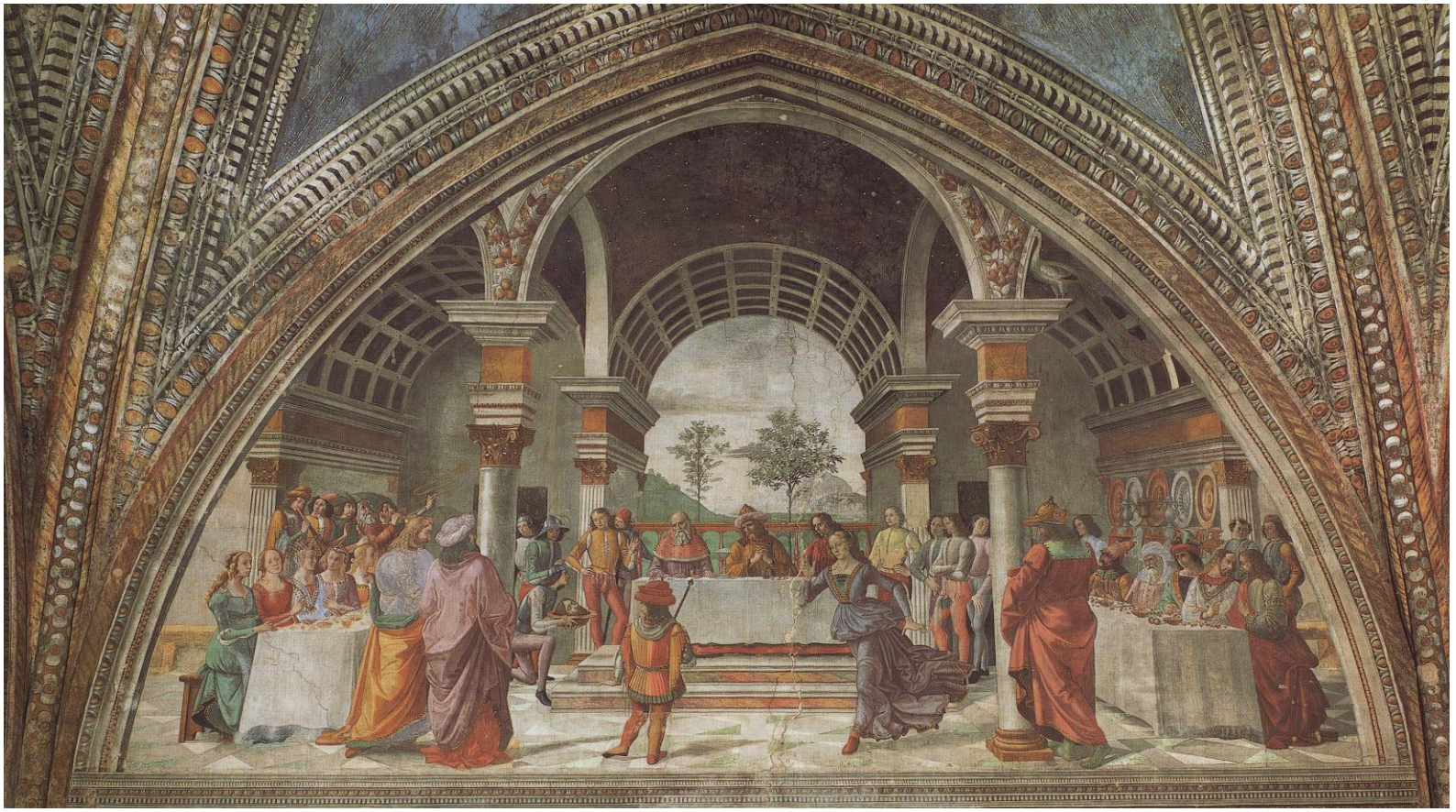


Plate 23: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirldandaio, and workshop, *Feast of Herod*, lunette, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 24: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple*, first tier, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 25: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Birth of the Virgin*, first tier, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 26:
Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, second tier, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 27:
Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Marriage of the Virgin*, second tier, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 28:
Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Adoration of the Magi*, third tier, 1485-1490-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 29: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Slaughter of the Innocents*, third tier, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 30: Domenico Ghirlandaio called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin*, lunette, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 31: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop
***Giovanni Tornabuoni*, altar wall,**
1485-1490,
fresco painting,
Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella,
Florence.



Plate 32: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirldandaio, and workshop,
***Francesca di Luca Pitti*, altar wall,**
1485-1490,
fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella,
Florence.



Plate 33: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Annunciation*, altar wall, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 34: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop,
***St. John the Baptist in the Desert*, altar wall,**
1485-1490,
Fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel,
Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 35: Domenio Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop,
***St. Dominic Tests Books in the Fire*,**
altar wall, 1485-1490,
fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel,
Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 36: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Martyrdom of St. Peter Martyr*, altar wall, 1485-1490, Fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Plate 37: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop,
Coronation of the Virgin,
lunette of the altar wall,
1485-1490,
fresco painting,
Tornabuoni Chapel,
Santa Maria Novella,
Florence.

Chapter 4

Filippo Lippi's Frescoes in the Prato Cathedral. Narrative Conventions, Illusion and the Ritual of Intercession

In May 1452 Filippo Lippi, an already established Florentine artist-monk, was chosen by the officials of the Pieve di Santo Stefano in Prato to decorate the walls of the main chapel of the church, which had remained bare for many years. The works were supposed to cost 1200 florins and were expected to be completed in three years. Lippi's name, however, was not the first to be proposed by Geminiano Inghirami, the cathedral's provost, as the possible author of the decoration. In fact, before offering the appointment to Lippi, Inghirami had proposed it for Fra Angelico, who seemingly refused the work. This denial forced the city council to continue the search for an available artist and resulted in Lippi's employment[1]. Work on the chapel continued for the next thirteen years and finished only in January 1466. Also, their cost turned out to be underestimated as the total expense for the wall paintings reached 1962 florins[2]. The Prato murals remain one of the key accomplishments in Lippi's *oeuvre*, as well as a crucial contribution to the process of elaboration of a new narrative convention in mural painting. Deeply rooted in the Tuscan tradition of narrative cycles of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the murals in Prato combine elements of past conventions with an innovative spatial display of the scenes. Lippi's care over the creation of a coherent spatial setting for his compositions, with an ever attentive use of linear perspective, and the introduction of illusory effect into the lowest tier of the frescoes, signal a significant stylistic transition in the Prato decoration. Thanks to the compositional novelty of the cycle, Lippi's high reputation in Florentine circles, Prato's proximity to Florence and the important contacts between the two cities, the murals in the cathedral became a point of reference for Florentine artists of the second half of the century who, like Lippi, were facing the challenge of decorating a chapel with a narrative cycle of frescoes.

[1] E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi and Murals for Prato Cathedral*, "Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz", 19, 1/1975, pp. 4-10.
[2] Ivi, p. 67.

Lippi's innovations – spatial organization of the scenes, introduction of illusory effects, contemporary characters and backdrops – coexist in the frescoes with distinctive elements of the tradition of narrative cycles such as continuous narration or unreal, fairytale-like landscapes chosen for some of the backdrops. The tension between novelty and tradition as the most intriguing characteristic of Lippi's decoration will lie at the centre of the present analysis. The study will begin with an examination of the commission's historical background. Further, the study will focus on the iconographic analysis of the cycles. Subsequently, the spatial and temporal organization of the narration will be discussed with particular attention paid to the introduction of illusory effects and the use of linear perspective. Finally, the relationship between the frescoes, ritual practices and religious spectacle will be examined. Lippi's frescoes in Prato remain crucial for the development of the narrative style of late-fifteenth century decorations and the investigation into their narrative structure can help us identify the sources of certain stylistic solutions and clarify their meaning.

Murals in Prato. The history of the commission

In early May 1452 Bernardo Bandinello, emissary of the *Opera del Sacro Cingolo*, contacted Filippo Lippi with the aim of involving him in the fresco decoration of the choir of the cathedral in Prato. At the same time Lorenzo da Pelago was appointed to execute the stained glass window for the same chapel. Later in the same month, during a meeting of the Prato city council, its nine officers not only established the cost of the murals and the time it would take to complete the works, but also appointed a five-man commission, responsible for the supervision of the enterprise[3]. The funding was to be supplied by the Ceppo Vecchio and the

[3] ASP, Ceppi 211: Ceppo Vecchio, Debitori e Creditori segnato D, f. 430r, published in E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., pp. 76-77. "La chappella dell'altare maggiore della pieve di Prato de' avere fiorini mille dugento e quali debbono isspendere tra in dipintura di detta chapella e nella finestra del vretto di detta chapella sechondo la dilibriazione fatta per lo chomune di Prato a que' tenpi che nella dilibriazione si chontiene, e quali danari si ànno a paghare a posta e volontà degl'infraschritti cioè Messere Giovannozzo Pitti, ser Andrea di Giovanni Bertelli, Filippo di Francesco Malassei, Piero di messer Guelfo Pugliesi, Jachopo degli Obbizi huomeni di balia del chomune di Prato sopra i detti lavori e di tre di loro d'achordo, a quegli maestri di dipintura e di finestre di vetro che essi o tre di loro diranno et altri chome loro diranno, e di detti danari ne tocha el terzo al Cieppo vechio di Prato sechondo detta dilibriazione, però restano fiorini ottociento fl. 800 posto a libro verde debitori E, c. 17."

Ceppo Nuovo[4]. The latter, thanks to its major economic resources, was supposed to cover two thirds of the sum, with the Ceppo Vecchio covering the remaining part. As subsequent events would show, on the day of the artists' appointment the commission significantly underestimated both the cost of the work and the time it would take to complete the project. In fact, works in the chapel lasted much longer than initially expected, that is three years, because of continuous economic difficulties and further complications related to the poor state of the church's structure, which required additional masonry work and caused interruptions of the frescoes' execution. The scaffolding was put in the chapel in July 1452 but it is doubtful that Lippi started painting before the summer of the following year[5]. In 1452 Lippi was probably involved in the preparation of drawings and he did not start his murals before the winter break. The nature of fresco painting allowed painters to work only during the dry and warm months of the year, as humidity and low temperatures could damage fragile layers of paint. It significantly limited the number of working days in each year as painters could work only between April and October. During the first year of his work in Prato, however, Lippi's winter break lasted even longer, as it protracted until July 1453. This delay was due to the painter's involvement in the commission for a tabernacle received from the Ceppo Nuovo. In fact, payments for the materials for the frescoes appear in the documents only after the completion of the tabernacle, in July 1453[6]. It is highly probable that in the summer of 1453 Lippi worked on the four Evangelists on the chapel's vault (plates 1-4). Initial delays marked an unpromising beginning of the project. In fact, they would recur during the entire period of Lippi's work in the cathedral. The commissioners' financial difficulties and Lippi's engagements in alternative projects in both Prato and Florence were the primary reasons for the excessive length of the work's completion. Delays forced the Prato authorities to modify the conditions of the contract with the artist as

[4] The Ceppo Vecchio was founded in 1283 by Monte di Turingo Pugliesi with the name "Cippum pauperorum terre Prati", the Ceppo of the poor from Prato. Its task was to help the poor, prisoners and *poveri vergognosi*. In 1410, at the birth of the Ceppo Nuovo, the preexisting association changed its name to "Ceppo Vecchio". The Ceppo dei poveri di Franceso di Marco, later called the Ceppo Nuovo was founded after the death of Francesco di Marco Datini. In his last will Datini left his entire inheritance and house for the formation of this organization, which was supposed to take care of the poor citizens of the town.

[5] E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 34.

[6] ASP, Ceppi 227: Ceppo Vecchio, Libro di Debitori e Creditori segnato B (1434-1470), f. 210r.

early as 1456, when the initially stipulated sum of 1200 florins had already been spent, the frescoes were only half ready and the window not yet installed. In April of the same year a new agreement was signed between the artists and the communal administration according to which the cost of the work was raised to 1725 florins[7]. Moreover, the committee wanted the chapel to be ready in two years time. Nevertheless, the time constraints determined by the commission proved once again to be unrealizable. In 1458, when the previous agreement expired, Lippi probably worked on the middle tier, so that the work over the frescoes were rather advanced. Nevertheless, as with previous years, new commissions arrived during the winter time, in this case the completion of a *Trinity* (now in the National Gallery in London) left unfinished by Pesellino, distracting Lippi from his main task in the cathedral[8]. Delays, though, not only affected the fresco decoration. The stained glass window by Lorenzo da Pelago was installed in the chapel only in May 1460[9]. In 1463, after almost eleven years from the beginning of Lippi's appointment, when the frescoes were still unfinished and nearly all the money spent, the authorities met again to discuss the problem of the choir decoration. In April 1464 the last agreement with the artist was made and this time Carlo de' Medici's thoughts on the matter were needed. Carlo di Cosimo, Cosimo de' Medici's illegitimate son, became provost of the cathedral in 1460, after the death of his predecessor, Geminiano Inghirami. As a result of his intervention in the agreement between the Prato authorities and Lippi himself, the artist's salary was secured for the following months and the officials promised the artist a *benandata*[10]. Due to this agreement, during the next two years the works on the chapel finally reached an end. The very last payment was made to Lippi on 28th November 1466[11] and the total cost of the decoration reached 1962

[7] ASP, Ceppi 230: Ceppo Nuovo, Libro Debitori e Creditori verde segnato E, f. 126r.

[8] P. Bacci, *La Trinità del Pesellino, ecc. Nuovi documenti*, "Rivista d'Arte", 8-9/1904, pp. 160-177; G .Gronau, I*n margine a Francesco Pesellino*, "Rivista d'Arte", Series 2, Year 10, 1938, pp. 123-146; M. Pittaluga, *Note sulla bottega di Filippo Lippi*, "L'Arte", 44/1941, pp. 20-37.

[9] ASP, Ceppi 230 : Ceppo Nuovo, Libro Debitori e Creditori verde segnato E, f. 229r.

[10] ASP, Comunale 102 (Diurno 1464-1466), ff. 1 v- 2r.

[11] ASP, Ceppi 212: Ceppo Vecchio, Libro rosso segnato F, Debitori e creditori (Luglio 1464 - Gennaio 1467), f. 79r, published in E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 140: "Frate Filippo di Tommaso dipintore da Firenze de' avere adi xxviii di novembre 1465 lire quatro ciento piccioli, cioè lire 400 piccioli, i quali sono per suo resto della dipintura della chapella magiore della pieve di Prato, cioè per ongni resto che lui potesse adimandare chosi di sua faticha chome di cholori e oro e azuro e d'ongni altra chosa che lui potesse adimandare per qualunche tenpo, chome apare per lo suo stanziamento fattogli per li IIII huomini, cioè messer Charllo de' Medici proposto, ser Michele di Messer Michele,

florins, the highest price ever paid for a fresco cycle during the fifteenth century in Tuscany[12].

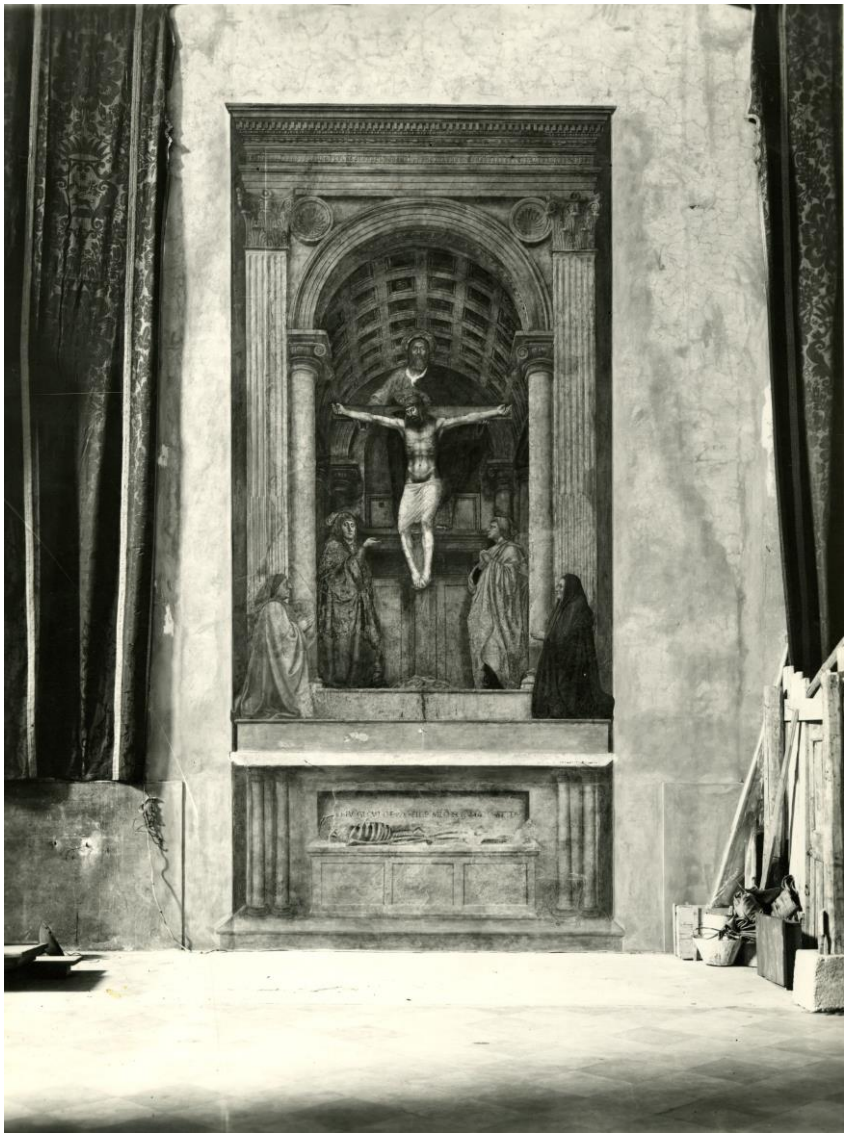


Figure 4.1: Tommaso di Ser Giovanni di Mone di Andreuccio called Masaccio, *The Holy Trinity, with the Virgin, St. John and Donors*, 1425-1427, fresco painting, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Nicholao di Bartolomeo speziale, Nicholao di Zanobi di ser Bartolomeo, Ghucio di Piero di Ghucio, huomini di balia eletti e diputati per lo chomune di Prato sopra la detta chapella per fare chompiere et fornire detta chapella. E di tanti apariscie lo stanziamento de' detti 4 huomini, ciè di lire 400 L. 400".

[12] E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 67.

Linear perspective and continuous narrative in fifteenth-century mural painting in Tuscany

At the core of Lippi's innovation in the Prato murals lay the spatial organization of the scenes and the introduction into the frescoes of illusory and immersive elements, provided by the use of perspective in the construction of the depicted space. From the very first years after the elaboration of perspective, monumental fresco became the favourite medium of many painters for experimentation in the field of the spatial representation. Hence, from Masaccio's *Trinity* (figure 4.1) through to Uccello's *Funerary Monument to Sir John Hawkwood* (figure 4.2) monumental fresco offered artists the possibility to investigate illusory and immersive potentialities of the device. The importance of the medium for perspectival experiments depended on monumental frescoes' visual potentialities and certain inherent characteristics of fresco decoration, which successfully reinforced perspectival illusion, namely in their size and in the distance from which they were usually observed.



Figure 4.2: Paolo di Dono called Paolo Uccello, *Funerary Monument to Sir John Hawkwood*, 1436, fresco painting, Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence.

Meyer Schapiro, in an article published in 1969, theorized the difference between bounded and unbounded images in the Western tradition[13] (see chapter 1, paragraph 7). The first

[13] M. Schapiro, *On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Sign*, "Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art", 6, 1/1972-1973, pp. 9-19 (first published in "Semiotica" 1/1969, pp. 223-242).

ones are self-contained and clearly divided from the external space by a frame. In an unbounded image, instead, the framing structure is challenged, and the represented world is visually connected with the physical space on the outside. A remarkable example of unbounded images in the Western tradition of painting are the *quadratura* ceiling decorations[14], which, with the use of perspectival construction, suggest the existence of an unlimited and infinite space in place of the wall or ceiling that constitutes the picture plane. In fact, linear perspective offered an efficient tool to artists who wanted to practice the immersive possibilities of painting. Painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as Andrea Pozzo, Correggio and Caravaggio, are well known for their experiments with the immersive possibilities of painting. Nevertheless, questions of the illusion, immersion and immediacy of religious images emerged already in the fifteenth century, not many years after the invention of perspective and its diffusion in Alberti's *Della pittura*. Wall painting, inextricably connected to the space and physical structure of the building, became an excellent vehicle for the unbounded image, which would enclose the external space into the representation. Even if it is not possible to compare the immersive qualities of fifteenth-century wall painting with, for example, Pozzo's ceiling in Sant'Ignazio in Rome, already Florentine artists from the times of Masaccio challenged the illusory features of the medium.

In order to achieve perfection in the elaboration of complex and sophisticated decorations in perspective, and attain excellence in foreshortening, theoretical reflection on the possibilities of the device was required. Perspective offered artists a true intellectual stimulus, attested by the multiple treatises elaborated after Alberti's lesson. Piero della Francesca and Luca Pacioli described in their writings the limits, possibilities and challenges that related to the new device[15]. They, in fact, fully realized the difficulties in creating a coherent perspectival construction, able to convey a convincing illusory impression to the spectator. Modern studies in the psychology of perception confirm some of the concerns shared by the fifteenth-century masters. In fact, one of the most

[14] T. Puttfarken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition*, op. cit., p. 21.

[15] P. Della Francesca, *De prospectiva pingendi*, ed. S. Carnoli, Ravenna, 2000; L. Pacioli, *De divina proportione*, Cinisello Balsamo, 2010; M. Kemp, *The Science of Art. Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat*, New Haven, 1992.

important limitations of linear perspective seems to be the dependence of the scheme on uniocular vision, which highly contradicts the nature of human binocular perception. Some of the scholars who analysed the perception of perspectival images, claim that one-point projection is inefficient in the creation of the illusion of depth[16]. At the same time, other analyses demonstrate that certain conditions of perception can reinforce the illusive effect of the one-point projection. Painters who want to create an illusion of three dimensions in an image, which will be observed binocularly by the viewer, can apply certain structural solutions that will help perception to resist the contradictory signals of the painting's two-dimensionality[17]. Thus, one of the methods that reduces the noticeability of the painting's surface is to force the viewer to observe it from a long distance. Another favourable factor that strengthens the illusory effect is the painting's large size. In fact, if the image fully covers the spectator's visual field and permits its perception from a large distance, information about the image's flatness coming from stereoscopic vision are reduced, and the picture provides the experience of depth. The data prove that stereoscopic vision does not provide enough information regarding the image's flatness if the observed surface is further than 200 cm from the spectator's eyes. Moreover, the image's large size favours the elimination from the spectator's visual field of other elements that could disturb vision and inform the viewer about the picture's two-dimensionality, such as the foreground or surrounding objects[18].

Another argument against the efficacy of linear perspective in the creation of an illusory effect in painting is the dependence of the scheme on the centre of the projection. It means that, in order to avoid distortions, it is necessary to look at the image from a fixed viewing point. Already Leonardo underlined that an image, in order to appear undistorted, had to be viewed from this precise position.

> Se vorrai figurare una cosa da presso che faccia l'effetto che fanno le cose naturali, inpossibile fia che la tua prospettiua

[16] M. H. Prienne, *Optics, Painting & Photography*, Cambridge, 1970, pp. 77-78.
[17] M. Kubovy, *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 39-64.
[18] Ivi, pp. 43, 49.

> non apparisca falsa con tutte le bugiarde dimostrationi e discordanti proportioni che si può imaginare in vna trista opera se il riguardatore d'essa prospettiva non si truova col suo vedere alla propia distantia e altezza e dirittura de l'ochio over punto che situasti al fare d'essa prospettiva: Onde bisognerebbe fare una finestra della grandezza del tuo volto o veramente uno buso, donde tu riguardassi detta opera; e se così farai sanza dubio nessuno l'opera tua, essendo bene accompagniata d'ombra e di lumi, farà l'effetto che fa il naturale, e non ti potrai fare credere che esse cose sieno dipinte, altrimenti non te ne inpacciare, se già tu non faciessi la tua veduta al meno 20 volte lontana, quanto è la maggiore larghezza o altezza della cosa che figuri, e questa sadisfarà a ogni riguadatore situato in ogni contraposta parte a detta opera[19].

If this is true, the possibility of a monumental fresco creating the intended effect of illusion would be significantly weakened, as wall decorations cover surfaces located significantly above the level of human eyes. In this way the frescoes are often observed from a point of view situated notably below the centre of the projection. The problem of foreshortening persisted, in fact, in the history of wall decoration and, in particular, of dome decorations well into the seventeenth century. Artists commissioned for a dome decoration had to choose between a strongly foreshortened perspective *di sotto in su*, which guaranteed a strongly illusory character of the painting, or a flat, but highly legible composition, similar to a fresco decoration on a flat surface[20]. Similarly, artists who projected narrative cycles would try to differentiate the foreshortening between the tiers. The higher scenes would present a stronger foreshortening, in order to adjust the perspectival projection with the viewpoint. In both cycles analysed here, Lippi's murals in Prato and Ghirlandaio's decoration of the Tornabuoni chapel, the artists would adopt this solution. Despite the dependence of perspectival construction on the viewpoint, which should be as close as possible to the centre of the

[19] L. da Vinci, *Libro di pittura*, in *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci Compiled and Edited from the Original Manuscripts*, ed. J. P. Richter, vol. 1, London, 1939, pp. 325-326.
[20] A. Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds, 1439-1650. Italian Art and Theatre*, Farnham, 2014, pp. 57-178.

projection, it has been proved that if the spectator has enough information regarding the location and orientation of the picture plane he would still perceive very little distortion of the image. This particular phenomenon is guaranteed by the so-called robustness of perspective, namely, the persistence of human perceptual experience of the illusion of depth in front of an image in perspective perceived in inaccurate visual conditions. It results from the ability of the brain to register the nature of the virtual space of the image and the orientation of the picture's surface and to correct the former in light of the latter[21]. Thus, if the viewer is able to understand the location and the orientation of the picture plane, perspective will create the intended suggestion of the three-dimensionality, even if it is observed from a position other than the centre of the perspectival projection.

Thanks to the structure and conditions of perception of the monumental fresco cycles, the medium was particularly favourable for the creation in these images of the illusory effect of depth. Monumental frescoes covering churches' walls were, by their nature, rather large images, projected for perception from a certain distance. The viewers could see their location within the surrounding space and understand their orientation. Therefore, the robustness of perspective guaranteed little distortion of the perspectival scheme, even if the spectators did not have the chance to observe the fresco from the centre of the projection. A monumental fresco in perspective could potentially build a spatial unity between the real and the depicted space. In this way frescoes managed to convey a strong sense of immediacy, which resulted in the impression of temporal unity between the viewer and the represented events. In fact, perspective became an efficient method to represent what happened "here and now". Through its illusory potentialities, perspective visualized in front of the viewer a virtual world that extended the physical borders of real space and made possible the visual cognition of an imaginary realm, which opened up before the spectator's eyes. Perspective made present what was represented in the painting, and investigations into the iconography and meaning of frescoes confirm the relevance of this concept for the religious imaginary of the period. The use

[21] M. Kubovy, *The Psychology of Perspective*, op. cit., pp. 52-64, 87.

of perspective, in fact, has its own semantics[22] as Masaccio's *Trinity* (figure 4.1) may suggest. One of the latest analyses of the fresco's iconography puts emphasis on the relevance, for the theological message conveyed by the image, of the questions of the physical presence of God on earth and the temporal and spatial unity between the sphere of transcendence and the terrestrial dimension[23]. As John Moffit argues, the fresco represents God's physical proximity, his presence between human beings and his propitiative agency on earth. Therefore, thanks to the application of perspective a painting not only managed to create a sensorial illusion of three-dimensionality, but also built spatial and temporal unity between the viewers and the virtual space of the fresco. However, this peculiar feature of the perspectival image, which could have been so easily applied into a single monumental fresco had to be used in a different manner in the case of a narrative cycle. In order to introduce compositional and structural novelties of perspective into a fresco which illustrated, for instance, the life of a saint or the Virgin, artists had to challenge well established compositional traditions inherited from their predecessors. One of the most important elements of this tradition was continuous narrative, namely the choice of representing consecutive actions performed by the main character of the story, often represented in separated niches, within one common background uniting all the events. Each event was recognizable thanks to the figure of the main character, always dressed in the same way, who carried out actions in chronological order. One event happened before another and the character moved from one space to another in the course of narrative. The application of linear perspective to narrative cycles became a significant novelty and changed the rules of composition. It forced artists to elaborate new narrative solutions, which would guarantee the legibility of the stories. The continuous narrative would persist in the tradition of mural painting until the end of the fifteenth century. Still Ghirlandaio would have to face the choice of following or giving the practice up. Frey, Gadol, Argan and Robb, all claimed that the increasing abandon of the continuous narrative mode was related

[22] A seminal study examining the semantics of the perspective in the Florentine Quattrocento painting is Daniel Arasse's *L'annonciation italienne*, which offers the analysis of multilayered significance of the perspective in the annunciation scenes, D. Arasse, *L'annonciation italienne: une historie de perspective*, Paris, 1999.

[23] J. F. Moffitt, *Painterly Perspective and Piety. Religious Uses of the Vanishing Point, from the 15th to the 18th Century*, Jefferson, 2008, pp. 65-123.

to a parallel increase of the importance of perspectival device. Therefore, continuous narrative was interpreted as a purely medieval solution, while perspective and narrations composed of scenes representing single events, namely "the reduction of narrative to drama"[24], was attributed to the Renaissance[25]. As has been stressed above, one of the possible meanings introduced by perspective was the representation of a spatial and temporal unity, which strongly contrasted with the modalities of temporal representation inherent to continuous narrative. Yet, continuous narrative remained common practice during the Quattrocento, as it corresponded to the contemporary modality of storytelling[26]. In fact, during the fifteenth century, a painting of a *historia* would very often require a representation of both spatial and temporal dimensions of the narration. In other words, the action, the sequence of gestures or movements of figures would be illustrated



Figure 4.3: Tommaso di ser Giovanni di Mone di Andreuccio called Masaccio, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1426, tempera on panel, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

even on a painting representing a single event, thus introducing a temporal dimension into the scene. The spectator, in the process of viewing, would have to reconstruct in his mind the action represented on the image, thus animating the figures and recreating their movements or gesture[27]. An example of this kind

[24] G. C. Argan, N. A. Robb, *The Architecture of Brunelleschi and the Origins of the Perspective Theory in the Fifteenth Century*, "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", 9/1946, p. 116.
[25] D. Frey, *Gotik und Renaissance: Als Grundlagen der modernen Weltanschauung*, Augsburg, 1929, p. 38; J. Gadol, *Leon Battista Alberti: Universal Man of the Early Renaissance*, Chicago, 1969, p. 54, 58; G. C. Argan, N. A. Robb, *The Architecture of Brunelleschi*, op. cit., p. 116.
[26] L. Andrews, *A Space of Time: Continuous Narrative and Linear Perspective in Quattrocento Tuscan Art*, PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1988, Idem, *Story and Space in Renaissance Art. The Rebirth of Continuous Narrative*, Cambridge, 1995.
[27] L. Andrews, *A Space of Time*, op. cit., pp. 53-72.

is offered by Masaccio's *Adoration of the Magi* from 1426 (figure 4.3) (kept today in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin), on which the artist painted three magi in three different positions, one standing, one kneeling and the third one kissing the foot of the Infant Jesus, in the act of adoration. Even if the painting represents three different figures, the viewer could have seen in them the visualisation of three different phases of the same movement. Thus, in his imagination, the spectator could animate the image and form a mental picture of the movement of the magi. Virtually, we can imagine that the first magus stands up from his knees and leaves space for the others, the second approaches the Virgin and kisses the foot of the Baby, while the last one kneels. Perspective did not necessarily exclude the use of continuous narrative. On the contrary, it allowed the artist to construct a coherent space, in which they could set their stories, distributing the figures like actors on a stage. However, the application of perspective to scenes in continuous narrative faced the artist with new challenges. Artists who decided to unite perspective with continuous narrative had to elaborate new spatial solutions in order to guarantee the legibility of the stories.



Figure 4.4: Benozzo di Lese called Benozzo Gozzoli, frescoes in the choir of the church of St. Augustine, 1464-1465, San Gimignano.

Some of the scenes from Benozzo Gozzoli's fresco decoration of the main chapel in St. Augustine church in San Gimignano (figure 4.4) clearly illustrate the importance of this problem for the development of narrative techniques in monumental fresco cycles. The artist, in fact, decided to integrate into the cycle both types of scenes, namely the panels representing single events, as well as scenes in continuous narrative. While a continuous space is pictured in in *St. Augustine Reading Rhetoric in Rome* (figure 4.5), in other scenes Gozzoli represented multiple events within one framework, like in *St. Augustine*

meets the Christ Child, Visits the Hermits in Tuscany and Bestows His Rule (figure 4.6) or *St. Augustine Arrives in Milan and Meets St. Ambrose* (figure 4.7). Comparison of these three scenes testifies the difficulty the artist had in combining perspective with continuous narrative. *St. Augustine Reading Rhetoric in Rome* represents a coherent perspectival construction, which offers an insight into a congruent space where Augustine's lecture is held. In the scene, spatial and temporal unity are maintained. In *St. Augustine meets the Christ Child, Visits the Hermits in Tuscany and Bestows His Rule* (figure 4.6), instead, the backdrops for the three scenes are incorporated into one frame, yet represent different locales. In the bottom left corner we see the saint at the seaside, talking to the Infant Jesus about the mystery of the Trinity. In the centre, farther from the spectator, the saint meets the hermits. The scene takes places at the foot of a hill, with the hermitage at the top. Finally, at the bottom right, Augustine dictates the rule to his brothers seated in front of a church. The three places, even if united into a single scene, do not create a continuous spatial space. The lack of a clear perspectival construction makes it impossible to evaluate the distances between the represented sites. Consequently, the relative size of each figure does not correspond to their position in the pictorial space. The proportions of trees and the size of the church, likewise, do not correspond to the dimensions of the mountain in the background and to the measurements of the human figures. Paradoxically, this spatial



Figure 4.5: Benozzo di Lese called Benozzo Gozzoli, *St. Augustine Reading Rhetoric in Rome*, 1464-1465, fresco painting, choir of the church of St. Augustine, San Gimignano.

incoherence guarantees greater clarity to the narrative and increases the legibility of the three episodes. The three *luoghi deputati* are easily distinguishable from one another, and they follow their own spatial and proportional logic even if they do not create a coherent unity between them. Thus, the lack of unity reinforces the discrepancies between the different scenes and strengthens the legibility of the whole. The introduction of linear perspective into a scene with continuous narrative required from the artists a remarkable ability in building an efficient and clearly legible sequence of events. As we can observe in the aforementioned *St. Augustine Arrives in Milan and Meets St. Ambrose* (figure 4.7), perspective, which possesses an intrinsic property to consolidate and homogenize the represented space, makes it difficult to reconstruct the proper chronological order of the events depicted in the fresco. In Gozzoli's mural St. Augustine is represented three times, as is customary when continuous narrative is applied by an artist. We can see the saint on his arrival in the middle-ground of the fresco, then greeting the Emperor Theodosius under a loggia in the background and, finally, meeting St. Ambrose in the right foreground. Contrary to what was represented in the scene *St. Augustine meets the Christ Child* (figure 4.6), here all three events take place within one, coherent and mathematically calculated space. In consequence, the scene loses its legibility. The chronological order of the events is unclear, because even if the scene should be read from left to right, the spatial axis, from back to front, contradicts the vertical order of the events. St. Augustine paying his regards



Figure 4.6: Benozzo di Lese called Benozzo Gozzoli, *St. Augustine Meets the Christ Child, Visits the Hermits in Tuscany and Bestows His Rule*, 1464-1465, fresco painting, choir of the church of St. Augustine, San Gimignano.



Figure 4.7: Benozzo di Lese called Benozzo Gozzoli, *St. Augustine Arrives in Milan and Meets st. Ambrose*, 1464-1465, fresco painting, choir of the church of St. Augustine, San Gimignano.

to the Emperor, visible in the background is smaller and less visible than the central figure of the saint arriving in Milan, which, in turn, is smaller than the saint greeting Ambrose in the foreground. It is thus clear, that the use of continuous narrative and perspective challenged the artist's compositional skills. It was seminal for the construction of a narrative scene with the use of perspective to divide subsequent scenes from each other whilst maintaining, at the same time, spatial continuity.

The iconography and the spatial organization of Lippi's murals in Prato

As has been shown before, the application of perspective to monumental narrative frescoes posed artists with the problem of greater care over the legibility of their works. Filippo Lippi, in his cycle in Prato, would face the same difficulties observed before in Benozzo Gozzoli's paintings in San Gimignano, which was to combine continuous narrative with the construction of a coherent spatial organisation of narration. Lippi's solution, however, would differ from what we have seen in Gozzoli's proposition in the *Life of St. Augustine*. The artist would not only try to guarantee high legibility of the stories without reducing the spatial coherency of each scene, but he would also examine illusory and immersive possibilities of perspective. The tension between tradition and innovation, the use of continuous narrative and the artist's experimentation with perspectival illusion constitute the most remarkable elements of Lippi's decoration in Prato. The frescoes in Prato represent the lives of St. John the Baptist and St. Stephen. The

first was patron saint of Florence, the latter the protector of both Prato and the cathedral itself. The composition of both cycles presents strong similarities, which testify an attempt to underline parallels between the lives of both saints[28]. Lunettes are dominated by the scenes of both births (plates 5 and 9), with a similar composition of the *puerpera*'s room on the right and events directly following the deliveries of the babies represented on the left - *The Naming of the Baptist* in St. John's life, and *St. Stephen Fed by a Doe* and *St. Stephen Rescued by Bishop Julian* in St. Stephen's cycle. The middle tier presents the scenes of the parting of both saints from their protectors and their preaching activity (plates 6 and 10). On the lower level both martyrdoms are depicted on the altar wall and the relics of both saints are presented to the spectator on the side walls in the scenes of the *Feast of Herod* (plate 12) and the *Celebration of the Relics of St. Stephen* (plate 8).

The textual sources for the life of St. John the Baptist were multiple at the time of Lippi's work in Prato. Varagine's *Golden Legend* contains two chapters dedicated to the Saint, namely *The nativitate sancti Johannis baptistae* and *De decollatione sancti Johannis baptistae*. Moreover, the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze holds two fifteenth-century manuscripts containing a Life of St. John[29]. One also finds a manuscript first published by Domenico Maria Manni in the *Delle vite de' SS. Padri* in 1734 and subsequently republished[30]. These manuscript sources seem to be inspired by a fourteenth-century version of the saint's *Vita*[31]. The textual tradition of the life of St. Stephen is based on the *Acts of the Apostles*[32] and two chapters from Varagine's *Golden Legend*, namely *De sancto Stephano* and *De inventione sancti Stephani protomartiris*. Furthermore, one finds St. Stephen's *Vita* in four Italian manuscripts compiled between the tenth and the fifteenth century[33]. These sources were creatively reinterpreted on the walls of the chapel

[28] E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 30.
[29] BNCF, Magliabechiano II. II. 445 (formerly Magliabechiano XXXVIII, cod. 100). It was writen by Zanobi di Paolo d'Agnolo Perini in 1409. BNCF, Magliabechiano XXXVIII, cod. 10, written by Gheruccio di Pagholo di Franciescho Gherucci in 1458.
[30] *Vita di S. Giovambatista*, in *Delle vite de' SS. Padri*, vol. 4: *Vite di alcuni santi scritte nel buon secolo della lingua Toscana*, Milano, 1830, (first ed. D. M. Manni, Firenze, 1734).
[31] E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 29, note 66.
[32] *Acta* VI, 5 - VIII, 3.
[33] Biblioteca di Montecassino, CXVII (dated between the tenth and the eleventh century); Venezia, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, VI, 51 (dated between the fourteenth and the fifteenth century); Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Ashburnham. 870 (dated between the fourteenth and the fifteenth century); Venezia, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, IX, 16, fols. 332-336, a collection

in order to compose a coherent iconographic program, centred on the idea of the saints' martyrdom and on the parallels between their sacrifice and Christ's death on the cross. Moreover, the selection of the scenes represented on the walls of the chapel underlines the correspondence between the two biblical figures. Both St. John the Baptist and St. Stephen are represented as martyrs and preachers, in which their mission resembles that of the apostles.

St. John the Baptist's cycle starts directly with the scene of the saint's birth. In this way, the program omits the previous part of St. John's *Vite* related to the history of his parents, Zacharias and St. Elisabeth, St. Elisabeth's infertility, the annunciation of St. John's birth, the miracle of his conception and the motive of the Virgin's visitation. These scenes, instead, constitute an important part of Ghirlandaio's decoration in the Tornabuoni chapel and this difference aptly illustrates how the choice of diverse scenes could have influenced the meaning of the cycles. Lippi's decoration excludes the scenes related to the problem of fertility and focuses on the central part of St. John's legend, this activity as a preacher and his later martyrdom. As it will be shown further (chapter 5, paragraph 3), the theme of fertility would become central for the interpretation of St. John's life pictured in the Tornabuoni chapel. Thus, the initial scenes related to the annunciation to Zacharias and the visitation would occupy a prominent place in Ghirlandaio's decoration. Instead, Lippi paints only the birth scene and the moment of the naming of St. John. Both events are pictured as taking place in St. Elisabeth's house. The iconography of the birth scene follows a very common scheme in the period, and recalls domestic interior of a bedroom with St. Elisabeth resting in the bed and the wet nurses taking care of the newborn. A similar composition can be found in other scenes of the sacred births from the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, such as the *Birth of the Virgin* by Taddeo Gaddi, painted between 1328 and 1333 in the Baroncelli Chapel in Santa Croce in Florence. Also the juxtaposition of the birth and the naming of St. John within one scene was common at Lippi's time. Already Giotto in the Peruzzi Chapel, also in Santa Croce, painted between 1318 and 1322, put these two events together. These two events seemed to be inseparable because of meaning in the New Testament story

of legends written by Petrus Calo in 1340 ca. See also G. Kaftal, *The Fabulous Life of a Saint*, "Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz", 17, 2-3/1973, pp. 295-300.

of St. John's birth. According to the Bible (Luke 1:5-24, 57-66), the conception of St. John was announced to Zacharias, his father, by an angel sent from God. Although, this heavenly message was received with distrust. Zacharias' lack of faith was punished by the angel who made the man mute until the time of the child's birth. In this way the birth of St. John and naming of the child fulfils and confirms the miracle brought about by God's grace. When Zacharias wrote the name of his son, John, on a writing tablet, his "tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God" (Luke 1:64).

The following scenes tell the story of St. John's mission. Lippi pictures the moment of St. John's parting from his parents and praying in the desert. The following scene represents St. John's preaching and it includes few iconographic details, which reinforce the thesis on the dependence of the cycle on the vernacular *Vite* of the saint, as the *Vita di S. Giovambatista* published by Manni[34]. In Lippi's fresco St. John stands on a rather high stone and preaches to the men and women who sit around him. The listeners are divided by sex in two groups, women on the saint's left and men on his right. The division imitates the fifteenth-century habit of gender separation of the listeners during the preaching, which is proven by some painting representing San Bernardino's preaching in fifteenth-century Siena[35]. On St. John's left, behind a parapet of high rocks one can see a young man with a halo who blesses the crowd. St. John points him out with his finger. Meanwhile, on his right there are two men. One of them seems to be talking to the preacher. He wears a rich, red cloth and holds a letter in his hand. These details correspond to the extend description of St. John's preaching activity in the *Vita di S. Giovambatista*. At the beginning the text reports on St. John's childhood and narrates the boy's frequent escapes to the desert. According to the *Vita*, at some point the young John decided to give a final farewell to his parents and dedicate his life to God. St. John crossed the river Jordan and started his life of penitence, fasting and prayer[36] and soon after he initiated also his preaching

[34] E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

[35] See for example Sano di Pietro's painting *Preaching of San Bernardino in piazza San Francesco* from 1444-1450 kept today in the Museo dell'Opera in Siena. B. Tavolari, *Museo dell'Opera della Metropolitana, Siena. Dipinti*, Milano, 2007, pp. 100-101.

[36] E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., pp. 30-31. The motive of St. John crossing the Jordan is pictured by Lippi, as in the fresco the saint kneeling in the desert is divided from his partents by a river.

activity.

The subsequent description of St. John's preaching activity is rather vast and it seems that Lippi synthesized in one scene different elements mentioned in the narrative. In the text, in fact, one finds the motive of St. John showing Jesus to his disciples, Christ blessing St. John's followers and Herod's emissaries asking St. John to visit Herod in person. First, one sees the motive of St. John who would show Christ to his disciples "*a dito*":

> Diss Pietro: Dimmi, Messere, tu annunci il regno del cielo, che vuo' tu dire e di' che egli è presso noi? Noi non troviamo nella Scrittura nullo profeta e nullo de' nostri santi passati che questo ci abbia annunziato. Dunque tu se' il primo che ci annunzi il regno del cielo che ci è presso. Preghiamoti per l'amore d'Iddio che tu cene ai alcuno buono intendimento. E Giovanni rispuose: Io vi dico fermamente la veritade. Egli è venuto ed è nel mezzo di voi colui che ci farà salvi e per cui ci sarà aperto il regno del cielo; ma voi nol cognoscete, e io non vi posso più dire ancora; ma non ci andrà molto tempo che io vel' mosterrò a dito e farollovi conoscere palesemente [...][37].

Further, it is also mentioned that St. John, in order to be heard by the crowd, would stand at the top of a small hill:

> Costoro istavano che per udirlo e sentivano tutti il cuor loro infiammare della dottrina sua; e Giovanni istava un poco da lungi in su qualche monticello [...][38].

Finally, the text describes the moment of the meeting between St. John's disciples and Christ and the motive of "mostrare a dito" returns:

> S. Giovanni venisse con grande disiderio; e' discepoli suoi gli si feciono incontro e dicevano insieme: Ecco ch'è colui quello che

[37] *Vita di S. Giovambatista*, op. cit., pp. 309-310.
[38] Ivi, p. 310.

> ci mostrò a dito e disse: Ecco l'agnello di Dio[39].

Then Christ blessed the crowd:

> E stato che [Gesù] fu un pezzo con loro, sì si partì e diede la benedizione sua a tutti quelli che si disponevano secondo il consiglio di Giovanni [...][40].

Subsequently, Herod send two of his emissaries to St. John and asks him to pay him a visit.

> E incontanente tolsono due della famiglia, persone savie, e non mostrarono loro la mala corata ch'egli avevano, ma dissono: Andate a quell santo uomo, cioè Giovanni di Zaccheria, e pregatelo umilmente e reverentemente che gli piaccia di venire a noi, che vogliamo consiglio da lui di certi nostri fatti. E gl'imasciadori andarono a S. Giovanni e saviamente dissono la 'mbasiata loro; e S. Giovanni gli ricevette graziosamente e disse: Andate a Erode e dite che fermamente io verrò a lui e diede certo termine. E tornarono gl'imbasciadori e dissono la 'mbasciata di S. Giovanni[41].

In Lippi's frescoes, one of the two men standing on St. John's right side holds a rolled piece of paper in his hand, similar to a letter, which may suggest the identification of the figures as Herod's heralds. It seems, therefore that Lippi pictured in the scene the three elements described in the vernacular *Vite*, namely St. Johns showing Christ to his disciples, Jesus blessing the crowd and the embassy from Herod. The scenes depicted in the middle tier demonstrate considerable relevance within the cycle. They are followed by the representations of the final events in St. John's life, the feast of Herod and St. John's beheading, and the illusive and immersive qualities of these scenes will be analysed further.

The life of St. Stephen pictured on the opposite wall also focuses on the

[39] Ivi, p. 326.
[40] Ibidem.
[41] Ivi, p. 332.

saint's preaching activity and his martyrdom caused by his teaching. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the subject of St. Stephen's life was less popular than St. John the Baptist's cycles. In Tuscany there is only one another fresco cycle on this subject in the San Lucchese abbey, near Poggibonsi. Three scenes from St. Stephen's life painted on the arch of San Lucchese's chapel in the left transept of the church in the late 1380s are today considered a work by Cennino Cennini[42]. They picture St. Stephen's birth, the devil who swaps the children and kidnaps the little boy and the subsequent finding of the new-born by the Bishop Julian. Therefore, the frescoes include only the scenes from the saint's childhood. In Lippi's cycle, instead, the events from the early life of the martyr occupy only the lunette, while the rest of the decoration narrates the saint's preaching activity, his death and the celebration of his relics. The narrative is based on Varagine's *Golden Legend* and different versions of the saint's *Vita*, which circulated in the period. An example of this kind is *De natione santi Stefani* contained in a manuscript from the Laurentian Library in Florence[43] edited by George Kaftal[44]. These popular narratives include certain motives, such as a report on St. Stephen infancy, which reappear in Lippi's frescoes. The same scenes, which are painted in San Lucchese abbey, are pictured in the lunette of Lippi's cycle. They include the birth scene, the kidnap of the new-born, St. Stephen fed by a doe and the Bishop Julian finding the child. There is therefore a direct parallel between the Prato cycle, the frescoes in San Lucchese and the texts like *De natione santi Stefani*. In the manuscript one reads:

> qui cum in ieiunis et horationibus existentes ad spiritu sancto eis rev[e]llatum est quod filium conciperet et cum tempus pariendi devenerit, priusquam de utero ecrederetur, nomen eius ab angelo parentibus est assigniatum, diciens: Stefanus est nomen eius, de quo gaudebant parentes et exultabant, nec non tota familia de tanto excellenti pig[n]iore decorate. quod

[42] M. Boskovits, *Cennino Cennini – pittore nonconformista*, "Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz", 17, 2-3/1973, pp. 209-218; "*Fantasie und Handwerk". Cennino Cennini und die Tradition der toskanischen Malerei von Giotto bis Lorenzo Monaco*, ed. W.-D. Löhr, S. Weppelmann, exhibition catalogue, Berlin, 2008, pp. 49-50.
[43] Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Ashburnham. 870.
[44] G. Kaftal, *The Fabulous Life*, op.cit., pp. 299-300.

> videns innimicus et hostis humane nature, comperiens invidia ductus nocte, in figura hominis, a[d] lectulum ubi puer quiescebat avenit. quem tollens puer[um] et inde posuit idolum in lecto dimisit, puerumque in provincia troie supra mare deduxit aput quedam monasterium ubi erat quidam santissimi iuliani, et iustam portam dimisit, pannis involutum dimisitque ei et habiit. puer non diu iacens in terra in silentio noctis, vellocissime in cepit frere, ad quem santus iulianus episschopus in lecto iacens et audiens, dixit ministris suis: fratres mei, anne vos fretis, an vox pueri est quam a[u]dio? qui dixerunt: vox pueri esse videtur, sed cavendum. est, pater, ne hostis in lesione, sub voce pueri, decipiamini. episschopus itaque, gravi sopore sonni recectus, siluit. Videns itaque deus puerum suum assuffragico illius episschopi derelictum, recordatus est eius paransque nocte illa cerviam albam latentem eum et custodientem, cumque esset circa mediam noctem fera venit silvestrique beulluam que natura ei negaverat quomodo divina hac crementia pro custodia par voli tribuit ante hostium dicti episschopi et crementissime cepit clamare[45].

The Prato murals, given the little space dedicated to St. Stephen infancy, omit the scene of the sea travel of the new-born as described by the author of *De natione*. However, other details mentioned in the texts reappear also in the fresco, which try to synthetize in one scene the vicissitudes of St. Stephen's early life. The scenes painted in the lunette mirror these on the opposite wall which illustrate the birth and the naming of St. John. Likewise the birth of the Baptist, also the birth of St. Stephen is pictured in an intimate, domestic interior (plate 5). The puerpera rests in bed and the nurses help her with the newborn. They do not realize that the devil is about to swap the infants and kidnap the little Stephen. The scene is rich in iconographic details which testify Lippi's acquaintance with the classical art. These can be found in the entablature of the room's niche and the cornice with which it is crowned. On the left, one can also see the figure of a house maid, who carries fresh linens in a basket placed on her head. Her dress is

[45] Ivi, p. 299.

gently moved by an invisible wind and she moves with her dancing steps towards the puerpera's room. To some degree this figure resembles Ghirlandaio's maid who enters St. Elisabeth's room in the *Birth of St. John the Baptist* in the Tornabuoni chapel (figure 5.1, plate 19). The iconographic sources of both figures seem similar and recall female figures from the ancient sculptures and reliefs. In particular, they refer to the figures of nymphs from the Dionysian pageants. An example of this kind can be found in a circular altar from the Age of Augustus kept today in the Vatican Museum (Greg. Prof. 9940), which represents Pan leading a group of nymphs. Here the nymphs are characterized by the same dancing poses and translucent, ethereal dresses. In fact, Aby Warburg recognized this iconographic type as a *ninfa fiorentina* and showed the recurrence of the motif in the fifteenth-century Florentine painting in different figures of maid, Judith, Salome or angel[46]. Warburg's interpretations originated from series of letters exchanged with his friend, André Jolles, and were developed in the project *Mnemosyne*, where the plates 46 and 47 were fully dedicated to the *ninfa*[47]. Warburg distinguished his "nymphs" on stylistic bases and noticed constant returns of the motif in different semblances. What persists in the Warburgian nymphs is the movement of the figures and the dynamism of their ethereal gowns, which represents the Lucretian turbulence of the spirit caused by terror or desire[48]. In fact, recent studies of this Warburgian concept underline[49] the persistence of Dionysian elements in the female figures which recall the *ninfa fiorentina*. The most recent investigations of this iconographic formula are developed by the scholars interested in the questions related to the representation of female figure in Western art, from the Renaissance to contemporary times. They further prove that the Warburgian category of *ninfa* does not refer to the semantics of the nymphean figures, but asks questions about the anthropological notions of femininity, desire and passion. Being these questions highly interesting and important, they do not regard purely iconographic questions of the meaning of each figure within the

[46] A. Warburg A., *Ninfa fiorentina 1900*, Warburg Institute Archive, 118; *Idem*, *Ninfa fiorentina (1900)* in *Werke in einem Band by Aby Warburg*, ed. P. Ladwig, M. Treml, S. Weigel, Frankfurt-am-Main, 2010, pp. 198-210.
[47] E. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: an Intellectual Biography*, Oxford, 1986, pp. 105- 127.
[48] G. Didi-Huberman, *Ninfa fluida. Essai sur le drapé-désir*, Paris, 2015, pp. 90-123.
[49] G. Didi-Huberman, *Ninfa fluida*, op. cit..; *Idem*, *Ninfa moderna. Essai sur le drape tombé*, Paris, 2002; B. Baert, *Nymph: Motif, Phantom, Affect. A Contribution to the Study of Aby Warburg*, Leuven, 2014.

given scene. In this way the maid painted by Lippi in the *Birth of St. Stephen* represents an example of the Warburgian *ninfa* but within the scene its meaning remains that of a servant girl who helps the puerpera. The following chapter (chapter 5, paragraph 2) will show how Ghirlandaio reinterpreted the motive of the maid. The iconographic analysis of the figure will investigate different semantic threads interwoven in it and the study will argue that the painter enriched the meaning of the figure and connected it with philosophical and political message of the entire decoration. In Lippi's decoration the maid who assists St. Elisabeth seems not having a particular relevance for the semantics of the entire decoration. Significantly more important than the scenes pictured in the lunette are the events represented in the middle and the lowest tier of the frescoes.

The scenes depicted in the middle tier of Lippi' frescoes prove themselves inspired by the popular narratives on the saint's life mentioned before. The parallels between the frescoes and *De natione* are striking. According to the text, St. Stephen became a charismatic preacher who christened many communities around Alexandria and Sicily. One day an angel appeared to the saint and suggested him to visit his parents. Thus, St. Stephen took blessing from the Bishop Julian and departed through the sea to reach his home. Once arrived there, he found his parents full of sadness. He learned that the boy, who they believed to be their son, grew up very ill and gave them many troubles. On hearing it, the saint expelled the devil from the youth and explained to his parents that he was their true son taken away from them at the birth. Then, St. Stephen went to preach in the synagogue, where he managed to convert many of his listeners[50]. The three

[50] G. Kaftal, *The Fabulous Life*, op.cit., p. 300. "terum ergo aparuit algelus domini, dicens ad eum: egredere hin[c] et vade in galileam et consolare domum pratris tui, multum enim. tenpore as sata et conturbata. qui mane surgens, ostitit coram, sancto iuliano et impetrans beneditionem, significans se esse recessurum. qui audiens sanctus iulianus contristatus est nimis, noluit dimictere eum. at ille narans sibi angellicam visionem, statim benedixit ei sanctus iulianus et dimisit eum. qui continuuo veniens a[d] mare, invenit quadam naviculam ad domino sibi paratam et intravit inn ea et incepit navigare. cum autem venisset in civitatem suam et ductus a spiritu sancto intravit in domum patris sui, et tristes inveniens pater et mater: cur vos ita tristis estis? qui dixerunt: rogavimus dominum ut daret nobis filium et ipse dedit nobis filium tribulationis et scandalis. tune conversus sanctus stefanus dicit diabolo: adiuro te per dominum. yesum christum ut dicas cuius filius es. cui tremens dixit: sancte Stefane, noli me intrimere et ego cuntos innimicos tuos consumo, tune sanctus stefanus iuxit igniem deferri, cumque delatu fuisset cepit demon stridere rugitus tauri ac omnium, bestiarum voces emictere et continuo sanctus stefanus pro[i]ecit inn ignie eu[m] et ilium combuxit. et dixit partri et matri sue: ego sum filius vester, quern satan abstulit a vobis. letabantur pater et mater et parentes eius et sapientia eius viso miraculo. altera autem die veniens a[d] sinagogam, cepit predicare et aperire scricturas et

scenes painted by Lippi closely correspond to the text. Particularly interesting is the scene of St. Stephen expelling the devil from the changeling. Lippi pictured the boy chained to a column while the winged devil comes out from his mouth. The scene included also an element, painted *a secco* under the roof of the room, which probably showed God's direct intervention. Today it is no longer visible, but the upright glances of the two witnesses of the miracle, who look at something above their heads, and some traces of the paint on the fresco's surface suggest that the painting included a visual element painted *a secco*, which today is lost.

The legend of St. Stephen infancy finishes with the description of his preaching activity. Thus, the depiction of the final scenes from the saint's life had to follow a different source. It seems that Varagine's *Golden Legend* remains crucial for the iconography of the *Martyrdom* and the *Celebration of relics*. Varagine's narrative, contained in the chapter *De sancto Stephano*, could result useful for the authors of the iconographic program of the chapel as it focuses on St. Stephen's preaching activity and his martyrdom. These two elements offer a parallel between St. Stephen and St. John the Baptist's *Vite*. Varagine starts his narration with an explanation of the meaning of the saint's name, which contains the program for Stephen's sanctity. As the author reports, *Stephanus* means crown, which is also the crown of his martyrdom. The name can also come from "*stenue fans"*, which means "speaking with zeal", and this semantic root alludes to the importance of St. Stephen's preaching activity.

> The name Stephen – Stephanus in Latin – comes from the Greek word for crown – stephanos: in Hebrew the name means norm or rule. Stephen was the crown of the martyrs in the sense that he was the first martyr under the New Testament, as Able was under the Old. He was a norm, i. e., an example or rule, showing others how to suffer for Christ, as well as how to act and live according to the truth, or how to pray for one's enemies. Or Stephen (Stephanus) comes from stenue fans, speaking strenuously or with zeal, as the saint

solvere legem, afirmans yesum esse filium et spiritum sanctum. a[d] cuius predicationem plusquam quinque milia virorum, excectis parvolis et mulieribus, crediderunt in nomine domini yesu christi et batizati sunt, confitentes pariter yesum esse filium dei."

> showed in his manner of speaking and his brilliant preaching of the word of God. [...] So Stephen is a crown because he is first in martyrdom, a norm by his example in suffering and his way of life, a zealous speaker in his praiseworthy teaching of the widows[51].

Therefore, this source in a very efficient way provided parallels between the life, activity and death of both saints. In the scene of the martyrdom, St. Stephen is being crowned from heaven for his sacrifice, and just like St. John, he prays for his enemies. The presence of the crown in the fresco may suggest a direct reference to the initial part of Varagine's narrative.

As it has been shown, the iconographic program of both cycles was composed with the aim to underline similarities between the saints' biographies, and to present them both as preachers who paid with their life for their firm faith. The textual sources, which laid at the basis of the images helped in establishing of this connection and represented legitimate authority of truthfulness for the tale.

If the similarities between the lives of both saints lay at the centre of the iconographic program, Lippi reinforced these parallels by a similar spatial organization of both cycles. The scenes strongly resemble each other and the analogies can be found in each tier: architectonic interior for the birth scenes, rocky landscapes on the middle rows and illusory spaces on the lowest tier, which suggest spatial continuity between the chapel and representation. An attempt to locate the narration in a unified spatial setting is visible throughout all scenes of both cycles.

The spatial compositions of the *Birth* and the *Naming of St. John the Baptist* (plate 9), painted in the lunette of the right wall, are unified by one architectonical frame, which encloses both events. On the left, there is St. Elisabeth's room. The mother lies on her bed while maids take care of the new-born. On the right, we

[51] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golen Legend. Readings on the Saints*, transl. W. Granger Ryan, vol. 1, Princeton, 1995, p. 45. Jacobi a Voragine, *Legenda Aurea vulgo historia lombardica dicta*, Lipisiae, 1850, pp. 49-50: "Stephanus graece, latine dicitur corona, sed hebraice norma. Fuit autem corona, id est, principium martirum in novo testamento, sicut Abel in veteri. Fuit etiam norma, id est, exemplum et regula aliis patiendi pro Christo, sive vere agendi et vivendi , vel pro inimicis orandi. Vel Stephanus dicitur, quasi strenue fans, quod patet in suo sermone et in luculenta divini verbi praedicatione. [...] Est ergo corona propter principium martirii, norma propter exemplum patiendi et bene vivendi, strenue fans propter luculentam praedicationem, strenue stans propter viduarum laudabilem instructionem."

see another space of the house, adjacent to the *puerpera*'s room, divided from it only by a wall. There, at the entrance to the corridor enclosed by a colonnade, Zacharias writes down the name of his son. Both events, therefore, take place in the same building. Even if the fresco represents two different temporal moments and the action develops from left to right, the location of the action remains the same, namely St. John's family house. Despite Lippi's efforts to unite the spatial arrangement of both scenes, the perspectival construction of the architectonic structure hosting the events is not coherent. The perspective lines do not converge at one vanishing point. In fact, each structure – St. Elisabeth's room, the corridor on the left and the top floor, visible from the outside – are all depicted from different points of view. This modality evidences that Lippi, at the beginning of his work in Prato, still used intuitive perspective. At the same time, however, the artist tried to adapt this device to his purposes, in order to produce the effect of the spatial unity of the scene. Similar efforts are visible in the lunette on the opposite wall, as well as on both frescoes of the middle tier.

On the one hand we can see here how deeply Lippi's narrative language was rooted in the tradition of continuous narrative and spatial solutions typical of the late Trecento and early Quattrocento painting. Single events are easily distinguishable, as each of them takes place in a small area of the fresco, within its own spatial frame. However, the composition of these multiple spaces is much more coherent than we could observe in Benozzo Gozzoli's *St. Augustine meets the Christ Child, Visits the Hermits in Tuscany and Bestows His Rule* (figure 4.6), where the proportions of the elements composing the scenes were clearly unbalanced. Despite locating each event in a slightly distinct space, Lippi managed to balance the overall compositions and suggest spatial continuity between them. In fact, compositional unity was one of the most important achievements of painting in perspective. The subordination of all elements of a painting to a precise measure of distance not only made possible a closer imitation of the natural world, it also significantly increased the unity of the composition and resulted in the final effect of a high verisimilitude of a pictorial representation[52]. On the two upper tiers of Lippi's frescoes in Prato we cannot yet observe a coherent, mathematically

[52] J. White, *Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space*, London, 1972 (first ed. 1957), p. 198.

calculated, perspectival space. Nevertheless, we witness the artist's effort to locate the action of both stories in a rational setting, constructed with the help of intuitive perspective. It is clear that in the frescoes on the two upper tiers Lippi tried to maintain the proportions between the size of the human figures painted in the foreground and those in the background, and the proportions between the measure of a human body and the architecture. Moreover, the unifying effect of the depth and spatial continuity within each fresco was strengthened by Lippi's use of colour. In fact, the colour technique applied by Lippi in Prato was truly innovative[53]. The artist, not fully satisfied with the colouristic possibilities of fresco painting, strengthened the modelling of the figures on the murals *a secco*. By the use of colour, and by stressing the contrast with the backdrop, Lippi accentuated the figures' plasticity. As paint applied on a dry wall does not have the same resistance as the parts painted in *buon fresco*, it is difficult today to conceive the visual effect intended by Lippi. Yet, even with the present-day state of conservation of the frescoes, we can see that the backdrops of both upper tiers are painted with the use of rather neutral colours, greens, greys and light browns. The human figures, instead, vibrate against this pale landscape thanks to the bright, vivid colours of their draperies, which are painted in pinks, reds and oranges (plates 6 and 10). The effect of increased depth and plasticity of the scenes can today be perceived only in part, but it would certainly have been much more striking when fresh colours and *a secco* modelling were still visible. Thus, it is evident that, despite the use of continuous narrative, Lippi wanted to guarantee the spatial coherency of his paintings. He tried to provide the spectator with a visual experience of depth and plasticity through the use of intuitive perspective and colour design, which allowed him to increase the relief of the human figures from the picture plane.

Illusion and immersion in Lippi's frescoes

Lippi's *inventio* would reach its peak in the lowest tier of the decoration, in the scenes of Saints' martyrdoms, the *Feast of Herod* (plate 12) and the *Celebration*

[53] J. Ruda, *Colour and Representation of Space in Paintings by Fra Filippo Lippi*, in *Color and Technique in Renaissance Painting. Italy and North*, ed. M. B. Hall, New York, 1987, pp. 49-50.

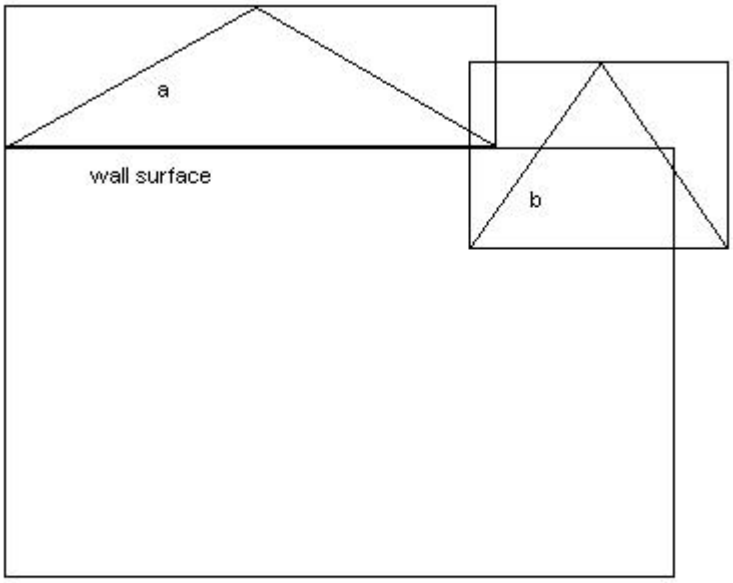
of the Relics of St. Stephen (plate 8). Here, the artist would not only succeed in the construction of a correct perspectival scheme for both frescoes, but he would also try to extend the illusion of a connection between the space of the chapel and the depicted scenes, already guaranteed by perspective, by an unusual organization of the chapel's angles and a particular linking of the scenes of both martyrdoms on the altar wall with the scenes on the chapel's side walls. The visual effect of this spatial organization has been described in the scholarship as a "visual shock", and a "surprise for the eye[54]" and these words truly capture the essence of sensorial confusion offered by the frescoes. The eccentricity of Lippi's design is expressed in the manner in which he connected the martyrdom with the subsequent scene, abandoning at the same time the convention of an architectonic frame, which usually divided one section from another. Both martyrdoms were painted on the altar wall, thus their meaning would be connected to that of the Eucharist. Saint's sacrifices acquire their full theological sense only in relation to Jesus' sacrifice, repeated during every Holy Mass[55]. Lippi, however, uses the angular localization of the scenes to introduce the space of the chapel into the representation. In both cases, the martyrdoms span between the altar and the side walls. In the *Martyrdom of St. Stephen* (plate 7) the stones are thrown from one side and hit the martyr on the other. Therefore, the stones "virtually" pass through the space of the chapel[56]. In St. John's martyrdom (plate 11) the prophet's head is cut off and the body of the kneeling Baptist remains on the altar wall side. His head, instead, a relic and a trophy at the same time, is handed by the executioner to Salome, who approaches him from the side wall. Here, the headsman's arm follows the wall, bending ninety degrees around the corner. Differences between this solution and the inclusion of the chapel space into the representation of the *Martyrdom of St. Stephen* (plate 7) on the opposite wall has been emphasized. Here the architectonical rupture follows the narrative as the abruptness of the passage from one backdrop to the other, which coincides with the corner of the chapel and cuts in two the executioner's arm, represents the violence of the cut, which detached St. John's

[54] L. Marin, *Filippo Lippi a Prato*, in Idem, *Opacità della pittura. Saggi sulla rappresentazione nel Quattrocento*, Firenze, 2012, pp. 210-13, first edition of the volume: L. Marin, *Opacité de la peinture. Essais sur la représentation au Quattrocento*, Paris, 2006.

[55] E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 21.

[56] It has been noticed by both Borsook and Marin. Cf. E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 21, L. Marin, *Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 212-17.

head from his body[57]. However, even if we treat the ninety degrees corner as a metaphor for the door of St. John's prison[58], the saint's head, in order to move from one place to another, had to "virtually" cross the space of the chapel, as with the stones in the depiction of St. Stephen's martyrdom. Lippi included in the cycles another peculiar connection between the scenes. On the right side of the *Celebration of the Relics of St. Stephen* (plate 8) we can see that the rocky landscape, which is the background of St. Stephen martyrdom, invades the space of the neighbouring scene. For Borsook it "penetrates the very basilica where Stephen's body lies in state – defying all logic but somehow satisfying the formal requirements of a fable.[59]" It could be argued, however, that the rocks do not enter the space of the church but expand, instead, in front of it, occupying the space of the real chapel. It has already been shown how the corner scene involves the actual space of the church, thanks to the stones that "fly" from one wall to another. Lippi, however, tried to produce in the corner a visual illusion of the saint's martyrdom truly happening behind the main altar. Therefore, if observed in this three-dimensional key, the corner scene develops towards the spectator, who is in the chapel. The space of the neighbouring *Celebration of the Relics of St. Stephen* (plate 8), instead, develops backwards, in depth. If one reads the relationship between pictorial and real space in this way, the rocky landscape of the martyrdom appears to occupy the actual



a - virtual space of the church in the scene of the Celebration of the Relics of St. Stephen
b - virtual space of the scene of the Lapidation of St. Stephen

Figure 4.8: Scheme of the spatial organization of the *Martyrdom* and the *Celebration of the Relics of St. Stephen*.

[57] L. Marin, *Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 212-13.
[58] Ivi, p. 212, footnote no.6.
[59] E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 28.

space of the main chapel, and spatially extends onwards, thus covering the first of the church's pillars, which are simply behind it (figure 4.8). These two scenes prove Lippi's creativity in the field of perspectival experimentation. While in the *Celebration of the Relics* (plate 8) the image is conceived "as an open window through which the *historia* is observed[60]", in the *Martyrdom* (plate 7) the surface of the wall disappears under the pressure of the virtual space, which develops in the opposite direction. Therefore, Lippi takes the spectator on a truly virtual walk between imaginary spaces accessible for him from the space of the chapel. The construction of an illusory effect of connection between the space of the fresco and the real space of the choir is offered also by the *Feast of Herod* (plate 12), painted on the opposite wall. Here, as in the *Celebration of the Relics* (plate 8), the artist invited the viewer into one of the rooms of Herod's palace, where banqueters admire Salome's dance and witness the delivery of St. John's head to Herodias. In this scene, in fact, the conjunction between innovation and tradition in Lippi's narrative is the most visible. Here, more so than in the rest the cycles, the contrast between a coherent, perspectival space and the continuous narrative is heightened. The spatial construction of the room, where the event happens, creates a convincing illusion of three dimensions. The illusory connection between the spectator and the space of the feast is strengthened through the use of painted steps leading to the room from the chapel and a parapet running along the painting's edge, a sort of *trompe l'oeil*, which builds an architectonical connection between both spaces. The spectator, virtually entering Herod's palace, does not witness one event happening there, but attends the banquet in its temporal dimension. Through the use of continuous narrative, Lippi represented in the fresco three different temporal moments during the feast: the dance of Salome, Salome collecting the head of St. John from his executioner, and, finally, the delivery of the relic to Salome's mother. The artist displays before the viewer the sequence of events flowing before his eyes. The reading order is nonlinear, in that it does not move either from right to left nor from left to right. The narration begins with the middle scene, as the space between the tables constitutes the stage for Salome's dance. The second event happens at the left edge of the fresco,

[60] L. B. Alberti, *On Painting*, transl. R. Sinisgalli, New York, 2011, p. 39.

while the last event is on the far right. Despite this intricate organization, the narration does not lose its legibility. Lippi managed to guide the spectator's eye through the fresco thanks to a net of gazes, which unites the guests of Herod's feast with the protagonists of the story and, in turn, with the spectators in the chapel[61]. The dancing Salome is observed by a wealthy man wearing a red hat, seated at the centre of the table, while the banqueter next to him is already watching the following scene in which Salome offers St. John's head to Herodias. This Salome, instead, kneeling in front of her mother with the precious trophy on the plate, turns towards the chapel, trying to catch the spectator's glance (figure 4.9). In this way the spectator is guided through the scene from one event to another, and thanks to this solution Lippi managed to maintain the legibility of the episode.

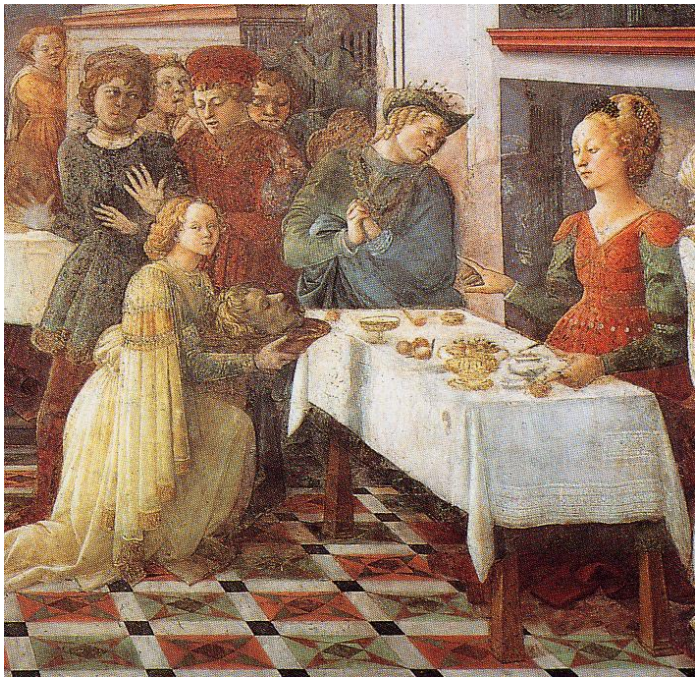


Figure 4.9: Filippo Lippi, *Feast of Herod*, detail, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.

The narrative clarity of the cycle was preserved even in the scenes where the perspectival construction of the space was the most rigorous. Lippi managed to transform the background of the scene into a stage, on which the narrated action took place. The fresco represented in this way the temporal aspect of the story. The illusory effect guaranteed by perspective pulled the spectator into the fresco, and subsequent phases of the depicted event, animated by the viewer's imagination, could be performed in front of his eyes. As has been shown, in the scenes on the lowest tier, Lippi challenged the traditional framing device of frescoes. In this way, the images conveyed a strong sense of immediacy

[61] L. Martin, *Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., pp. 215-217.

and allowed the spectator to engage with them sensorially and emotionally. The narration started to flow in front of his eyes.

Fresco, ritual and spectacle

Lippi's efforts to unify the spatial organization of the scenes made possible the animation of the figures in the spectator's imagination. In this way the fresco turned into a performance, in which the represented events "happened" in front of the viewer's eyes. It is argued that the use of perspective, and the creation of a coherent spatial organization for the scenes, should not be interpreted merely in stylistic terms. Defining the structure of a painting's background constituted an artistic problem, and the modalities of its resolution partook in the definition of the image's meaning. Therefore, it is important to investigate the significance of Lippi's choice to represent the saints' lives on the walls of the chapel with the use of perspective and the construction of illusory spaces.

The fresco decoration on the church's walls played an important role in the complex process of defining the space of a church. The legitimization of a sanctuary not only required the existence of a cult confirmed by the authority of a relic or an image, supported by a legend regarding its supernatural origins (like an *acheiropoieton*), a vision or recognized miracles attributed to it. The architecture of the building itself, together with its decoration partook in the formation of the holy areas. The space of a church was divided into zones, each of a different function and diverse relationship with liturgy. A narthex or an atrium became an intermediary space, suspended between the secular and the sacred. The ecclesiastical authorities often complained about the misuse of the sacred space by various communities, through activities such as markets, organized in the courtyards, and secular plays and games, which were not uncommon in Italy between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as frequently recorded in sermons and bishops' admonitions[62]. Thus, the most sacred area, the choir, where

[62] On Antonino Pierozzi's attempts to divide the liturgy from the theatrical activity during the St. John the Baptist festivity see P. Ventrone, *Sulle feste di San Giovanni: Firenze 1454*, "Interpres", 19/2000, pp. 89-101. The scholar summarizes the aims of Pierozzi's reforms of 1454 and states: "[...] questa rinnovata edizione del San Giovanni possa essere stata una conseguenza dell'intervento antoniniano: la separazione della dimensione spettacolare da quella cerimoniale, ossia l'estromissione degli edifizi dalla processione ecclesiastica, se certamente dovette raggiungere lo scopo prefissato di rendere più

the sacrament was kept and the Holy Mass was celebrated, had to be firmly protected from any contamination with the profane. The choir was divided from the main nave by a rood screen, and was thus made invisible and inaccessible to the worshippers, and represented the heart of the sanctuary[63]. These spatial divisions aimed at preserving the sacrality of the space, they shaped and were shaped by the liturgical use of the sanctuary. Within the architectural framework, the fresco decorations of the nave and chapel walls engaged in the dialogue with the worshipers. They exposed the theological truths of God's revelation, and situated local cults of saints and martyrs within the plan for human salvation[64]. From the sixth century onwards one of the most common iconographic schemes of wall decorations in Italian churches became the narrative cycles telling the Old Testament stories, or the stories of Jesus's life, or both sets of narratives, represented on opposite sides of the church. A decoration based on this iconographic program covered the walls of the Old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome or, much later, the walls of the nave of the Collegiate in San Gimignano. Far from being merely the *Biblia pauperum*, these decorations partook in the process of legitimization the Christian faith and the cult inside of a sanctuary. The choice of an iconographic program, which mirrored the scenes from the New Testament with the Old Testament stories, expressed the concept of typology. Decorations based on this scheme represented the life of Jesus as fulfilment of the prophecies described in the Old Testament and built parallels between the events from the Scriptures and Jesus' revelation[65]. Scriptural typology as a discipline of early Christian theology searched for semantic continuum between the biblical figures and identified the types, which prefigured Christ and proved that God's salvific plan transcended space and time[66]. Typology confirmed the truth of Christ's sacrifice and guaranteed the authority of God's word kept in the Scriptures.

devoto e solenne il corteo dei religiosi, ottenne anche il risultato di conferire maggiore libertà e autonomia allo sviluppo degli elementi teatrali."

[63] J. Stabenow, *Introduzione*, in *Lo spazio e il culto. Relazioni tra edificio ecclesiale e uso liturgico dal XV al XVI secolo*, ed. J. Stabenow, Venezia, 2006, pp. 9-23.

[64] *Art, Cérémonial et Liturgie au Moyen Âge. Actes du colloque de 3e Cycle Romand de Lettres Lausanne-Fribourg, 24-25 mars, 14-15 avril, 12-13 mai 2000*, ed. N. Bock, P. Kurmann, S. Romano, J.-M. Spieser, Roma, 2002.

[65] M. A. Lavin, *The Place of Narrative. Mural Decoration in Italian Churches, 431-1600*, Chicago, 1990, p. 23.

[66] K.-H. Ostmeyer, *Typology, Scriptural*, in *Religion Past and Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, ed. H. Dieter Bets, Don S. Browning, B. Janowski, E. Jüngel, vol. 13, Leiden, 2013, p. 156.

Jesus's life, death and resurrection acquired true meaning and supremacy only if interpreted in light of the Old Testament. The frescoes visualized, therefore, this theological doctrine. They pictured the theological basis of the faith and the Christian cult[67].

In other cases, the fresco decoration may have been employed to legitimize local cults, and confirm the sacrality of local oratories and churches. An example of this kind is given by the fresco decoration in Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella in Rome. Dating from the early eleventh century, executed probably during the pontificate of Urban II (1088-99), the decoration includes a Christological cycle and the legends of St. Urban and St. Cecilia. The stories of the martyrs, who were executed along the Via Appia during the papacy of Urban I (222-230?), were placed next to the scenes of Christ's Passion. In this way the frescoes represented the spiritual meaning of the deaths of St. Cecilia, Anolinus and St. Urban. Their martyrdom became the beginning of their spiritual life and proved the saving power of the Christian faith. The frescoes established a direct, physical and historical link between the location of the church and the martyrdoms of the first Christians that occurred along the Via Appia, as well as with the nearby catacombs of Praetextatus and Callixtus, where St. Cecilia and St. Urban were buried. Thus, they confirmed the sacrality of the place and legitimized the cult of both saints[68]. Finally, in order to legitimize local cults, frescoes were involved in the process of establishing local festivities, which related to the saint protector of a given church. This is supported by the eleventh-century frescoes in the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome, where the scenes of St. Clement's life proposed a liturgical calendar of feast days for the saint: the celebration of the *cathedra* of St. Clement, the discovery and the translation of the relics[69].

The relevance of the fresco decoration for the space of the church and local cults went far beyond mere decorative and didactic aims. The frescoes established a theological basis for the cult, confirmed the sacrality of the space, visualized the saints' protection over the sanctuary and the community

[67] M. A. Lavin, *The Place of Narrative*, op. cit., p. 23.
[68] K. Noreen, *Narrative Layout and the Creation of a* Locus Sanctus *in the Frescoes of Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella, Rome*, in *Shaping Sacred Space and Institutional Identity in Romanesque Mural Painting. Essays in Honour of Otto Demus*, ed. T. E. A. Dale, J. Mitchell, London, 2004, pp. 95-121.
[69] C. Filippini, *Function of Pictorial Narratives and Liturgical Spaces: The Eleventh-Century Frescoes of the Titular Saint in the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome*, in *Shaping Sacred Space*, op. cit., p. 132.

of believers, and confirmed the feast days celebrated in it. Thus, the decorations were actively involved in the ritual practice of the community and in this way they also acquired their political meaning, confirming the authority of the church and the commune. It is difficult to find more suitable evidence for the involvement of a fresco cycle in civic ritual than the Chapel of the Holy Belt in the Prato cathedral, decorated between 1392 and 1395 by Agnolo Gaddi. The chapel was built with the aim to host the most precious relic of the city, the Sacra Cintola, given by the Virgin to St. Thomas at the moment of her Assumption into heaven. The frescoes on the chapel's walls depict the Life of the Virgin and the Legend of the Holy Belt, that is the history of the relic, its arrival to Prato and the miracles performed by it. The decoration functioned in a close relationship with the main ceremony related to the relic, the feast day of the Birth of the Virgin, celebrated on 8th September with the public display of the Holy Belt. The Life of the Virgin depicted on the walls confirmed the authenticity of the relic, while the Legend of the Sacra Cintola guaranteed its power and authority[70]. Moreover, the decoration acquired its full meaning only in the context of the sumptuous procession organized in Prato on the feast day of the Birth of the Virgin. The last scene of the cycle of the Legend of the Holy Belt (figure 4.10) represents, in fact, the first of these processions that, according to the story, occurred when the relic was handed to the provost of the Pieve and was translated to the church. Therefore, the fresco mirrored the actual celebrations, repeated in Prato every year with the participation of the ecclesiastic and political authorities of the town[71]. The image became the guarantor of the authority and the power of the relic, establishing a basis for its cult and patterns for the public ceremonies in its honour.

[70] J. K. Cadogan, *The Chapel of the Holy Belt in Prato: Piety and Politics in Fourteenth-Century Tuscany*, "Artibus et Historiae", 30, 60/2009, pp. 107-137.
[71] Ivi, pp. 122-123.



Figure 4.10: Agnolo Gaddi, *Death of Michele* and *Belt Is Brought in Procession to the Pieve*, 1392-1395, fresco painting, chapel of the Holy Belt, St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.

The relationship between the frescoes in the Chapel of the Holy Belt and the annual celebration in Prato on 8th September was at the centre of the iconographic program and determined the meaning of the cycle. The presentation of the relic of the Sacra Cintola was the most important religious and civic ceremony in fifteenth-century Prato, which significantly overshadowed the feast day of the patron saint of the town, St. Stephen. The cult of St. Stephen in Prato dates back to the tenth century and to the first *pieve* dedicated to the saint. In the thirteenth century, however, with the development of the devotion related to the most precious relic of the city, the festivity of the discovery of the relics of the first martyr, celebrated 25th December, lost its primacy in the annual calendar of celebrations. Therefore, the decision to dedicate the main chapel of the church to the patrons of Prato and Florence, St. Stephen and St. John the Baptist respectively, has to be seen as an offering of the most holy site of the church, the area of the main altar, to the main protectors of the city. The frescoes, therefore, would reinforce the cult of both saints and the importance of their intercession for the community of citizens. Through this decoration the cult of St. Stephen would be strengthened and it would re-acquire its proper place in the sacred geography of the Pieve.

The tradition of locating images of saints who mediated between God and the believers in the area of the main altar developed during the Middle Ages, first in the Eastern world, where the icons of saints were exposed on the iconostasis. The decoration of this “wall of icons”, imported from the East into the Western tradition, which guarded the access to the presbytery, may have included different

types of representations. Nevertheless, they were united by their meanings mainly centred on the idea of intercession. Thus, the surviving examples of icons that formed the iconostasis, coming likewise from Italian territories, include the icons of The Mother of Mercy (*Eleousa*), who addressed a long letter of petition to "Christ who answers" (*Antiphonites*) or icons of monasteries' patrons who directed their plea in the name of the believers. Frequently, on the top of the entablature of the chancel partition a frieze was placed, which represented saints as mediators in the name of the believers. The frieze could also include the representations of Christological or Marian feasts, which composed actual cycles of lives. The icons of patron saints incorporated into the iconostasis, instead, could correspond to the type of a biographical icon, where the central figure of the heavenly protector was surrounded by scenes from his life, which formed a sort of narrative frame (figure 4.11)[72].

The last two types of images used in the decoration of the iconostasis – the frieze with the saint intercessors, which also included the feast scenes, and the biographical icons framed by the saint's life – are particularly important for our understanding of the role and meaning of narrative in the space of the main altar. First of all, they suggest that the division of the religious images into devotional (*immagini*) and narrative (*storie*) was not as clear and simple as it would be tempting to believe[73]. In scholarship on the subject to date, narratives have been understood as images that served didactic purposes, and only icons were understood as part of the devotional practices of communities.

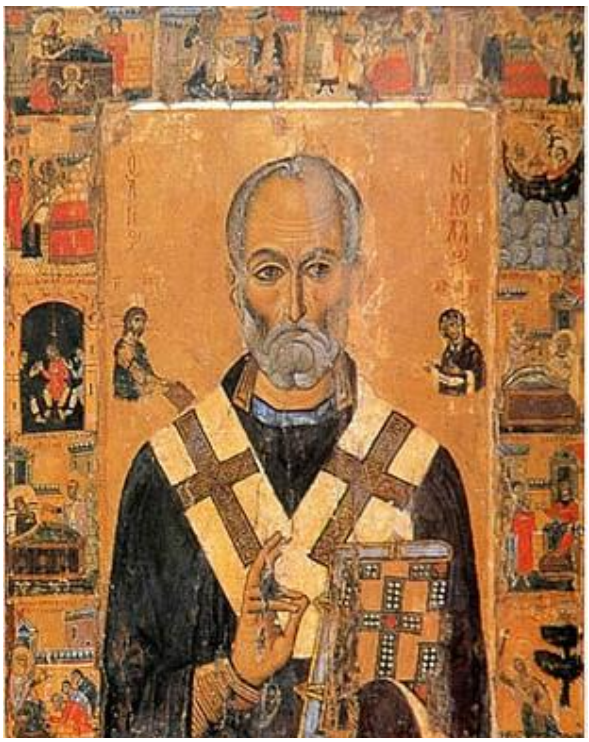


Figure 4.11: *Narrative Icon of St. Nicholas*, fifteenth century [attr], St. Catherine's Monastery in Mount Sinai.

[72] H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, transl. E. Jephcott, Chicago, 1992, pp. 233-258.

[73] C. Hope, *Religious Narrative in Renaissance Art*, "Journal of the Royal Society of Arts", 134, 5364/1986, pp. 804-818.

However, the prominent place given to narrative frescoes in the space of a church invites us to reconsider this traditional dichotomy. As the examples of the biographical icons show, the narratives formed the basis for a cult, and legitimized the authority of a saint on the earth, which could have been translated in his thaumaturgical powers. Finally, the saint's life, visualized in the sequence of scenes, illustrated his ethical perfection thanks to which he became a mediator between the believers and the heavens. The narration, therefore, did not have exclusively didactic purposes but served as a confirmation of the authority and power of a saint. Only this authority could have guaranteed the agency of an image and assure the efficiency of the saint's intercession.

The inclusion of the Virgin's and Jesus's lives into friezes with saint intercessors and other types of icons – composed by the scenes of main Christological and Marian festivities such as the Annunciation, Nativity, Epiphany, Baptism, Transfiguration, Jesus's entry into Jerusalem and Crucifixion – guaranteed the efficacy of an image by its appeal to the moments of hierophany, the greatest mysteries of the faith, recalled and repeated during each feast day. Religious festivities marked the course of each year and filled it with salvific power coming from the celebrated event. A feast day, as a remembrance of hierophany (a moment when God manifested himself to humanity), participates in the sacrality of the event. "By its very nature sacred time is reversible in the sense that [...] it is a primordial mythical time made present. Every religious festival, any liturgical time represents the re-actualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past [...]."[74] Therefore, the visualisation of the moments of hierophany, which composed the narrations of Christ's or the Virgin's lives under the representations of saints who appealed for the blessing of the believers, reinforced the agency of the image. In this way the icon recalled the salvific power of each of these feast days, which guaranteed its efficiency.

Hitherto, in the scholarship, the iconographic tradition of the iconostasis decoration has not been taken into consideration in the analyses of fresco decoration of the main altar area in late medieval and early modern Italy[75].

[74] M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, transl. W. R. Trask, New York, 1959, pp. 68-69.

[75] Dale, in the *Introduction* to the volume *Shaping Sacred Space* (op. cit.) discussed the theological bases for the presences of the fresco decorations in the medieval churches, without reference to the ritual

It is strongly believed, however, that the semantics of such cycles was, as with the role attributed to the icons in an iconostasis, strongly dependent on the idea of the intercession. If so, the frescoes could have functioned as agents between God and the believers. The saints' lives represented on the chapel's walls legitimized their authority and confirmed their ethical perfection and miraculous power, which guaranteed the efficiency of their intercession. Moreover, as with the narrative cycles included in Eastern icons, the narrative fresco decoration that recalled the saint's feast day remained seminal, as Lippi's murals in Prato show.

Representing the lives of the patron saint of the cathedral and the patron saint of neighbouring Florence, who dominated Prato in the mid fourteenth century, the decoration of the main chapel was supposed to guarantee the protection of these two saints over the city, its institutions and inhabitants. Through the composition of both cycles, the visual and semantic power of the decoration is concentrated on the two bottom tiers representing the scenes of martyrdoms, the *Feast of Herod* (plate 12) and the *Celebration of the Relics of St. Stephen* (plate 8). In fact, these two lowest frescoes refer to the feast days related to the two saints. The *Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist* (plate 11) and the *Feast of Herod* (plate 12) recall the feast of 29th August, so called "San Giovanni Decollato", which commemorates the death of the saint. *The Lapidation of St. Stephen* (plate 7) and the *Translation of the Relics* (plate 8) visualize the events commemorated on 26th December, the martyrdom of the saint, and 2nd August, the translation of the relics from Jerusalem to Constantinople. Lippi employed highly illusory stylistics to represent these scenes. Through this representation the community of believers could participate in the salvific power of the saints' intercession. The saints' martyrdoms could bring fruits for the citizens of Prato and in this way the frescoes became agents of salvation.

From the *Memorie* of Giusto d'Anghiari we know that on 29th August 1451 the feast of the martyrdom of St. John the Baptist was celebrated with a spectacle

of intercession and the use of iconostasis. Belting recognized the value of the fresco decorations within the space of a church and claimed that the murals are closely tied to the liturgic functions of the space, but he did not further discuss the eventual similarities between the frescos in the choir area and the iconostasis. See H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, op. cit., pp. 173-183.

staged in the prato della Porta alla Giustizia in Florence[76]. The text, which was probably used for this *sacra rappresentazione*, is preserved in one of the most ancient manuscripts dated 1464 containing the Florentine religious dramas[77]. *La rappresentazione di San Giovanni Battista quando fu decollato* narrates St. John's first encounter with Jesus and Jesus' baptism, the preaching of the last prophet, his premonition of Herod, imprisonment, and death, which followed a great banquet organized by the king. The description of the Feast of Herod is, in fact, of central importance for the text. The text emphasises the visual beauty of the feast and the wealth of the guests, which all confirmed the honour of Herod's household.

Partesi l'Araldo, e vassene il Signore colla sua gente e dice così:
Po' ch'a lui piace, i'son molto contento
di venir là e di fargli onore.
Su presto, baronia, sanza spavento
ogniun si metta il suo vestir migliore.

Giungono al Re e dicon così:
Eccoti, Re, che t'è in piacimento
e vogliamo onorarti di buon core
in questa festa ch'è sì bene ornata,
però qui meco ho assai brigata.

Giungono tutti e Signori e Baroni e 'l Re dice loro così:
[…]

Oltre, al nome di Dio, agli stormenti,
empiete questa festa di letizia.
Oggi è quel dì ch'io vi farò contenti
e farò magni doni e gran dovizia.
Truovin le mense, scudieri e sergenti,
donzelli e servi istretti in amicizia;

[76] Giusto D'Anghiari, *Memorie, 1437-1482*, BNCF, Fondo Nazionale II. II. 127 (formerly Magliabechiano XXV, 496); R. C. Trexler, *Florentine Theatre, 1280-1500. A Checklist of Performances and Institutions*, "Forum Italicum", 14/1980, p. 463.
[77] *Nuovo corpus di sacre rappresentazioni fiorentine del Quattrocento edite e inedite, tratte da manoscritti coevi o ricontrollate su di essi*, ed. N. Newbigin, Bologna, 1983, p. 109.

nappi d'argento e tovaglie di renso
si truovi<n>, che altro fare oggi non penso[78].

After the dance of Salomé the grace of the girl is described with the most sublime metaphors:

O glorïosa Maestà regale,
quant'è da gloriarsi la tua vita
solo per questa fanciulla imperïale
ch'un'angioletta par, del Cielo uscita.
Quanto danza vezzosa in grazia sale
di questa Baronia alta e gradita.
O franco Re, sare' onesto e buono
di farle in questo dì qualche gran dono[79].

Finally, after the beheading of the saint, when his head is brought to the king and the queen, their reaction is as follows:

Il Siniscalco porta la testa in mensa e dice così:
Ecco, magno Signor, la chiesta testa
del vergine figliuol di Zaccheria.
Fanne che vuoi, che per noi nulla resta.

Risponde subito il Re e dice così:
Cattiva, dolorosa figlia ria,
portala via, che tal doglia e tempesta
sopra te venga che in eterno sia
ricordo del don chiesto scellerato,
e vendetta del tuo chieggio peccato.

La Fanciulla prese la testa e portolla alla Madre e dice così alla Madre:
Ecco, diletta madre, del Battista
la testa che fe' già tante parole

[78] *La rappresentazione di San Giovanni Battista quando fu decollato*, in *Nuovo corpus*, op. cit., pp. 125-126.
[79] Ivi, p. 126.

contra di voi, e quel che lui n'acquista.
Ecco non parla più come far suole.

Risponde la Madre e dice così:
Mostra qua, dolce figlïuola. Vista!...
Oh, ché non parli, ché parlar si vuole
quand'è bisogno, come fa l'uom saggio,
e tacer quando fai altrui oltraggio?[80]

There is a strong parallel between the text of the *sacra rappresentazione* and Lippi's interpretation of the *Feast of Herod*. The attention towards the appearance and magnificence of the feast, the palace rooms, the costumes of the guests, the richness of the crockery, all seem similarly important for the painter as well as for the author of the drama. Secondly, Salome's angelic dress painted by the Carmelite monk, the delicate movements of her dance find analogies in the textual description of the girl's *"danza vezzosa"*. Finally, Lippi seems to depict Herod, seated on Herodias' right side, reacting with the same false horror and terror at the sight of Baptist's head delivered by Salome to the royal couple as the author of the *sacra rappresentazione* did in his verses (figure 4.9). In the fresco we see the king folding his hands in prayer, asking for God's mercy, and turning his head from the plate on which sits the precious relic with an expression of abhorrence. At the same time, Herodias accepts the gift from her daughter with a gentle smile on her face, a subtle sign of contentment and satisfaction.

We cannot know if there is a direct dependence between the text of the *rappresentazione* and Lippi's interpretation of the subject. However, the text and the fresco come close to each other in certain aspects of the narrative. Lippi's direct acquaintance with the text and with the spectacle cannot be completely excluded given the artist's commitment to the world of Florentine religious spectacle (chapter 3, paragraph 2). The artist is known for frequent quotations in his paintings of some of the visual elements of stage design and costumes. In fact, it will be argued that it is possible to find in the murals of Prato cathedral certain similarities between the frescoes' narrative structure and narrative

[80] Ivi, pp. 132-133.

conventions of Florentine *sacre rappresentazioni*. These parallels develop at various levels and they spread from the visual elements borrowed by the artist from the stage design, through to the organization of the narrative, which results in common patterns of the representation of the sacred and ritualistic function of both the frescoes and the performances.

The elements borrowed by painters from the world of religious drama can be found in the production of different artists. We can trace them in the decoration of the Upper Basilica in Assisi or in Carpaccio's *Legend of St. Ursula*. At the same time, painters looked to the stage in search of solutions for the spatial organization of their narrative scenes. Popular in narrative painting between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was the division of the action into different *luoghi deputati* and the recurrence of the motif of a mountain in the backgrounds of the compositions, all inspired by the experience of the medieval stage, proving the relevance of the artist's direct contact with the world of spectacle[81]. It seems that drama offered painters a ready-made set of spatial and expressive solutions, which they could apply in their pictorial production.

Filippo Lippi's art, despite its technical and spatial innovations, was certainly deeply rooted in the Trecento tradition. Undoubtedly, the experience of Giotto, Gaddo, Taddeo and Agnolo Gaddi's art made a strong contribution to the formation of Lippi's narrative style in Prato. Therefore, like his predecessors, Lippi paid credit to the world of religious drama and used visual elements in his frescoes that derived from the theatrical tradition, such as *luoghi deputati* and the motif of the mountain. In the Prato murals, the narration of two upper tiers develops through a succession of events, each located in a small area, slightly divided from the rest of the scene. Even if an attempt to obtain a greater

[81] L. Zorzi, *Figurazione pittorica e figurazione teatrale*, in *Storia dell'arte italiana. Questioni e metodi*, ed. Giovanni Previtali, vol. 1, Torino, 1979, p. 426.

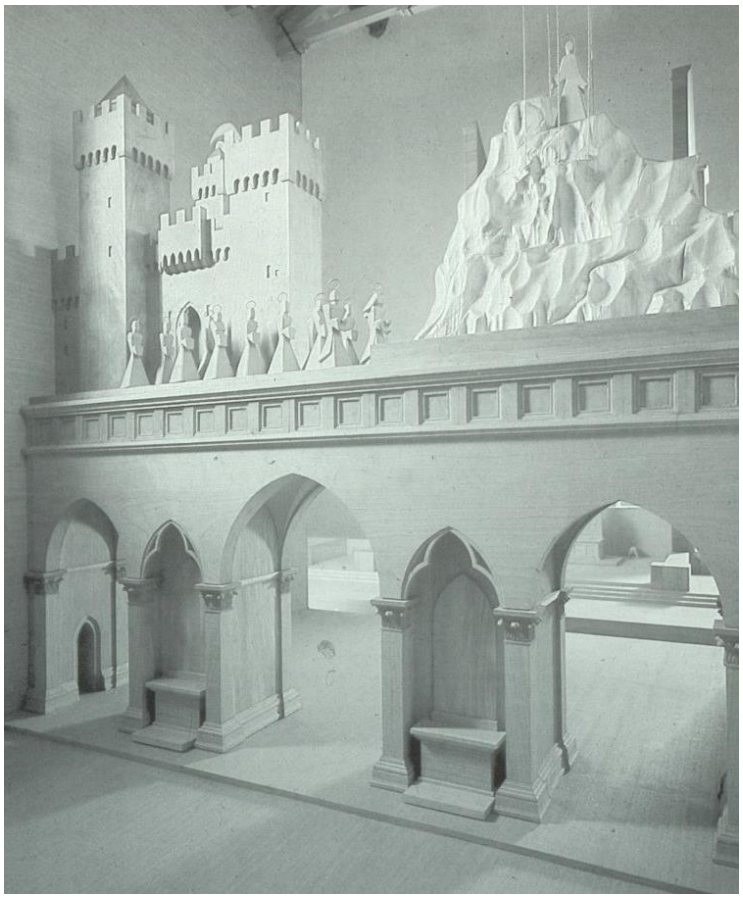


Figure 4.12: Cesare Lisi, *Reconstruction of the Ascension Spectacle in the Santa Maria del Carmine Church in Florence*.

spatial unity can be seen here, the space of the fresco still seems to be divided into successive *luoghi deputati*, well known from the previous tradition. Moreover, Lippi located the action of the middle tier in a characteristic rocky landscape, which for Eve Borsook marks the artist's "fairy-tale style[82]". Here again, however, we deal with a solution that brings us back to the world of spectacle. The mountain was certainly one of the most widespread elements of the Quattrocento religious drama[83]. Moreover, it constituted one of two main scenic components of the Ascension spectacle in the Florentine Carmine (figure 4.12), where Lippi had grown up and become a monk. The *monte*, which appears in the far distance of the *Birth of St. John* and the middle tier of St. Stephen's life, reappears with full expressiveness in the middle scenes from the Baptist's life and in the scene of St. Stephen's martyrdom. The similarities between Lippi's composition of the *Feast of Herod* and the text of the *Rappresentazione di San Giovanni Battista quando fu decollato* and the quotation throughout the entire cycle of elements from the world of religious spectacle, constitute a link between the decoration and the sacred drama. The parallels between the frescoes and the spectacle strongly influenced the meaning of the image. Through the elements of illusion introduced by Lippi into his murals, the artist managed to reduce the sensorial distance between the spectator and the

[82] E. Borsook, *Fra Filippo Lippi*, op. cit., p. 9.
[83] L. Zorzi, *Figurazione pittorica*, op. cit., p. 429-431.

represented scene. He challenged the boundaries between fiction and the physical realm of the spectator. The use of linear perspective and the creation of illusory continuity between the space of the chapel and the depicted scenes, opened the way to the spatial and temporal manipulations of the sacred stories figured in the painting. In this way the lowest tier of the frescoes, as with the religious spectacle of the period, suggested spatial and temporal continuity between the earthy realm of the believer and the sacred space of the narration. The tendency to actualize the biblical plots in the Florentine *sacra rappresentazione* and to manipulate the framing structures of religious dramas (chapter 2, paragraph 3) introduced into the spectacles an element of temporal and spatial ambiguity. In the same way linear perspective allowed Lippi to demolish the sensorial barrier dividing the space of the representation from the physical space of the chapel. This procedure weakened the sensorial frame of the representation, and its effects on the narrative of the story are similar to what we observed in the *Festa di Susanna*. In the spectacle, the introduction of contemporary characters and the omission of the angel's prologue connected the space of the stage with the public. The frame, that is, the framework that underlined the dissimilarity of the theatrical experience from the events offstage, was challenged. The spectator was invited to immerse his senses in the performance and suspend his disbelief. In the *Festa di Susanna* these immersive techniques not only guaranteed the public's strong emotional involvement, but also built a spatial link between the space of the public and the representation. In the same way, perspectival construction in Prato not only offered a sensorial illusion of spatial continuity between the chapel and the image, but also built an illusion of the painted space "invading" the physical space of the chapel. Just as in the drama the framing structure was weakened by the omission of the angel's prologue and the *inframessa*, so in the painting the frame disappeared, to be replaced by the illusory balustrade and the steps leading to Herod's palace. Just as the peasants from Chianti could have entered the stage and taken part in the performance, so the monks, praying in the chapel in Prato, could have metaphorically climbed these steps and joined the royal couple at their feast.

Perspective not only manipulated the spatiality of the representation, but it also distorted its temporal dimension. We have seen before to what extent

spectacle manipulated the temporal dimension of ritual. Drama could represent the elders from Susanna's story as contemporary judges who declared guilty one of the peasants from Chianti. In this way, the drama broke through temporal barriers and so did Lippi's fresco. The temporal ambiguity of the representation is suggested by the *Celebration of the Relics of St. Stephen* (plate 8). The scene, which represents a commemorative celebration, recounted the translation of the saint's corpse, celebrated every year on 2nd August. The church interior represented in the fresco is strikingly similar to the interior of Prato cathedral itself. The space of the fictive cathedral is divided, like the real *pieve*, into three naves by two lines of columns and pillars, even if their colours are altered. While in the fresco the columns are white and the walls dark grey, in the church the grey columns stand out against the white walls of the interior. The identification of the depicted space with the Duomo of Prato is reinforced by the inclusion into the scene of contemporary characters. Pope Pius II and the new provost of the cathedral, Carlo de' Medici, assist in the celebration (figure 4.13). Moreover, on an inscription running along the step in the bottom left-hand corner of the fresco we read the date 1460. Therefore, what the fresco represents is, with great probability, the celebration related to St. Stephen's feast day on 2rd August 1460 when Carlo de' Medici was officially appointed Dean of the cathedral[84]. Thus, the fresco seems to be characterized by temporal polyvalence. It represents both the final scene of St. Stephen's legend, the translation of the relics, and also the feast day of the city's patron saint in 1460, when one of the members of the Medici family obtained a prominent ecclesiastical office.



Figure 4.13: Filippo Lippi, *Celebration of the Relics of St. Stephen*, detail with the portraits of Pius II, Carlo de' Medici, Filippo Lippi and Fra Diamante, 1452-1466, fresco painting, choir of the St. Stephen Cathedral, Prato.

[84] Ivi, p. 23.

Through the illusory effect of perspective, the frescoes' temporal and spatial dimension became multilayered. The image connected the earthy dimension of the believers with the sacred realm. The action represented in the frescoes was performed in the space of the chapel and this is how the painting could have changed into ritual. The intercession for the city and its inhabitants became efficient through the salvific force of the feast day recorded in the image. The events commemorated on the saints' feast days were re-enacted in the frescoes as they were in the spectacles staged during the most important festivities in Florence. The consequences of the use of perspective, thus, were not merely stylistic. The device revealed new potentialities of the religious image, which now could have become more effective in establishing a contact between the believers and their heavenly protectors and guaranteeing their protection over the community.

Finally, it is important to observe that the *Celebration of the Relics of St. Stephen* (plate 8) was one of the first manifestations of the Medicean tradition of representing the family members as direct participants in the most important events in the history of salvation, as celebrated in the Florentine festive calendar. Contemporaneous with the completion of the *Celebration of the Relics* (plate 8) in Prato, the Medici represented themselves as taking part in the Magi pageants in their private chapel in the Palazzo Medici in Florence. The Medicean influence on the celebration on 6th January and the iconography of the adoration of the Magi had strong political connotations[85]. The Magi, patrons of knights, merchants, travellers, scholars and physicians, were also symbols of the royal cult. Thus, through the promotion of the devotion to the Magi, the Medici established their own regal authority over the city. As the interpretation of the complex iconography of the private chapel in the Medici's palace shows, the inclusion of contemporary portraiture in the frescoes became an expression of a very precise political program. The adversaries of Medicean rule, Niccolò da Uzzano,

[85] R. Hatfield, *The Compagnia de' Magi*, "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", 33/1970, pp. 107-161; F. Cardini, *I re Magi di Benozzo a Palazzo Medici*, Firenze, 2001; R. C. Trexler, *The Magi enter Florence. The Ubriachi of Florence and Venice*, "Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History", 1/1978, pp. 129-213.

Gino Capponi, Maso degli Albizi and Palla Strozzi, are believed to be represented between the members of the procession following the eldest of the Magi, identified sometimes as the patriarch of Constantinople or as the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund of Luxemburg (figure 4.14). The Medicean faction, instead, followed the youngest King, Caspar, in whom some want to see the idealized portrait of Lorenzo de' Medici (figure 4.15). In this way the Medici rule represented the future, while the oligarchy was figured as belonging to the past[86]. The decoration of the chapel is strongly related to the celebrations on Epiphany



Figure 4.14: Benozzo di Lese called Benozzo Gozzoli, *Parade of Magus Melchior*, 1459-1460, fresco painting, Chapel in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Florence.

day, which included a spectacle and a triumphal parade of the Magi through the streets of Florence. Even if the celebration dated back to the end of the fourteenth century, only from the late 1430s, thanks to Medicean protection, the Compagnia de' Magi enjoyed solid support from the Signoria[87]. The Medicean

[86] F. Cardini, *I re Magi*, op. cit., pp. 28-32, 39-46.
[87] R. Hatfield, *The Compagnia de' Magi*, op. cit., pp. 113-114.

domination over Florentine ritual would carry strong implications for both the world of religious performance and the tradition of narrative fresco cycles. Through Medicean politics towards the sacred image and civic ritual, fresco painting approached the world of performance, and started to fulfill functions that up until that point were proper to ritual practices. Lippi's work in Prato poses a similar problem of an eventual Medicean influence. As we know, in the very last years of Lippi's work in Prato, the Medici played an important role as guarantors of the frescoes' completion. The *Celebration of the Relics* (plate 8) is likely to represent the day when Carlo de' Medici became the cathedral's provost. Even



Figure 4.15: Benozzo di Lese called Benozzo Gozzoli, *Parade of Magus Caspar*, 1459-1460, fresco painting, Chapel in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Florence.

if we cannot prove this direct influence, it is possible that since 1460, when the cathedral was governed by a member of the Medici family, their impact on Lippi could have become stronger than before. Unfortunately, the lack of precise

documents makes impossible a more exact assessment of a possible influence of the Medici on the iconography of the last tier of the frescoes.

As the present analysis shows, Lippi's frescoes in Prato, through the skillful application of the narrative conventions of monumental fresco painting and the use of new artistic devices, such as linear perspective, managed to activate the image and make it resemble a religious performance staged in the honour of the patron saint. As it has been shown, Lippi developed his narrative language on the bases of the Florentine pictorial and theatrical tradition. The comparison of his visual idiom with Ghirlandio's artistic solutions applied to the frescoes in the Tornabuoni chapel allows a better understanding of the evolution of the Florentine tradition of narrative painting that occurred during the second half of the fifteenth century. Lippi's artistic experience suggests that the particular closeness that has arisen between narrative religious fresco and religious spectacle results from a continuous exchange between the artistic and the confraternal environments of the city. Moreover, the parallels between theatrical and pictorial representations of the sacred narratives depend on the devotional habits of the period and on the place of the narratives in the devotional and ritual life of the believers. If Lippi's artistic production showed multiple contact points with the devotional culture of the Florentine middle class, Ghirlandaio's narrative cycles would fall under a strong influence of the Medicean circle of intellectual. As the following chapter will show, the dialogue between art and theatre would be further promoted by the Medici family and their circle, as it would participate in the Medicean campaign aimed at influencing the Florentine *sacra* and the world of civic ritual. Ghirlandaio's frescoes in the Santa Maria Novella would become a flagship example of these kinds of politics towards religious imagery. It will be shown how the Medici engaged with the local Florentine devotional and artistic traditions, modified them, used them to express completely new ideas and promoted a new theological and philosophical theories. Ghirlandaio continued on Lippi's legacy but his narrative language had to change under the weight of the new humanistic culture. It can be seen already in the differences between the organization of the backgrounds of the narrated stories in the two fresco cycles. If Lippi located the figures in a rocky, fictive landscape, Ghirlandaio depicted ideal urban spaces with many creative reconstructions of the Roman architecture. As it

will be shown in the following chapter, the frescoes would also refer to the sources different than the hagiographic writings such as the *Golden Legend* or vernacular *Vite* of the saints. The paintings would engage instead in the ongoing philosophical disputes, which took place in the Medicean *entourage*. Ghirlandaio's decoration for the Tornabuoni would have to fulfill multiple functions: to be an efficient tool in the intercession for the fortune of the *consorteria*, to promote the theological, philosophical and political program of the Medicean faction, and, last but not least, to narrate the sacred stories of the life of the Virgin and St. John the Baptist. The following chapter will show how the tradition inherited by Ghirlandaio from Lippi was creatively reinterpreted by him in a changed cultural, political and social context of 1480s.

Chapter 5

Domenico Ghirlandaio's Frescoes in the Tornabuoni Chapel: Living Images at the Service of the Medicean Faction

Filippo Lippi's wall paintings in the main chapel in the Pieve di Santo Stefano in Prato suggested the existence of close ties between the ritual of intercession and the fresco decoration of the choir area. Moreover, they showed that the use of linear perspective was not merely a question of style but it played an important role in the formation of the image's meaning and guaranteed the efficiency of the frescoes, which in turn took part in the civic ritual. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, though, narrative fresco cycles covered not only walls around the main altar, but also adorned family chapels in numerous churches spread along the peninsula. The Tornabuoni Chapel (plate 15) in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, decorated between 1485 and 1490 by Domenico Ghirlandaio and his workshop, is a noteworthy example of this kind. By agreeing on the execution of the decoration, the Dominican friars from Santa Maria Novella allowed the main chapel of one of the principal churches in the city to become a private chapel for one of the Florentine families. This ambiguous situation was usually avoided and the patronage over the main chapel was divided between more than one family. The importance of the project conceived by Giovanni Tornabuoni depended also on a close relationship between the commissioner and the circle of Lorenzo il Magnifico, Tornabuoni's nephew, who from the 1470s ruled the city, and promoted new cultural values across different strata of the society.

Because of the crucial role the decoration played in the Florentine art of the late fifteenth century, the bibliography regarding Ghirlandaio's work in Santa Maria Novella is vast and it may seem that our understanding of the cycle of frescoes, stained-glass windows and the iconographic program for the main altar has been fully acquired[1]. Scholarly attention was attracted by the multiple

[1] See the studies by J. Schmid, Et pro remedio animae et pro memoria*: bürgerliche repraesentatio in der Cappella Tornabuoni in S. Maria Novella*, München, 2002; P. Simons, *Portraiture and Patronage*

portraits of the members of the Tornaquinci *consorteria* included into the scenes, the definition of feminine and masculine roles in society and the praise of the female members of the family who guaranteed the continuity and force of the lineage and by Ghirlandaio's ability to reproduce in painting contemporary settings and costumes of the portrayed personalities[2]. The social importance of the decoration analysed in light of the self-representation of a family, and the enquiry into the process of establishment of social recognition in the vibrant Florentine society between 1470 and 1490, is the subject of two seminal studies dedicated to the chapel, namely, Patrizia Simons's PhD thesis *Portraiture and Patronage in Quattrocento Florence with Special Reference to the Tornaquinci and their Chapel in S. Maria Novella*, and Josef Schmid's *Et pro remedio animae et pro memoria: bürgerliche repraesentatio in der Cappella Tornabuoni in S. Maria Novella*[3]. Nevertheless, it is still possible to ask questions about the religious and theological dimension of the decoration. In fact, a striking element of the frescoes in the Tornabuoni chapel is the artist's choice to link the detailed style of the representation and multiple actualizations of the narratives with a strong illusory effect provided by the use of the perspective technique, and to include in his composition characters coming from three different cultural contexts. We can easily recognize in the frescoes the protagonists of the New Testament stories: Jesus, the Virgin, St. John and their parents. At the same time, some of the scenes include portraits of contemporary characters, such as the members of the Tornaquinci *consorteria*. Finally, the artist included into the cycles figures from classical antiquity.

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in Quattrocento Florence with Special Reference to the Tornaquinci and their Chapel in S. Maria Novella, 2 vols, PhD dissertation, Department of Fine Arts, University of Melbourne, 1985; A. M. van Loosen-Loerakker, *De Koorkapel in de Santa Maria Novella te Florence*, Zierikzee, 2008; S. McClure Ross, *The Redecoration of Santa Maria Novella's* Cappella Maggiore, PhD dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1983; A. Salucci, *Il Ghirlandaio a Santa Maria Novella, la cappella Tornabuoni. Un percorso tra storia e teologia*, Firenze, 2012; T. Ito, *Domenico Ghirlandaio's Santa Maria Novella Altarpiece: A Reconstruction*, "Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institut in Florenz", 56, 2/2014, pp. 171-191.

[2] P. Simons, *Portraiture and Patronage*, op. cit.; J. Schmid, Et pro remedio, op. cit.; Ch. M. Rosenberg, *Virtue, Piety and Affection: Some Portraits by Domenico Ghirlandaio*, in *Il ritratto e la memoria*, ed. A. Gentili, P. Morel, C. Cieri-Via, Roma, 1993, pp. 173-195; I. Westergård, *Approaching Sacred Pregnancy. The Cult of Visitation and Narrative Altarpieces in Late Fifteenth-Century Florence*, Helsinki, 2007.

[3] P. Simons, *Portraiture and Patronage*, op. cit.; Idem, *Patronage in the Tornaquinci Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence*, in *Patronage, Art, and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. F. W. Kent, P. Simons, Oxford, 1987, pp. 221- 250; J. Schmid, Et pro remedio, op. cit..

This chapter will investigate the devotional functions of the decoration through an analysis of the iconography of the frescoes. Illusory features of the paintings, portraiture and actualization of the backdrops will be interpreted in light of religious and political ideas of the Laurentian epoch. First, devotional aspects of family patronage will be discussed. Further, the influence of the Medicean circle of the intellectuals on the decorative programme of the Tornabuoni frescoes will be analysed and multiple *imagines agentes* (agent elements) of the decoration will be recognized. Finally, the relationship between the frescoes, the religious ritual and sacred drama of the period will be examined. Special attention will be given to Medicean politics towards the sacred image and Florentine ceremonial. The analysis will lead to consider the possible agency of monumental fresco painting. It will discuss the importance of linear perspective for the sacred iconography and the consequences of its application to the religious painting during the last quarter of the fifteenth century in Florence.

Decorating a family chapel

On 1st September 1485 Giovanni Tornabuoni, Lorenzo il Magnifico's uncle and the head manager of the Medicean bank in Rome, signed a contract with Domenico and David Ghirlandaio for the decoration of the main chapel of Santa Maria Novella[4]. The commission included the decoration of the chapel's walls with the figures of Four Evangelists in the vault, the life of the Virgin and the life of St. John the Baptist on side walls, the Coronation of the Virgin and figures of Dominican saints: St. Antonino Pierozzi, St. Dominic, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Vincent Ferrer and St. Peter Martyr on the altar wall. In the following years, Giovanni Tornabuoni secured for himself and for the Tornaquinci *consorteria* the patronage over the stained glass windows and the altarpiece. For many years, the Dominican friars tried to avoid the inappropriate situation in which the rights of patronage over the main chapel would belong

[4] ASF, Notarile Antecosimiano, 13186 [formerly M 237] (Ser Jacopo di Martino da Firenze, 1481-1487), ff. 159r-160r. The contract has been first published by G. Milanesi, *Documenti inediti dell'arte Toscana dal XII al XVI secolo*, "Il Buonarroti", 3, 2/1887, pp. 335-338. More recently it has been published by J. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, op. cit., pp. 350-351. An English translation is published by D. S. Chambers, *Patrons and Artists in the Italian Renaissance*, London, 1970, pp. 173-175.

to one single family. Prior to the agreements between Giovanni Tornabuoni and the convent, the rights over the chapel were divided between Tornaquinci, who were patrons of the walls, Sassetti, whose arms were exposed on the altarpiece, and Ricci, who sponsored not only the stained glass window but also the altar paraments[5]. It is not completely clear when, how and why the Dominicans conceded to Giovanni to unite in his hands such a vast patronage over all the elements of the chapel decoration and its furnishing.

The Tornaquinci were the patrons of the chapel's walls already at the time of the commission of the previous frescoes, traditionally attributed to Andrea Orcagna, which in 1485 were in bad conditions and needed a replacement. In 1486, Tornabuoni obtained for himself, his family and the Tornaquinci consorteria the patronage rights over the altarpiece[6], which was previously due to Francesco Sassetti[7]. In his testament, instead, Tornabuoni secured the execution of the wooden *spalliere* and the stained glass windows[8]. Moreover, from Giovanni's last will we can clearly deduce his intention to change the chapel into the burial place for his family. Thanks to a graffito found on the chapel's right wall after the flood of 1966, we know that the patron was actually buried in front ofthe main altar[9].

Giovanni Tornabuoni's determination to obtain a full patronage over the main chapel of the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella was truly uncommon. The monks' approval for Giovanni's design was also unusual. The division of the patronage over the different elements of the chapel's furnishing, applied by the Dominicans before the arrival of Giovanni, testifies their will to preserve the area of the main altar from an usurpation by one single family from the Florentine patriciate. The change of the monks' approach seemed so unusual that some scholars suspected a direct intervention of Lorenzo il Magnifico, who

[5] R. Hatfield, *Giovanni Tornabuoni, i fratelli Ghirlandaio e la cappella maggiore di Santa Maria Novella*, in *Domenico Ghirlandaio. 1449-1494*, ed. W. Prinz, M. Seidel, Firenze, 1996, p. 112-114.
[6] ASF, Notarile Antecosimiano, 13186 [formerly M 237], (Sei Iacopo Iacopi, 1481-1487), ff. 192v-193v, published by J. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, op. cit., pp. 357-358.
[7] A. Warburg, *The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie*, in Idem, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contribution to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, Los Angeles, 1999, p. 189.
[8] ASF, Notarile Antecosimiano, 5675 [formerly C 644] (Ser Piero di Bruno, 1490-1500), ff. 47r-50r, published by J. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, op. cit., pp. 369-371.
[9] R. Hatfield, *Giovanni Tornabuoni*, op. cit., pp. 114, 116-117, note no. 41.

convinced the Dominicans to agree on Giovanni's project[10]. As bold as his aim was, the fact that the main chapel of Santa Maria Novella became a burial chapel for one of the Florentine families, astonishes mainly because of its religious significance. The patronage over a chapel or an altarpiece, in fact, aimed at the acquirement of spiritual benefits arising from any kind of prayer or ceremony held at it. Therefore, the patron did not obtain rights of property to a space or an object, as a chalice or an altarpiece, but benefited from the grace coming from all the religious rites that clergy and believers enacted in front of it[11]. Giovanni's affair has to be analysed in this light, as the social consequences of his gesture were not limited to the manifestation of his family's economic supremacy. Tornabuoni, by acquiring the patronage over the chapel and changing it into his own burial place, made a significant investment for the afterlife of himself and the members of his family. The members of the Tornaquinci *consorteria* would endlessly benefit from heavenly blessing resulting from every mass, prayer or ceremony, any kind of ritual held at the main altar of the church, which is not a secondary parish church of the town, but one of the four main churches of Florence, and the head of one of the Florentine quarters. Thus, the boldness of Giovanni's successful project laid in the religious dimension of the commission. As we will see further, Giovanni's primary concern was the care for the spiritual benefits arising from the decoration.

Prisca theologia and Neoplatonism, the iconography of the chapel

Upon first viewing Domenico Ghirlandaio's masterpiece in Santa Maria Novella, Aby Warburg was struck by the figure of one of St. Elisabeth's maids in the *Birth of St. John the Baptist* (plate 19). The woman looks like an ancient nymph in her ethereal blue dress and she enters the room of the *puerpera* with gentle, dancing steps, balancing a large plate full of fresh fruits on her head (figure 5.1). The figure of the maid has since attracted the attention of other scholars who, despite easily finding iconographical sources for the motif in classical sculpture, have been unable to explain the meaning of the figure in the context of the scene. The *Birth*

[10] Ivi, p. 113.
[11] M. Bacci, *Investimenti per l'aldilà. Arte e raccomandazione dell'anima nel Medioevo*, Roma, 2003, pp. 134-138.



Figure 5.1: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Birth of St. John the Baptist*, detail, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

of the Virgin (plate 25) contains another young girl in a similar dress pouring water into a pitcher to prepare the Virgin's first bath. Domenico Ghirlandaio's lives of the Virgin and of St. John the Baptist narrated the biblical stories combining figures coming from three different registers. In the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* (plate 26) we can see a semi-nude man draped in red cloth sitting on the temple steps. Next to him is a small wooden barrel with the top of a bottle sticking out. The man cups his chin with his elbow resting on his knee as though deep in thought (figure 5.2). In the *Preaching of St. John the Baptist* (plate 21) a group of four men gather at the bottom right-hand corner (figure 5.3). Two are seated and hold each other's hands. One of the seated men wears purple and blue drapery and holds a walking stick; the other is dressed in red and white drapery with an Arabic turban on his head. The two men standing behind them seem to be discussing something with St. John the Baptist. The older one points to heaven; the younger man indicates the ground.

The peculiar presence of these figures has passed almost unobserved by the scholars who have studied the chapel's decoration. Ghirlandaio's frescoes are more famous for the portraits of the members of the Medicean faction, seminal personalities during the years of Lorenzo il Magnifico's rule over Florence. However, the frescoes illustrate a direct relationship between the decoration and Medicean intellectual circles. The *Annunciation to Zacharias* (plate 17) portrays not only members of the Tornaquinci *consorteria*, but also Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo

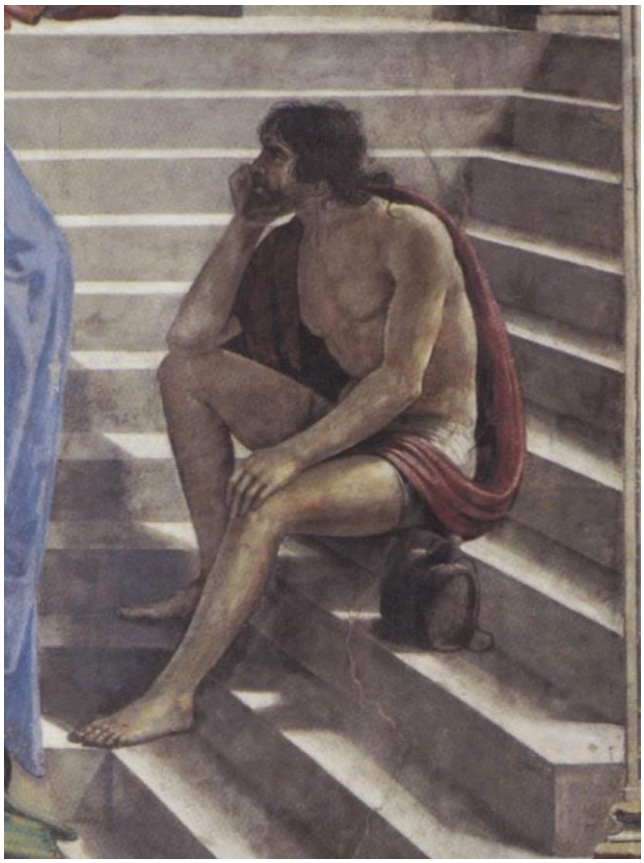


Figure 5.2: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, detail, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Landino, Angelo Poliziano and Gentile Becchi[12] (figure 5.4). Moreover, we can see an inscription probably composed by Poliziano himself above the arch on the right[13] (figure 5.5):

> In the year 1490, when the most beautiful city, graced by richness, victories, arts, and monuments, enjoyed wealth, health and peace.
>
> AN[NO] MCCCCLXXXX QVO PVLCHERRIMA CIVITAS OPIBVS VICTORIIS ARTIBVS AEDIFICIISQUVE NOBILIS COPIA SALVBRITATE PACE PERFRVEBATVR

From this point of view, the scene points to the existence of a link between the

[12] P. Simons, *Portraiture and Patronage*, op. cit., pp. 273-74.
[13] Ivi, pp. 273.



Figure 5.3: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Preaching of St. John the Baptist*, detail, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

chapel commission and the Medicean entourage. However, no investigation into the iconography of the chapel has hitherto taken account of the close relationship between the decoration and the intellectual world of Ficino, Poliziano, Landino and Becchi. Given the fortune of themes inspired to classical antiquity among the scholars linked to Lorenzo il Magnifico, the return to classical drama, art and philosophy in the years of his rule, it is sensible to look at both religious and philosophical sources to interpret the meaning of figures inspired to classical art. The textual tradition at the origins of both the Life of the Virgin and the Life of St. John the Baptist is a safe starting point to understand the iconography of Ghirlandaio's frescoes in the Tornabuoni Chapel. At the time the frescoes were painted, the main textual sources for the iconography of the Life of Virgin were the *Protovangelium of James*, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (*Liber de Ortu Beatae Mariae et Infantia Salvatoris*), the *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary* (*Historia de Nativitate Mariae et de Infantia Salvatoris*) and Jacopus de Varagine's *Legenda Aurea*. The Life of St. John, on the other hand, generally followed the New Testament and, again, Varagine's *Golden Legend*. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the iconography of the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* (plate 26) included a representation of the temple with ten or fifteen steps leading up to it and the Jewish rabbis who received the girl,



Figure 5.4: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Annunciation to Zacharias*, detail with the portraits of Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo Landino, Angelo Poliziano, and Gentile Becchi, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Figure 5.5: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Annunciation to Zacharias*, detail 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Figure 5.6: Giotto di Bondone, *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, 1305, fresco painting, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua.

her parents, St. Anne and Joachim at the bottom of the steps, surrounded by other Jews and bystanders. This is how Giotto portrayed the scene in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua in 1305 (figure 5.6) and how Taddeo Gaddi represented it in the Baroncelli Chapel in the church of Santa Croce in Florence in 1328-1338. Thus, at a first glance, the semi-nude figure sitting on the temple steps in Ghirlandaio's *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* seems to break with these established schemes of representing the subject. Ghirlandaio introduced a new visual element to his composition, and this element must be interpreted in the context of the scene. From an iconographic point of view, the figure displays similarities in relief and pose to the Belvedere Torso[14] (figure 5.7), which was discovered in the 1430s and became a model for fifteenth- and sixteenth-century artists. In fact, Ghirlandaio was one of the first to readapt this classical model in his own work. From the 1490s onwards the Belvedere Torso would receive even greater attention. Michelangelo cited it several times, including in the *Ignudo* over Jeremiah on the Sistine Chapel ceiling (1511-1512)[15]. Ghirlandaio's classical quotation suggests a link between his figure and the world of classical antiquity. The barrel on the steps next to the figure is similar to the one in Ghirlandaio's Tornabuoni *Adoration of the Magi* from 1487. Though already mentioned by Vasari[16], this



Figure 5.7: Apollonius of Athens, *Belvedere Torso*, first century BC, Vatican Museums, Rome.

[14] N. Dacos, *Ghirlandaio et l'antique*, "Bulletin de l'Istitut Historique Belge de Rome", 34/1962, p. 435.
[15] L. Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture*, New Haven, 1999, pp. 189-207.
[16] "Nella terza, che è la prima sopra, è quando la Nostra Donna saglie i gradi del tempio, dove è un casamento che si allontana assai ragionevolmente dall'occhio; oltra che v'è uno ignudo che gli fu allora lodato per non se ne usar molti, ancorché e' non vi fusse quella intera perfezzione come a quegli che si son fatti ne' tempi nostri, per non essere eglino tanto eccellenti." G. Vasari, *Le vite*

figure has attracted some attention among art historians. Sheila McClure Ross has interpreted him as a pilgrim[17], and Alessandro Salucci argued that he represents the pagan religion defeated by Christianity[18]. Anna Maria van Loosen-Loerakker has instead claimed that the figure represents Hermes Trismegistus[19].



Figure 5.8: Tiziano Vecellio, *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, 1534-1538, oil on canvas, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.

In fact, none of these interpretations provide a conclusive analysis of the motif, its sources or similar iconographic references. For instance, McClure Ross' interpretation is based on a comparison with paintings executed after the completion of Ghirlandaio's frescoes, such as Titian's *Presentation in the Temple* (figure 5.8) for the Scuola della Carità from 1534-38, which therefore could not have served as a source for the Florentine painter. Further, the identification of the figure as a pilgrim is based on the attribute of the chest with the food, while the figure's near-nudity refers to the ritual of baptism, represented on the opposite wall[20]. Unfortunately, this interpretation is not supported by textual or iconographic sources. We could say the same for Salucci's identification of the figure as the pagan religion. In fact, the author's reading does not offer any comparison of the motif with other representations of the same subject and it seems to be influenced by religious approach to Ghirlandaio's frescoes, demonstrated by the study of this Dominican friar[21]. Van Loosen-Loerakker's

de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568, ed. R. Bettarini, vol. 3, Firenze, 1971, pp. 485-486.

[17] S. McClure Ross, *The Redecoration of Santa Maria*, op. cit., p. 124, 242, note 134.

[18] A. Salucci, *Il Ghirlandaio a Santa Maria Novella*, op. cit., p. 62.

[19] A. M. van Loosen-Loerakker, *De Koorkapel in de Santa Maria* Novella, op. cit., pp. 111-114.

[20] S. McClure Ross, *The Redecoration*, op. cit., p. 242, note 134.

[21] A. Salucci, *Il Ghirlandaio a Santa Maria Novella*, op. cit., pp. 61-63.

interpretation of the semi-nude figure as Hermes Trismegistus reads the figure as an expression of the philosophical ideas circulating at that time among the Medicean circle of intellectuals. Nevertheless, a comparison between this figure and other representations of Hermes Trismegistus, such as that on the floor of Siena Cathedral, which represents the philosopher in obvious Eastern garb, including a turban, calls for further analysis of the motive.

The aforementioned sources upon which the iconography of the *Presentation of the Virgin* was traditionally based offer the key for understanding the meaning of the semi-nude figure more precisely. The description of the episode in the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* brings to our attention an angel, adopted by Jacopus de Varagine in the *Golden Legend*, from whose hand Mary received divine food and to whom she often spoke while staying at the temple. The chest, or barrel with a bottle sticking out of it, sitting next to the mysterious semi-nude in Ghirlandaio's fresco, invite us to pursue this interpretation. An iconographic comparison with other representations of the Presentation in the Temple reinforces the connection between the figure sitting on the steps of the temple and food. In the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* by Cima da Conegliano (1496-97) (figure 5.9) we can see a young boy sitting on the steps surrounded by what we could call bounty from the countryside: a small cage with birds and food-bearing baskets. Titian would go on to include this motif in his *Presentation in the Temple* for the Scuola della Carità (1534-38) (figure 5.8) in which we can see an elderly egg-seller with her basket beside her at the bottom of the steps. The painting was, as already mentioned, executed later than Ghirlandaio's fresco and, thus, cannot constitute the source



Figure 5.9: Giovanni Battista Cima called Cima da Conegliano, *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, 1496-1497, oil on panel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Maister, Dresden.

for Domenico's figure. Nevertheless, it is possible to look for some convergences between the characters, which allow to research common textual roots. David Rosand interpreted Titian's figure as *Carità*, the patroness of the confraternity for which the painting was created. The egg-seller would consequently be a beggar who asks for charity, as often happens in front of temples[22]. The semantics of the figure in Titian's painting corresponds to the context of the commission just as the representation of charity relates to the *Scuola della Carità*, the painting's patron. On the other hand, the presence of the food brought to the temple links the figure in the painting with the angel from Pseudo-Matthew. Even if the figure has lost its angelical attributes, its role and meaning in the life of the Virgin still holds true.

According to the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* and Varagine's *Golden Legend*, the angel was originally concerned with the Virgin's spiritual growth. He not only brought the girl divine nourishment but also became a frequent interlocutor through whom the Virgin could practice the art of contemplation.

> [6.2.] And this was the order that she had set for herself: from the morning to the third hour she remained in prayer; from the third to the ninth she was occupied with her weaving; and from the ninth she did not again cease from prayer. She did not retire from praying until there appeared to her the angel of the Lord, from whose hand she received food; and thus she became more and more perfect in the work of God. She was so instructed with the older virgins in the praises of God that none was found before her in vigils, none more learned in the wisdom of the law of God, more lowly in humility, none more elegant in the songs of David, none more gracious in charity, more pure in chastity, more perfect in all virtue. She was indeed steadfast, immoveable, unchangeable, and daily advancing to perfection. [6.3.] No one saw her angry, nor heard her speaking evil. All her speech was so full of grace, that her God was known to be upon her tongue. She was always engaged in prayer and in searching the law, and she was anxious concerning her companions lest anyone should sin

[22] D. Rosand, *Titian's Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple and the Scuola della Carità*, "The Art Bulletin", 58, 1/1976, p. 74.

> in speech, lest anyone should raise her voice in laughter, lest in the sound of her beautiful voice, she herself should commit any fault, or lest, being elated, she should display any wrong-doing or haughtiness to one of her equals. She blessed God without intermission; and lest perchance, even in her salutation, she might cease from praising God, if any one saluted her, she used to answer by way of salutation: Thanks be to God. And from her the custom first began of men saying, Thanks be to God, when they saluted each other. She refreshed herself only with the food which she daily received from the hand of the angel; but the food which she obtained from the priests she divided among the poor. The angels of God were often seen speaking with her, and they most lovingly obeyed her. If any one who was unwell touched her, the same hour he went home cured[23].

The same motif, with an equally strong emphasis on Mary's contemplative attitude, was repeated in the *Golden Legend*:

> Mary advanced steadily in all holiness. Angels visited her every day, and she enjoyed the vision of God daily. In a letter to Chromatius and Heliodorus, Jerome says that the Blessed

[23] *The Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew*, transl. A. Roberts, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, *Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A. D. 325*, ed. A. Clevland Coxe, D. D., vol. 8, New York, 1916, pp. 370-371. Latin text in Pseudo Matthew (?), *Liber de Ortu Beatae Mariae et Infantia Salvatoris a Beato Matthaeo Evangelista Hebraice Scriptus et a Beato Ieronimo Presbytero in Latinum Translatus*, in *Evangelia Apocrypha Adhibitis Plurimis Codicibus Graecis et Latinis Maximam Partem nunc Primum Consultis adque Ineditorum Copia Insignibus*, ed. C. De Tischendorf, Leipzig, 1876, pp. 63-64: "[6.2.] Hanc autem regulam sibi statuerat, ut a mane usque ad horam tertiam orationibus insisteret; a tertia autem usque ad nonam textrino opere se occuparet: a nona vero hora iterum ab oratione non recedebat usque dum illi angelus domini appareret, de cuius manu escam acciperet, et melius atque melius in dei laudi bus proficiebat. Denique cum senioribus virginibus in dei laudibus ita docebatur, ut iam nulla ei in vigiliiis prior inveniretur, in sapientia legis dei eruditior, in humilitate humilior, in carminibus Davidicis elegantior, in caritate gratiosior, in castitate purior, in omni virtute perfectior. Erat enim constans, immobilis, immutabilis, atque cotidie ad meliora proficiebat. [6.3.] Hanc nemo irascentem vidit, hanc maledicentem nunquam ullus audivit. Omnis autem sermo eius ita erat gratia plenus, ut cognosceretur in lingua eius esse deus. Semper in oratione vel scrutatione legis permanebat, et erat sollicita circa socias suas, ne aliqua ex eis vel in uno semone peccaret, nec aliqua in risu esaltare sonum suum nec aliqua in iniuriis aut in superbia circa parem suam existeret. Sine intermissione benedicebat deum; et ne forte vel salutatione sua a laudibus dei tolleretur, si quis eam salutabat, illa pro salutazione deo gratias respondebat. Denique primum a bea exiit ut nomine, cum se invicem salutarent, deo gratias resonderent. Cotidie esca quam de manu angeli accipiebat ipsa tantum reficiebatur; escam vero quam a pontificibus consequebatur pauperibus dividebat. Frequenter videbant cum ea angelos loqui, et quasi carissimi eius obtemperabant ei. Si quis autem de infirmanti bus tetigisset eam, salvus ad domum suam eadem hora remeabat."

> Virgin had made a rule for herself: the time from dawn to the third hour she devoted to prayer, from the third to the ninth hour she worked at weaving, and from the ninth hour on she prayed without stopping until an angel appeared and brought her food[24].

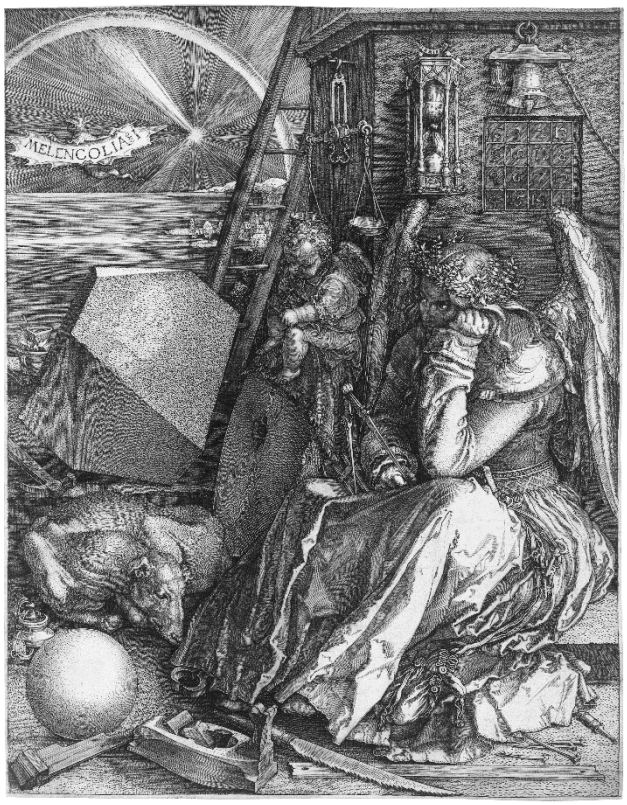


Figure 5.10: Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia*, 1514, engraving.

If the semi-nude in Ghirlandaio's fresco is an angel, we have to ask why does he not correspond to traditional iconography. He has no wings, no angelic vest. On the contrary, his thoughtful pose relates to the iconography of melancholia, as represented, e.g., in Albrecht Dürer's famous engraving (figure 5.10). According to the theory of the four temperaments, the melancholic temper was thought to result from a strong influence of Saturn. The early modern iconography of melancholia therefore depended on the previous iconography of Saturn's children. We can see an early fifteenth-century example of this in the Salone della Ragione in Padua where a fresco shows one of Saturn's children seated with his head in his hand[25] (figure 5.11). But what is the link between the figure of the angel and Saturn?

[24] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend. Readings on the Saints*, transl. W. Granger Ryan, vol. 2, Princeton, 1995, pp. 152-153. The Latin text in Jacopus de Varagine, *Legenda Aurea*, Leipzig, 1850, pp. 588-589. "Perfecta igitur oblatione filiam cum aliis virginibus in templo dimittentes ad propria redierunt, virgo autem quotidie in omni sanctitate proficiens et ab angelis quotidie visitabatur et visione divina quotidie fruebatur. Ait Hieronymus in quadam epistola ad Chromatium et Heliodorum , quod beata virgo hanc regulam sibi statuerat , ut a mane usque ad tertiam orationibus insisteret, a tertia usque ad nonam textrino operi vacaret , a nona ab orationibus non recedebat, quousque angelus apparens sibi es eam daret."

[25] On the relationship between Saturn and melancholy, see: R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky, F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, London, 1964.



Figure 5.11: ***Saturn with one of his children*****, before 1440, fresco painting, Salone della Ragione, Padua.**

The sources seem to point in opposite directions. According to the literary sources, the figure represents an angel, while from an iconographic point of view we seem to be looking at a Saturnine. This apparent duality can be untangled if the wider intellectual context of the fresco is taken into account. Devoting attention to the philosopher whose writings shaped the cultural politics of the Magnifico's rule is fully legitimate in this context, that is, taking into consideration the strong relationship between the Tornabuoni frescoes and the intellectual circle of Lorenzo il Magnifico. Giovanni Tornabuoni, who commissioned the decoration, was not only the head manager of the Medici Bank in Rome but also Lorenzo's uncle, brother of Lorenzo's mother Lucrezia Tornabuoni.

In fact, the philosophy of Marsilio Ficino offers us a direct link between the angel and Saturn. Ficino's idea of angels is conflicting because of the major differences between his sources. On the one hand, the philosopher based his idea of angels on Scripture, scholasticism and pseudo-Dionysius's hierarchy of celestial beings[26]. On the other hand, to express his metaphysics Ficino adopted the Plotinian ontological system, in which the term "angel" is never used. Ficino thus adopted the Plotinian *nous*, meaning 'mind' or 'intelligence', and adapted it to the pseudo-Dionysian, scholastic idea of the angel[27]. For Ficino angels were therefore spheres of pure intelligence[28], and the philosopher claimed that Saturn, the 'highest' of the planets, had a direct influence on these celestial beings, bestowing upon them the most noble of faculties such as reason and speculation.

> He wants [...] but Saturn to be the supreme intellect among the angels, by whose rays souls are illuminated over and above

[26] M. J. B. Allen, *The Absent Angel in Ficino's Philosophy*, "Journal of the History of Ideas", 36, 2/1975, pp. 219-221.
[27] Ivi, pp. 224-225.
[28] P. O. Kristeller, *Il pensiero filosofico di Marsilio Ficino*, Firenze, 1953, p. 177.

> the angels and set on fire and wafted continually, according to their capacities, up to the intellectual life[29].

In fact, for Ficino, Saturn's link with the melancholic temperament was closely tied to the planet's capacity to stimulate contemplation of the highest matters[30].

> But in the *Statesman* Plato writes that the contemplation of divine things is bestowed by Saturn, since the ray of his intelligence, as it is raised to God, so in descending to us raises our intelligence too towards the divine countenance. In the Laws Book 4 Plato says Saturn is the true master of those who have intelligence[31].

In *Theologia Platonica*, on the other hand, Ficino attributes a sphere of influence to each planet, underlining Saturn's particular impact on contemplative skills.

> Because the Moon, the mistress of Cancer, is closest to generation, however, while Saturn, the lord of Capricorn, is most remote, they say that souls descend through Cancer, that is, through the instinct that is lunar and vegetative, but ascend through Capricorn, that is, through the instinct that is saturnian and intellectual. For the ancients call Saturn the mind by which alone we seek higher things. Moreover, the dry power of Capricorn and of Saturn, while it internally contracts

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[29] M. Ficino, *Theologia Platonica*, 18, 8, transl. M. J. B. Allen, ed. J. Hankins, vol. 6, Cambridge (Mass.), 2006 pp. 130-31. "Esse vult [...] Saturnum vero supremum inter angelos intellectum, cuius radiis illustrentur ultra angelos animae accendanturque et ad intellectualem vitam continue pro viribus erigantur."

[30] M. Ficino, *De vita*, 1, 4, ed. C. V. Kaske, J. R. Clark, Binghamton, 1989, pp. 112-114. "Therefore black bile continually incites the soul both to collect itself together into one and to dwell on itself and to contemplate itself. And the being analogous to the world's center, it forces the investigation to the center of individual subjects, and it carries one to the contemplation of whatever is highest, since, indeed, it is most congruent with Saturn, the highest of planets. Contemplation itself, in its turn, by a continual recollection and compression, as it were, brings on a nature similar to black bile."("Igitur atra bilis animum, ut se et colligate in unum et sistat in uno contempleturque, assidue provocat. Atque ipsa mundi centro similis ad centrum rerum singularum cogit investigandum, evehitque ad altissima qua eque comprehendenda, quandoquidem cum Saturno maxime congruit altissimo planetarum. Contemplatio quoque ipsa vivissimo assidua quadam collectione et quasi compressione naturam atrae bili persimilem contrahit.")

[31] M. Ficino, *The Philebus Commentary*, ed. M. J. B. Allen, Berkeley, 1975, pp. 242-243. "Divinorum vero contemplationem a Saturno datam in Politico scribit Plato, quia eius mentis prout in Deum erigitur radius in nos descendens mentem quoque nostram in divinum attollit intuitum. Et quarto Legum dicit Saturnum esse verum dominum eorum qui mentem habent."

> and collects the spirits, stimulates us ceaselessly to contemplation, whereas the wetness of the Moon disperses and dilates [the spirits] and distracts the rational soul with sensibles. In the descent, however, the rational soul receives, both from the divinity of Saturn through itself and from the light of Saturn through its ethereal body and idolum, certain aids or inducements to better prepare it for contemplation[32].

Saturn's contemplative nature and its influence on angelic beings could explain the appearance of the Saturnian figure on the steps of the temple in Ghirlandaio's *Presentation*. The angelic, contemplative figure present during Mary's stay in the temple would excite her spirit and push her into a deeper meditation on the divine word. Saturnian nourishment and the influence of the highest planet would encourage the Virgin's spiritual and intellectual growth, and facilitate her awareness of divine truth and God's plan for humanity.

In addition to its significance described above as part of the *Presentation* and the life of the Virgin, the angel-Saturn figure also introduces the topos of the Golden Age to the fresco cycle. In chapter eight, book 18 of the *Theologia Platonica*, "*De statu animae purae, praecipue secundum Platonicos*", we read:

> Plato adds that the souls are nourished there with the same foods as the gods, namely with ambrosia and nectar. He considers ambrosia to be the clear, delightful gazing at the truth, and nectar to be providence in its supreme goodness and effectiveness. Here is unfolded that ancient mystery celebrated by Plato in the *Statesman* before all others: that the present circuit of the world from east to west is the fatal jovian circuit, but that at some time in the future there will be another circuit opposed to this under Saturn that will go from west

[32] M. Ficino, *Theologia Platonica*, 18, 5, op. cit., pp. 112-115. "Sed quia luna, Cancri domina, generationi proxima est, Saturnus vero, dominus Capricorni, remotissimus, ideo per Cancrum, id est lunarem vegetalemque instinctum, descendere animas dicunt, per Capricornum vero, id est per saturnium intellectualemque instinctum, ascendere. Saturnum enim prisci mentem vocant, qua sola superiora petuntur. Accedit ad haec quod Capricorni Saturnique sicca virtus, dum spiritus ad intima contrahit atque colligit, ad contemplandum assidue provocat, lunaris autem humor spargit atque dilatat et animum circa sensibilia distrahit. In ipso autem descensu animus accipit, et a Saturni numine per se, et a Saturni lumine per corpus aethereum atque idolum adminicula quaedam sive incitamenta ad contemplationem aptius exsequendam."

back again to the east. In it men will be born of their own accord and proceed from old age to youth; and foods will be spontaneously furnished them at will in an eternal spring. He calls Jupiter, I think, the World-Soul, by whose fatal law this manifest order of the manifest world is disposed. Besides, he wants the life of souls in elemental bodies to be the jovian life, one devoted to the senses and to action, but Saturn to be the supreme intellect among the angels, by whose rays souls are illuminated over and above the angels and set on fire and wafted continually, according to their capacities, up to the intellectual life. As often as souls are turned back towards such a life, and to the extent they live by understanding, they are said correspondingly to live under the rule of Saturn. In that life consequently they are said to be regenerated of their own accord, because they are reformed for the better by their own choice. And they are daily renewed; that is daily (if days can be numbered there) they blossom more and more. This is what that saying of the apostle Paul refers to: "The inner man is renewed day by day." Finally foods arise of their own accord and are supplied to souls in abundance in a perpetual spring, because they enjoy the wonderful spectacles of Truth itself – enjoy not through the senses and trough laborious training, but through an inner light and with life's deepest tranquility and loftiest pleasure. The fragrance of such a life is perceived by a mind that has been separated insofar as it can be; but its flavor is tasted by a mind that has been absolutely separated[33].

[33] M. Ficino, *Theologia Platonica*, 18, 8, op. cit., pp. 128-131. "Addit eisdem una cum superis illic alimentis, scilicet ambrosia et nectare vesci. Ambrosiam quidem esse censet perspicuum suavemque veritatis intuitum, nectar vero excellentem facillimamque providentiam. Hic panditur et vetus illud arcanum a Platone in libro *De regno* prae ceteris celebratum, praesentem mundi circuitum ab oriente ad occidentem esse Iovium atque fatalem; verum fore quandoque alterum huic oppositum sub Saturno ab Occidente vicissim ad Orientem, in quo sponte nascentur homines atque a senio procedent in iuventutem, alimentaque illis ultro aeterno sub vere ad votum suppeditabuntur. Iovem, ut arbitror, animam mundi vocat, cuius lege fatali manifestus hic manifesti mundi ordo disponitur. Praeterea vitam animorum in corporibus elementalibus Ioviam esse vult, sensibus actionique deditam, Saturnum vero supremum inter angelos intellectum, cuius radiis illustrentur ultra angelos animae accendanturque et ad intellectualem vitam continue pro viribus erigantur. Quae quotiens ad vitam eiusmodi convertuntur, aetenus sub regno Saturnio dicuntur vivere quatenus intellegentia vivunt. Proinde in ea vita ideo sponte dicuntur regenerari, quia electione propria in melius reformantur. Rursus in dies reiuvenescere, id est, in dies, si modo ibi dies dinumerantur, magis magisque florescere. Hoc illud Apostoli Pauli: «Homo interior renovatur in dies.» Denique illis alimenta sponte affatim sub perpetuo vere suppeditari, quia non per sensus operasamque disciplinam, sed per lumen intimum summaque cum vitae tranquillitate atque voluptate miris veritatis ipsius spectaculis perfruuntur.

Here Ficino defines ambrosia as *perspicuum suavemque veritatis intuitum*. Ambrosia allows one to recognize Truth. From this perspective, we can understand that it was this divine nutrition that the Angel-Saturn brought to the Virgin during her stay in the temple and thanks to it Maria recognized and followed God's will towards her. However, Ficino also talks here about the arrival of Saturn's reign, and during the rule of the Magnifico the classical topos of the Golden Age became a popular motif in the discourse of power. The motif passed from Hesiod to Plato and Virgil, with the latter reinterpreting it in a messianic key in his *Eclogue 4*[34]. In the text the poet attributed a prophecy of an incumbent arrival of the Golden Age to the Cumaean Sibyl, according to which the reign of Saturn would return on the earth only when a *virgo* would give birth to a child.

Sicelides Musae, paulo maiora canamus.	Sicilian Muses, let us sing a somewhat loftier strain.
non omnis arbusta iuvant humilesque myricae;	Not all do the orchards please and the lowly tamarisks.
si canimus silvas, silvae sint consule dignae.	If our song is of the woodland, let the woodland be worthy of a consul.
Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas:	Now is come the last age of the song of Cumae;
magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo.	the great line of the centuries begins anew.
iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna;	Now the Virgin returns, the reign of Saturn returns;
iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.	now a new generation descends from heaven on high.
tu modo nascenti puero, quo farrea primum	Only do thou, pure Lucina, smile on the birth of the child,
desinet ac toto surget gens aurea mundo,	

Eiusmodi vitae odor quidem mente pro viribus separata sentitur, sapor vero mente penitus separata gustatur."

[34] U. Pizzani, *Età dell'Oro e millenarismo nel mondo antico*, in *Millenarismo ed Età dell'Oro nel Rinascimeto*, conference proceedings, ed. L. Secchi Tarugi, Firenze, 2003, pp. 11-22, A. Tarabochia Canavero, *Marsilio Ficino e l'Età dell'Oro:* Saeculum Aureum ab Ingeniis Aureis, in *Millenarismo ed Età dell'Oro*, op. cit., pp. 207-220.

	under whom the iron brood shall first cease,
	and the golden race spring up
Casta, fave Lucina: tuus iam regnat Apollo.[35]	throughout the world!
	Thine own Apollo now is king!

During the Middle Ages, Virgil's *Eclogue* was reinterpreted in light of Christian theology and was read as a prefiguration of the New Testament and the arrival of Christ[36]. One of the most significant expressions of this notion is Dante's *Purgatory* 22, where Statius praises Virgil for the light of his prophecy. He referred expressly to the *Eclogue 4*, as the text, which foresaw and announced the arrival of the "vera credenza" and "etterno regno".

> Ed elli a lui: "Tu prima m'invïasti
> verso Parnaso a ber ne le sue grotte,
> e prima appresso Dio m'alluminasti.
>
> Facesti come quei che va di notte,
> che porta il lume dietro e sé non giova,
> ma dopo sé fa le persone dotte,
>
> quando dicesti: "Secol si rinova;
> torna giustizia e primo tempo umano,
> e progenïe scende da ciel nova".
>
> Per te poeta fui, per te cristiano:
> ma perché veggi mei ciò ch'io disegno,
> a colorare stenderò la mano:
>
> Già era 'l mondo tutto quanto pregno
> de la vera credenza, seminata
> per li messaggi de l'etterno regno;[...][37]

[35] Virgil, *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, *Aeneid I-VI*, transl. H. Ruston Fairclough, London, 1974, pp. 28-29.
[36] M. Martelli, *Politica e religione nella sacra rapresentazione di Lorenzo de' Medici*, in *Mito e realtà del potere nel teatro: dall'antichità classica al Rinascimento*, conference proceedings, ed. M. Chiabò, E. Doglio, Roma, 1987, pp. 191-193.
[37] Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 22, v. 64-78.

Through these texts the figure of the Cumean Sybil entered into the religious iconography of the medieval and early modern art. Between the late Quattrocento and the early Cinquecento representations of sibyls were very popular[38] owing to the belief in the prophetic character of their revelations and the circulation of texts like Lactantius' *Divinae Institutiones*, which helped to establish a catalogue of the sibyls accepted by Christianity. In the Renaissance this catalogue was set out by Filippo Barbieri in his *Opusculum de his in quibus Augustinus et Hieronymus dissentire videntur in divinis litteris* (1481) and included twelve oracles: Delphic, Cumaean, Persian, Lybian, Cimmerian, Erythraean, Samian, Hellespontine, Phrygian, Tiburtine, European and Agrippine. The belief in the prophetic nature of their oracles led sibyls to be associated with Old Testament prophets. In fact, they were often represented together as we can see in the Borgia Apartments decorated by Pinturicchio in 1492-1494. The messages of the sibyls' prophecies were related to different aspects of Christian revelation, such as Christ's crucifixion, his resurrection or his miracles. However, the messianic character of the Cumaean Sybil's vaticination and her prophecy of the birth of a child from a virgin womb linked her revelation to that of the last prophet, St. John the Baptist. In some ways, both the sibyl and St. John announced the arrival of a child who would change the course of history, establish a new reign and inaugurate the Golden Age of humanity. It will be argued that the spiritual affinity between their messages – that found in Virgil's *Eclogue* in the case of the sibyl and John's prophecy narrated in the Bible – is portrayed in the Tornabuoni frescoes in the *Birth of St. John the Baptist* where the Cumaean Sibyl enters the room in the garments of an ancient nymph (figure 5.1). She carries a plate of fruit on her head and a *fiasco* of wine in her hand, both of which symbolize the opulence of the Golden Age of Saturn as described by Ficino:

> Finally foods arise of their own accord and are supplied to souls in abundance in a perpetual spring, because they enjoy the wonderful spectacles of Truth itself – enjoy not

[38] M. Gagliardo, *Le Sibille nel giardino: un ciclo di affreschi per Giovanni Romei a Ferrara*, "Prospettiva", 64/1991, pp. 14-37; C. De Clercq, *Quelque séries italienne de Sibylles*, "Bulletin de l'Institut Historique Belge de Rome", 48-49/1979, pp. 105-127; Idem, *Quelques séries des Sibylles hors d'Italie*, "Bulletin de l'Institut Historique Belge de Rome", 51/1981, pp. 87-116; S. Settis, *Le Sibille di Cortina*, in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Craig Hugh Smyth*, vol. 2, Florence, 1985, pp. 437-457.

> through the senses and trough laborious training, but through an inner light and with life's deepest tranquility and loftiest pleasure[39].

Following Warburg's reading of the figure, the sibyl can be identified as a nymph, since the iconography of the former was often based on classical representations of the latter. Moreover, this is not the only nymph represented in the chapel. In the parallel scene of the *Birth of the Virgin* a nymph-like figure prepares a bath for the new-born Mary (figure 5.12). In classical mythology, nymphs are not only goddesses of nature and guardians of water springs but also healers and prophetesses. As protectors of water, they were often represented as *kourtrophos* – wet nurses – in service of Dionysus, Zeus, Hermes or Aeneas as infants[40]. We can see an example of this in a relief recorded as part of the Florentine collection of the Peruzzi family in 1752 and now in the Woburn Abbey Collection[41] (figure 5.13). It represents a pair of nymphs bathing the new-born Dionysus. Likewise, Greek and Roman sculpture offers many examples of nymphs in translucent garments assuming dance-like poses. The Museo Civico in Vicenza, for example, contains a marble statue of a nymph sitting on a rock wearing an almost transparent *chiton* tied under her breast by a *zone* (figure 5.14). Her legs



Figure 5.12: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Birth of the Virgin*, detail, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

[39] M. Ficino, *Theologia Platonica*, 18 , 8, op. cit., pp. 130-131.
[40] M. Halm-Tisserant, G. Siebert, *Nymphai*, in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (LIMC)*, vol. 8 (1), Zürich, 1997, p. 891.
[41] E. Angelicoussis, *The Woburn Abbey Collection of Classical Antiquities*, Mainz am Rhein, 1992, pp. 95-96.

are covered by a *himation*, which creates heavy, plastic folds on her left hip[42]. In the Vatican Museums there is a circular marble altar from the Age of Augustus (Greg. Prof. 9940) representing Pan leading a group of nymphs. The goddesses are recognizable by their dancing poses and voluminous robes falling gently around their bodies. Even if we cannot identify precise iconographic sources for the poses of the two nymph-like figures painted by Ghirlandaio, we know that the ancient-nymph motif circulated in the Florentine artistic environment of his day. The *Codex Escurialensis*, long attributed to Ghirlandaio's workshop but more likely from the circle of Giuliano da Sangallo[43], includes several drawings of female figures copied directly from ancient sarcophagi or inspired by the classical iconography of nymphs (ff. 15 v, 48 v, 51 v). The popularity of this iconographical motif resulted from the increasing presence and popularity of nymphs in fifteenth-century literature. Nymphs are represented as personifications of love and companions of Venus from Bocaccio's *Ninfale fiesolano* to Poliziano's *Stanze per la Giostra*. However, according to classical texts nymphs had many functions and meanings. As love deities, they became protectors of marriage and goddesses of fertility. Antiquity also handed down the tradition of nymph-



Figure 5.13: *Right End Panel of a Dionysiac Sarcophagus*, ca 140-160 AD, relief, Woburn Abbey Collection.

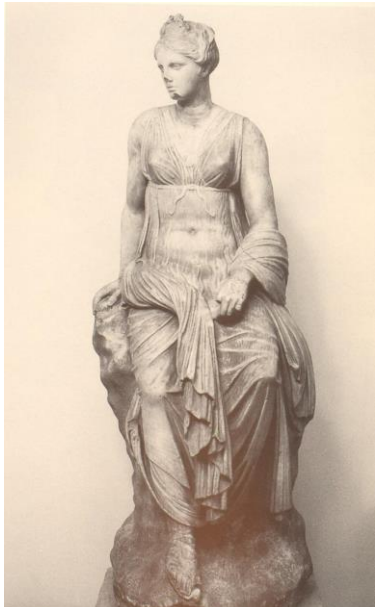


Figure 5.14: *Nymph*, sculpture, Museo Civico, Vicenza (cat. number D31).

[42] V. Galliazzo, *Sculture greche e romane del Museo Civico di Vicenza*, Treviso, 1976, pp. 68-73.

[43] A. Nesselrath, *Il Codice Escurialense*, in *Domenico Ghirlandaio 1449-1494*, ed. W. Prinz, M. Seidel, Firenze, 1996, pp. 175-198; *Codex Escurialensis. Ein Skizzensbuch aus der Werkstatt Domenico Ghirlandaios*, ed. H. Egger, 2 vols, Wien, 1906.

oracles. In fifteenth-century intellectual circles influenced by Neoplatonism, this tradition passed into the iconography of sibyls. In fact, the Cumaean Sibyl in the Tornabuoni chapel is not the only example of a sibyl represented in the garments of a nymph. In the early 1480s, inlaid marble panels portraying Hermes Trismegistus and ten sibyls were produced in Siena for the pavement of the Cathedral[44]. The sibyls, each with her own inscription containing the text of her prophecy, wear beautiful *all'antica* costumes. The figure of the Samian Sibyl (figure 5.15) most clearly conveys this dependency on the classical figures of nymphs. The gentle movement of her body, which causes all of her drapery to sway, looks almost like dancing. Her delicate, feminine hands are draped in ethereal cloth and she holds a book in her left hand. Indeed, a book or a scroll containing an inscription of their prophecy is the traditional attribute of sibyls, and such elements are missing from Ghirlandaio's *Birth of St. John the Baptist*. While this certainly challenges the interpretation of Ghirlandaio's figure as a sibyl, we must acknowledge that fifteenth-century Sibylline iconography remains rather inconsistent[45]. Not all of the sibyls in Siena Cathedral are represented with books, for example. The Delphic Sibyl holds a torch in her hand, while the Cumaean Sibyl carries the Golden Bough – an allusion to Virgil's *Aeneid*. The sibyls in Nicola Pisano's pulpit in Siena Cathedral from over 200 years earlier have no attributes at all. The nymph-sibyl in the Ghirlandaio fresco, instead, carries on her head the attributes of opulence, which constitute the link between the motive and Ficino's *Theologia Platonica*. In his interpretation, thus, Ghirlandaio is very close to Donatello's statue of *Dovizia*, which since about 1430 adorned the



Figure 5.15: *Samian Sybil*, 1482-1483, inlaid floor panel, Santa Maria Assunta, Siena.

[44] R. Guerrini, *Ermete e le sibille. Il primo riquadro della navata centrale e le tarsie delle navate laterali*, in *Il pavimento del Duomo di Siena. L'arte della tarsia marmorea dal XIV al XIX secolo. Fonti e simbologia*, ed. M. Caciorgna, R. Guerrini, Milano, 2004, p. 20.

[45] L. Barbagli, *Sul nuovo canone delle Sibille nel Rinascimento. Da Giovanni Pisano al Pavimento del Duomo di Siena*, in *Studi interdisciplinari sul pavimento del Duomo di Siena. Iconografia, stile, indagini scientifiche*, ed. M. Caciorgna, R. Guerrini, M. Lorenzoni, Siena, 2005, p. 78.

Mercato Vecchio in Florence. Even if the statue is lost today, and we can reconstruct its iconography only thanks to some textual and visual documents[46], we can be sure that both figures were rather similar. Already Vasari enumerated the statue among Donatello's works[47]. The figure was also described by Ferdinando del Migliore, in his *Firenze città nobilissima illustrata* of 1684[48], and the description explaines also the meaning and the iconography of the figure.

> [...] espressa la Statua in quella forma consueta figurarsi dagl'antichi l'abbondanza, con una cesta di frutta in testa e sotto 'l braccio il cornucopia[49].

Donatello's original, made in *pietra serena*, which is little resistant to changeable climatic conditions, was replaced between 1720 and 1722 by a figure of the same subject by Giovanni Battista Foggini[50] and is now lost. However, Foggini's sculpture was very likely shaped on Donatello's model. The figure is characterized by the same aerial dress and dynamic movement of the body, and is composed in a strong *contrapposto*. The strong torsion made her dress slip from her breast and leg, showing the goddess' nudity. She carried a plate of fruits on her head and in her left arm she holed a *cornucopia*[51]. In this way, the *Dovizia* was similar to Ghirlandaio's nymph from the Tornauoni chapel. The meaning of the figure referred not only to abundance and prosperity. *Dovizia* was supposed to be an allegory of Florence itself, the flowering *Florentia*, famous by the virtue of wealth and charity, praised by the Florentine humanists[52], such as Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini or Matteo Palmieri. Yet in Bruni's *Historiarum florentini populi*, started in 1415[53], the richness of Florence became one of the seminal sources of the city's

[46] D. G. Wilkins, *Donatello's Lost* Dovizia *for the* Mercato Vecchio*: Wealth and Charity as Florentine Civic Virtues*, "The Art Bulletin", 65, 3/1983, pp. 401-423.
[47] G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. R. Bettarini, vol. 3, Firenze, 1971, p. 206.
[48] F. del Migliore, *Firenze città nobilissima illustrata da Ferdinando Leopoldo Del Migliore. Prima, seconda, e terza parte del primo libro*, Firenze 1684, pp. 514-515.
[49] Ivi, p. 515.
[50] D. G. Wilkins, *Donatello's Lost* Dovizia, op. cit., p. 403.
[51] Ivi, pp. 411-412.
[52] Ivi, pp. 415-422.
[53] C. Vasoli, *Leonardo Bruni*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 14, Roma, 1972, p. 624.

power[54]. For the historiographer already the name of the city, which originally sounded "Fluentia", changed into "Florentia" because of its extraordinary flowering.

> The new city located between these two waterways was at first called Fluentia and its inhabitants Fluentini. The name lasted for some time, it seems, until the city grew and developed. Then, perhaps just trough the ordinary process by which words are corrupted, or perhaps because of the wonderfully successful flowering of the city, Fluentia became Florentia[55].

Subsequently, the idea of wealth acquired values related to the concept of common good and public interest and, as such, was highly estimated and praised by the Florentine humanists. This aspect has been emphasized by Poggio Bracciolini in his dialogue *De avaritia*, appeared in 1428, in which the avaricious man was criticized because of the lack of the interest towards the *res publica*.

> A propos of this, the Stoic Cato, as cited by Cicero, said: "It is no less worthy of blame to desert the public welfare for private advantage than to betray one's own country". Hence, the avaricious man, who is dedicated only to himself and looks out only for himself, not only desert but even opposes the public welfare and is its enemy. In the interest of his own profit, he never brings benefits to many but hurts everyone. It is certain that, just like a traitor to humanity, he departs from the law of nature itself; for avarice is distant from nature's law

[54] M. Becker, *The Florentine Territorial State and Civic Humanism in the Early Renaissance*, in *Florentine Studies. Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. N. Rubinstein, London 1968, p. 135; D. J. Wilcox, *The Development of Florentine Humanistic Historiography in the Fifteenth Century*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1969, p. 94

[55] L. Bruni, *History of the Florentine People*, Book 1, trans. J. Hankins, Cambridge (Mass.), 2001, pp. 10-11. "Novam urbem, quod inter fluenta duo posita erat Fluentiam primo vocitarunt eiusque incolae Fluentini dicti. Et id quidem nomen per aliqua tempora urbi fuisse videtur, donec crescentibus rebus et civitate maiorem in modum adaucta, sive corrupto ut in plerisque vocabulo sive quod miro floreret successu, pro Fluentia Florentiam dixere."

> and opposed to the public good, for whose protection and preservation we exist[56].

Thus, personal economic prosperity and care for private income was justified, only if it was followed by an activity in the public sphere, if it brought to the growth of the *magnificentia* of the community, and was accompanied by acts of charity and mercy.

> You soon would see what total confusion would result if we wanted only enough to provide for ourselves. The people would be deprived of fine virtues such as mercy and charity, for undoubtedly no one could be generous and liberal in those circumstances. After all, what can anyone give away if he has nothing in excess to give? How can anyone be munificent who has only enough for himself? Every splendour, every refinement, every ornament would be lacking. No one would build churches or colonnades; all artistic activity would cease, and confusion would result in our lives and in public affairs if everyone were satisfied with only enough for himself[57].

The *magnificentia* was also discussed by Matteo Palmieri, a prominent protagonist of the Medicean entourage, in his *Vita Civile* composed between 1430 and 1436. Similarly to how the subject was presented by Bracciolini, Palmieri associated the idea with the problem of wealth and public commitment of the élite.

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[56] P. Bracciolini, *Dialogus contra Avaritiam*, 8, 3, transl. by B. G. Kohl, E. B. Welles, in *The Earthly Republic. Italian Humanists on Government and Society*, ed. B. G. Kohl, R. G. Witt, E. B. Welles, Manchester, 1978, p. 251. Latin text in Idem, *Dialogus contra Avaritiam*, 8, 3, ed. G. Germano, Livorno, 1994, p. 72. "Unde stoicus ille Cato apud Ciceronem disputat non esse magis vituperandum proditorem patriae quam communi utilitatis desertorem propter suam utilitatem. Cum ergo avarus, sibi prospiciens, sibi consulens, non solum desertor, sed oppugnator atque hostis sit communis utilitatis, sui commodi causa neque prosit multis, sed obsit omnibus, certum est ipsum veluti societatis humanae proditorem descriscere ab ipsius lege naturae contraque eam esse avaritiam remotam atque adversam ab utilitate pubblica, ad quam conservandam tuendamque editi sumus."

[57] P. Bracciolini, *Dialogus contra Avaritiam*, 12, 6, transl. by B. G. Kohl, E. B. Welles, in *The Earthly Republic*, op. cit., p. 260. Latin text in Idem, *Dialogus contra Avaritiam*, 12, 6, ed. G. Germano, op. cit., p. 77. "Vide quanta rerum omnium sequatur confusio, si nihil habere velimus praeterquam quod sit nobis satis: tolletur usus gratissimarum populo virtutum, misericordiae videlicet et caritatis; nullus erit neque beneficus neque liberalis: quid enim dabit alteri cui nihil ad dandum superest? Quomodo munificum se praestare poterit qui[d] tantum possidet quantum sibi soli sufficiat? Auferetur magnificentia civitatum, tolletur cultus atque ornatus omnis, nulla aedificabuntur templa, nullae porticus, nulla palatia, artes cessabunt omnes; perturbatio denique vitae nostrae et rerum publicarum sequetur, si quilibet eo quod sibi satis erit acquiescet."

> Magnificenzia è posta nelle grandi spese dell'opere maravigliose et notabili; per questo tale virtù non può essere operata se non da' ricchi et potenti; e poveri et mezani non supperiscono a quella, et se si sforzassino in dimonstrarsi in alcune opere magnifici, sarebbe di cose piccole, in elle quali sopraspendere sarebbe matta sciocheza. Le spese magnifiche vogliono essere grandi et convenienti in degne opere in modo che l'opera paia mirabile et meriti la facta spesa et ogni cosa sia bene allogato in essa. Le spese del magnifico vogliono essere in cose honorifice et piene di gloria, non private ma publice, giuochi, conviti: et in così facte magnificentie non computare né fare conto di quanto si spenda, ma in che modo sieno quanto più si può maravigliose et bellissime[58].

Book 4, which directly follows the above quotation, was entirely dedicated by the author to the question of utility, and it further discussed the relationship between the wealth and the public good. Palmieri, introducing the subject of the human activity aimed at the increase of wealth and well-being, first recalled the myth of the Golden Age, the fantastic period described by the ancient writers, as the time when people did not work, nor practiced agriculture, nor trade. Palmieri recalled that a radical change in the life of these early communities was marked by the arrival of Saturn, who sailed from Crete to Italy, and started to spread the knowledge of agriculture, fruit cultivation, cooking and building. His activity brought the introduction of money, and awoke people's desire to possess more than others and more than they needed themselves[59]. That opened the door to the rise of avarice on one hand and generous opulence on the other. The generosity of wealthy citizens, directed towards the embellishment of the cities and the increase of the magnificence of the community, was further praised by the humanist as greatly useful for the civic life.

> In nel luogo sequente pognano quelle cose che in nella città sono meno necessarie, ma contengono apparato magiore

[58] M. Palmieri, *Vita civile*, 3, 207-209, ed. G. Belloni, Firenze, 1982, p. 147.
[59] Ivi, 4, 118-127, pp. 174-176.

> et amplitudine splendida degli ornamenti civili. Di queste, parte ne sono poste nella insigne magnificentia degli spaziosi edificii, parte in nella veneranda degnità et somma excellentia della servata maiestà de' publici magistrati, parte nelle reverendissime celebrità de' magnificentissimi apparati delle solennità de' culti divini, parte ancora in negli ornamenti particulari et nello splendido vivere de' privati cittadini[60].

Thus, it is clear that in Medicean Florence wealth and opulence of private citizens, interpreted in the key of their utility for the common good, became one of main figures of public discourse and humanistic writings supporting the regime. The figure of the Cumaean Sybil, who carries with her the fruits of opulence of the Golden Age, can be interpreted in the light of these texts.

The persistence of the classical motive of opulence, and its relevance for the Tornabuoni frescoes, is further supported by the contract between the commissioner and the artist. In the part of the agreement relative to the elements to be included into the decoration, a further list was added on the margin of the document, offering a picture of a true, visual abundance of the future wall paintings.

> And the surface above the columns of the said chapel he is to paint in stone colour (grey, as it is called in the vulgar tongue) on the outer side. And in all the said stories and pictures mentioned above, and on the whole of the wall of the said chapel, the ceiling, arch and the columns inside and outside the said chapel, he is to paint and depict figures, [in the margin: buildings, castles, cities, villas] mountains, hills, plains, water, rocks, garments, animals, birds, and beasts, of whatever kind as seems proper to the said [...][61].

[60] Ivi, 4, 213, p. 194.

[61] D. S. Chambers, *Patrons and Artists*, op. cit., pp. 174-175. Original document: ASF, Notarile Antecosimiano, 13186 [formerly M 237] (Ser Jacopo di Martino da Firenze, 1481-1487), f. 160r. "Et in super collunnas dicte cappelle in parte exteriori pingere colore petrino, ut vulgariter dicitur, bigio, et in omnibus suprascriptis hystoriis et circa dictas omnes hystorias et figuras et pitturas, de quibus supra fit mentio, et totam et universam dictam cappellam et parietes et testudinem et archus et collunnas dicte cappelle intus et extra pingere, et figuras [in margin: hedifitia, castra, civitates, villas], montes, colles, planities, aquas, lapides, vestes, animalia, aves et bestias quascumque et omnes cuiuscumque generis, apponere, pingere et annotare et ornare ut et prout et sicut videbitur dicto Iohanni, [...]"

Tornabuoni's desire to represent in the frescoes the fortune and prosperity of his family, connected to the wealth of Florence ruled by the Medici, found its visual realisation in the figure of the Sybil, who recalled the Saturnian Golden Age and Florentine *Dovizia* known from the writings of the humanists.

The identification of the nymph-like figure in Ghirlandaio's *Birth of St. John the Baptist* as the Cumaean Sibyl is further corroborated by the presence of the four men gathered on the right side of the fresco listening to the saint in the *Preaching of St. John the Baptist* (figure 5.3). The two seated figures are easily recognizable. Moses is the elderly man with the long, white beard holding a rod.



Figure 5.16: Giovanni di Stefano, *Hermes Trismegistus*, 1488, inlaid floor panel, Santa Maria Assunta, Siena.

The iconography follows the type developed in fourth-century Rome, the same environment where the iconography of St. Peter was being formed. Unlike the earlier Hellenistic type showing a young Moses-Hercules with a short beard wearing an *all'antica* garment, this iconography emerged to support the primacy of Rome in the Christian world. In fourth-century Roman art, an elderly Moses – a true sage with a long white beard – looks much like St. Peter. Indeed, both were legislators and guides of the People of God[62]. In Ghirlandaio's fresco next to Moses sits Hermes Trismegistus, a younger man with a short brown beard wearing an Oriental turban. Although the *princeps sacerdotum Aegyptorum*[63] is represented as younger than in his most famous effigy in Siena Cathedral, his Oriental headgear confirms his

[62] L. Cracco Ruggini, *La tarsia rinascimentale di Mercurio Trismegisto, Mosé e l'uso della tradizione classica*, in *Studi interdisciplinari sul pavimento del Duomo di Siena*, op. cit., pp. 41-43.
[63] M. Ficino, *Theologia platonica*, 17, 1, op. cit., p. 6.

Egyptian origin (figure 5.16). The prophets hold their hands together in the gesture of the *dextrarum iunctio*. This gesture was the most common iconographic detail of marriage scenes in Roman and Paleochristian art from the last decades of the Republican Age until ca 600. It was also popular on sarcophagi and probably referred to the duration of the union in the afterlife (figure 5.17). Further, the motif passed into the iconography of the *Concordia*[64]. The scene therefore represents this particular agreement, the *Concordia* – an intellectual and spiritual union between Moses, the father of Christian theology and the first prophet of the Old Testament; and Hermes Trismegistus, the first of the Egyptian philosophers.



Figure 5.17: Roman Sarcophagus from San Saba church, 3rd century AD, relief, Rome.

Behind the seated pair are two men standing. The young man on the left has an almost child-like face with beautiful light-brown hair falling behind his shoulders. He holds his right hand in front of him, his palm turned down. Next to him is a sage-looking elder man with a long white beard wearing a sumptuous violet *all'antica* garment. The gesture of his right hand contrasts that of his young companion. He points towards heaven with his palm facing upwards. It is possible to argue that the younger one is Aristotle, and the older his master, Plato. In medieval iconography, both of these philosophers were often represented as master and pupil with Plato visibly older than Aristotle. Their presence in the *Preaching of St. John* (plate 21) next to Moses and Hermes reflects Ficino's vision of the history of Western thought. These four figures complete the iconographic program, together with the angel-Saturn and the nymph-sibyl, and promote Ficino's ideal of the *prisca theologia*, the idea that there existed an agreement and a continuation between

[64] L. Reekmans, Dextrarum iunctio, in *Enciclopedia dell'arte antica*, ed. R. Bianchi Bandinelli, G. Becatti, vol. 3, Roma, 1960, pp. 82-85.

antiquity and Christianity. Ficino began developing the theme of the *prisca theologia*, which was central to his thought[65], in the 1460s through his translations of the *Corpus hermeticum* and other texts like *Mercurii Trismegisti Liber de Potestate et Sapientia Dei, cui titulus Pimander*, *De Christiana religione* and the *Theologia Platonica*. With his writings, Ficino became a propagator of this ancient concept of the continuity and unity of human *sapientia*, imbuing the idea with new meanings and making its mythical protagonists – Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster and Moses – messengers of his philosophy[66]. In fact, Ficino had adopted the idea of the *prisca theologia* from a long tradition of thinkers who had tried to reconcile Christian theology with the contributions of pagan philosophers starting immediately after the collapse of the Roman Empire. From Philo of Alexandria, to Clement of Alexandria and Lactantius, to Bacon and Georgius Gemistus, the Western tradition elaborated an interpretation of the past that not only invested Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus with prophetic powers but also claimed the existence of a unity and a continuity in human knowledge and divine revelation from the beginning of time until its fulfilment in the Christian age[67]. Ficino reopened this discussion and his philosophy became a sort of "archive" of classical knowledge in which the traditions of Moses, Hermes, Zoroaster, Plato and Pythagoras fused together and formed a true philosophical family. Ficino's aim was to create a *communis religio*, which could finally aspire to the status of a philosophical religion[68]. In Ficino's thought, the idea of the *prisca theologia* and philosophical concord became tightly interwoven with the discussion about a possible agreement between Plato and Aristotle. For Ficino, Plato was not only a pagan philosopher to be taken as a philosophical source but also a religious authority whose writings were to be used just as Aristotle's thought was used by Christian theologians[69]. Ficino was therefore involved in a deeply-rooted

[65] See C. Vasoli, *Da Giorgio Gemisto a Ficino: nascita e metamorfosi della* prisca theologia, in *Miscellanea di studi in onore di Claudio Varese*, ed. G. Cerboni Baiardi, Manziana, 2001, pp. 787-800; Idem, *La* prisca theologia *e il neoplatonismo religioso*, in *Il Neoplatonismo nel Rinascimento*, ed. P. Prini, Roma, 1993, pp. 83-101.

[66] C. Vasoli, *Da Giorgio Gemisto*, op. cit., p. 795.

[67] G. Civati, Si Homo idem Mercurius fuit atque Moyses. *Ancora un'indagine su* prisca theologia *e* perennis philosophia, PhD dissertation, Università degli Studi di Milano, 2003-2004, pp. 64-97.

[68] P. Magnar, *Introduction*, in *Marsile Ficin. Les platonismes à la Renaissance*, ed. P. Magnar, Paris, 2001, p. 7.

[69] F. Purnell, Jr., *The Theme of Philosophic Concord and the Source of Ficino's Platonism*, in *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone. Studi e documenti*, ed. G. C. Garfagnini, vol. 2, Firenze, 1986, p. 401.

discussion about a possible accordance between Plato and Aristotle. We can trace the debate back to writings by Antiochus of Ascalon (130/20-68 BC), who claimed that they both represented the same philosophical tradition. Cicero, on the other hand, wrote that Aristotle's Peripatetic philosophy and Plato's Academy "differed in words while agreeing in fact"[70]. The tendency to look for agreement between the two philosophers continued in the writings of Albinus and Porphyry. In the Middle Ages the debate was taken up by Boethius, who clearly expressed the intention of his work in his commentary on Aristotle's *De interpretatione*: "to reduce the opinions of Aristotle and Plato to a single concord and demonstrate that they, unlike most, do not disagree about everything, but rather agree to a great extent on the majority of subjects which comprise philosophy"[71]. However, once again the influence of Georgius Gemistus Pletho on Italian Neoplatonism seems crucial. In the spring of 1439, as part of the Council of Florence, Pletho composed the treaty *Περί ων 'Αριστοτέλης πρός Πλατωνα διαφέρεται* (*De Platonicae atque Aristotelicae philosophiae differentiis*) in which he discussed the role of Aristotle's writing in the Platonic schools of thought. The importance of Gemistus was irrefutable to Ficino, who contributed to the discussion about the concordance between the two philosophers. In a letter to Diaccetto in July 1493 – just three years after the completion of the Tornabuoni frescoes – Ficino wrote:

> Those who think that the Peripatetic discipline is contrary to the Platonic are totally wrong. For a road cannot be contrary to its destination. Now whoever rightly considers it will find that Peripatetic doctrine is the road to Platonic wisdom, that *naturalia* lead us to *divina*; thus it was established that no one ever be admitted to the more hidden mysteries of Plato unless he be first initiated in the Peripatetic disciplines[72].

[70] "Platonis autem auctoritate, qui varius et multiplex et copiosus fuit, una et consentiens duobus vocabulis philosophiae forma instituta est, Academicorum et Peripateticorum, qui rebus congruentes nominibus differebant" (Cicero, *Academica*, *I*, *iv*, 17), F. Purnell, Jr., *The Theme of Philosophic Concord*, op. cit., p. 404.

[71] Boethius, *In librum Aristotelis De interpretatione libri sex. Editio secunda*, *seu maiora commentaria*, in *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 64, Paris, 1844-1864, col. 43c-d: "His peractis non equidem contempserim Aristotelis Platonisque sententias in unam quodammodo revocare concoridiam, et in his eos non ut plerique dissentire in omnibus, sed in plerisque quae sum in philosophia maxime consentire demonstrem."

[72] M. Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, I, Torino, 1962, p. 982. "Errant omnino, qui Peripateticam disciplinam Platonicae contrariam arbitrantur. Via siquidem termino contraria esse non potest. Peripateticam

This interpretation allows us to read the Tornabuoni Chapel frescoes as similar in meaning and inspiration to Raphael's *School of Athens* (figure 5.18) in the Stanza della Segnatura of the Vatican Palace. What Ghirlandaio interwove into traditional chapel decoration, i.e. stories from the lives of saints divided into superimposed bands, became an independent subject in Raphael's frescoes completed nineteen years later. The meaning of the figures represented in the Tornabuoni Chapel frescoes have probably remained obscure because of the apparently marginal role that Neoplatonic philosophy played in the chapel's decoration. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to suppose that their significance was legible for contemporary spectators familiar with Ficino's writings in the years following the frescoes' execution. The similarity between Plato and Aristotle's gestures in the Tornabuoni Chapel and those in the *Scuola di Atene* suggest that Ghirlandaio's invention could have inspired Raphael in his search for iconographic solutions to represent the two philosophers. Although in the *Scuola di Atene* Plato and Aristotle are easily recognizable because of the books they hold – the *Ethics* for Aristotle and the *Timaeus* for Plato – the position of their hands resemble those in Ghirlandaio's fresco. While Aristotle stretches his arm in front of him with his palm turned down, Plato raises his forearm and points up. In Raphael's fresco, the composition of the scene and the centrality of the

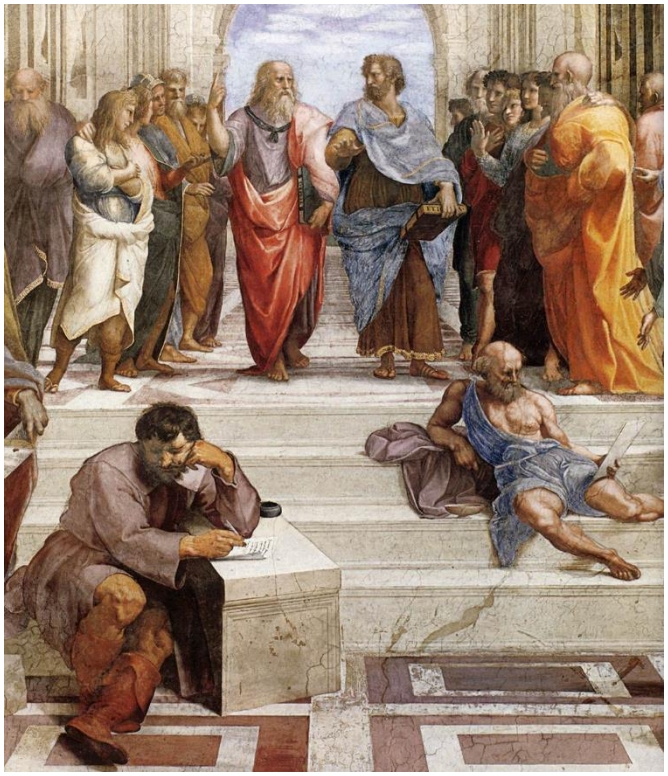


Figure 5.18: Raffaello Sanzio, *School of Athens*, detail, 1509-1511, fresco painting, Apostolic Palace, Vatican.

vero doctrinam ad sapientiam Platonicam esse viam comperiet, quisquis recte consideraverit, naturalia nos ad divina perducere; hinc igitur effectum est ut nullus unquam ad secretiora Platonis mysteria sit admissus, nisi Peripateticis disciplinis prius initiatus".

philosophical subject lend the gestures greater rhetorical strength. By positioning them alone in the centre of the composition, Raphael was able to place greater emphasis on the figures and allow more freedom for their gestures. Nevertheless, the gestures express the same idea in both frescoes. Aristotle's horizontal gesture articulates his positive philosophy, which focused on studying the rules governing the nature.[73] Plato's gesture instead emphasizes his speculative authority and his search for an absolute, ideal principle from which everything originates and to which everything returns[74]. The similarities between Ghirlandaio's and Raphael's interpretation of these gestures suggest the dependence of the Vatican fresco on its Florentine antecedent.

Another important clue that suggests that the Neoplatonic notions conveyed by Ghirlandaio's frescoes were intelligible to the contemporary public is the decoration of the Strozzi Chapel, directly adjacent to the choir of Santa Maria Novella Church and decorated between 1494 and 1500 by Filippino Lippi. One aspect of Lippi's frescoes for the Strozzi family – one of the political opponents of the Medici – undermines the Ficinian concept of the *prisca theologia* and Hermes Trismegistus as the key figure in Ficino's theological vision. According to Luciana Müller Profumo, the two-part inscription we can see crowning the exedra of the

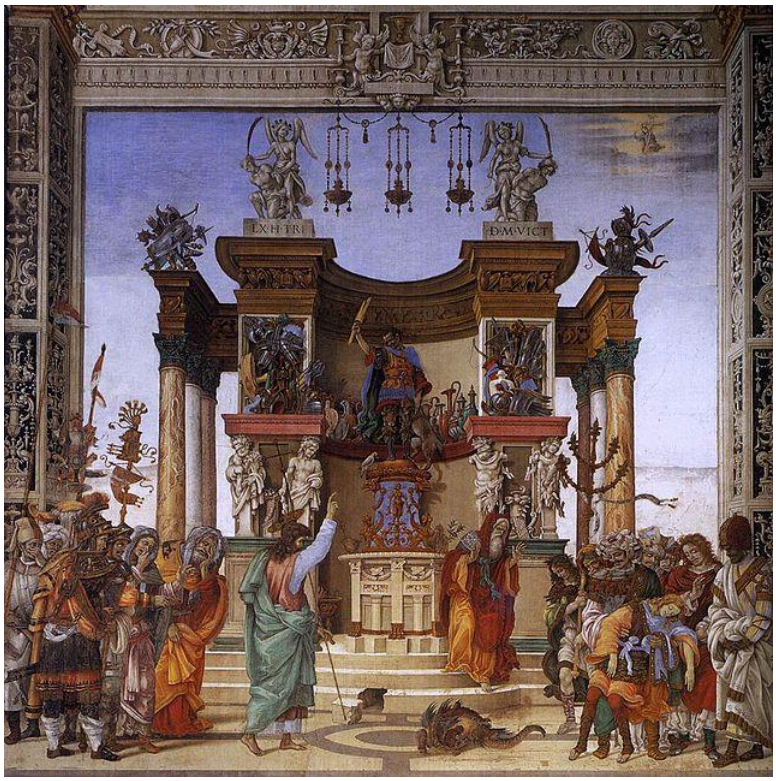


Figure 5.19: Filippino Lippi, *St. Philip Driving the Dragon from the Temple of Hierapolis*, 1494-1502, fresco painting, Strozzi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

[73] A. Emiliani, M. Scolaro, *Raffaello. La Stanza della Segnatura*, Milano, 2002, p. 120.
[74] Ibidem; A. Chastel, *Art et Humanisme à Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique. Études sur la Renaissance et l'Humanisme platonicien*, Paris, 1959, pp. 478-479.

altar in the scene of *St. Philip Driving the Dragon From the Temple of Hierapolis* (figure 5.19) ties Hermes Trismegistus to black magic, thus delegitimizing his prophesies. The abbreviation EX-H-TRI-D-M-VICT would stand for EXEMPLUM HERMETI TRISMEGISTI – DIVO MARTI VICTORI ("following the example of Hermes Trismegistus - to God Mars victor"), thus suggesting the altar of Hierapolis was dedicated to Mars observing Hermes' teaching[75]. Lippi's frescoes not only interpret the figure of Hermes as a magician rather than a prophet, but they also expose a theological tradition that was close to both Girolamo Savonarola and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Ficino's *prisca theologia* is replaced here by a spiritual magic that adopted a faith in the symbolic value of words and numbers from the Jewish mystical doctrine of Cabal. The Ficinian idea of continuation and agreement between pagan philosophy and Christian theology was thus denied and the only admissible continuation was that between Jewish and Christian thought and mysticism. We can also find expressions of this thought in Pico's *Nonagentae conclusiones* or Savonarola's *De ruina mundi*[76]. We can therefore see how discussions about Hermes Trismegistus gave expression to both theological and political rivalries. In fact, the history and iconography of the Tornabuoni and Strozzi Chapels in Santa Maria Novella Church support this thesis. The Strozzi Chapel frescoes were commissioned in 1486 – just one year after the contract between Giovanni Tornabuoni and Domenico Ghirlandaio was signed. Considering that the sidewalls, which contain the scene of *St. Philip Driving the Dragon*, were probably painted between 1494 and 1502 their subject would have been decided just a few years after the Tornabuoni frescoes were completed. It is therefore highly probable that the patrons conceived the Strozzi frescoes as a response to the theological and political message expressed by the circle of their main antagonists, the Medici.

[75] L. Müller Profumo, *Per la fortuna di Ermete Trismegisto nel Rinascimento. Filippino Lippi e la Cappella Strozzi*, "Athenaeum. Studi periodici di letteratura e storia dell'antichità", 58, 3-4/1980, pp. 433-434.
[76] Ivi, pp. 443-444, 446-447.

Living images, the agency of the frescoes

Aby Warburg, from whose considerations we departed, underlined in his writings on Ghirlandaio's style the visual force of the artist's creations and compared the portraiture included into his narrative cycles to the wax *voti* offered in the Florentine churches[77]. In this way the scholar claimed that the function of a fresco decoration was similar to the role given to the *ex voto*. The scholar interpreted the artistic choice to represent the commissioners in the fresco as "a comparatively discreet attempt to come closer to the Divine through a painted simulacrum[78]". Interpreted in this light, Ghirlandaio's detailed style and his care for a strong resemblance of the patrons' effigies conveyed a very precise meaning to the image and allowed this religious representation to fulfil its primary function, i.e., to be an active agent able to connect the believers with the transcendence. The Tornabuoni frescoes are characterized not only by the inclusion of the portraitures to the scenes, but also by the use of a very precise perspective scheme. As it has been shown in the analysis of Lippi's frescoes in Prato (chapter 4), perspective was an efficient tool to activate the action represented in the frescoes and to draw the spectator into the represented space. Ghirlandaio used a similar technique in his work. The scenes located on contemporary backdrops received an illusory frame, which further reinforced the visual power of the image. The devotional character of the cycles and the materialization of God's power on earth was suggested by the inclusion of appropriate symbolical elements, as well as by the illusory style of the paintings. Painted marbles, objects and images believed to excite fertility, ambiguous inscriptions and contemporary setting of the scenes, in which the portraiture of Tornaquinci *consorteria* is placed, guaranteed the polysemy of the images and made them active agents of God's power on the earth.

Painted marbles, which are so easily found on the chapel's walls still during the fifteenth century, carried highly symbolic and religious connotations. Their presence on the chapel's walls was secured already, together with the

[77] A. Warburg, *The Art of Portraiture*, op. cit., pp. 189-91. On the importance of the offerings of the ex-voto for the Medici family see: F. W. Kent, *Sainted Mother, Magnificent Son: Lucrezia Tornabuoni and Lorenzo de' Medici*, in Idem, *Princely Citizen. Lorenzo de' Medici and Renaissance Florence*, ed. C. James, Turnhout, 2013, pp. 95-96.

[78] A. Warburg, *The Art of Portraiture*, op. cit., p. 190.

guaranty of employment of gold and ultramarine, by the contract for the decoration, signed in 1485 between Giovanni Tornabuoni and Domenico and Davide Ghirlandaio:

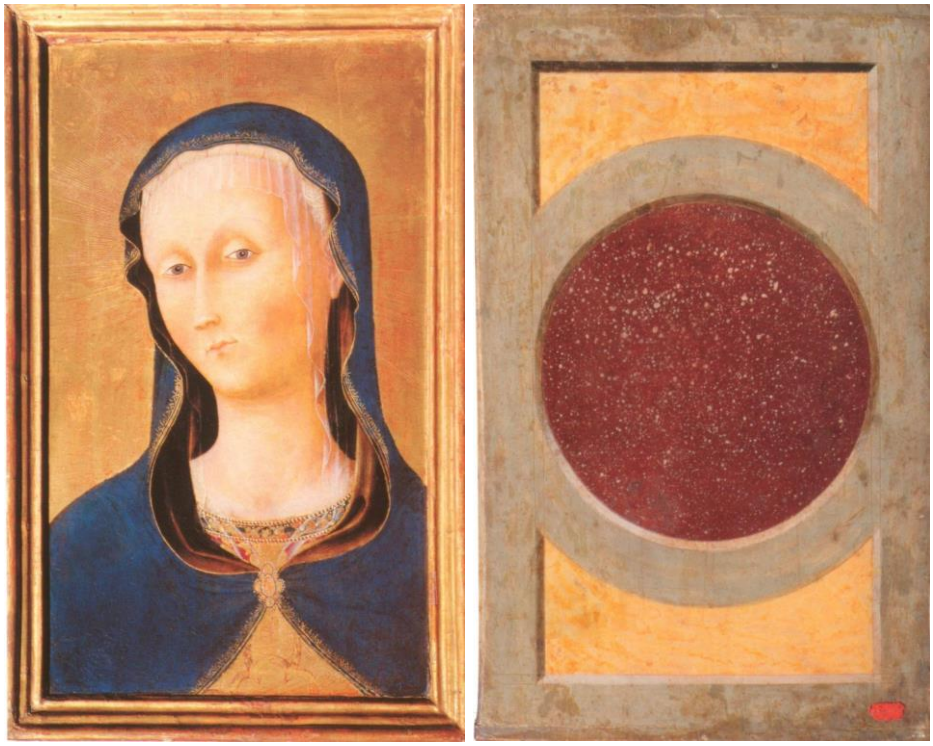
> And the said contractors have promised to paint and embellish all the said stories, figures, and pictures with colours rendered in fresco (as it is called in the vulgar tongue), and with fine ultramarine azure where the work of the said figures should be in azure, and with fine German azure where all the other details and backgrounds should be rendered in a less deep azure. And all the surroundings which represent marble he must paint in the colour of marble, with decorations in fine gold and other colors appropriate and requisite for the beauty and quality of such a work. And the pilasters (as they are called in the vulgar tongue) in the said chapel he is to paint with foliage resembling the colour of marble, with a background of fine gold and capitals rendered in fine gold and other colours suitable and requisite for such a work. And the arch above the said pilasters he is to paint with rectangles resembling the colour of marble with an azure background and roses embellished with fine gold[79].

The mention of gold and ultramarine in the contract was, in fact, not unusual, as their extensive use and quality influenced the value of every single art work. High costs of these precious pigments pushed the commissioners to decide their use rather precisely in the written agreements[80]. However, gold, blue ultramarine

[79] D. S. Chambers, *Patrons and Artists*, op. cit., p. 174. The original document: ASF, Notarile antecosimiano, 13186 [Ser Jacopo di Martino da Firenze, 1481-1487], ff. 159v-160r. "Et promiserunt dicti locatores ut supra, dictis modis et nominibus, omnes dictas hystorias, figures et pitturas de quibus supra, pingere facere et exornare cum omnibus coloribus, ut vulgariter dicitur, posti in frescho, et cum azzurro ultramarino ubi opus esset in dictis figures colore azurrino; et in aliis ortamentis et campis ubi opus esset colore azurrino, pingere et ornare cum azurro magno fini, et omnes ricintos facere apparentes marmonis et coloris marmorei, cum ornamentis auri finis et cum aliis coloribus prout convenit et oportunum erit et necessarium iuxta operis pulcritudinem et qualitatem; ac etiam; ut vulgariter dicitur, e pilastri dicte cappelle pingere cum fogliaminibus apparentibus coloris marmorei, cum campo auri finis et capitellis ornatis auro fini et aliis coloribus condecentibus et requisitis in tali opera; et archum existentem super dictis pillastris pingere cum requadratis apparentibus coloris marmorei cum campo coloris azurrini, cum rosonibus orantis auro fini."

[80] Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-century Italy. A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford, 1988 (1 ed. 1972), p. 11.

and marble had, at the same time, highly symbolical meaning. During the fifteenth century the use of painted marbles in religious painting was, in fact, widespread. *Faux-marbre* would appear often on the rear side of a small devotional objects,



Figures 5.20 and 5.21: Piero di Giovanni Ambrosi, Portrait of the Virgin, *recto* and *verso*, 1440s, tempera on panel, Keresztény Múzeum, Esztergom.

as is the case of Fra Angelico's *Nativity* and the *Prayer in the Garden* (1440-1450s) kept today in the Pinacoteca Civica in Forlì or Piero di Giovanni Ambrosi's *Portrait of the Virgin* (1440s) (figures 5.20 and 5.21) held in Keresztény Múzeum in Esztergom. Further, they would often constitute the lowest level of a fresco decoration as in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, and Peruzzi or Bardi chapels in Santa Croce church in Florence. Finally, imitation of marble floors and other marble-like elements would become particularly frequent in fifteenth-century Annunciations and other Marian representations. The symbolical meaning of the marble, which brought to its frequent use in the religious painting, had its theological reason. In medieval theology rock stood for Christ himself[81] and multi-colour marble, being considered one of the less opaque between all stones, characterized, at the same time, by its multi-coloured brightness, would become

[81] 1Cor, 10, 4: et omnes eundem potum spiritalem biberunt; bibebant autem de spiritali, consequente eos, petra; petra autem erat Christus.

a figure of Mary's virginity[82]. Finally, rock, *petra*, would soon be identified with the altar itself. In fact, already from the sixth century portable altars, called *petra sacra*, were in use[83]. They were small tables of natural stone (the size could vary from about 12,5 x 7,5 cm to 48,5 x 36,7 cm approximately), often framed with wood, bearing inside a relic[84]. The existence of an inviolable bond between Christ, altar and rock was claimed by St. Thomas Aquinas in the eighty-third question of his *Summa Theologica* dedicated to the Eucharistic ritual.

> As we read in De Consecr., dist. 1, "altars, if not of stone, are not to be consecrated with the anointing of chrism". And this is in keeping with the signification of this sacrament; both because the altar signifies Christ, for in 1 Corinthians 10:3, it is written, "But the rock was Christ": and because Christ's body was laid in a stone sepulcher. This is also in keeping with the use of the sacrament. Because stone is solid, and may be found everywhere, which was not necessary in the old Law, when the altar was made in one place. As to the commandment to make the altar of earth, or of unhewn stones, this was given in order to remove idolatry[85].

Interchangeable character of painted and real marble could be corroborated by the existence in fifteenth-century Tuscany of painted altarpieces, which functioned on equal rights of their stone counterpart. Examples of this kind can be found in the Rinuccini Chapel in Santa Croce or in the sacristy of Santa Maria

[82] G. Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico. Dissemblance and Figuration*, Chicago, 1995, p. 71, P. Castelli, *Le virtù delle gemme. Il loro significato simbolico e astrologico nella cultura umanista e nelle credenze popolari del Quattrocento*, in *L'oreficeria nella Firenze del Quattrocento*, Firenze, 1977, pp. 307-29.

[83] P. Siffrin, voice *Pietra sacra*, in *Enciclopedia cattolica*, ed. C. Testore, S. J., vol. 9, Città del Vaticano, 1952, pp. 1394-1395.

[84] Ibidem.

[85] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, 83, 3. "Ad quantum dicendum quod, sicut legitur de consecrat. dist. I, cap. 3I, altaria si non fuerint lapidea, chrismatis unctione non consecrentur. Quod quidem competit significationi hujus sacramenti, tum quia altare significat Christum: dicitur autem I Corinth. 10. 3: Petra autem erat Christus tum etiam quia corpus Christi in sepulcro lapideo fuit reconditum. Competit etiam quoad usum sacramenti. Lapis enim et solidus, et de facili potest inveniri ubique, quod non erat necessarium in veteri lege, ubi fiebat in uno loco altare. Quod autem mandatur altare fieri de terra, vel de lapidi bus insectis, fuit ad idolatriam removendam."

del Carmine in Florence. The symbolical meaning of marble[86] was inherited by Christianity from previous traditions. Stones and rocks, in fact, held magic and mystic value in different cultures and religions. Steady character of stone would become guarantee for oaths sworn on it. Therefore, ancient *fetiales* would carry with them *lapis silex* from the temple of Jupiter Feretrius to approve treaties[87]. During the Middle Ages the meaning of term "marble" included different types of stones. In fact, still in the sixteenth century marble was understood as a diversity of bright rocks[88] and the category included so different minerals like breach, alabaster, jasper, serpentine, porphyry, granite or basalt.

In the contract for the frescoes Giovanni Tornabuoni asked Ghirlandaio brothers to cover with painted marbles the frescoes' frames and columns dividing the scenes, although in the final version of the decoration we discern a wider use of this particular medium, which exceeded the agreement between the commissioner and the artists. Marble columns not only hold the architectural frame of both cycles but painted marbles appear also in the architectural details in some of the scenes. In particular, they are introduced in the architecture of temples and consecrated buildings. They are vastly used in the first scenes of both cycles, the *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple* (plate 24) and the *Annunciation to Zacharias* (plate 17) on the temples' steps, floor and on the apse in the case of Zacharias's scene (figures 5.22 and 5.23). Further, we can find them again on the columns of the temple in the scene of the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* (plate 26), on the floor in the *Naming of the Baptist* (plate 20) and in the decorative plaques above the arches of the niches occupied by two donors Giovanni Tornabuoni and Francesca di Luca



Figure 5.22: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple*, detail, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

[86] I consider here painted marble carrying the same significance and force of *imago agens*, as precious stones themselves and not mere imitations of true marble. Here again, I follow Didi-Huberman's thought and I agree with his conviction that not the iconographical meaning of marble has to be asked for but rather what marble stays for. G. Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, op. cit., p. 71.

[87] N. Turchi, voice *Pietra*, in *Enciclopedia cattolica*, op. cit., vol. 9, p. 1394.

[88] Ch. Klapisch-Zuber, *Le Maître du Marbre. Carrare, 1300-1600*, Paris, 1969, pp. 15-16.

Pitti (plates 31 and 32). Painted marbles are the most captivating in the first scenes mentioned here, the *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple* (plate 24) and the *Annunciation to Zacharias* (plate 17). Their bright colours attract attention and capture the spectator's glance. The symbolical meaning of painted marbles is multi-layered, and remains so also in the frescoes in the Tornabuoni Chapel. On one hand the marble marks the holy space of the temple, like in the scene with the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* (plate 26) where it testifies the presence of God in the temple's courtyard. Yet, it can also mean God's presence and his action on the earth. This is the case of the *Naming of the Baptist* and the *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple* (plate 24), scenes, which at the core of the exegesis have the question of God's exercise for the case of the human salvation. In the *Naming of the Baptist* (plate 20), it is only God's perspective, which can explain reason and sense of the event narrated by the New

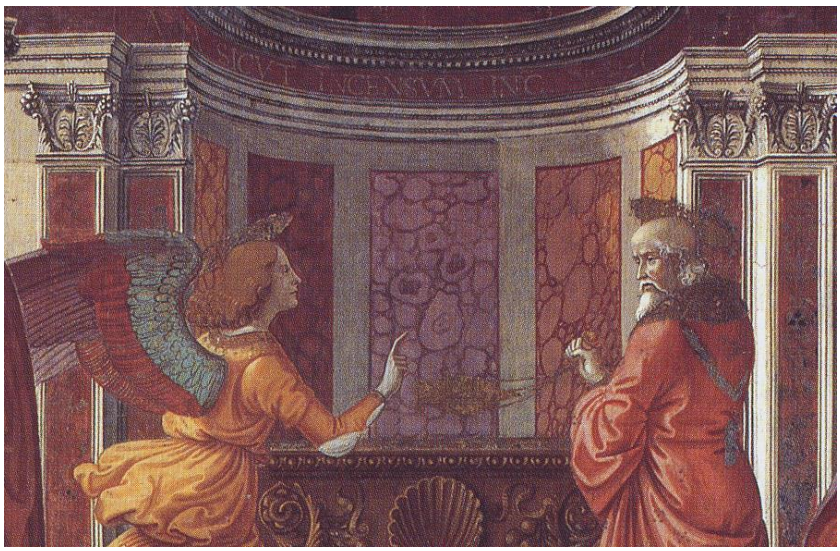


Figure 5.23: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio and workshop, *Annunciation to Zacharias*, detail, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

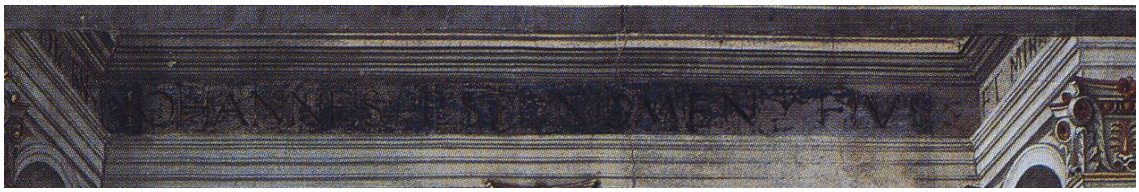


Figure 5.24: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio and workshop, *Naming of the Baptist*, detail, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Testament. Versus 63 from the Gospel of Luke, narrating the represented event, is carved along the temple's frieze. We can easily read its main part "IOANNES EST NOMEN EIUS", which appears along the frontal arcade. Above side arches,

therefore, it is possible to distinguish words *"DICENS"* on the left and *"ET MIRA"* (figure 5.24) on the right, which suggest the full verse *"Et postulans pugillarem scripsit dicens: «Ioannes est nomen eius». Et mirati sunt universi"* [89].

The reference to Luke's description of the event not only makes possible the recognition of the scene itself but also draws the attention to its true significance. The theological sense of the scene lays, in fact, in the juxtaposition between the people's astonishment, the lack of comprehension of an event, which, if rationally analysed, seems pure nonsense, and the deepest meaning hidden in the substance of the matter. In the Jewish tradition, the father would give his son a name of his ancestors, a name already existing in the family, while Zacharias named his first-born in breach of this well-established custom. It is only God's pursuit, and his will to inscribe Elisabeth, Zacharias and John's life in the history of the human salvation, which can explain the true sense of the matters. Therefore, it is God's activity that provides meaning to history. The Supreme and his active force on the earth are represented in the fresco by the colourful plates of the marble. According to Didi-Huberman, painted marbles were used in fifteenth-century painting as 'figures of dissemblance'[90]. These are the representations of what cannot be represented, namely the sphere of transcendence, which goes beyond human sensorial cognition and cannot be pictured by a mere imitation. In line with this interpretation, the marble on Ghirlandaio's frescoes may symbolize God's presence and his activity on the earth. Painted marbles as figures of dissemblance did not function as simple iconic signs or symbols, which referred to one, easily recognizable object[91]. The contemporary understanding and use of symbols followed St. Augustine's theory of sign, expressed in *De doctrina christiana* and *De dialectica*[92], which remained the only elaborate theory of signs until the thirteenth century[93]. In his writings, St. Augustine underlined not only the indexical character of a sign, but also stressed

[89] E. Marchand, *His Master's Voice: Painted Inscriptions in the Works of Domenico Ghirlandaio*, "Artibus et Historiae", 66, 33/2012, p. 105.
[90] G. Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, op. cit., pp. 11-102.
[91] Ivi, pp. 43-48.
[92] B. Darrell Jackson, *The Theory of Signs in Augustine's* De doctrina christiana, "Revue des Études Augustiniennes", 15/1969, p. 10.
[93] S. Meier-Oeser, *Medieval Semiotics*, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), ed. E. N. Zalta, URL: http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/semiotics-medieval/ [last access: September, 2015].

its sensorial nature. The sign, in order to be one, had to be perceptible to one of the senses, generally the sight or the hearing.

> As when I was writing about things, I introduced the subject with a warning against attending to anything but what they are in themselves, even though they are signs of something else, so now, when I come in its turn to discuss the subject of signs, I lay down this direction, not to attend to what they are in themselves, but to the fact that they are signs, that is, to what they signify. For a sign is a thing which, over and above the impression it makes on the senses, causes something else to come into the mind as a consequence of itself: as when we see a footprint, we conclude that an animal whose footprint this is has passed by; and when we see smoke, we know that there is fire beneath; and when we hear the voice of a living man, we think of the feeling in his mind; and when the trumpet sounds, soldiers know that they are to advance or retreat, or do whatever else the state of the battle requires[94].

Further, Augustine divided signs in two categories: natural signs (*signa naturalia*), which were created unintentionally, like the track of an animal, and intentional signs (*signa data*), which were created on purpose in order to transmit what had been conceived in one's mind to somebody else ("Nor is there any reason for giving a sign except the desire of drawing forth and conveying into another's mind what the giver of the sign has in his own mind."[95]). In Augustine's semiotics, the relation of signifying is, thus, triadic, as it involves the sign, what is signified by it and the situation within the subject that receives it[96]. Moreover, both types

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[94] St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2, 1. English translation in A *Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. P. Schaff, series 1, vol. 2, Buffalo, 1887, p. 535. "Quoniam de rebus cum scriberem, praemisi commonens ne quis in eis attenderet nisi quod sunt, non etiam si quid aliud praeter se significant; vicissim de signis disserens hoc dico, ne quis in eis attendat quod sunt, sed potius quod signa sunt, id est, quod significant. Signum est enim res, praeter speciem quam ingerit sensibus, aliud aliquid ex se faciens in cogitationem venire; sicut vestigio viso, transisse animal cuius vestigium est, cogitamus; et fumo viso, ignem subesse cognoscimus; et voce animantis audita, affectionem animi eius advertimus, et tuba sonante milites vel progredi se vel regredi, et si quid aliud pugna postulat, oportere noverunt."

[95] Ivi, 2, 2, 3. English translation in *Selected Library*, op. cit., p. 536. "Nec nulla causa est nobis significandi, id est signi dandi, nisi ad depromendum et traiciendum in alterius animum id quod animo gerit is qui signum dat."

[96] B. Darrell Jackson, *The Theory of Signs*, op. cit., p. 13.

of signs, the natural and the intentional, were indexical. They were created in a physical contact with what they stayed for. The examples given by Augustine emphasize that point clearly. As an animal leaves his track by running on the snow, the trumpet player indicates the position of his battalion with the sound of his instrument, and as he is a member of the division, he remains in a physical contact with what his music indicates. Therefore, material contact between the sign and its object was for Augustine implicit. It was this non-iconic character of a sign to bring to existence the sphere of dissemblance. As the smoke does not imitate the colour of the fire and the footprint of an animal does not resemble the aspect of the beast, every sign, alongside the relationship between the significant and the signified, contains a sphere of emptiness, of what it cannot express[97]. As Didi-Huberman argues, this space of dissemblance carried by every sign is essential for the Biblical exegesis, as it is open to the Bible's profound mystery and it can become a figure expressing complex, profound, multiple senses of Biblical *historia*[98]. Therefore, the meaning of a sign is never univocal or direct, as the sign has to answer the Scriptures' complexity and profundity. Quattrocento painting suggests that painted marbles functioned as a polysemous sign of God, figures of dissemblance. It has been already mentioned that symbolical meaning of *faux marbre* in religious painting would include references to Mary's virginity and purity. Marble background would, in



Figure 5.25: Guido di Pietro called Beato Angelico, *Annunciation*, 1430-1432, tempera on panel, Museo della Basilica di Santa Maria delle Grazie, San Giovanni Valdarno.

[97] G. Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, op. cit., p. 43.
[98] Ivi, p. 44-45.

fact, became extensively used during the Quattrocento in Tuscan Annunciations. Many examples can be given from Fra Angelico's production, such as his *Annunciation* from the Basilica of Santa Maria delle Grazie in San Giovanni Valdarno (figure 5.25). In fact, the Annunciation was, from the theological point of view, one of the most complex theological mysteries to be represented in a visual form. To paint an annunciation meant to paint the exact moment of the incarnation, which is one of the pivotal truths of the Christian faith. Fifteenth-century understanding of the mystery of annunciation can be illustrated by a quote from San Bernardino da Siena's sermon *De triplici Christi nativitate*[99]:

> L'eternità viene nel tempo, l'immensità nella misura, il Creatore nella creatura, [...] l'infigurabile nella figura, l'inenarrabile nel discorso, l'inespilicabile nella parola, l'incircoscrivibile nel luogo, l'invisibile nella visione[100].

San Bernardino described the incarnation as a pure paradox, a mystery overwhelming human cognition. In his view, in that short moment of time the immeasurable God suddenly became accessible to human senses, entered the earthy dimension, characterized by the limitations of the physical world. Thus, to represent the Annunciation in a painting meant to visualize the very moment when the mystery happened. In Arasse's interpretation, the use of perspective was one of the means, how to represent the theological meaning of the scene, as it gave to the artists the possibility to picture the measurable, rational space of the Virgin's room as contrasted with indescribable dimension of God[101]. The introduction of the painted marbles in the background of these scenes reinforced this contraposition. The abstract pattern of the stone surface strongly differed from the rational order of the human space, the room and the garden. It symbolized the immeasurable and sacred dimension of natural forces, which penenetrated into the ordinary life in the moment of the incarnation.

[99] D. Arasse, *L'Annonciation italienne. Une histoire de perspective*, Paris, 1999.
[100] San Bernardino da Siena, *De triplici Christi nativitate*, in Idem, *Pagine scelte*, ed. D. Pacetti, OFM, Milano, 1950, p. 54.
[101] D. Arasse, *L'Annonciation italienne*, op. cit., pp. 130-143.

This problem and Ghirlandaio's own solution to it are unexplored so far. Previous analysis of the chapel's iconography, conducted by Patricia Simons and Ira Westergård, shed light on the core subjects of the iconographical program of the frescoes, namely praise of the female gift of fertility, importance and esteem for women as guarantors of families' continuity and prosperity[102], but overlooked their theological implications. The theme of fecundity lays at the core of fifteenth-century interpretation of Biblical *historia* depicted in the frescoes. It is central also for the exegesis the *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple* (plate 24) and the *Annunciation to Zacharias* (plate 17), which are traditionally interpreted in their social and political context. The scenes depict the *gravitas* of the Tornaquinci *consorteria*[103] in the idealized public space, *forum* of the *Pulcherrima Civitas*, Florence represented as New Rome, populated by active men, guarantors of its nobility and peace[104]. The political meaning of these "masculine" scenes, however, can be read on the background of the theological exegesis of the *historia*. The importance of the subject of fertility and of the mystery of conception emerges in the light of the cycles' textual sources for both the aforementioned "political" scenes of the *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple* (plate 24) and the *Annunciation to Zacharias* (plate 17), and the "feminine" ones like the *Birth of Virgin*. The textual tradition of the Life of the Virgin and the Life of St. John the Baptist includes, besides the four Gospels, Apocryphal texts, such as the *Protovangelium of James*, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (*Liber de Ortu Beatae Mariae et Infantia Salvatoris*) and the *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary* (*Historia de Nativitate Mariae et de Infantia Salvatoris*). The description of the *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple* contained in the Pseudo-Matthew evidences the importance of the problem related to the lack of fertility in the history of Anne and Joachim. The first three chapters of the text describe the couple's struggle with their sterility and Joachim's shame caused by it. The lack of the offspring was a reason of his expulsion from the temple by Ruben, the temple scribe. *"Non tibi licet inter sacrificia dei agentes consistere, quia non te benedixit deus ut daret tibi germen in Israel"*, was Ruben's judgment, which pushed Joachim into abandoning his wife and escaping into the mountains. Wife

[102]P. Simons, *Portraiture and* Patronage, op. cit., pp. 298-317; I. Westerård, *Approaching Sacred Pregnancy*, op. cit..
[103]P. Simons, *Portraiture and Patronage*, op. cit., p. 271.
[104] Ivi, pp. 274-75.

and husband shared the same feeling of shame, humiliation and injustice towards God and the community. In Ghirlandaio's fresco depicting the *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple* we can see painted marble, which covers the floor of the building. The appearance of the figure of God in the multi-coloured marbles of the temple's floor and steps anticipates the future events and the future miraculous conception of Mary. The fertility would be donated by God and the offspring given by him would be of particular importance for God's plan of Salvation. Therefore, it is God who gives meaning to Joachim's humiliation, it is him who gives fertility and who signs the conception of the Virgin Mary with miracle and mystery. An analogous reading can be provided for the *Annunciation to Zacharias*, the parallel scene opening the *Life of John the Baptist*. Here a belief in a complete loss of fertility due to the spouse's advanced age became reason for Zacharias' distrust in Gabriel's annunciation and for the punishment was delivered from the heavenly messenger. Nevertheless, the scene illustrates God's force and his operation revealed in an impossible conception of St. John. DOMINUS AB VTERO VOCAVIT ME DE VENT[RE] (Isaiah 49:1) announces the inscription running along the frieze of the pediment. It was God who called St. John, who by his will formed him in an already fainted womb. Thus, Lord's action, that is his creative force, is present in the fresco, hidden in the figure of painted marble. What is more, the inclusion of contemporary characters, the members of the commissioner's *consorteria*, actualise the scenes, so that God's grace and protection of the family's continuity and prosperity is bestowed upon the family members. His protection is not limited to the dimension of the Biblical history, but persists into contemporaneity. The painted marbles as figures of dissemblance are agents of God's power on the earth. Passing through the temporal borders, God actively participates in the human life, hidden under a veil of invisibility, covered by a thin layer of painted marble.

The *faux marbres* are not the only element of the frescoes in the Tornabuoni chapel that represent God's propitious activity on earth. It has been shown before how important for the meaning of both cycles was the theme of fertility, and how God's agency in favour of the commissioner's family, veiled under the layer of marbles, would grant the continuity of the lineage. For fifteenth-century societies the prompt appearance of a numerous offspring was

considered to be one of the principal aims of a happy marriage. Dealing with a high level of infant mortality and frequent cases of women's deaths during the delivery, contemporaries saw their main task in the preservation of their family line. Given this general instability of life conditions, many propitious rituals arose around the rituals of engagement, marriage, pregnancy and delivery of a new-born. These were supposed to guarantee the heavenly protection over spouses, new-borns or women in childbirth. Miraculous water, stones, prayers were believed to alleviate the pain of labour or to cure suffering children[105]. Images were also listed among these miraculous objects. They were able to influence positively the fertility of a couple and grant a successful delivery. Such propitious decorations were put on the walls of couples' bedrooms or on different objects offered on the occasion of marriage or childbirth, such as paintings decorating *lettuccio*, *cassoni* or *deschi da parto*[106]. Domenico Ghirlandaio seems to revive these Florentine traditions and beliefs related to the fecundity and childbirth on the walls of the Tornabuoni chapel. The composition of the scenes of the *Birth of the Virgin* and the *Birth of St. John the Baptist* brings our attention on the similarities with analogous scenes on Florentine *deschi da parto*. The fifteenth-century iconographical tradition of the scenes of sacred births came, in fact, very close to the depictions of secular births represented on these particular objects. A birth salver was often offered as a gift to a young couple on the day of their *giure*[107] or it was commissioned by the family



Figure 5.26: Tommaso di Ser Giovanni di Simone called Masaccio, *Nativity*, 1427, desco da parto, recto, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

[105] V. Dini, *Il potere delle antiche madri*, Firenze, 1995.
[106] C. De Carli, *I deschi da parto e la pittura del primo Rinascimento toscano*, Torino, 1997.
[107] For an analysis of wedding procedure in 14th- and 15th-century Florence see Ch. Klapisch-Zuber, *Zacharias, or the Ousted Father: Nuptial Rites in Tuscany between Giotto and the Council of Trent*,

on the occasion of the arrival of a new child, as is the case of the Medici-Tornabuoni *desco* commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici for the birth of Lorenzo, Piero's first son[108]. These objects, besides their practical functions of a tray and a family record, performed symbolical and augural functions. Therefore, their iconography is easily recognizable and it includes a limited number of iconographical themes all carrying ideological programs related to the world of family affection, ethic of matrimony, love and fertility[109]. The scenes represented on the *deschi* would include scenes of profane nativities, Garden of Love, Diana and Actaeon, Judgment of Paris, Susanna and the Elders, Judith and Holophernes, Judgment of Salomon, Venus with Mars, Trial of Moses, Charity or Triumphs. On verso, instead, motives of *putti* playing instruments, fighting or urinating, would repeat frequently. The composition of Ghirlandaio's nativities are strikingly similar to the composition of profane nativities represented on multiple *deschi*, to start with Masaccio's *Nativity* and *Putto with a marten* from Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie in Berlin (figures 5.26 and 5.27), Lo Scheggia's visit to a *puerpera* from Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris, Master of Charles of Durazzo's (Francesco di Michele?) *Scene of a Birth* in Fogg Art Museum at the Harvard University in Cambridge (Mass.) (figure 5.28), and Carlo di Giovanni's (attr.) *Nativity* and *Putti* playing drums and singing from Ca' d'Oro in Venice. We can see on these scenes the same compositional scheme of a woman's bed parallel



Figure 5.27: Tommaso di Ser Giovanni di Simone called Masaccio, *Putto with a Marten*, 1427, desco da parto, verso, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

in Idem, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, translated by L. Cochrane, Chicago, 1985, pp. 178-212.

[108] C. De Carli, *I deschi da parto*, op. cit., p. 15, J. M. Musacchio, *The Medici-Tornabuoni* Desco da Parto *in Context*, "Metropolitan Museum Journal", 33/1998, pp. 137-151.

[109] C. De Carli, *I deschi da parto*, op. cit., pp. 21-22.



Figure 5. 28: Master of Charles of Durazzo (Francesco di Michele?), *Scene of a Birth*, 1410 ca, desco da parto, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge (Mass.).

to the image plan, guests approaching from one side towards the mother while the new-born is taken care of by the maids at the bottom of the bed. In fact, between the end of fourteenth and the beginning of fifteenth century, the scenes of profane nativities represented on the *deschi da parto* would enter into dialogue with the iconography of nativity of the Virgin, St. John the Baptist and other saints. Ghirlandaio, therefore, inscribed himself in a tradition dating back to the late Trecento, which depicts the sacred nativities using the visual patterns of the contemporary life. But Ghirlandaio's dialogue with symbolism of the *deschi da parto* went a step further. In the *Birth of the Virgin* (plate 25), in fact, above St. Anne's bed, we find a frieze of *putti* dancing and playing instruments (figure 5.29). The scene, therefore, unites a recto and a verso of a traditional *desco*, and *putti* are another element of the cycle carried with the agent force, able to act on human life and excite the fertility of the members of the Tornabuoni family. Proofs of symbolical meaning related to fertility attributed to the putti can be found directly on some of the birth salvers. The *desco* by Bartolomeo di Fruosino, for example, represents on its reverse a *putto mictans* and bears an inscription with an explicit augury of fertility and protection of women in childbirth:

> FACCIA IDDIO SANA OGNI DONNA CHFFIGLIA E PADRE LORO . . . RO . . . ERNATO SIA SANSA NOIA ORICHDIA ISONO VN BANBOLIN CHESV LI ... ADIMORO FO LA PISCIA DARIENT ... EDORO[110]

[110] P. F. Watson, *A* Desco da Parto *by Bartolomeo di Fruosino*, "The Art Bulletin", 56, 1/1974, p. 4.



Figure 5.29: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Birth of the Virgin*, detail, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Belief in an active force of putti, or *spiritelli*, was based on medical theories of the period which interpreted spirits as forces transmitting life-sustaining nutriments to the body, stimulating passions and cognition[111]. *Spiritel d'amore* was considered to be responsible for the arousal of physiological reactions to love[112], therefore the presence of *spiritelli* on *deschi da parto* and in decorations of bed chambers was believed to excite couples' fertility and strengthen their attachment.



Figure 5.30: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Birth of St. John the Baptist*, detail with the portraits of Giovanna degli Albizi and Lucrezia Tornabuoni, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Both scenes of the births in Ghirlandaio's frescoes include the portraits of the female members of the Tornabuoni family. In the *Birth of St. John the Baptist* (plate 19) the first of three Florentines attending the event is believed to be Giovanna degli Albizi (figure 5.30), pregnant herself, who greets Elisabeth and asks for a happy delivery of her

[111] C. Dempsey, *Inventing Renaissance* Putto, Chapel Hill, 2001, pp. 41-49.
[112] Ivi, p. 43.

child[113]. She would be pictured again on the chapel's walls, in the scene of the *Visitation* (plate 18), this time in profile with her husband's emblem and the Tornabuoni device, which suggest a commemoration after Giovanna's death by childbirth in October 1488. In fact, in the features of a young lady walking behind her, Simons recognized Ginevra Gianfigliazzi (figure 5.31), Lorenzo Tornabuoni's second wife[114], which suggests that the marriage with Giovanna ended tragically. In the scene of the *Birth of St. John*, however, Giovanna is alive and she waits for the delivery of her second child. We can recognize her pregnancy thanks to the gesture of her hands, put on a delicately marked abdomen[115]. Fecundity is symbolized also by fruits and flasks brought to the room by the Cumanean Sybil. Here, again, as in the case of the Neoplatonic figure of the Angel-Saturn, we face the polysemy of certain elements in Ghirlandaio frescoes. The Sybil not only carries with her the symbols of Abundance, related to the Myth of the Golden Age, and wealth of



Figure 5. 31: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Visitation*, detail with the portraits of Giovanna degli Albizi, Ginevra Gianfigliazzi, and Lucrezia Tornabuoni, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

[113] P. Simons, *Portraiture and Patronage*, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 311-313.

[114] Ivi, pp. 305-306. The portraits of Giovanna degli Albizi, pregnant in the *Birth of St. John* and celebrated post-mortem in the *Visitation* fresco, allow a precise dating of both frescoes. With high probability the *Birth of St. John* was executed in spring or summer of 1488. Giovanna died in October of the same year and the lowest tier of the decoration on the wall would be done between 1489 and 1490. P. Simons, *Portraiture and Patronage*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 312.

[115] The older women, standing behind Giovanna, closer to the picture edge, is probably Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Giovanni's sister and mother of Lorenzo il Magnifico. We can recognize her thanks to a comparison with her portrait attributed to Ghirlandaio from ca 1475, kept today in the National Gallery of Art (London). She is portrayed, just like Giovanna, also in the *Visitation*, standing, again, behind her, next to Ginevra Gianfigliazzi. The lady on Lucrezia's left in the scene of the *Birth of St John* unfortunately remains anonymous to us.



Figure 5.32: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Birth of the Virgin*, detail with the portrait of Ludovica Tornabuoni, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Florence, but alludes to the fertility and prosperity of the household. Domestic and intimate connotations of *Dovizia* are proved by copies of Donatello's sculpture, already discussed as a possible iconographic source of the motive. A group of figures from Della Robbia's workshop represents *Dovizia* desitinated for a personal use and family context. Female allegories appear with a plate of fruit on their heads and a *cornucopia* under the left arm. The figure from the Casa Buonarrotti, in particular, contains an inscription in Latin: "GLORIA ET DIVITIE IN DOMO TUA", which explicitly expresses its meaning as a carrier of abundance and wealth for the household. Some other statuettes, like the one the Minneapolis Institute of Art, include infant boys and puppies at their side, which further underline their reference to fertility and domestic prosperity[116]. In Ghirlandaio's fresco, thus, the Sybil offers her blessing of fecundity to Elisabeth, but also to the members of the Tornabuoni family, Giovanna degli Albizi and Lucrezia Tornabuoni. An analogous representation is in the *Birth of the Virgin* (plate 25), where five contemporary Florentine women assist St. Anne in the intimate moment of the first bath of the new-born Mary. The first of them, who leads the group, is Ludovica Tornabuoni (figure 5.32), Giovanni's third child and his only daughter. She is represented as an unmarried young woman, as we can understand from her uncovered head and unplaited hair. Her décolletage is adorned with pearls. On the one hand the jewellery confirms the wealth and high social status of her family. On the other hand, pearls carried symbolical values of faith, chastity and virginity[117]. Thus, the necklace symbolized Ludovica's virtues

[116] D. G. Wilkins, *Donatello's Lost* Dovizia, op. cit., p. 409.
[117] E. de Jongh, *Pearls of Virtue and Pearls of Vice*, "Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art", 8, 2/1975 - 1976, p. 76.

and purity and it dialogues with other symbolical elements of the scene, the water falling from the nymph-servant's bowl and two keys in the cupboard beneath Anne's bed (figure 5.33). The falling water and the preparation of the bath symbolizes blessing and purification, and it was a frequent motive in the iconographic tradition of the Birth of the Virgin[118]. The keys, instead, refer to the Virgin's untouched chastity, and like a *hortus conclusus* allude to her virginity[119].



Figure 5.33: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Birth of the Virgin*, detail, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

In the scene of the births, Ghirlandaio managed to interpret in an inventive way the traditional iconography of the subject, underlining the actuality of the theological and philosophical meaning of the events. Using the visual elements, believed to actively influence the physical world and to bestow fecundity and prosperity, Ghirlandaio used the medium of the fresco as an agent of the divine protection over the commissioner's family. It is through the fresco, thus, that the auspice of fecundity, prosperity and wealth for Giovanni's lineage and the city of Florence materialized in the space of the chapel. An appeal for the heavenly protection over the family would be continuously repeated during every liturgy and prayer held on the main altar.

Fresco, ritual and spectacle. The Medici and the Florentine ritual

The analysis of the decoration's iconography indicates that Ghirlandaio's frescoes took shape in direct relationship with the intellectual environment of the Medici. They were filled in with a complex philosophical, theological and political program

[118] D. Denny, *Some Symbols in the Arena Chapel Frescoes*, "The Art Bulletin", 55, 2/1973, p. 205.
[119] P. Simons, *Portraiture and Patronage*, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 303-304.

characterized by a strong performativity of their visual language. The performative quality of the Tornabuoni frescoes was carried out through the visual characteristics of the decoration, such as the use of perspective and the actualizations, namely the introduction of the contemporary characters into the biblical plots. Furthermore, it was nourished by contemporary beliefs in agent properties of religious images. With the use of this particular visual language the frescoes became an expression of Medicean activity in the field of Florentine culture, and of their involvement in the process of shaping local religious imagery. The complex theological and philosophical message conveyed by the frescoes was expressed with the help of certain stylistic solutions that Ghirlandaio and his commissioners inherited from the past Florentine tradition. The artist's predilection toward the illusory effect of perspective and his choice to locate the narrated stories on backdrops, which can be identified with the real monuments, was already present to a certain extent in Filippo Lippi's decoration in Prato (chapter 4). There, as on the walls of the Tornabuoni chapel in Florence, these artistic devices were used with consciousness of their semantics and they communicated a precise set of meaning.

As it has been shown in the analysis of Lippi's murals in Prato, the fresco decoration was a constitutional part of the ritual activity of the community. The illusory effect of perspective, with its ability to animate the image in the viewer's mind and to suggest the three-dimensionality of the depicted space, gave a new expressive force to narrative painting, making it an eternal ritual in the holy space of a church. This ritual dimension of the monumental narrative frescoes was deeply rooted in the culture of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florence, in which the narrations of saints' lives and biblical stories staged in Florentine churches and in the city squares, were one of the seminal elements of the various festive celebrations (chapter 2).

The analysis of the legacy of Ghirlandaio's decoration with both Florentine ritual culture and the Medicean circle requires some initial considerations. The Medicean influence on the Florentine culture has been often discussed in terms of a manipulation of the local social fabric[120]. However, the

[120] D. Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance. The Patron's Oeuvre*, New Haven, 2000, p. 41.

members of Medicean intellectual élite, who started to shape Florentine culture from the times of Cosimo il Vecchio, not only were themselves participants of this rich socio-cultural life, but their activities were influenced by the repertoire of Florentine religious, political, artistic, literary and civic tradition. Thus, instead of talking about Medicean "manipulation" of Florentine culture, as if the cultural creativity of the circle would constitute an element foreign to the cultural scene of the period, it is worth to see the involvement of the ruling family and their entourage in the cultural life of the city as its inherent expression. Given a wide network of connections between the rulers, their clients, supporters, collaborators and foreign authorities, the Medicean circle included not only the members of the Florentine politic and economical élite, but also numerous artists, artisans, literary men, humanists, *condottieri*, rulers of allied *signorie* as well as religious authorities, such as pope Eugenius IV and the Florentine Archbishop Antonino Pierozzi. Therefore, the heterogeneous activity of such a wide and indefinite group of individuals cannot be described merely as propaganda in favour of a ruler, but has to be seen as an expression of social, political, religious and artistic tensions, manifestation of innovative ideas or an artistic research.

Another problem related to the question of the Medicean activity on the Florentine cultural stage, is the question of their relationship with, what we call today, high and popular culture. Even if the Medici were the patrons of the main artistic projects of the period, supporters of the most excellent humanists, poets and philosophers, educated in the most lively humanistic circles, their activity was deeply rooted in the wide Florentine social fabric.[121] Fifteenth-century Florence was characterized, in fact, by a particularly flexible social structure and a continuous exchange between the lower and the higher strata of the society was one of its distinctive features[122]. The Medici met their fellow citizens from a very diverse background in different contexts of the Florentine life, such as the participation to the confraternal life of the city, civic festivities and popular performances, the life of their parish, San Lorenzo, or their neighbourhood. As patrons of arts they also established relationships with artisans and architects, often as their employers. They belonged to the Florentine middle-class of workers

[121] Ivi, pp. 41-128.
[122] G. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, Berkeley, 1969, p. 38.

and shopkeepers, rather than to the intellectual élite of the city. Finally, the members of the family themselves composed texts belonging to the popular religious tradition of the period. Lorenzo's *Sacra rappresentazione di Santi Giovanni e Paolo*, or Lucrezia Tornabuoni's religious literary production are expressions of the popular tradition of the city, in which religious texts were staged or used for private devotion. The figure of Lucrezia Tornabuoni, for example, and her charitable activity in Florence were interpreted as a part of Medicean policy of reconciling opponents. Her religious writings in the vernacular were seen as a link between the rulers and the old oligarchy and popular circles, two groups traditionally opposed to the Medicean government[123]. The studies of Medicean patronage demonstrate that Cosimo, Piero and Lorenzo de' Medici, together with their closest collaborators like Giovanni Tornabuoni or Francesco Sassetti, before being commissioners of various works of art, promoters of new cultural tendencies, were citizens actively engaged in the process of shaping Florentine culture[124]. Therefore, their activity is intrinsically related to the local universe of religious, ritual, literary, and artistic practises.

The example of the Tornabuoni frescoes shows how, in their activity of patrons and commissioners of art, the members of the Medicean faction, participants of the new Renaissance culture, drew from the past tradition and, at the same time, modelled it transmitting a meaning related to their humanistic culture. The iconographical program of the chapel included a Neoplatonic plot interwoven into a traditional narrative scheme of saintly lives. In this way, the chapel became an early Renaissance 'mosaics', in which the classical sources were inserted into a medieval structure and creatively re-interpreted, forming a new polysemantic entity. Therefore, on the one hand the decoration of the chapel is strongly related to Florentine devotional and popular culture of the period. On the other hand, it introduced new philosophical ideas, comprehensible only for a highly prepared viewer, who belonged to the intellectual élite of the city.

The traditional narrative structure of the cycles situated the decoration in a long tradition of Tuscan mural painting. As seen in the previous chapter (chapter 4), late medieval wall decorations referred not only to the ritual

[123] P. Orvieto, *Introduzione*, in L. Tornabuoni, *La istoria della casta Susanna*, Bergamo, 1992, p. 18.
[124] D. Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, op. cit..

of a community but partook also in the process of formation of a holy space. In Prato, Filippo Lippi decorated the main chapel of the cathedral with the stories of the protector of the city (St. Stephen) and of the patron saint of its ruler (St. John the Baptist). Instead, the Tornabuoni frescoes include the life of the Virgin, venerated by the Dominicans in particular, and of St. John, the Florentines' most beloved saint. The narration of the frescoes develops through singles scenes, with an almost complete abandonment of the continuous narrative device. The artist represented multiple events only in three of the frescoes, the *Birth of the Virgin* (plate 25), the *Death and the Assumption of the Virgi*n (plate 30) and the *Feast of Herod* (plate 23). The first one includes the moment of the meeting between Anna and Joachim, happening not at the Golden Gate, as the tradition said, but at the door leading to one of the room of their dwelling. *The Death and the Assumption of the Virgin* (plate 30) are represented in the same scene, according to the traditional iconography of the subject, with Mary ascending to heaven when her dead body still lays on the catafalque. The last one, the *Feast of Herod* (plate 23), inspired by Lippi's representation of the same subject in Prato, shows two subsequent events happening in the same space. In the banquet room, the viewer assists to Salome's dance and, at the same time, to the arrival of St. John's head. Besides these three frescoes, the narration of the cycles develops through the representations of single events, all set in a space composed with a precise use of perspective. The abandonment of the continuous narrative and the use of perspective illusion reinforced the temporal and spatial unity of the scenes (chapter 4) and strengthened the effect of continuity between the representation and the space of the chapel. The scenes chosen for both cycles followed the traditional iconographical scheme of lives of the Virgin and St. John the Baptist, deeply rooted in the popular devotional culture of the period, inspired by the Apocrypha and by Varagine's *Golden Legend* (see above par. 2). The Life of the Virgin included the *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple*, *The Birth of the Virgin*, *The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, *The Marriage of the Virgin*, *The Annunciation* (on the altar wall), *The Birth of Jesus*, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, *The Death and the Assumption of the Virgin* and the *Coronation of the Virgin* (on the altar wall). The life of St. John, instead, was composed of the *Annunciation to Zachariah*, the *Visitation*, the *Birth of St. John the Baptist*, the *Naming of St. John*, *St. John in the*

Desert (on the altar wall), the *Baptism of Christ*, the *Preaching of St. John* and the *Feast of Herod*.

It was Frida Forsgren who first noticed a certain similarity between the rhetoric of the Tornabuoni frescoes and the language of Florentine *sacre rappresentazioni*[125]. For the scholar the seminal resemblance between the frescoes and Florentine drama lays in the unemotional character of Ghirlandaio's figures, which was inspired by the features of the protagonists of the religious spectacles[126]. Forsgren, however, did not consider that what she called the "stiffness" of the figures and their rhetoric staging within the represented space related not only to *sacre rappresentazioni*, but more generally, to Florentine religious writings of didactic and moral purpose. The chapel reflected the instructive approach to the devotional culture of the closest circle of the Medici, related to the activity of the Archbishop Antonino Pierozzi, and to some of the writings by Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Luigi Pulci or Feo Belcari. Lucrezia Tornabuoni's *Vita di Sancto Giovanni Baptista*, composed before April 1478 and the Congiura dei Pazzi[127], could be one of the sources for the iconography of the cycle, even if the frescoes lack some of the scenes narrated by Giovanni Tornabuoni's sister, such as the parting of young John from his parents. In the scenes present in both the frescoes and in Lucrezia's poem, there are certain details that reveal a parallel. While describing the annunciation to Zacharias, Lucrezia stressed that the angel apeared exactly in the moment when the priest incensed the altar. At the same time, outside of the temple there was a group of citizens gathered to take part in the ritual.

> Advenne in questo tempo Zacheria
> dovea il sacrificio celebrare
> com'usato era, e si misse per via
> et andò al loco dove suole andare.
> Et giunto al tempio cola mente pia,

[125] F. Forsgren, *Generic Transfer in the Tornabuoni Frescoes: Domenico Ghirlandaio and the* sacra rappresentazione, in *The Formation of the Genera in Early Modern culture*, ed. C. Laraik Guest, Pisa, 2009, pp. 193-230 and Idem, *Art and Drama. Religious Performance and Realism in the Italian Quattrocento*, PhD dissertation, University of Oslo, 2007, pp. 182-223.
[126] F. Forsgren, *Generic Transfer*, op. cit., pp. 220-227.
[127] F. Pezzarossa, *Momenti di una cultura quattrocentesca*, in L. Tornabuoni, *I poemetti sacri di Lucrezia Tornabuoni*, ed. F. Pezzarossa, Firenze, 1978, p. 41.

nell'ora che·llo 'ncenso si suol dare,
et tutto 'l popol con gran devozione
di fuori stava a far suo orazione,[128]

In Ghirlandaio's fresco, in fact, Zacharias is surprised by the angel just in the moment of censing the altar (plate 17). The *popolo* praying in front of the temple, instead, was represented as the members of the Tornaquinci consorteria and the Medicean circle of intellectuals. Another scene resembling Lucrezia's poem is the *Feast of Herod* and, in particular, the dance and the figure of Salome. The writer puts it in these words:

Li stormenti acordati, et a sonare
s'incominciò con dolce melodia.
Questa fanciulla sì s'ebbe a levare
con suo' be' modi, allegra et giulìa,
et così intorno cominciò a danzare
a passi pian, ch'appena si movia;
come finito ell'ebbe e lenti passi,
fermossi un poco et pensosetta stassi.

Quando ell'ebbe così pensato un poco
riprese la sua danza incontanente
et non lasciava a far nessun bel giuoco
che fussi al danzare apartenente.
Stati sarebbon credo inn un gran foco,
sentito non l'arebbon quelle genti,
tanto contenti stavano ad mirare
le suo bellezze e 'l suo gentil ballare.

Ella parea apparita da cielo
tant'era ornata, gentile e vezzosa;
el vestire era d'un candido velo
di gioie adorno ch'è maravigliosa
cosa ad vedere, et già nulla non celo
le suo bellezze, ch'è incredibil cosa;

[128] L. Tornabuoni, *Vita di Sancto Giovanni Baptista*, in Idem, *I poemetti sacri*, op. cit., p. 154.

tanto è leggiadro il vestir che portava,
colle bellezze insieme s'accordava.

S'ella non fe' delle danze dovizia!
Ella non ne lasciò niuna a fare,
et tutte quelle ch'erano a notizia
et ancor più ch'ella seppe trovare,
ad riferir parre' quasi stultizia.
Ad ogni salto si sentie gridare
vedendola levar con tal destrezza,
tutti l'amiron con grande allegrezza[129].

The composition of Ghirlandaio's fresco (plate 23) owns a great part of its setting to Lippi's interpretation of the same subject in Prato, with the arrangement of the tables in the shape of a U, Herod sitting in the centre of the composition, Salome dancing in the empty space in front of the central table and the musicians playing their instruments under the left wall of the room. Salome's dress is airy and soft but the girl is captured during one of her delicate jumps, with her left foot stepped forward, safely landing on the ground, rather than in a simple dancing pose. "*Ad ogni salto si sentie gridare / vedendola levar con tal destrezza, / tutti l'amiron con grande allegrezza*", Lucrezia's poem said.

Written in *ottava rima* the *Vita di Sancto Giovanni Baptista* shared its approach to the sacred Scriptures with the devotional attitude of the traditional genres of Florentine religious poetry, *cantare* and *sacra rappresentazione*. During the fifteenth century the religious culture of Florence was marked by a great sensibility towards the sensorial dimension of religious experience (see chapter 2) and the largely moralistic and educative reading of the Bible. It resulted in the great popularity of hagiographic writings, which claimed that the divine will find its immediate actualization through the human action. The Bible was represented through poetic images, which reproduced every-day features of the narratives, scenes from common life, underlining ethical and moral values of the stories[130]. Within this framework the myth of the family and the problem of actuality of the

[129] Ivi, pp. 191-192.
[130] F. Pezzarossa, *Momenti di una cultura*, op. cit., pp. 49-50.

biblical message acquired their centrality[131]. Serenity of marital relationships, obedience and oblige of children and sincere devotion of the family, these were the subjects particularly important for the authors of devotional literature, aforementioned Pulci, Belcari and Lucrezia Tornabuoni herself.

The rhetoric of the Tornabuoni frescoes correspond to the didactic approach of the sacred narratives created in Florentine circles and, in particular, to the Florentine *sacra rappresentazione*. The importance of the family in the social and religious structure of the city has been identified as one of the central topics of the decoration, which suggests the dependence of the decoration on the moralistic and instructive interpretation of the sacred scripture elaborated in the years of Dominici's and Pierozzi's pastoral activity. The influence of religious spectacle and literature, however, not only affected the frescoes' subject matter, but was also reflected in the chosen modality of temporal and spatial representation. Chapter 2 showed, on the examples of the *Festa di Susanna*, the *Rappresentazione di Abramo e Agar* and the *Rappresentazione del Figliuol Prodigo* by Castellano Castellani, that the poets often actualized the spectacles' structure and language. Similar structural solutions can be found in the Tornabuoni frescoes. As the dramas challenged framing devices to bring the narration closer to the spectator and to convey a strong sense of immediacy, the painter did the same with the use of pictorial means, namely the use of perspective, contemporary backgrounds and inscriptions. In the frescoes the temporal and spatial distances between the biblical narrative and contemporary city almost disappeared. The actualization of the narration became analogue to the solutions applied to the sacred drama. As in the *Festa di Susanna* the text lacks the angel's prologue and the initial scene of an argument between two peasants from Chianti situated the action of the spectacle in contemporaneity, in the frescoes the inscriptions locate the biblical narration in



Figure 5.34: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

[131] Ivi, pp. 53-54.

fifteenth-century Florence. One of these inscriptions, included into the scene of the *Annunciation to Zachariah*, introduced the motive of the Golden Age and suggested that the prosperity of the Saturnian reign was actually happening in Florence ruled by Lorenzo il Magnifico (see paragraph 2). The second one appears on the frieze of the pagan temple in the scene of the *Adoration of the Magi* (plate 28, figure 5.34). The inscription:

In the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Caesar Augustus

CAES[ARI] AVG[V]STO XXXVIII A[NNO] P[RINCIPATVS]

As Eckart Marchand noted[132], this inscription introduces a double temporal dimension to the fresco. The temple's ruin represent the ruins of Templum Pacis, built under the rule of Emperor Augustus, and collapsed at the moment of Christ's birth. The same motive appeared also in other Adorations of the Magi from Florentine circle, such as Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi* from 1475, kept today in the Uffizi Gallery (figure 5.35).



Figure 5.35: Sandro di Mariano Filipepi called Sandro Botticelli, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1475, tempera on panel, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

In Botticelli's painting, Jesus' crib is situated between the ruins of a pagan temple, visible in the background. In Ghirlandaio's fresco, the inscription running along the frieze would be, therefore, the date of the construction of the temple. According to Marchand, however, the inscription can have a second meaning and can indicate the thirty-eighth year of the rule of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederic III, called "the

[132] E. Marchand, *His Master's Voice*, op. cit., p. 106.



Figure 5.36: Benozzo di Lese called Benozzo Gozzoli, *Procession of the Magi*, detail, 1459-1460, fresco painting, Chapel in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Florence.

Peaceful", who was crowned in Rome in 1452. The inscription, therefore, indicates 1490, the year of the completion of the cycle, according to the contract between Ghirlandaio and Giovanni Tornabuoni[133]. The event represented in the fresco happened, thus, at the same time in the biblical past and in 1490 Florence. The temporal polyvalence of the image results, therefore, in a double meaning of the fresco. It represents the historical event of the adoration of the Magi described in the Bible, as well as it visualizes, in an idealized way, the Florentine festivity of the Magi and the civic ritual of the adoration repeated every year on 6th January. The *Festa dei Magi* was, in fact, the most "Medicean" in character among the Florentine civic festivities[134]. Benozzo Gozzoli's interpretation of the Magi's parade depicted on the walls of the chapel in the Palazzo Medici, which includes the portraiture of the contemporary Florentines, is the most direct example of dialogue between the historical event of a feast and the mural decoration in fifteenth-century Florence (see chapter 4, paragraph 5). Ghirlandaio seems to recall Benozzo's frescoes (figures 5.36 and 5.38) in the background of his *Adoration of the Magi* (plate 28) in the Tornabuoni chapel. On both sides of the composition the artist represented two hills and roads climbing up. Two processions travel along these roads, the one of the right is strongly Oriental in character with a giraffe, a camel and travellers wearing Oriental costumes. The one on the left shows a group of hunters getting ready for a hunt (figures 5.37 and 5.38). Both details seem to correspond rather

[133] Ibidem.

[134] R. Trexler, *The Magi Enter Florence: The Ubriachi of Florence and Venice*, in Idem, *Church and Community 1200-1660: Studies in the History of Florence and New Spain*, Roma, 1987; Idem, *Florentine Theatre, 1280-1500: a Checklist of Performances and Institutions*, "Forum Italicum" 14/1980, pp. 454-575; R. Hatfield, *The* Compagnia de' Magi, "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", 33/1970, pp. 107-161.

precisely to certain portions of the backdrops in Gozzoli's frescoes. Moreover, the composition includes a view on a contemporary city seen in the background, and some of the figures attending the event, like the young boys taking care of the horses on the left side of the fresco, evidently wear contemporary costumes. Through these deliberate anachronisms, repeated in almost all of the scenes of the cycles, the frescoes visualized the idea expressed in the religious spectacle and popular devotional writings of the period, namely the claim of the actuality of the biblical text and a belief in a direct involvement of God in the earthly matters. In the *Adoration of the Magi*, through the quotations from Gozzoli's chapel decoration, Ghirlandaio invoked Florentine tradition of the representation of the subject, civic festive tradition related to the Epiphany, Medicean devotion to the Magi and their involvement in the civic celebrations of 6th January. Through an inscription carrying a double temporal meaning, the fresco resembled the feast day, when through the ritual and parade Florence became the actual place of the Magi's parade. The adoration of the child was once again taking place. As it happened in Bethlehem during the rule of Herod, it occurred in Florence in 1490, in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Fredrick III the Peaceful.



Figure 5.38: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Figure 5.37: Domenico Bigordi called Ghirlandaio, and workshop, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail, 1485-1490, fresco painting, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Figure 5.39: Benozzo di Lese called Benozzo Gozzoli, *Procession of the Magi*, detail, 1459-1460, fresco painting, Chapel in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Florence.

As recalled by Forsgren, in Ghirlandaio's frescoes the actualized sacred stories, located in the contemporaneity, were populated by the characters with an "unemotional" attitude[135]. The members of the Tornabuoni family seem to observe the subsequent scenes from the outside, like bystanders detached from what was happening around them. Forsgren interpreted this feature as a visual translation of the figures-types from the *sacra rappresentazione*. In fact, the moral and didactic character of the spectacles resulted in a rather superficial construction of the most part of the protagonists of the dramas, who were meant to be easily recognisable with virtues and vices, bad and good, God or the devil. As seen above (chapter 2, paragraph 3), the narrative variety of the spectacles was guaranteed by the *inframessa* and the inclusion of the elements deriving from the everyday life. Nevetheless, the general scheme of each piece was based on a binary opposition between the virtuous and the vicious characters. The emotional impact on the spectators became stronger, however, in the scenes representing physical cruelty, suffering and pain. The saint's martyrdoms, Jesus' death on the cross and Mary's sorrow caused by his sacrifice, were all represented with a strong emphasis on emotions. Ghirlandaio seems to apply a similar rhetoric in his narratives. The figures in most of the scenes are calm, or even stiff, as Berenson and Kecks called them[136]. The exception is the scene representing the *Massacre of the Innocents* (plate 29), pictured with all the cruelty of the soldiers, the suffering of the babies and mothers and the women's attempts to protect their children with a particular expressivity and force. The emotional strength of the image contrasts sharply with the peaceful compositions of the rest of the decoration, where we can see gentle

[135] F. Forsgren, *Generic Transfer*, op. cit., pp. 220-225.
[136] B. Berenson, *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, London, 1959, pp. 64-65, R. G. Kecks, *Ghirlandaio: catalogo completo*, Firenze, 1995, p. 16.

gestures and movements of the biblical characters quietly observed by the Florentines. The contemporary characters represented in the frescoes seem to be the audience, the public of the spectacle happening before their eyes. The space where they belonged and the area where the sacred events happened were unified by a coherent construction of the pictorial space with the use of linear perspective. The perspective was a powerful tool, which offered to the painters a possibility to suggest spatial continuity within the depicted scene, and between it and the space of the observer. Already Filippo Lippi used the perspective to reinforce the visual effect of his frescoes in Prato. Thanks to the application of a coherent perspective scheme, the artist managed to transform the represented space into a stage on which the events took place (chapter 4, paragraph 4). Ghirlandaio's spatial solution and the use of illusory effect of perspective was similar to Lippi's lesson from Prato. The difference between the two artists lays in the narrative techniques they chose. Lippi applied to his cycles the continuous narrative device. In turn, Ghirlandaio opted for scenes representing single events, with the exceptions of the *Birth of the Virgin* (plate 25), the *Death and the Assumption of the Virgin* (plate 30) and the *Feast of Herod* (plate 23), described above. Ghirlandaio's precise perspective construction of the depicted space hints at the importance of the illusory effect offered by the frescoes for the semantics of the image. The two lower tiers offered the most suitable conditions for the perception of an image in perspective. The last two tiers were significantly higher and farther from the spectator. The narrow space of the chapel made impossible the observation of the paintings from a long distance, which would correct the inappropriate angle of observation. Nevertheless, Ghirlandaio tried to improve the final visual effect and correct eventual distortions. First, he significantly increased the angle of projection of the scenes depicted in the upper tiers, as we can clearly see in the *Feast of Herod* (plate 23). In this way he tried to avoid great distortions of the image observed from the ground level. Secondly, he gradually enlarged figures depicted always higher, farther from the spectator. In the *Expulsion of Joachim from the temple* (plate 24) the figures in the foreground measure 160 cm, while in the *Death of the Virgin*

(plate 30) 204.5 cm[137]. Despite these efforts, the illusory effect of the frescoes in the upper tiers remained limited due to the structure of the chapel. The lower sections of the decoration, instead, allowed the artist to develop fully the illusory space for his narratives. The frescoes manage to provide a strong suggestion of spatial continuity between the space of the chapel and the represented scenes thanks to their large size. Each tier is divided in two sections, each of them 4.5 m wide. Therefore, the single scenes observed from the inside of the chapel are large enough to cover the entire visual field of the spectator, which reinforces the illusory effect of perspective and allows the observer's mind to correct the eventual distortion of the image[138]. The columns, which frame each scene, suggest the third dimension of the space that opens behind them. They are uniformly illuminated with the light coming from the direction of the window wall and the illusory effect is reinforced by the architectonic setting of the scenes, constructed with precise perspective foreshortenings. Ghirlandaio managed to develop Lippi's achievements and illusory effect of the spatial organization of the lowest tier of the Prato murals. The rocky landscape, known from the Trecento tradition, almost completely disappeared in Ghirlandaio's invention, leaving space to urban settings, wealthy interiors and the architecture of an ideal Renaissance city, an idealized portrait of Renaissance Florence. The rocks return only in the scenes set outside of the city walls, like the *Visitation* (plate 18), the *Baptism of Christ* (plate 22), the *Preaching of St. John the Baptist* (plate 21) and the *Adoration of the Magi* (plate 28), but they never acquire their own expressive force, as it was in Lippi's frescoes in Prato. The backdrops testify Ghirlandaio's partial abandonment of the Trecento tradition and his involvement in the process of establishment and consolidation of the new, Renaissance culture in fifteenth-century Florence. It is particularly interesting to note that Ghirlandaio replaces the rocky background of the frescoes – an element related to the theatrical tradition of the religious spectacles

[137] J. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, op. cit., p. 68.
[138] M. Kubovy, *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 39-64. See also chapter 4, paragraph 2.

organized in the Florentine churches (see chapter 4, paragraph 5), with the



Figure 5.40: Giuliano da Sangallo, Domenico Ghirlandaio [attr.], *Perspective with the Round Temple*, 1470, tempera on panel, Galeria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino.

perspective illusion of an ideal city – a very recent invention in the 1480s influenced by the re-birth of the classical theatre and the research for new staging conventions. Ghirlandaio conceived the backgrounds as measurable and rational stages on which he located his figures. From this point of view, the architectonic compositions of the backgrounds are similar to the famous Urbino panel, the *Perspective with the Round Temple* (figure 5.40), attributed to Giuliano da Sangallo and Ghirlandaio himself[139]. The painting is paired with the *Perspective with the Triumphal Arch* attributed to Cosimo Rosselli and preserved in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore[140]. Both panels are recognized today as decorations of a *spalliera* or wall paitings designed for a study room or a private chamber[141]. However their relationship with the contemporary study of the Vitruvian *De architectura* and the research in the field of the stage design has been long discussed[142]. Undoubtedly, in the very years of Ghirlandaio's work in Santa Maria Novella, perspective and architecture were both involved in the gradual process of the renewal of staging conventions. The research not only concerned the discovery of the classical architecture used in the backgrounds but brought to the

[139] *Il luogo teatrale a Firenze. Brunelleschi, Vasari, Buontalenti, Parigi*, exhibition caltalogue, ed. M. Fabbri, E. Garbero Zorzi, A. M. Petrioli Tofani, Milano, 1975, p. 78.

[140] H. Saalman, *The Baltimore and Urbino Panels*, "The Burlington Magazine", 110, 784/1968, pp. 373-381, 383.

[141] F. Finotti, *Perspective and Stage Design, Fiction and Reality in the Italian Renaissance Theater of the Fifteenth Century*, "Renaissance Drama", 36-37/2010, *Italy in the Drama of Europe*, p. 25; A. Chastel, «*Vedute urbane dipinte» e teatro*, in *Teatro e culture della rappresentazione: lo spettacolo in Italia nel Quattrocento*, ed. R. Guarino, Bologna, 1988, pp. 289-299.

[142] R. Krautheimer, *The Tragic and Comic Scene of the Renaissance: the Baltimore and Urbino Panels*, "Gazette des Beaux-Arts", 33/1948, pp. 327-346; Idem, *Le tavole di Urbino, Berlino e Baltimora riesaminate*, in *Rinascimento da Brunelleschi a Michelangelo: la rappresentazione dell'architettura*, ed. H. Milion, V. Magnago Lampugnani, Milano, 1994, pp. 233-257; A. Conti, *Le prospettive urbinati: tentativi di un bilancio e abbozzo di una bibliografia*, "Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa", 6, 1/1976, pp. 1193-1234.

introduction into the theatre of the idea of optical illusion. In 1508, eighteen years after the completion of the Tornabuoni frescoes, Ariosto's *Cassaria* was staged at the Court of Ferrara. It was the first comedy whose stage design used the perspective and optical illusion. The illusory power of this new approach to the staging device was consciously employed in the opening of act 4, in the monologue of Volpino[143]. The text of the piece reproduces in words the situation of the spatial confusion created by the backdrop. First, the master loses his way in the city streets and then the servant, Volpino, perceives the feeling of danger. He feels threatened by the continuous appearance and disappearance of the light of his master's lamp. The illusory city, built with the use of perspective and architecture, changed into a labyrinth that hid a threat, a mystery and a danger.

> [...] lui, solo intento a spiare de la femina tolta, *va di là, di qua* , *tutta la città scorrendo* [. . .] Da questo infortunio [. . .] mi saprei forse difendere, *s'io avessi tanto spazio* che vi pensassi un poco: n'avessi tanto ch'io potessi respirare almeno! Ma sì *da un canto* mi occupa il dubbio che con la cassa il ruffiano non si fugga questa notte, *da l'altro* uno improviso timore che 'l vecchio patrone non ci sopragiunga e mi cogli e mi opprima in guisa che io non abbia tempo da comperarmi uno capestro con che mi impicchi per la gola, ch'io non so dove mi corra a rompere questo infortunato capo. [...] Ma che lume è questo *che di là viene*?[144]

The return of classical theatre and the use of modern staging devices was gradual, and Florence ruled by Lorenzo il Magnifico was seminal for the process of a progressive reception of classical comedy. The same intellectual circle involved in the project of the Tornabuoni frescoes was the protagonist of the first readings of classical dramas occurred in Florence between 1476 and 1488. During the carnival of 1476 pupils of the humanist Giorgio Antonio Vespucci, friend of both Poliziano and Ficino, acted in Terence's *Andria*. Among the students who recited the Latin text of the drama were, probably, also the young Lorenzo de' Medici and

[143] F. Finotti, *Perspective and Stage*, op. cit., pp. 28-29.
[144] L. Ariosto, *Cassaria*, act 4, scene 1.

Amerigo Vespucci[145]. The exercise had mainly pedagogical purpose, and served, following the guidance of Cicero and Quintilian[146], to improve the pupils' oratory skills[147]. In the same year, Pietro Domizi, the rector of clerics in the Florentine Duomo, asked Lorenzo de' Medici if his palace could host the performance of Domizi's Latin comedy *Licinia*[148]. Domizi used the pedagogic qualities of recitation in the formation of clerics, even if he preferred his own moral composition in Latin, inspired by the classical models, rather than original texts of pagan authors. Similar in its education perspective was the approach of Luca de' Bernardi da San Gimignano, who between 1485 and 1498 introduced the recitation of his own composition imitating classical dramas, and even a comedy by Plautus, into his grammar course at the *Studio fiorentino*[149]. The relationship between these personalities and Poliziano, Lorenzo de' Medici and Marsilio Ficino was undoubtedly direct and very strong. Ficino was Luca de' Bernardi's pupil and in 1474 he recommended his impoverished teacher to Matteo Palmieri, who had the office of the captain in Volterra at that time[150]. Poliziano seems to directly participate in these performances. In 1488, so just two years before the completion of the Tornabuoni frescoes, another humanist, Paolo Comparini da Prato, organized a recitation of Plautus' *Menaechmi*. For that occasion, Poliziano composed a highly polemical prologue to the drama[151]. Finally, from Poliziano's letters we learn about a performance in ancient Greek of the *Electra* by Sophocles in Bartolomeo Scala's palace in 1493. Bartolomeo was at that time the chancellor of the republic. In the play the part of Electra was acted by Alessandra Scala, Bartolomeo's daughter, and the girl was praised by Poliziano in a Greek epigram in her honour[152]. These events represent probably only part

[145] P. Ventrone, *Gli araldi della commedia. Teatro a Firenze nel Rinascimento*, Pisa, 1993, pp. 22-24.
[146] Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 1.11.1.
[147] P. Ventrone, *Gli araldi*, op. cit., p. 24. See also: E. Garin, *Il pensiero pedagogico dello Umanesimo*, Firenze, 1958; F. Cruciani, *Il teatro dei ciceroniani: Tommaso «Fedra» Inghirami*, "Forum Italicum", 14/1980, pp. 356-377.
[148] P. Ventrone, *Gli araldi*, op. cit., p. 26.
[149] C. Vasoli, *Bernardi, Luca di Antonio da San Gimignano*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 9, Roma, 1967, pp. 173-174
[150] M. Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, Basileae, 1561, I, p. 640; C. Vasoli, *Bernardi, Luca*, op. cit., pp. 173-174.
[151] G. Bombieri, *Osservazioni sul «Prologo» ai «Menecmi» di Angelo Poliziano*, in *Tradizione classica e letteratura umanistica. Per Alessandro Perosa*, ed. R. Cardini, L. Cesarini Martinelli, E. Garin, G. Pascucci, vol. 2, Roma, 1985, pp. 489-506.
[152] G. B. Pesenti, *Lettere inedite del Poliziano*, „Athenaeum", 3/1915, pp. 284-315; A. Poliziano, *Epigrammi greci*, transl. and ed. A. Ardizzoni, Firenze, 1951, pp. 20-56.

of a more vibrant performative culture in Florence under the rule of Lorenzo. They testify not only an increasing interest in the world of classical drama, which would bring to the further renewal of the theatrical practices and staging devices, but also a creative transformation of classical tradition in Florentine literary production. In particular the authors who belonged to a more traditional and conservative environment, like Domizi, chose to write their own compositions in order to ensure their compatibility with the moral and theological requirements, and refused an open promotion and diffusion of original texts in Greek and Latin. Poliziano's critique in the *Prologue to Menaechmi*, was in fact directed against this practice and against Domizi himself[153]. However, Domizi's or Bernardi's activity proves a significant diversity of Florentine culture and a great influence of the humanistic research on different cultural environments, including popular tradition and local ritual.

The Tornabuoni frescoes arose from this precise cultural climate of an intense revival of classical antiquity, classical drama and subsequent use of the antique motives in the composition of new texts, performances and images. In the decoration, thus, we can recognize elements of the previous tradition interwoven with the new, Renaissance and humanistic ones. The ritual features of the monumental fresco decoration and the relationship between the fresco and the world of the civic ritual and the religious spectacle, which we could observe in the example of Lippi's murals in Prato, were enriched by the current interests in drama, architecture and the illusory power of perspective in creating an imitation of the ideal world. The Florentine devotional tradition, expressed in the frescoes' narrative structure and the hagiographic convention of the paintings' matter, encountered the Neoplatonic ideas conveyed by the cycles and the classical form of the setting. The culture of Medicean Florence was, in fact, characterized by a gradual penetration of the new, classical and Renaissance culture into the popular tradition of the city. The Tornabuoni chapel is not, in fact, the only example of the Neoplatonism passing to the popular religious imagery. The Neoplatonic ideas started to influence Florentine rituality at least since the half of the century, as the sources demontrate. For St. John the Baptist festivity of 1454, for example

[153] P. Ventrone, *Gli araldi*, op. cit., pp. 35-36.

between the wagons staging the *sacre rappresentazioni*, recalled by Matteo Palmieri, there was a group of carts, whose subject suggest a Neoplatonic inspiration.

> Per san Giovanni 1454 si mutò forma di festa la quale era usata a farsi a dì 22 la mostra; a dì 23 la mattina la processione di compagnie, frati, preti e edifici; la sera l'offerte de' gonfaloni; e poi il dì di san Giovanni la mattina l'offerte e el dì el palio. E riordinossi in questo modo: cioè che a dì 21 si facesse la mostra. A dì 22 la mattina la processione di tutti gli edifici, e quali detto anno furono e andorono come appresso dirò.
>
> […]
> 6. Un Moisè a cavallo con assa' cavalleria de' principali del popolo d'Isdrael e altri.
>
> 7. L'edificio di Moisè, el quale in piaza fe' la rapresentazione di quando Iddio gli diè le legge.
>
> 8. Più profeti e sibille con Ermes Trimegisto ed altri profetezatori della incarnazione di Cristo.
>
> 9. L'edificio della Nunziata, che fe' la sua rapresentazione.
>
> 10. Ottaviano imperadore con molta cavalleria e colla Sibilla, per fare rapresentazione, quando Sibilla gli predisse dovea nascere Cristo e mostrogli la Vergine in aria con Cristo in braccio.
>
> 11. *Templum pacis* coll'edificio della natività per fare la sua rapresentazione[154].

Palmieri recalled a pageant with Moses on a horse, leading the Jewish people, and a following *sacra rappresentazione* with Moses receiving the Tablets of Law. Unfortunately, we cannot identify today the text of this spectacle, but the

[154] Matteo Palmieri, [*Historia Fiorentina (1429-1474)*], in Firenze, BNC, codice *Magliabechiano* XXV.511, ff. 50v-51v; edito in *Rerum Italicarum Scripores*, vol. 26, 2a edizione, Città di Castello: Lapi, 1906, *Nuovo corpus di sacre rappresentazioni fiorentine edite e inedite, tratte da manoscritti coevi o ricontrollate su di essi*, ed. N. Newbigin, Bologna, 1983, pp. XXVIII-XXX.

centrality of the figure of the prophet in these two pageants is undoubtful. Moreover, immediately following these two carts was another one representing a play of prophets with Sibyls and Hermes Trismegistus who foresaw the birth of Jesus. The next spectacle was the *Annunciation*, followed by the play with the Emperor Augustus and the Sibyl. With great probability the *Annunciation* staged during the feast performed the text of Feo Belcari, the most influential version of the drama, at the time, written by a poet coming from the Medicean circle and the most famous composer of *sacre rappresentazioni*. The text starts with a sequence of scenes showing prophets and Sibyls who enter the stage and announce their prophecies of Christ's birth. This uncommon introduction was followed by the theatrical performance of the Annunciation itself. The disposition of the plays during the feast of 1454 may suggest that the first part of Belcari's drama became an independent spectacle. Palmieri's description indicates directly that Hermes Trismegistus was one of the prophets pronouncing the vaticination. The figure of the magus, however, is missing from Belcari's text. On the basis of the evidence we can suppose that during St. John's festivity of 1454 they may have staged Belcari's *Rappresentazione quando la Nostra Donna Vergine Maria fu annunziata dall'Angelo Gabriello* in a version different than the one handed down by the tradition, which could have comprised the vaticination of the Egyptian magician. Another possibility is that on the occasion they staged a different play on the same subject preceded by a sequence of prophecies, similar to the ones in Belcari's version, but including the figure of Hermes. Due to their direct relationship with the stage, the texts of the *sacre rappresentazioni* were largely dependent on the oral tradition. Thus, we can easily imagine their multiple modifications, additions or disappearances of entire *stanzas* in the versions staged on different occasions over the years. This is proved also by the textual tradition, which testifies of the occurence of significant variations between manuscripts and printed editions[155]. Therefore, we cannot exclude that also Belcari's text underwent some changes deriving from different stage-settings. The fact that

[155] See the critical notes by Nerida Newbigin to the texts of the *sacre rappresentazioni* published in the volume *Nuovo corpus di sacre rappresentazioni fiorentine*, op. cit.. The textual tradition of the *Festa della Susanna*, e.g., include three manuscript versions and thirteen printed editions between 1500 and 1615 significantly different between each other. The variations include even the omission of the verses 1-56, which contain the entire *inframessa* with the scene of the peasants' conflict. *Nuovo corpus*, op. cit., p. 138.

Palmieri directly quotes Trismegistus' name in his description of the spectacle staged during the festivity is interesting, as it anticipates the arrival to Florence of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which happened around 1460, and its translation by Ficino, completed during the first half of 1464[156]. Even if, through the writings of Iamblichus and Lactantius, the figure of Hermes Trismegistus was known already during the Middle Ages, the *Corpus Hermeticum* contributed significantly to the diffusion of hermetic philosophy during the second half of the fifteenth century.

The popularity in fifteenth-century Florentine spectacle of the scheme introduced by Belcari's *Annunciation*, of the Sibyls and the prophets appearing on stage, is confirmed by the text of the *Sacra rappresentazione della purificazione*, handed down by manuscripts from ca 1465 and ca 1470[157], thus, being one of the earliest texts we know about. In the text, similarly to Belcari's drama, before the actual performance of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, the prophets and the Sibyls entered the stage[158]. The prophecies included into these *sacre rappresentazioni* had multiple sources, the Bible, the *Sermo Contra Judaeos, Paganos et Arianos de Symbolo* composed between the fifth and the sixth century but attributed at the time to St. Augustine, and Filippo's Barbieri *Sibyllarum et Prophetarum de Christo Vaticinia*[159]. It seems that the problem of the legitimization of the antiquity and the pre-Christian thought became seminal for the Florentine ritual of the period. Also the spectacle, which followed the Annunciation, hint at the same subject. Palmieri recalled that the subsequent performance represented the Nativity with Augustus and the Sibyl and we can recognize the play as the *Festa della Natività del Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo*, which staged the prophecy of the Tiburtine Sibyl to Augustus. The spectacle was based on a well-known legend, recalled in the *Legenda Aurea*, the *Sermo II in Nativitate Domini* by Innocent III and the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* and related to the foundation of the Roman church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli. The spectacle tells the story

[156] F. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London, 2002, pp. 13-14 (first edition London, 1964).
[157] *Nuovo corpus*, op. cit., p. 83.
[158] On the meaning of the procession of the prophets during the feast of Purification see: *Nuovo corpus*, op. cit., pp. 81-84.
[159] Ibidem; *La passione di Revello, sacra rappresentazione quattrocentesca*, ed. A. Cornagliotti, Torino, 1976, pp. xxxvii-xliii.

of the Emperor who sought advice from the Tiburtine Sibyl as he wanted to know if he should have been venerated by his people. Through the Sibyl's agency the Emperor experienced a vision of a virgin with a child in her arms. The prophetess explained to Augustus that the one he saw was Jesus, the only and true God who ought to be venerated, with his pure mother the Virgin Mary. Thus, the spectacle examined the subject, so dear to Ficino's and the Medici's circles, of the religious legitimacy of the antiquity. The text not only granted the authority of the Sibylline prophecy, but offered the pious vision of Augustus, who, not yet Christian himself, became conscious of the imminent arrival of the true God. The wide circulation of this narrative in Medicean Florence is testified also by Ghirlandaio's fresco on the arch of the Sassetti Chapel in Santa Trinita church, which represent the vision of Augustus and the Sibyl. In the fresco the Emperor instead of seeing the figure of the Virgin holding the Infant Jesus in her arms, observes St. Bernardine's symbol with the letters "IHS" surrounded by sunbeams.

All these examples indicate a particular importance of the subjects related to the problem of the authority of pagan, pre-Christian prophecies in Medicean Florence. As we could see, the last three spectacles of St. John the Baptist festivity in 1454, mentioned by Palmieri, together with Ghirlandaio's fresco painted for Francesco Sassetti, testify the revival of ideas on the continuity between Antiquity and Christianity, developed by Ficino's Neoplatonism, his ideas of *prisca theologia* and *perennis philosophia*. What is particularly interesting here, however, is the fact that these ideas penetrated into Florentine rituality and received a much greater public. Their circulation was not restricted to the narrow circle of thinkers and literary men, but now included the members of all the social strata attending the main festivity of the town. Even if it is impossible to estimate the level of understanding of these motives by the public of the spectacles, their presence evidences the attempts of the ruling class at a wide dissemination of new cultural ideas and values. Ghirlandaio's frescoes in the Tornabuoni chapel fit in this politics and illustrate this particular encounter between Neoplatonic philosophy, Florentine rituality and local culture, which happened not only in the wall painting but also in the religious spectacle of the period.

The analysis of Ghirlandaio's fresco decoration, compared with Lippi's murals in Prato, shed light on the process of composition of the Early Renaissance

“mosaics”, works of art deeply rooted in past religious and artistic traditions, and filled up with new ideas and contents. This chapter tried to show how the meaning of these works was formed at the crossroads of the various traditions, and that for their correct interpretation any of these cultural references should not be underestimated or neglected. Ghirlandaio’s work in Santa Maria Novella not only continued the Tuscan tradition of monumental fresco painting, with its strong dependence on local ritual, but also became one of the first Renaissance fresco decorations, which exposed a coherent philosophical program fully depending on the current debates and discussions. The chapel results in this way a unique microcosm where painting met with religion, civic ritual, philosophy and politics.

Conclusions

This study shed light on the numerous contact points between visual arts, spectacle and devotional culture in fifteenth-century Florence. Its primary aim was to point out the persistence of certain rhetorical and narrative devices, which organized the narratives across various media, such as painting, religious drama and devotional literature. As it has been shown, the use of those devices depended on the current understanding of cognitive processes and functioning of memory, in which images played an important role. Images, conceived as both physical objects and mental representations of the visual world, were used in rhetoric, exposition of knowledge, and spiritual edification. Therefore, the devotional texts became carriers of certain compositional norms for the sacred narratives, which penetrated also into the religious spectacles and the narrative painting of the period. The analysis of documentary sources testifying the spectators' response to the sacred stories staged during the Florentine festivities, brings to the fore the visual and emotional impact of the performances on the public. The identification of framing structures as both literary and pictorial means, created the possibility for an analysis of the structural similarities between staged and frescoed narratives. The frame of a *sacra rappresentazione* consisted in an established modality of beginning and concluding the spectacle with the angel's *annunzio* and *licenza*. The frame of the fresco, instead, was defined by the physical limits of a chapel, in which the artist outlined the borders of the scenes. It was observed that the authors of the *sacre rappresentazioni* challenged the traditional structure of the performances. In some cases, they decided to cancel the angel's initial and final greetings. Moreover, they included contemporary characters into the plot who seemed to enter the stage from the public. At the same time, the sacred stories were directly located in fifteenth-century Florence and the protagonists became the common Florentines. Painters, instead, visually challenged the boundaries of the representation. They used linear perspective to connect the space of the viewer with the painted scenes. Similarly to the poets, they located the sacred stories on contemporary backdrops and moved the time of the action into the present day. At the same time, they included the portraiture

of donors and figures of other contemporary citizens as participants of the narrated events. In both cases, the manipulation of the framing structures resulted in a stronger sensorial and emotional engagement of the spectators and allowed the representation to convey a sense of immediacy. These stylistic features of sacred narratives also influenced their efficiency as devotional and ritual tools aimed at increasing the faith and at ensuring the heavenly protection over the community.

The comparative study between the narrative techniques of religious dramas and to those painted on the walls in the churches required a preliminary enquiry of the personal exchange between the artistic environment of the city and the world of religious spectacle. In fact, the documents related to the Florentine confraternities responsible for the organization of the spectacles confirm the existence of multiple contact points between the artistic production of the city and its devotional and theatrical activity. In fifteenth-century Florence there was still little distinction between craftmanship and "noble" genres, such as painting, sculpture and architecture, called *beaux-arts* in the following centuries. A successful artist practiced multiple techniques and media. Even a recognized and established painter, if needed, could also execute ephemeral statues in *cartapesta*, such as those used during the St. John festivity, vax *voti*, exposed in the Florentine churches or paint the figures of angels, which decorated the hoisting machinery of the Annunciation spectacle. Moreover, the artists were themselves participants of the devotional activities of the confraternities, and the sodalities became important commissioners of artistic objects related to their activity. As it has been shown, one of the most discussed cases of collaboration between an artist and the organizers of Florentine religious spectacles is the hypothetical involvement of Brunelleschi in the elaboration of the hoisting machinery for the Annunciation *festa*. Proposed by Vasari, the attribution of the construction to the architect persists in modern scholarship. The myth does not find its confirmation in the documents if not in an enigmatic sentence of Abraham of Suzdal: "Un sapiente uomo italiano [...] ha eseguito in Italia un'opera magnifica

[…][1]", which opens his description of the spectacle staged in 1439. Challenged by the nature of Vasari's *Vite*, the attribution of the hoisting machinery to Brunelleschi's remains doubtful. Nevertheless, the persistence of the attribution confirms the ongoing research of a name, an author and an *ingegno*, who conceived the complex structures of ropes, cog wells and platforms. It corroborates the high level of sophistication of the apparatus, which suggests that it had to be designed by a skillful inventor. Therefore, seen in this light, religious spectacles confirm their centrality in the visual culture of fifteenth-century Florence. Thus, the direct quotations of the elements of stage design from the spectacles in the Florentine religious painting does not come as a surprise.

Filippo Lippi is one of the artists who was personally involved in the confraternal and festive life of the city. Lippi's religious training and his in-depth knowledge of devotional practices and religious spectacles allowed an analysis of the meaning of the artist' compositional schemes in the light of rhetorical patterns of instructive literature. The research showed that in Lippi's body of work the reproduction of the theatrical qualities of the space was aimed at the spectators' pious response. The iconographical motives inspired by the spectacle were carefully inserted into the paintings, and were supposed to excite the religious attitude of the viewers. In this way, the paintings fulfilled their devotional functions and partook in the ritual of intercession. They became the agents of human hopes, fears and pleas in front of God.

Strongly related to Florentine local culture, Lippi's career finished with his death in 1469. In December of the same year Piero di Cosimo di Medici also died, and his son, Lorenzo took the rule over the city. The ascent of the young Lorenzo to power would further intensify the influence of the Medicean circle on Florentine culture, devotion and arts, dating back to the times of Lorenzo's grandfather, Cosimo il Vecchio. Domenico Ghirlandaio's professional experience demonstrated the importance of the Medicean patronage and their impact on the visual arts during the 1470s and the 1480s. During this period the Medici

[1] Description of the Annunciation spectacle by Abraham bishop of Suzdal in A. D'Ancona, *Origini del teatro italiano libri tre con due appendici sulla rappresentazione drammatica del contado toscanoe sul teatro mantovano nel secolo XVI*, vol. 1, Torino, 1891, p. 246.

promoted their politics and searched a wide support for their government with the use of multiple media. They also tended to control different aspects of Florentine civic life. Nevertheless, Medicean activity in the field of Florentine culture and public scene cannot be reduced to simple propaganda. It rather seems that the rulers creatively reinterpreted Florentine devotional and artistic traditions. The promotion of the new cultural values, and support of the study of the classical art, literature and philosophy, served at the reinforcement of the Medicean government. At the same time, during the 1480s, the intellectual circles related to the rulers promoted a vigorous philosophical debate on the shape of the Christian religion and on the place of the classical thought in the Christian theology, illustrated by the iconography of the Tornabuoni.

The interpretation of Lippi's murals in Prato and Ghirlandaio's decoration in Santa Maria Novella allowed a better understanding of the influence of Florentine devotional culture on the visual language of the narrative frescoes. Moreover, thanks to this kind of investigation devotional functions and agent qualities of the frescoes emerged. The analysis of Ghirlandaio's frescoes in Santa Maria Novella illustrated the impact of Medicean politics towards Florentine devotional, ritual, and artistic life on narrative frescoes and spectacle. It has been shown that the new subjects penetrated into the narrative painting and religious dramas, and that the new philosophical ideas constituted a serious and vivid debate over the theological bases of the Christian religion. At the same time, this study revealed the religious and devotional meaning of the stylistics applied by Ghirlandaio. It has been shown, how perspective, actualization of the biblical stories and the inclusion of contemporary characters into the plots, followed by the inclusion of certain symbolical elements, such as painted marbles, or motives related to the propitiatory rites and beliefs, were aimed at the reinforcement of the intercessional function of the decoration. Therefore, the relationship between religious art and drama was not limited to the thematic proximity, the similarity of narrative structures and a common interest in the illusory and emotional impact on the spectators. Both media were also engaged by the community in the dialogue with the heavenly protectors and expressed their devotion. Sacred stories were re-enacted on stage and took place metaphorically

in the chapels, as an expression of worship. They were performed in front of God and the Saints with a hope for merciful regard in the afterlife.

While watching Ghirlandaio's frescoes in the Tornabuoni chapel, one faces one of the last expressions of a world which would soon disappear, blown away by a chain of subsequent events. First, Savonarola's rule, then the years of Reformation and Counter-reformation, would profoundly influence the religious iconography and religious fresco painting in sixteenth-century Italy. In the post-Tridentine art, the sensorial illusion would play a particularly important role and the dialogue between art and theatre would not cease. Nevertheless, the illusory spaces painted on the churches' ceilings would now represent imaginary, ideal and celestial visions and not the present day cities inhabited by their citizens. A deeper control by the Church would regard also art's subject matter, and it seems that the exposition of such an innovative philosophy as Ficino's idea of *Prisca theologia*, would not be possible in the changed religious and political situation[2]. Therefore, the present study captures and describes a pivotal moment in Florentine art, when the local religious traditions met with the humanism and classical philosophy and their dialogue resulted in the creation of multilayered semantical structures, which invite for further investigation of their meaning.

Through the investigation into the relationship between the fresco painting and the religious spectale of the period, this study highlighted the devotional qualities of the narrative fresco decorations. The research invites for further analyses of the performative qualities of the Renaissance religious painting. Moreover, the present research demonstrated the complex nature of the relationship between the artists and their commissioners. It further confirmed that the final form of a Renaissance painting resulted from a mediation between the needs of the donor, the background of the artist, the cultural context of the commission and the physical qualities of the object requested. Moreover, it has been shown that, in the case of Lippi and Ghirlandaio, the dialogue between the artists and the patrons was possible because of shared cultural background.

[2] The struggles of one of Ghirlandaio's pupils, Michelangelo Buonarroti himself, with the Holy Office and the censorship of the Counter Reformation are well known. On the subject see: E. Campi, *Michelangelo e Vittoria Colonna: un dialogo artistico-teologico ispirato da Bernardino Ochino e altri saggi di storia della riforma*, Torino, 1994; R. De Maio, *Michelangelo e la controriforma*, Roma, 1978.

Thanks to the present research it is possible to conduct in the future an in-depth study of Ghirlandaio's relationship with the Medici family. The research project which will follow the present study, will focus on the artist's works done under the patronage of the Medici and their entourage, in particular on the decoration of the Sala dei Gigli in Palazzo Vecchio, the Sassetti Chapel in Santa Trinita and Ghirlandaio's activity in the field of portraiture. The aim of the future research lays in an analysis of the possible impact of the neoplatonic thought on Ghirlandaio's artistic production. This kind of analysis makes possible a better understanding of the place of the neoplatonic and hermetic philosophy in Florentine culture during the second half of the fifteenth century. The research will include the investigation into the writings of the intellectuals from the circle of Lorenzo il Magnifico, Marsilio Ficino and Angelo Poliziano. It would be important to trace and to map the diffusion of the neoplatonic philosophy in different media such as painting, spectacle and literature. It would be important to investigate both the genres dedicated for a limited circultation between the intellectuals and these aimed for a wider audience. This kind of interdisciplinary analysis can provide the data necessary for an assessment, description and understanding of the Medicean politics towards the Florentine cultural, ritual, artistic and devotional traditions during the second half of the fifteenth-century.

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