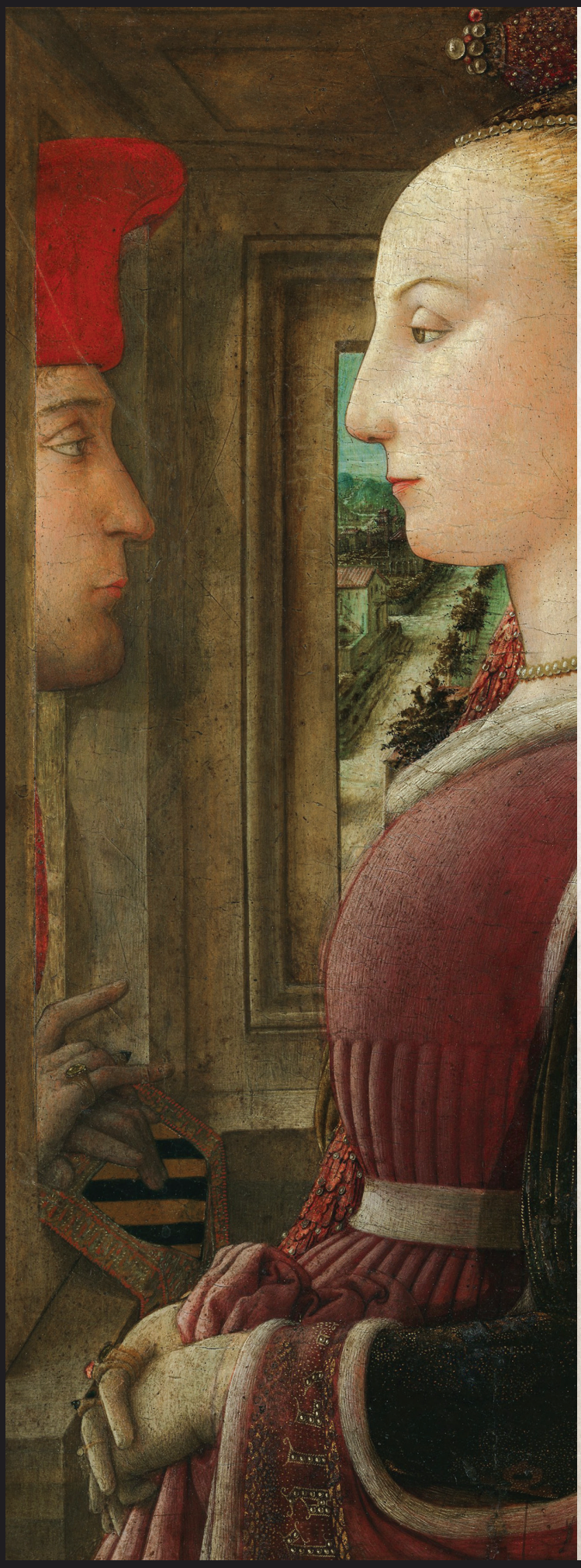

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GUIDE TO

ITALIAN ART IN THE 1400s

Smarthistory Guide to Italian Art in the 1400s

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Lisa Ackerman, Dr. David Boffa, Dr. Joseph Dauben, Dr. David Drogin, Dr. Lane Eagles, Dr. Heather Graham, Dr. Sally Hickson, Dr. Beth Harris, Dr. Heather A. Horton, Dr. Rebecca Howard, Elaine Hoysted, Dr. Ellen Hurst, Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, Dr. Joanna Milk Mac Farland, Dr. Susan Nalezyty, Dr. Shannon Pritchard, Dr. Elizabeth Rodini, Dr. Lorenza Smith, Christine Zappella, and Dr. Steven Zucker

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Ruth is a doctoral candidate at Harvard University, where she specializes in the art of late-medieval and Renaissance Europe. Upon completion of her BA at Williams College, she studied in the UK on a Marshall Scholarship, earning an MPhil in history and philosophy of science from the University of Cambridge and an MA in history of art from the Courtauld Institute. A committed educator, Ruth has recently served as a Gallery Lecturer at both the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the National Galleries of Scotland, as well as a Teaching Fellow at Harvard.

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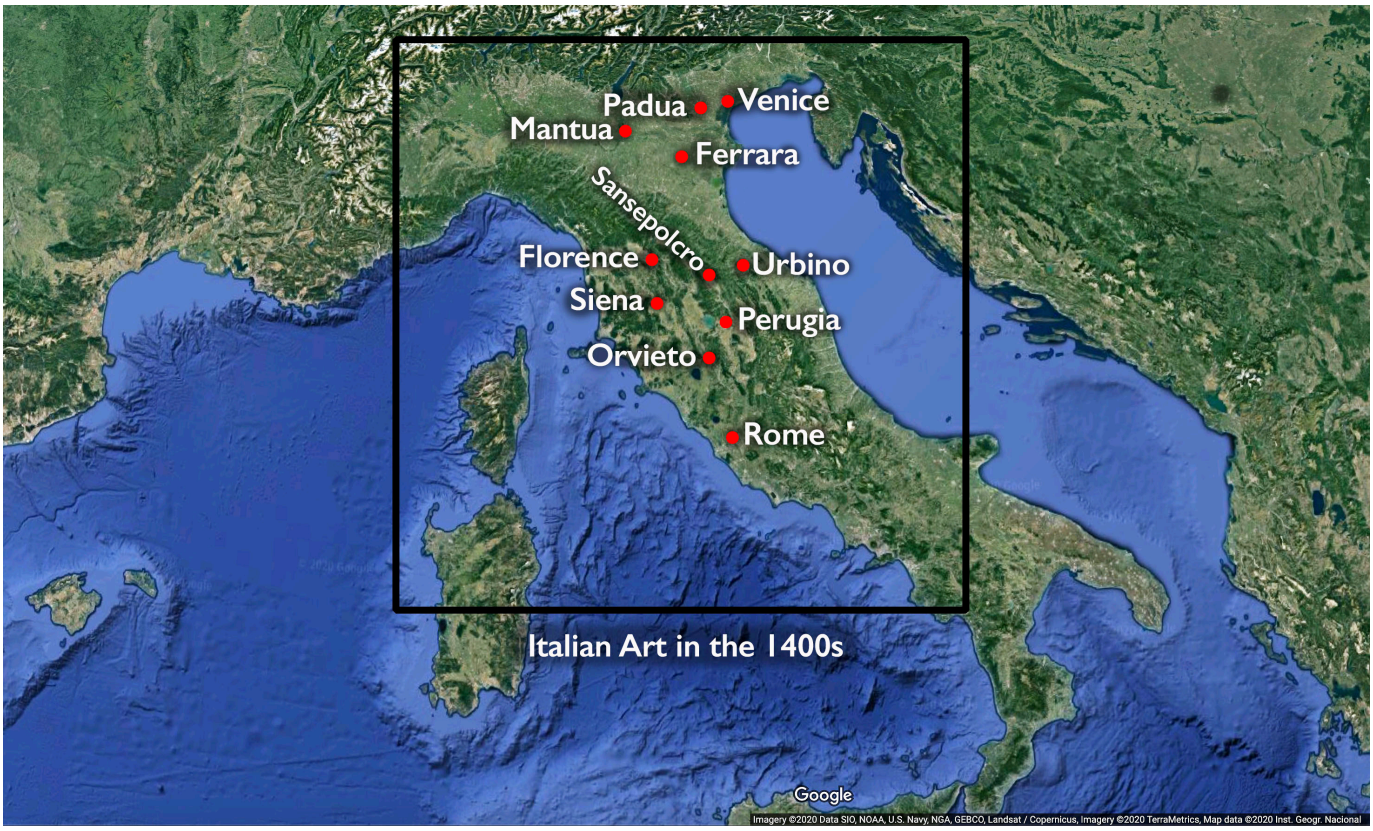
Map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I

A beginner's guide

1.

How to recognize Italian Renaissance art

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation that introduces Italian Renaissance art.

Steven: How do you recognize Italian Renaissance art?

Beth: Sometimes we use the word "renaissance" to talk about the revival of something generally, but in art history, Renaissance means something very specific.

Steven: It means the rebirth of the culture of ancient Greece and ancient Rome…

Beth: …which we call the Classical Period, or Classical Antiquity.

Steven: Let's start at the very end of the medieval.

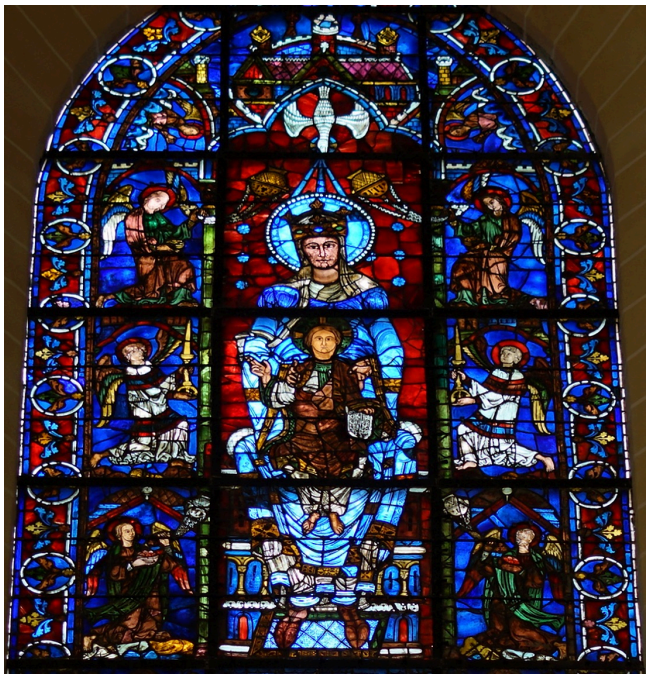
Beth: And that's a good place to start because it gives us a sense of what the Renaissance is going to do differently. So let's start with this beautiful stained glass window from Chartres Cathedral.

Steven: This was a very important cathedral in the medieval period, and it's extremely famous for its stained glass. One of its most famous windows is known as the Blue Virgin. In the center is the Virgin Mary, she's seated on a throne, and the young Christ Child is seated on her lap.

Beth: Both of the figures are frontal, and that's a pose that is very static—it gives us a sense of the divine. We move our bodies in space, we're rarely seen from a perfectly frontal view, so as soon as a figure is represented in a frontal way, there's a sense of authority, a sense of the eternal.

Steven: There's a formality. This is not meant to portray real people, this is meant to portray the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child in a heavenly sphere. In fact, we see above them a representation of a dove and that's a symbol of the Holy Spirit…

Beth: …the Holy Spirit being one part of the three-part nature of God. We also see that the figure of the Virgin especially, if she were to stand up, her body would be so long.



Notre Dame de la Belle Verriere (the Blue Virgin) window, detail, Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, France, 12th and 13th century (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/SsKvB6>

Steven: There's no concern with a naturalistic rendering of the proportions of the human body. But one of my favorite aspects is that you have this very large Virgin and Child in the center, and then you have these rather small angels that are framing them on either side.

Beth: A hierarchy is expressed here between the angels and the Madonna and the Christ Child, telling us that they're more important than the angels on either side of them. So let's now look at a painting, a fresco, by Giotto



Giotto, Lamentation, Arena (Scrovegni) Chapel, 1305-06, fresco, Padua (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We're now in Italy, we're in a town named Padua, and we're looking at one scene in a complex series of scenes painted on the walls of a private chapel, which is usually called the Arena Chapel or sometimes the Scrovegni Chapel.

Beth: So we've shifted to a smaller family chapel, and this tells us something about how patronage is shifting at the very end of the Middle Ages. We have more individuals who are accumulating wealth, and they spend their money often on religious works of art, on family chapels, to help to ensure their place in heaven.

Steven: But it also helped to ensure the patron's social position on earth. Scrovegni was a banker, his father had been a banker and they hired one of the most prominent artists of the era, Giotto, to paint a fresco cycle. Now Giotto came from the city of Florence, and every artist that we'll look at in the remainder of this conversation will be associated with Florence, which is often seen as the birthplace of the Renaissance.



Front elevation of the Arena or Scrovegni Chapel, Padua (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/e5EcbZ>

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Beth: So let's look closely at the *Lamentation*. This is after Christ has been crucified, his body has been removed from the cross, he's being held and mourned by his mother, Mary, in an incredibly emotional moment, surrounded by the apostles who are also mourning his death.

Steven: So a number of important changes. First of all, we have emotion, we have emotion in the face of Mary and in the tender way in which she holds her now-dead son. We have emotion in the angels. But I think, even more importantly, we've lost the frontality that we saw at Chartres.

Beth: We have figures from profile view, three-quarter view… we have figures that are seen from behind. This is much more the way we would really see a group of people. By using modeling, Giotto is able to create figures who take up space.



Giotto, Lamentation, Arena (Scrovegni) Chapel, 1305-06, fresco, Padua (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: When you use the term modeling, or we could use the Italian word, *chiaroscuro*, we're talking about the creation of an illusion on a flat surface of something that is rounded, something that takes up space, and if you look at the backs of these figures, you see how the cloth is light in certain places and shadowed in certain places. The figures seem to take up space, they have a sense of mass and volume.

Beth: Giotto's also using that light and dark to call attention to the forms of the body underneath the drapery. For example, with Mary Magdalene, who's seated at the feet of Christ, we see her knee pressing through the drapery, we see the beginnings of an interest in the human body.

Steven: One other important change is that we're now in a landscape. At Chartres, we were in a heavenly sphere, we had this marvelous red background, but here we see a bit of a hill, we see a tree, we see a sky—what we're seeing is an increased interest in placing Christ on earth.

Beth: So we're going to move from the early 1300s to the middle of the 1400s, to a period that art historians usually call the early Renaissance.

Steven: Now, the image that we saw at Chartres was stained glass. The Giotto was fresco—that is, it was painted directly on the wall. This next work (below) is different: this is a piece of wood, and on that, the artist has painted with tempera, or pigment that is suspended in egg yolk.

Beth: Tempera on wood means that the artist has created something that is movable. This is something that can be bought and sold.

Steven: This is by Fra Filippo Lippi, and we see again the Virgin Mary.

Beth: Even though her hands are in prayer, she seems more like an earthly mother, and those angels seem much more like little boys than they seem like angels.



Fra Filippo Lippi, Madonna and Child with two Angels, c. 1460-65, tempera on panel, 95 x 63.5 cm (Florence, Uffizi) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: In fact, they even look mischievous.

Beth: And the Christ Child seems more like a baby.

Steven: Lippi's facility with naturalism is evident. We want to believe the truthfulness of these figures. In fact, they seem to literally come out of the frame into our space.

Beth: I just want to call our attention to that word naturalism. It means "like nature" or truthful, as in the faithful representation of the observable world.

Steven: And we see it not only in this increasing ability to render something that seems believable but also in the landscape beyond. We see a convincing representation of depth, and that's represented by diminishing scale as well as something that we call atmospheric perspective: that is, as things go back in space, they become lighter and their colors become less intense. But these are all formal qualities. Why are artists interested in this kind of naturalism?

Beth: We have an increasing number of families in Florence who are accumulating vast amounts of wealth, and people want to enjoy their earthly life. One of the things that they do is commission works of art.

Steven: And works of art become a signal for somebody's social status.

Beth: Although these are religious paintings, we are still looking at a culture that is deeply religious.

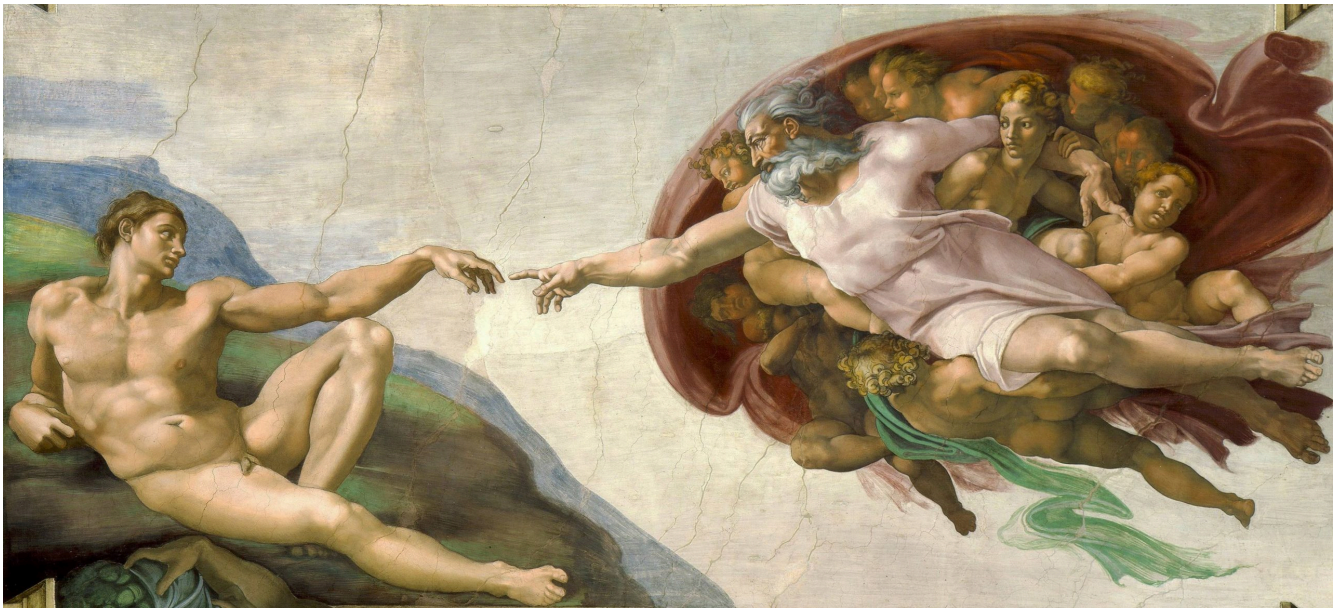
Steven: And we see the conflation of those issues in this painting. Here, we have tremendous naturalism, a tremendous interest in the anatomy of the human body, in human emotion, human intimacy, but at the same time, this is the Christ Child, this is the Virgin Mary.

Beth: Let's move now to a period art historians call the High Renaissance. The artists there are Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Raphael.

Steven: This example below is the *Creation of Adam* from the center of the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

Beth: Michelangelo is an artist from Florence but he's been called to Rome by the pope.

Steven: So what are the formal characteristics of the High Renaissance? For me, it is an extraordinary understanding of the anatomy of the human body, of its skeletal structure, of its musculature, and a direct focus on the beauty of the human form.



Michelangelo, Creation of Adam, Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, 1508-12, fresco (Vatican, Rome)

Beth: There's this new interest in the graceful movement of the human body, making that body move through space in an incredibly elegant way…

Steven: …and in increasingly complex ways as well. We see God on the right, who seems to be moving with great velocity, his arm reaches out. His other arm, however, moves back around another figure. We see his legs are crossed. His face is in profile but his chest is forward. We have not only this careful articulation of the body, but we have that body in the most complex poses.

Beth: And the same could be said of Adam. His right arm comes back and his right shoulder moves back. His left shoulder moves forward, his head tilts back as he looks toward his creator—this is an expression of the beauty and love of the body in the High Renaissance. We've been talking about the elegance and the complexity of God and of Adam, but we could also say that that complexity extends to groupings of figures, so we see those angels who surround God—they twist, they turn, they lean forward to see what God has created. We have this complex interaction between the figures and layering of the figures that is also very High Renaissance.

Steven: So where do you go after Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*?

Beth: After the other great works of the High Renaissance, like Raphael's *School of Athens* or Leonardo's *Last Supper*, it's as though the interest in naturalism had reached this level of perfection, so where do you go after you've gotten to the perfect? You heighten the perfect. You complicate the perfect.

Steven: And the Renaissance is slowly transformed into a style that we know as Mannerism. This was a moment when the virtuosity of the artist comes to the fore.

Beth: During much of the 15th century, Florence had been a republic, but in the early 1500s, Florence becomes basically ruled by the Medici, and the court culture results in this new style that we call Mannerism.

Steven: We're looking (below) at Pontormo's *Deposition*, or *Entombment of Christ*. Look at the length of his body. Look at the length of the figures that support him. They are unnaturally long. There's an unnatural complexity to their poses…

Beth: …and to the composition.

Beth: We don't know where to look, our eye doesn't rest anywhere, and there's no earthly setting here.

Steven: But this is not a regression, this is not painting that is less technically proficient than the High Renaissance; this was a further development. The culture had changed and therefore, the art had changed.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/6YiL9MNyGKE>



Pontormo, Entombment (or Deposition from the Cross), oil on panel, 1525-28, Capponi Chapel, Santa Felicita, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/cTNN7m>

2.

The study of anatomy

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

Picking up from the ancients

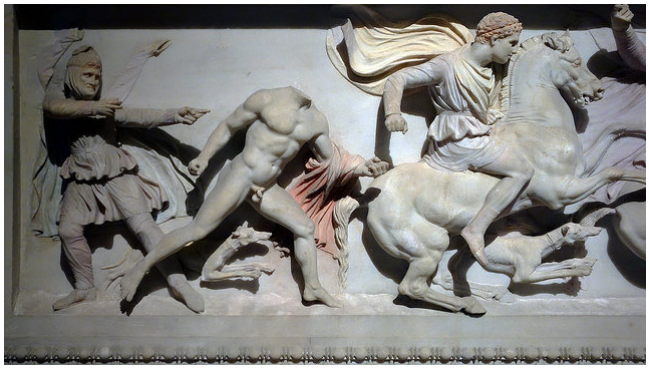


Donatello, David, 1440s, bronze, 158 cm (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jjshsV>

We can see from Donatello's sculpture of *David*—with its careful depiction of bones and muscles and a nude figure—that the study of human anatomy was enormously important for Renaissance artists. They continued where the ancient Greeks and Romans had left off, with an interest in creating images of the human beings where bodies moved in natural ways—in correct proportion and feeling the pull of gravity.

Sculptures from ancient Greece and Rome reveal that classical artists closely observed the human body. Ancient Greek and Roman artists focused their attention on youthful bodies in the prime of life. Ancient sources indicate these artists used models to help them study the details of the body in the way that it looked and moved. These artists tried to show their viewers that they understood systems of muscles beneath the skin.

An interest in human anatomy and ideal bodies can be seen in this ancient Greek sarcophagus.



Hunting scene (detail), The Alexander Sarcophagus, c. 312 B.C.E., Pentelic marble and polychromy, found in Sidon, 195 x 318 x 167 cm (İstanbul Archaeological Museums) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In the Middle Ages, there was very little interest in the human body, which was seen as only a temporary vessel for the soul. The body was seen as sinful, the cause of temptation. In the Old Testament, Adam and Eve eat the apple from the tree of knowledge, realize their nakedness, and cover themselves. Due to the nudity in this important story, Christians associated nudity

with sin and the fall of humankind. Medieval images of naked bodies do not reflect close observation from real life or an understanding of the inner workings of bodies.

The medieval approach to the human body can be seen in this manuscript illumination:



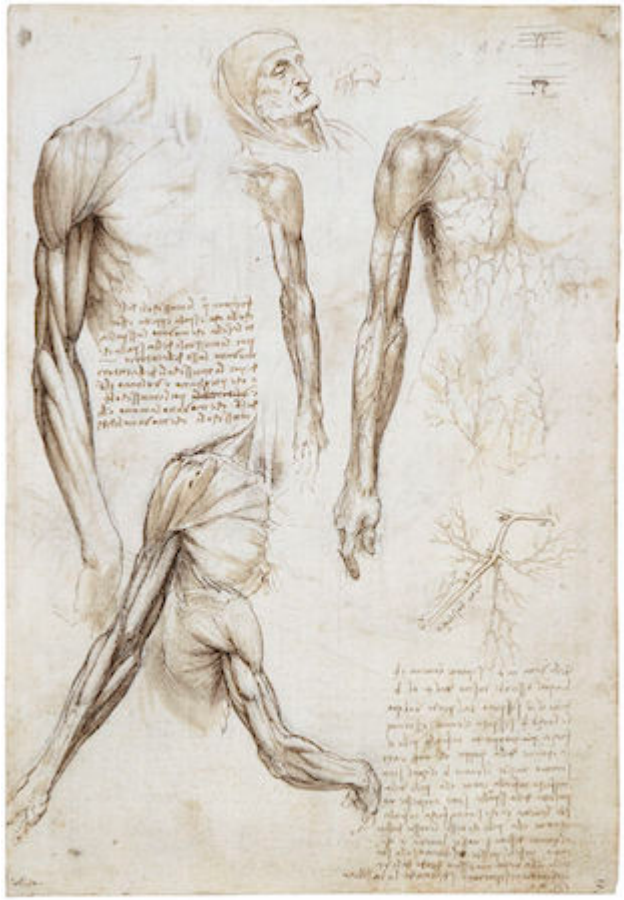
Artist unknown, Adam and Eve from the Escorial Beatus, c. 950, tempera on parchment (Real Biblioteca de San Lorenzo de El Escorial)

Dissection

The best way to learn human anatomy is not just to look at the outside of the body, but to study anatomy through dissection. Even though the Catholic Church prohibited dissection, artists and scientists performed dissection to better understand the body. Renaissance artists were anxious to gain specialized knowledge of the inner workings of the human body, which would allow them to paint and sculpt the body in many different positions.

The artists of the Early Renaissance used scientific tools (like linear perspective and the study of anatomy and geometry) to make their art more naturalistic, more like real life. The term "naturalism" describes this effort.

Scientific naturalism allowed artists in the Early Renaissance to begin to demand that society think of them as more than just skilled manual laborers. They argued that their work—which was based on science and math—was a product of their intellect just as much as their hands. They wanted artists to have the same status as intellectuals and philosophers, unlike the medieval craftsmen that came before them.



Leonardo da Vinci, Écorché (A Dead or Moribund Man in Bust Length), c. 1487, pen and ink over metalpoint on prepared paper (Royal Collection, London)

3.

Contrapposto explained

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



"Idolino" from Pesaro, (Roman), c. 30 B.C.E., bronze, 158 cm (Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze.

Steven: We're in the Archaeological Museum in Florence, looking at a life-size male nude figure in bronze.

Beth: We both saw this from down the hallway and thought immediately about contrapposto, the Greek invention in the 5th century B.C.E, which was a way of naturalistically representing the human body—a real revolution in Western art.

Steven: When we stand naturally, in a relaxed pose, we tend to stand with our weight on one leg or the other. In fact, if we stand for an extended period of time, we tend to shift our weight from one leg to the other every few minutes. It helps to rest the body.

Beth: Nevertheless, when the Greeks—or the Egyptians—represented the human body before this, they represented the figure standing with their weight equally distributed on both legs, making the figure appear very symmetrical, but in a way that you very rarely see human beings in the world.

Steven: I don't stand like that, and it's actually quite uncomfortable!

Beth: I'm not standing like that right now.

Steven: But to represent a figure with weight on one leg is a much more complex endeavor because the entire body responds. Contrapposto affects not

only the legs, but the torso, and to some extent, even potentially the shoulders and the head.

Beth: The ultimate effect is a revolutionary one—it creates a figure who seems to exist in our world by breaking the symmetry of the archaic Greek figures, of Egyptian pharaohs. By breaking that symmetry, we get a sense of a figure who exists in our own world, a figure who is human like us.

Steven: What I'm seeing first is a kind of S-curve in his spine, so that the hips seem to jut out to his right, and his rib cage seems to push to his left.

Beth: And because his weight is on his right leg, his left side is more elongated, because his left leg is relaxed, pulling that hip down, and his right torso is compacted.

Steven: You can see that very clearly if you look at the shift in the axis of the hips. It also allows for that sway not only in his body, but in his spine as well.

Beth: And then he looks in the direction of the swayed hip. We also notice, while his right leg is straight, his left arm is straight, and his right hand opens up toward us. In other examples of sculptures like this, from Classical Greece—for example, Polykleitos's *Doryphoros*—that hand often held a spear. So you have the weight-bearing hand on the right, and the weight-bearing leg on the right; the free leg on the left, and the free hand on the left.



Polykleitos, Doryphoros (Spear-Bearer), Classical Period, Roman marble copy after a Greek bronze original from c. 450-440 B.C.E. (Museo Archaeologico Nazionale, Naples) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: This affects the shoulders as well. If his right hip juts upward, his left shoulder falls down towards it. And so they're in opposition. The same is true on the other side. On his left, his hip falls, and his shoulder rises.

Beth: The Greek invention of contrapposto, in the 5th century B.C.E., tells us that the Greeks have a different way of thinking about human beings and their place in the world. This first naturalistic image of humanity, of human beings in the West, gives us a sense that the Greeks have a confidence in human beings, in the human mind, in human reason. We see that through their philosophy, through their love of athleticism, through their invention of the Olympics, their study of the heavens, the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, the great Greek comedies and tragedies… The confidence of Greek culture in humanity, I think, is expressed in contrapposto.

Steven: And this sculpture, because it's not actually Greek, but Roman—a Roman copy of these Greek principles—shows us the influence of these ideas, the way that the ancient Romans emulated the Greeks and saw themselves as the inheritor of this tradition. It is through the Romans that these ideas come down to us today…

Beth: …and are revived in the Renaissance. Here we are in Renaissance Florence, where sculptures like this one, once rediscovered, were collected. Artists like Donatello, Nanni di Banco, ultimately Michelangelo and then Raphael in his paintings, will create figures that look back to ancient Greek and Roman sculpture and to the tremendous naturalism that the ancient Greeks and Romans achieved.



Donatello, David, bronze, late 1420s to the 1460s, likely the 1440s (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/5vK7Z2Odnc0>

4.

Florence in the Early Renaissance

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

The Renaissance really gets going in the early years of the fifteenth century in Florence. In this period, which we call the Early Renaissance, Florence is not a city in the unified country of Italy, as it is now. Instead, Italy was divided into many city-states (Florence, Milan, Venice etc.), each with its own government (some were ruled by despots, and others were republics).



Italy in 1494

The Florentine Republic

We normally think of a Republic as a government where everyone votes for representatives who will represent their interests to the government (think of the United States pledge of allegiance: “and to the republic for which it stands…”). However, Florence was a Republic in the sense that there was a constitution which limited the power of the nobility (as well as laborers) and ensured that no one person or group could have complete political control (so it was far from our ideal of everyone voting, in fact a very small percentage of the population had the vote). Political power resided in the hands of middle-class merchants, a few wealthy families (such as the Medici, important art patrons who would later rule Florence) and the powerful guilds.

Why did the Renaissance begin in Florence?

There are several answers to that question: Extraordinary wealth accumulated in Florence during this period among a growing middle and upper class of merchants and bankers. With the accumulation of wealth often comes a desire to use it to enjoy the pleasures of life—and not an exclusive focus on the hereafter.

Florence saw itself as the ideal city state, a place where the freedom of the individual was guaranteed, and where many citizens had the right to participate in the government (this must have been very different than living in the Duchy of Milan, for example, which was ruled by a succession of Dukes with absolute power). In 1400 Florence was engaged in a struggle with the Duke of Milan. The Florentine people feared the loss of liberty and respect for individuals that was the pride of their Republic.

Luckily for Florence, the Duke of Milan caught the plague and died in 1402. Then, between 1408 and 1414 Florence was threatened once again, this time by the King of Naples, who also died before he could successfully conquer Florence. And in 1423 the Florentine people prepared for war against the son of the Duke of Milan who had threatened them earlier. Again, luckily for Florence, the Duke was defeated in 1425. The Florentine citizens interpreted these military "victories" as signs of God's favor and protection. They imagined themselves as the "New Rome"—n other words, as the heirs to the Ancient Roman Republic, prepared to sacrifice for the cause of freedom and liberty.

The Florentine people were very proud of their form of government in the early fifteenth century. A republic is, after all, a place that respects the opinions of individuals, individualism was a critical part of the Humanism that thrived in Florence in the fifteenth century.

5.

Alberti’s revolution in painting

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Heather Graham



Perugino, Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter, Sistine Chapel, 1481–83, fresco, 10 feet 10 inches x 18 feet (Vatican, Rome)

In a fresco (water-based pigment applied to fresh moist plaster) high on one wall of the Sistine Chapel, the aged Saint Peter kneels as he humbly accepts the keys of heaven from Jesus Christ standing before him. These two central figures are joined in the immediate foreground by a group of men to either side, some dressed in ancient styles, others in cutting-edge fifteenth-century fashion. They all have volumetric bodies that suggest gentle movement and expressions of solemn concentration. A wide piazza (a public square) opens behind them, with figures and the piazza’s paving stones receding in scale to suggest a deep space. Forms on the distant horizon fade into an atmospheric haze. A massive building and two triumphal arches, set at even intervals in the background, convey a sense of balance and geometric solidarity. Pietro Perugino’s biblical scene displays many of the key elements identified as necessary for a successful painting by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise about painting, including:

1. Convincing three-dimensional space
2. Light and shadow to create bodies that look three-dimensional
3. Figures in varied poses to create a compelling narrative

Alberti's *De Pictura* (*On Painting*, 1435) is the first theoretical text written about art in Europe. Originally written in Latin, but published a year later in the Italian vernacular (the local common language spoken by people) as *Della Pittura* (1436), this was the first artistic treatise (a written work dealing formally and systematically with a subject) to describe linear perspective and is the first known text in Europe to discuss the purpose of painting. Filippo Brunelleschi's experiments in linear perspective had occurred earlier in the 1420s, but Alberti codified these ideas in writing. It was during his time living in Florence that Alberti developed his thoughts on painting as he interacted with artists such as Brunelleschi, Donatello, Lorenzo Ghiberti, Masaccio, and others. These artists experimented with linear perspective before Alberti wrote his text, as we see in Masaccio's frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel.



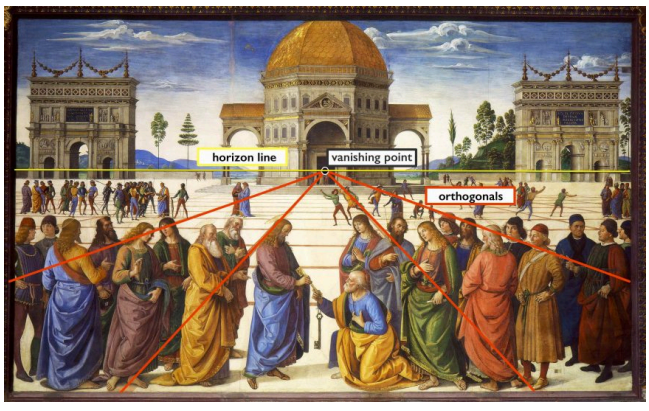
Masaccio, frescoes for the Brancacci Chapel, 1427 (Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/5DHpyb>

Alberti encountered firsthand works like Masaccio's fresco cycle on the life of Saint Peter where biblical characters are convincingly three-dimensional, walk upon solid ground casting shadows, and interact emotionally to tell a story. He dedicated the Italian version of *On Painting* to the artists from whom he had learned his practical ideas. Alberti's treatise was more ambitious than simply telling painters how to construct convincing three-dimensional space though. For him, painting "contains a divine force which not only makes absent men present . . . but moreover makes the dead seem almost alive." [1]

Creating three-dimensional space

> Know that a painted thing can never appear truthful where there is not a definite distance for seeing it.
> — *Alberti, On Painting, book 1:46*

Alberti believed that good and praiseworthy paintings need to have convincing three-dimensional space, such as we see in Perugino's fresco. In the first section of *On Painting*, he explains how to construct logical, rational space based on mathematical principles. It is here that he writes about linear perspective and how to construct a geometrically calculated vanishing point around which a painting's composition is centered.



Perspective diagram, Perugino, Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter, Sistine Chapel, 1481-83, fresco, 10 feet 10 inches x 18 feet (Vatican, Rome)

A painting attributed to Luciano Laurana of an ideal city envisions Alberti's ideas. The painting shows a perfectly symmetrical and mathematically defined cityscape. All of the forms within the painting appear to recede away from the viewer and converge at a single point at the center of the horizon line. This is an example of linear perspective, a system for creating an illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat, two-dimensional surface. It involves creating a horizontal line (called the horizon line), a point on the horizon line (called the vanishing point), and diagonal lines which appear to recede in space (called orthogonals) which all meet at the vanishing point. By having a single vanishing point, Alberti was instructing viewers to look at a painting like *The Ideal City* as if it were viewed through a window frame.



Luciano Laurana (attributed), View of an Ideal City, c. 1475, oil on panel (Galleria Nazionale della Marche)

Making figures look real

> There are some who use much gold in their *istoria*. They think it gives majesty. I do not praise it. Even though one should paint Virgil's Dido whose quiver was of gold, her golden hair knotted with gold, and her purple robe girdled with pure gold, the reins of the horse and everything of gold, I should not wish gold to be used, for there is more admiration and praise for the painter who imitates the rays of gold with colors. — *Alberti, On Painting, book 2:83*



Domenico Ghirlandaio, Birth of the Virgin, c. 1485-90, fresco, 24' 4" x 14' 9" (Cappella Maggiore, Santa Maria Novella, Florence)

For Alberti, the ultimate artistic goal of painting was to rival Nature in the depiction of visual reality. (More than flora and fauna, Nature refers to the entirely of what people understood as the created world.) Forms within a painting should be modeled with light and shade to appear sculptural, as though they stand out from the two-dimensional surface like the forms in ancient relief sculpture. Domenico Ghirlandaio's fresco depicting the birth of the Virgin Mary includes precisely the kind of convincing naturalism Alberti desired. In the scene, women cast shadows, and the deep folds and pleats in their dresses give the impression that their bodies take up space in the two-dimensional fresco.



Pietro Lorenzetti, Birth of the Virgin, c. 1342, tempera on panel, 6' 1" x 5' 11", for the altar of St. Savinus, Siena Cathedral (now in Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena)

Alberti also wanted human bodies to appear anatomically correct, and the movements and facial expressions of figures to suggest their emotions.

The second part of Alberti's treatise lays out these ideals, advising painters on how to most effectively tell a story (what he calls an *istoria*, or narrative) in their art using variety in figure types and gestures. Alberti wanted viewers to be able to relate to the stories portrayed in art and to empathize with painted characters, but he also wanted paintings to present an idealized vision of human behavior. In Ghirlandaio's scene, women stand, kneel, or sit. Two women in the background lean toward one another to embrace. We also see how Ghirlandaio paints women looking in different directions to create a sense that they are interacting with one another, offering viewers a more compelling narrative than simply showing Saint Anne reclining in bed.

Painting as a liberal art

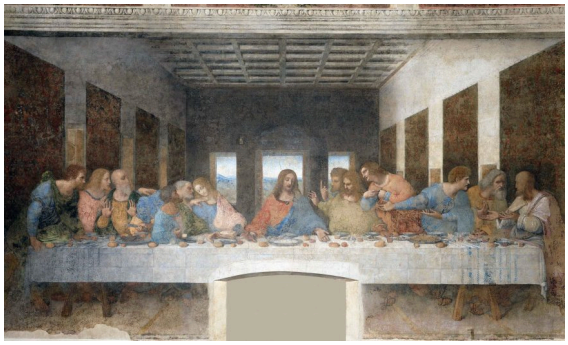
> For their own enjoyment artists should associate with poets and orators who have many embellishments in common with painters and who have a broad knowledge of many things whose greatest praise consists in the invention. — *Alberti, On Painting, book 3:89*

Why would Alberti go to such great lengths to talk about painting and its purpose? He wished for painting to be viewed as a liberal art, one similar to mathematics or music, rather than as manual labor. His goal was to elevate the status of painting, and painters along with it. One of the ways that he tried to prove that painting was an intellectual endeavor was to look to sources from antiquity. [2] He draws on the ideas of Roman authors such as Pliny the Elder, Quintillian, Cicero, Plutarch, and Lucian, turning to them for their discussions of ancient forms of painting and the artists who made them. He cites Pliny when talking about how artists like Praxiteles or Phidias were so skilled at painting that any work made by the Greek artists was valued more than costly materials like gold and silver. This inclusion and assumed familiarity with classical authors demonstrated his humanist (from the Latin word *humanitas*)learning and helped to initiate the formal transformation of the visual arts from manual skill to intellectual endeavor. Humanist intellectuals of the late medieval and renaissance eras valued the classical literature of Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, and early Christian writers such as St. Augustine.

De Pictura encapsulates many of Alberti's life pursuits. During his lifetime, he was a humanist, the author of an important architectural treatise, and a literary author who wrote plays, philosophical dialogues, and poetry in addition to working as a practicing architect and artist.

The reception of Alberti's ideas

Despite the fame of Alberti's ideas on painting today, this was not the case in his lifetime. Initially, *On Painting* was not printed—the European printing press wasn't invented until around 1450. This means that Alberti's ideas did not have a wide reception until later. Furthermore, renaissance artists would not have been able to read the 1435 Latin version of *On Painting*. Latin was the language of the educated elite, the language of the class of people who patronized art, not those who made it. It is likely that his initial intent was to share his ideas with a privileged audience, a reminder to us that artists worked at the pleasure of their wealthy employers. When he translated the text, he made it accessible to the people who might actually use his ideas directly.



Leonardo da Vinci, Last Supper, oil, tempera, fresco, 1495-98 (Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan)

Alberti's ideas about painting influenced later generations of artists, including the giants of high renaissance art, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael. Even those who disagreed with Alberti's ideas such as northern renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer, proceeded to write down their own ideas about perspective and painting.

Alberti's ideas would go on to have lasting influence on the history of art. Works of art by many early twentieth-century modern painters, such as Pablo Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, purposefully reject the illusion of deep space. They were avant-garde (a term taken from the French for the military front line that designates art at the forefront of innovation) precisely because they challenged traditions of painting set in place since the time of Alberti. A painting like René Magritte's *The Human Condition* also playfully engages with Alberti's notion of a painting as a window through which a viewer perceives the world.



René Magritte, The Human Condition, 1933, oil on canvas, 100 x 81 x 1.6 cm (The National Gallery of Art)

Notes:

[1] Alberti, trans. John R. Spencer, rev. ed. (1966), II:62

[2] While the Italian version differs in some respects from the Latin text, the translated work retains the classical references found throughout the Latin version.

6.

Linear Perspective: Brunelleschi's Experiment

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in front of the Baptistery of Florence Cathedral.

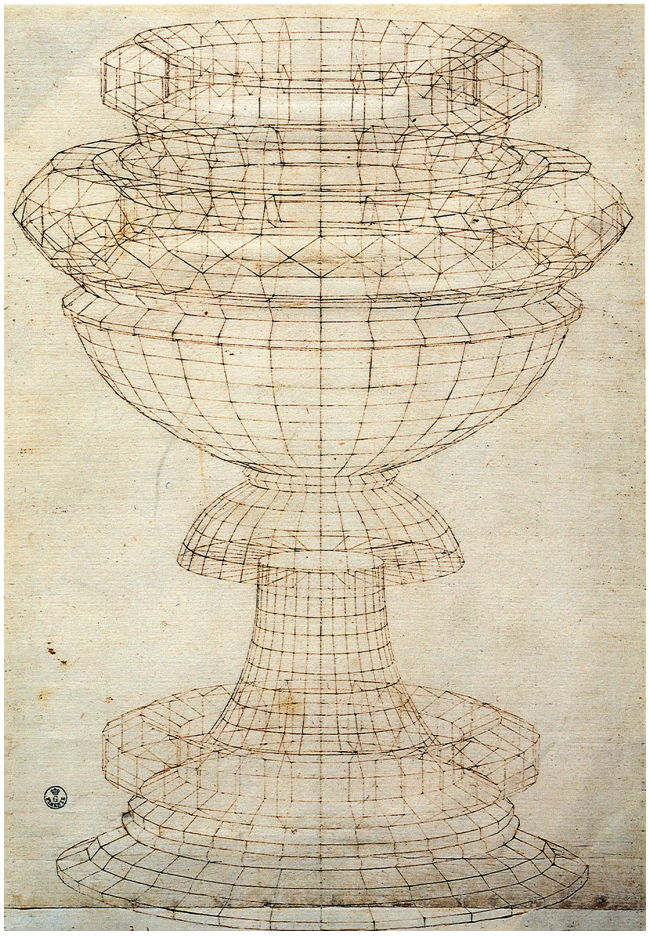


Cathedral and Baptistry, Florence (photo: John Donaghy, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Steven: According to Filippo Brunelleschi's biographer, he stood just inside the main doors of Florence Cathedral when he conducted his first perspectival experiment. And that's where we're standing right now.

Beth: We're very close to it. Brunelleschi's experiment demonstrated that linear perspective could produce an incredibly realistic illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface.

Steven: So this notion that we can actually develop a system that would be relatively easy to follow, but highly accurate, that could translate the volumetric world that we move through—through time—onto a frozen, two-dimensional surface is really an extraordinary achievement. There is some discussion among scholars as to whether or not there was linear perspective in the ancient world, but if there was, it was lost.



Paolo Uccello, Study for a Chalice, c.1450

Steven: Linear perspective was created, at least for us in the modern world, by Brunelleschi in the 15th century, around 1420.

Beth: Right. And so some people would say that Brunelleschi "rediscovered" linear perspective in case the Ancient Greeks and Romans had had it before him.

Steven: Brunelleschi had gone to Rome and had studied antiquity. Some have hypothesized that he developed the basis for linear perspective in an attempt to be able to accurately portray the buildings that he was looking at—that he was sketching, that he was drawing.

Beth: It's certainly something that artists, beginning really in the 1300s, were creating forms—human figures—that were three-dimensional by using modeling and making their figures bulky and monumental. Then you have the challenge of putting those figures within a believable space. Giotto and Duccio had approximated that space and began to create a kind of earthly setting for their figures, but had not achieved a perfect illusion of space for their figures to inhabit.

Steven: As the culture becomes increasingly analytical, mathematical—it's a trade-based culture—this is a culture that in some ways may have demanded of its artists a kind of precision, a kind of mathematical accuracy, in its representation. And Brunelleschi delivers that. So what does he do?

Beth: Brunelleschi creates a perspectively accurate image of the Baptistery and its surround.

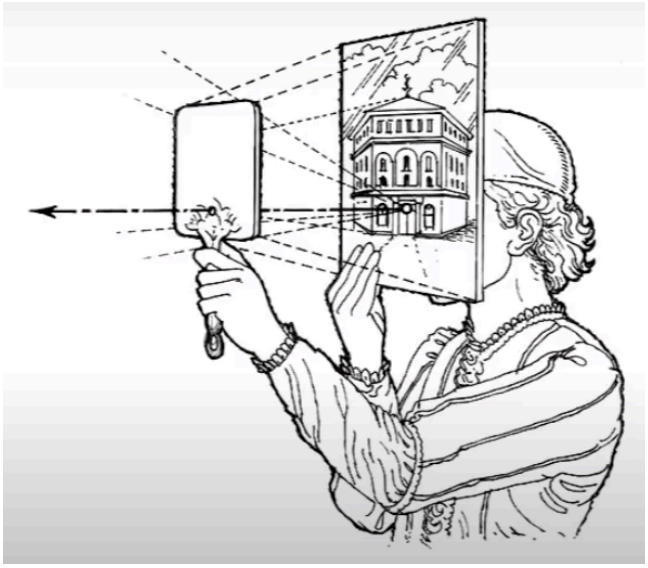
Steven: Right. So Brunelleschi develops a system with just a few essential elements and through these elements is able to construct accurate, scientific, one-point perspective. They include a vanishing point, which is at the viewer's horizon line, as well as a series of orthogonals, or illusionistically receding diagonals.



Giotto, The Ognissanti Madonna and Child Enthroned, 1306-10, tempera on panel, 128 x 80 1/4" (Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2ehsbjq>



Florence Baptistery, 11th century (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jySamt>



Reconstruction of Brunelleschi's experiment

Steven: What Brunelleschi then does is he paints or draws an image of the Baptistery with linear perspective and puts a small hole in the center of it. He takes that small drawing or painting, puts a handle on it, and holds it in front of his face—but facing away from him. He then takes a mirror and holds it in back of that. Now remember, his painting has a small hole in it. So he can see through it straight to the vanishing point.

Beth: So he's holding the mirror at arm's length, and the actual painting—with the hole in it—right in front of him for his eye to look through.

Steven: Right. So he can see the painting's reflection in the mirror. And if he pulls the mirror away, he can see the actual Baptistery. And he can bring the mirror back to see the painting, move the mirror away to see the actual Baptistery, and see if, in fact, those lines are well coordinated. And it was a very convincing experiment.

Beth: What Brunelleschi saw in the reflection of the painting looked exactly like the reality that was in front of him.

Steven: This would have the most profound effect on the history of Western art. Virtually every painting in the Western tradition, after the 15th century, is responding to linear perspective—either adopting it or very consciously rejecting it for some reason.

Beth: And within a couple of decades after Brunelleschi's discovery, Alberti, the brilliant architect and theoretician, writes a book called "On Painting," in which he codifies Brunelleschi's discovery and creates a manual for artists of how to use linear perspective and how to make great paintings.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/bkNMM8uiMww>



Francesco di Giorgio Martini (attributed), Architectural Veduta, c. 1490, oil on poplar, 131 x 233 cm (Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

7.

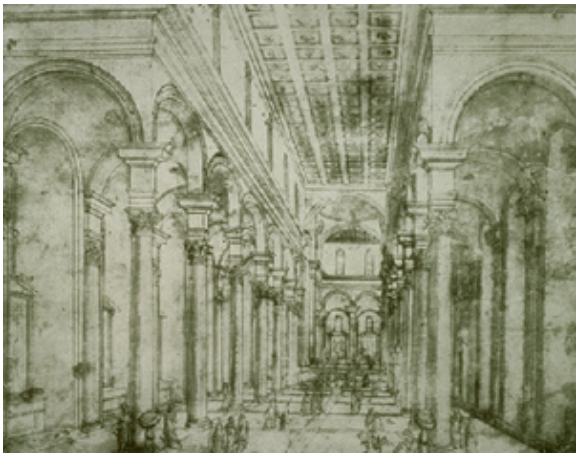
Early applications of linear perspective

Dr. Joseph Dauben

Representing the body

What Renaissance artists had clearly achieved through the careful observation of nature, including studies of anatomical dissections, was the means to recreate the three-dimensional physical reality of the human form on two-dimensional surfaces. In part, the key to this achievement lay in understanding the underlying, hidden structure of the human body, which enabled artists to reproduce what it was they saw in the real world on the flat surface of a wall (in the case of frescoes), or that of a wooden panel or paper (in the case of drawings and paintings).

Artists in the early fifteenth century had learned to portray the human form with faithful accuracy through careful observation and anatomical dissection. In 1420, Brunelleschi's experiment with perspective provided a correspondingly accurate representation of physical space.



Brunelleschi, elevation of Santo Spirito, 1434-83, Florence, Italy



Brunelleschi, elevation of Santo Spirito, 1434-83, Florence, Italy (photo: Randy Connolly, CC BY-NC 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/ftSNnh>

Representing space

Antonio Manetti, Brunelleschi's biographer, writing a century later, describes the experiment based on careful mathematical calculation. It seems reasonable to assume that Brunelleschi devised the method of perspective for architectural purposes—he is said by Manetti to have made a ground plan for the Church of Santo Spirito in Florence (1434-82) on the basis of which he produced a perspective drawing to show his clients how the church would look once built. We can compare this drawing with a modern photo of the actual church (above). It is clear how effective the new technique of mathematical perspective was in depicting spatial reality.

The body in space

But this was just the beginning. Ten years later, the painter Masaccio applied the new method of mathematical perspective even more spectacularly in his fresco The Holy Trinity. The barrel-vaulted ceiling is incredible in its complex, mathematical use of perspective. In this diagram, lines overlay Masaccio's actual geometric framework to make clear the structure of the perspective system itself.



Masaccio, Holy Trinity with the Virgin and Saint John, c. 1427, Fresco, 667 x 317 cm, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/NQKksn>



Perspective diagram of Masaccio's Holy Trinity

From the geometry it is actually possible to work backwards to accurately measure and reconstruct the full three-dimensional space that Masaccio depicts—illustrating Brunelleschi's interest in being able to translate schemata directly between two- and three-dimensional spaces.

It was not long before a decisive step was taken by Leon Battista Alberti, who published a treatise on perspective, *Della Pitture* (or *On Painting*), in 1435. Once Alberti's treatise was published, knowledge of perspective no longer had to be passed on by word of mouth. Newly codified, perspective became not just a matter of artistic interest but a philosophical concern as well.

8.

Why commission artwork during the Renaissance?

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Heather Graham



Leon Battista Alberti, Palazzo Rucellai, c. 1446–51, Florence, Italy (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

What's in it for me?

Why would someone patronize art in the renaissance? Giovanni Rucellai, a major patron of art and architecture in fifteenth-century Florence, paid Leon Battista Alberti to construct the Palazzo Rucellai and the façade of Santa Maria Novella, both high–profile and extremely costly undertakings. In his personal memoir, he talks about his motivations for these and other commissions, noting that "All the above-mentioned things have given and give me the greatest satisfaction and pleasure, because in part they serve the honor of God as well as the honor of the city and the commemoration of myself." [1]

Aside from bringing honor to one's faith, city, and self, patronizing art was also fun. Earning and spending money felt good, especially the spending part. As Rucellai goes on, "I really think that it is even more pleasurable to spend than to earn…." [2]



Leon Battista Alberti, Façade of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, 1470 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The ancient Roman world (with which much of renaissance Europe was endlessly fascinated) also provided motivation for patronage. The liberal expenditure on art and architecture by ancient Roman patricians (aristocrats) was celebrated in the literature of antiquity and survived—even if in fragmentary form—to dazzle the eyes of renaissance viewers. The Roman Emperor Augustus, who so famously said that he found Rome a city of brick and transformed it into a city of marble, provided the ultimate noble model of patronage.

Self-fashioning

Commissioning an artwork often meant giving detailed directions to the artist, even what to include in the work, and this helped patrons fashion their identities. While the identity of Bronzino's Florentine sitter in a *Portrait of a Young Man* is unknown, the artist shows him standing confidently in the composition's center, looking out at us while dressed in expensive black satin, slashed sleeves, and a codpiece complete with golden aglets (the small metal tips of a shoelace or cord). He holds his fingers between the pages of a poetry book, which rests atop a table carved with grotesque faces. The book and the table were undoubtedly intended to convey the man's sophistication and learning while his clothing and upright posture showed his wealth and nobility.



Bronzino, Portrait of a Young Man, 1530s, oil on wood panel, 95.6 x 74.9 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The renaissance was also a time when increasingly wealthy middle-class merchants and others aspired to increase their social recognition and began to commission portraits, as we see in double portraits like Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* showing the Italian merchant Giovanni de Nicolao di Arnolfini with his wife in Bruges (in present-day Belgium). Petrus Christus's *Portrait of a Carthusian* reveals the increasing prominence of religious figures, with clergy, monks, and nuns sitting for portraits, many likely made to celebrate the entry of wealthy individuals into religious orders.



Left: Jan Van Eyck, The Arnolfini Portrait, 1434, tempera and oil on oak panel, 82.2 x 60 cm (National Gallery, London; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); right: Petrus Christus, Portrait of a Carthusian, 1446 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Ottavio Vannini, Michelangelo Presenting Lorenzo the Magnificent de' Medici with his Sculpture of a Faun, 17th century, fresco (Palazzo Pitti, Florence)

Wealth, power, and status

In a seventeenth-century fresco by the artist Ottavio Vannini, Michelangelo, the artist, is shown presenting the powerful Florentine, Lorenzo the Magnificent de' Medici, with a sculpture of a faun. Lorenzo sits at the center of the image, facing frontally like a ruler, while Michelangelo stands off to the side, bowing respectfully towards him. While today the name Michelangelo is better known, in the fresco the Medici patron is shown as more important than the artist.

Paying for something lavish and monumental, such as Sant'Andrea in Mantua (commissioned by Ludovico Gonzaga, ruler of the Italian city-state of Mantua and built by Alberti) or El Escorial (commissioned by Philip II, King of Spain, outside of Madrid), was a powerful statement about a patron's wealth and status. Philip II was deeply involved in the planning of the massive complex that became El Escorial (a monastery, palace, and church). The complex was built in an austere, classicizing style that was intended to showcase Philip's imperial power by looking to ancient Roman architectural forms.





Left: Leon Battista Alberti, Basilica of Sant'Andrea, 1472–90, Mantua (Italy) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC: BY-NC-SA 3.0); right: El Escorial, begun 1563, near Madrid, Spain (photo: Turismo Madrid Consorcio Turístico, CC BY 2.0)



Left: Matthias Grünewald, Isenheim Altarpiece, view in the chapel of the Hospital of Saint Anthony, Isenheim, c. 1510-15, oil on wood, 9′ 9 1/2″ x 10′ 9″ (closed) (Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, France); right: Jan van Eyck, Ghent Altarpiece (open), completed 1432, oil on wood, 11 feet 5 inches x 15 feet 1 inch (open), Saint Bavo Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium. Note: Just Judges panel on the lower left is a modern copy (photo: Closer to Van Eyck)

Spiritual comfort and salvation

Some patrons paid for art to serve a larger purpose, perhaps to fulfill a devotional or religious need, as the Isenheim Altarpiece did for people suffering from the painful disease of ergotism. Others commissioned art to expiate (the need to make amends for doing something wrong) the patron's sins for such things as usury (charging interest for a loan), as Jodocus Vijd desired when he paid a large sum of money for the Ghent Altarpiece.

Inspiring civic duty and responsibility

Commissioning artworks also helped to inspire civic responsibility or to demonstrate that members of a particular community performed their duties properly. The Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, one of many Venetian devotional confraternities, paid Gentile Bellini to depict the procession of the relic of the True Cross through St. Mark's square.



Gentile Bellini, Procession in St Mark's Square, 1496, tempera on canvas, 347 x 770 cm (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice)

This commission highlights the importance of the miraculous object as well as the civic duty of the city's citizens, who are shown in the painting's foreground, with the Scuola members carrying a canopy above the relic. (The scuole were confraternities, or brotherhoods, founded as devotional—religious—institutions, that were set up with the purpose of providing mutual assistance.)



Lluís Dalmau, Virgin of the "Consellers", 1443–1445, oil on oak wood, 316 x 312.5 x 32.5 cm (Museums Nacional d'Art Catalunya)

Patrons in art

Patrons often had themselves incorporated into paintings and sculptures to remind viewers of who had paid for the work of art as well as to show themselves participating in the narrative. We call these "donor portraits." Lluis Dalmau's *Virgin of the Councillors*, for instance, shows the Virgin Mary enthroned, holding the baby Jesus and surrounded by saints in a luxurious Gothic interior. Kneeling before the saints, at the edge of the throne, are five men, all of whom were members of the Barcelona City Council (Casa de la Ciutat), who had paid Dalmau to create the painting to hang in the chapel at the council palace. The portrait collapses sacred and secular time, placing the men as perpetually revering Mary and showcasing their piety to anyone observing the painting.

Even in instances where patrons were not overtly depicted in artworks, artists would sometimes be directed to include heraldic symbols, visual puns, or other motifs to allude to the patron. The coat of arms of the wealthy Mendoza family rests above main entrance to the Palacio del Infantado (in Guadalajara, Spain) amidst the decorative plateresque elements, and advertising to any passersby who had paid for and lived in the striking palace. (Plateresque is the name of an architectural style particular to Spain and its dominions in the Americas from the 15th and 16th centuries. Its name derives from the word "plata," silver in Spanish, and denotes its silversmith quality, referring to profuse and delicate ornamentation that characterized the style.)



Juan Guas, Palacio del Infantado, 1480, Guadalajara, Spain (photo: José Luis Filpo Cabana, CC BY 3.0). The patron was Íñigo López de Mendoza y Luna.

Patrons as influencers

Patrons also set fashions for style and subject matter. Importing artists and artworks from distant lands could show off one's sophistication and introduce new styles, techniques, and subjects to local audiences. Artists and art traveled widely during this period, and exchanges across Europe and beyond were common. Because of the wealth and glamour of northern European court culture, it was fashionable for the wealthy elite of Italy and Spain to import both Netherlandish art and artists. Queen Isabel of Castile, whose father had favored Flemish painters such as Rogier van der Weyden,

had a number of artists, including Juan de Flandes, Michel Sittow, and Gil de Siloe, at her court to create lavish works that would speak to her power and magnificence.



The Tomb of Juan II of Castile and Isabel of Portugal in front of the altar of the church of the Carthusian Monastery of Miraflores (photo: Ecelan, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Likewise, Tomasso Portinari, who worked for the Medici bank in Bruges, hired the northern artist Hugo van der Goes to paint a massive altarpiece of the Nativity for his home town of Florence, Italy. When put on display in the hospital church of Santa Maria Nuova in 1483, it created a sensation. Italian artists, in awe of the accomplishments of the northern master, quickly responded to what they saw. Portinari not only showcased his own cosmopolitan sophistication, he also helped shape the direction of Florentine art by introducing this spectacular image to local artists.

Why patrons matter

Art communicated ideas about patrons. Status, wealth, social, and religious identities all played out across paintings, prints, sculptures, and buildings. At the same time, the careers of artists were shaped with the aid of powerful patrons. Likewise, artistic styles emerged or developed as a result of patrons hiring artists or buying artworks and by transporting them to new locations. The history of art has been shaped not only by artists, but also by the patrons whose choices in sponsorship determined what art was created, who created it, who saw it, and what art was made of. Until the modern era, the stories that have been told in art are the stories that reflect the interests of the rich and powerful, the privileged few—mostly men—who were in positions to patronize art. In a nutshell, patronage mattered.

Notes:

[1] Giovanni Rucellai, *Giovanni Rucellai ed il suo Zibaldone*, ed. Alessandro Perosa. 2 vols. (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1960), 1:121

[2] Rucellai, *Zibaldone*, 1:121



Hugo van der Goes, Portinari Altarpiece, 1476 and 1470, oil on panel, 253 cm x 586 cm (Uffizi Gallery)

9.

Types of Renaissance Patronage

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Heather Graham



Lorenzo Ghiberti, St. Matthew, bronze, completed c. 1423, 254 cm, Orsanmichele, Florence (photo: Dan Philpott, CC BY 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/5Ek6qT>

When the banker's guild of Florence commissioned a massive bronze statue of St. Matthew for Orsanmichele—a former grain house turned shrine at the heart of the city—they clearly had their own magnificence in mind. Not only did they hire the highly in-demand sculptor, Lorenzo Ghiberti, to create it, but they also stipulated in the work's contract that it must be as big or bigger than the sculptor's creation for a rival guild in the same location. They also wanted it to be cast from no more than two pieces (a difficult feat!). Ghiberti's fame, the statue's scale, and the technical proficiency required to cast it were all reflections of the banker's guild's own status.

Why is it important to know about patrons?

While today we often focus on the artist who made an artwork, in the renaissance it was the patron—the person or group of people paying for the image—who was considered the primary force behind a work's creation. We often forget that for most of history artists did not simply create art for art's sake. Information about patrons provides a window into the complex process involved in the production of art and architecture. Patrons often dictated the cost, materials, size, location, and subject matter of works of art.

Knowing about patronage also demonstrates the various ways that people used art to communicate ideas about themselves, how styles or subjects were popularized, and how artists' careers were fostered. Patrons were far more socially and economically powerful than the artists who served them. A work of art was considered a reflection of the patron's status, and much of the credit for the ingenuity or skill with which an art object was created was given to the savvy patron who hired well. Still, an artist's social status and reputation could also benefit from the support of a powerful patron.



Gil de Siloé, The Tomb of Juan II of Castile and Isabel of Portugal, 1489–93, alabaster, in the Carthusian Monastery of Miraflores, near Burgos, Spain (photo: Ecelan, CC BY-SA 4.0). Commissioned by Queen Isabel of Castile to honor her parents, Juan II of Castile and Isabel of Portugal.



Leon Battista Alberti, Façade of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, 1470 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0). Commissioned by the Florentine banker Giovanni Rucellai.

Defining our terms

A closer look at terminology helps us to understand how patronage was understood in the renaissance. The English term "patron" comes from the Latin word *patronus*, meaning protector of clients or dependents, specifically freedmen. The term *patronus*, in turn, is related to *pater*, meaning father. Like the father of a family, or the protector of dependents, a patron was responsible for the conception and realization of a work of art. The relationship of patronage of art and architecture to ideas about fatherhood reflects the patriarchal order of renaissance society. As the wealthy Florentine banker Giovanni Rucellai once noted: "Men have two roles to perform in life: to procreate and to build." [1] Just as men held primary social and political power, attitudes towards artistic patronage also saw it as a masculine pursuit.

While both men and women commissioned art, the cost and public nature of the art market meant that most women were not in a social or financial position to act as patrons. Not only did men commission far more art than women, but also they tended to commission art that was more expensive, like sculpture and architecture, and more daring in subject matter, like mythological scenes and nudes. While laws pertaining to women's financial independence varied across Europe, the vast majority of women had limited funds at their disposal for freely commissioning art.



Andrea Mantegna, Mars and Venus (or Parnassus), 1497, tempera and gold on canvas, 159 cm × 192 cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris)

Even women at the top of the social hierarchy, like the Marchioness of Mantua, Isabella d'Este, who was one of the most prolific female patrons of the renaissance, commanded far smaller sums than their male peers. With few exceptions, women's patronage, in keeping with their primarily domestic and maternal roles in society, was often limited to religious painting and imagery that celebrated their husbands and sons.

How do we study patronage?

To study patronage we have to consider the broader context for the creation of art. Economics, politics, social and cultural formations, and psychology—these areas (among others) all inform the way we understand why people hired artists to make specific types of images and structures. To study these choices we look at two main types of evidence: written and visual. Written documents might include contracts, letters, diary entries, and inventories. Visual documentation includes donor portraits (images where the features of the patron are included in the work), inscriptions, coats of arms, and other imagery that represents the family or the community of the person or people paying.



Rogier van der Weyden, Deposition, c. 1435 (Prado, Madrid)

Rogier van der Weyden's famous *Deposition*, painted for the archer's guild of Leuven for a public setting, includes miniature crossbows at the upper corners of the composition as a direct allusion to the patrons. This inclusion helps us to understand the multiple motivations for commissioning this work—it was intended both to honor God and to commemorate those who paid for it.

Ghiberti's *St Matthew* and van der Weyden's *Deposition* are both public works of art commissioned by groups of patrons. We can roughly break renaissance patronage into two main categories:

- **Public**: Although the boundaries between public and private were fluid, in general a public work of art was intended for display outside the home to a broad, public audience. This includes art in churches, town squares, and public buildings, and imagery like prints that circulated in multiples.
- **Private**: "Private" art was limited in audience and generally displayed in the home. Of course, some homes were more private than others. The home of a wealthy merchant or a ruler might serve (as the U.S. White House does today) as a semi-public space where business was conducted and a wider audience was reached.

The works discussed above are also both examples of religious imagery. There are two main types of renaissance art that one might pay for:

- **Religious**: This includes imagery for both public and private use that relates to a particular faith. Christianity was the predominant faith throughout Europe during the renaissance.
- **Secular**: This means non-religious imagery and includes portraiture, scenes taken from history or literature, and mythological subjects.



Michelangelo, Tomb of Pope Julius II, completed 1545, marble, in San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Of course, like the difference between public and private, there was much overlap between religious and secular. Funerary or memorial imagery is a good example: a portrait (secular) of the deceased might be placed within a tomb monument that includes the Virgin and Christ Child (religious) as well as forms and figures borrowed from ancient (secular) art. Michelangelo's tomb for Pope Julis II (completed 1545), for example, includes a full body portrait of the deceased and numerous religious figures, all placed within a sculpted framework borrowing forms from ancient Roman sarcophagi and buildings.While all renaissance patrons of art enjoyed a certain amount of wealth and social privilege, patronage could be a personal or a collective endeavour. Both the *St. Matthew* and the *Deposition*were commissioned by groups of men who were members of powerful guilds, or the corporate entities that dominated renaissance public life. Other types of patrons included rulers, nobles, members of the clergy, merchants, confraternities, nuns, and monks. It is important for us to keep in mind these different types of patronage because they help us understand the motivations of the patron as well as the possible functions of the artwork itself.

Notes:

[1] Giovanni Rucellai, *Giovanni Rucellai ed il suo Zibaldone*, ed. Alessandro Perosa. 2 vols. (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1960), 2:13

10.

Introduction to Gender in Renaissance Italy

Dr. Heather Graham





Left: Titian, Portrait of Francesco Maria Della Rovere, c. 1537, oil on canvas, 114 x 103 cm; right: Titian, Portrait of Eleonora Gonzaga, c. 1537, oil on canvas, 114 x 103 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

Ideal representatives of masculinity and femininity

In a pair of portraits painted by the Venetian artist Titian, the Duke and Duchess of Urbino are presented as ideal representatives of their sexes. Duke Francesco Maria della Rovere, the great mercenary captain, stands upright, his body encased in shining armor. His right arm juts outward from his body, seemingly breaking through the picture plane, as his hand rests upon the war baton he carries as a reminder of his military authority as commander of Venetian troops. Francesco Maria's prominent codpiece and piercing stare emphasize his aggressive masculinity, while his dark beard and ruddy complexion mark him as a mature man of action. The objects behind him communicate his valor and political commitments: two other war batons bearing the Papal Keys (two crossed keys, the traditional symbol of the Papacy; they refer to the keys of the kingdom of heaven belonging to the first Pope, Saint Peter, that were given to him by Christ in the Gospel of Matthew) and the Florentine lily (the traditional heraldic device, or symbol, of the city of Florence, Italy) lean against a wall (the lily has faded over time) next to an oak branch marking his della Rovere lineage (the della Roveres were a powerful noble family of Italy).

His wife, the Duchess Eleonora Gonzaga, makes the perfect, demure counterpoint to her virile husband. While he stands erect and linear, she sits, swathed in copious folds of costly fabric that suggest the rounded forms of her body. While he is active, she is passive, her containment within the domestic sphere affirmed by the window to her right. Eleonora's bodily comportment is a far remove from her husband's thrusting fist that intrudes upon the audience's space. The small dog and the costly clock that rests upon the table beside her remind us of her loyalty and patience in reservedly awaiting her husband whose military pursuits often kept him abroad.

Internal virtues, including gender characteristics, were believed to be communicated through outward appearance. The author Pietro Aretino noted in sonnets dedicated to Titian's portraits that Francesco Maria's "place between his eyebrows inspires terror, his spirit in his eyes, his pride in his forehead, in which place honor and wise counsel sit. In his armored chest and ready arm valor burns…." For Eleonora, "Prudence guards her honor and counsels in beautiful silence: the internal virtues adorn her brow with every wonder." [1] Like the portraits, Aretino's sonnets highlight Francesco Maria's active and awe-inspiring masculinity and Eleanora's passive feminine charms.

Titian's portraits help us to understand ideas that people in the past had about gender. While sex is determined by biological markers such as genitalia and other genetic differences between male or female, gender refers to the social role that a person plays based upon individual and collective ideas about identity as it relates to being a man or a woman. Different cultures define masculinity and femininity differently. These social roles are constructed by multiple factors including medical understandings of the body and mind, as well as cultural and religious ideas about the sexes.



Batons (detail), Titian, Portrait of Francesco Maria Della Rovere, c. 1537, oil on canvas (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)



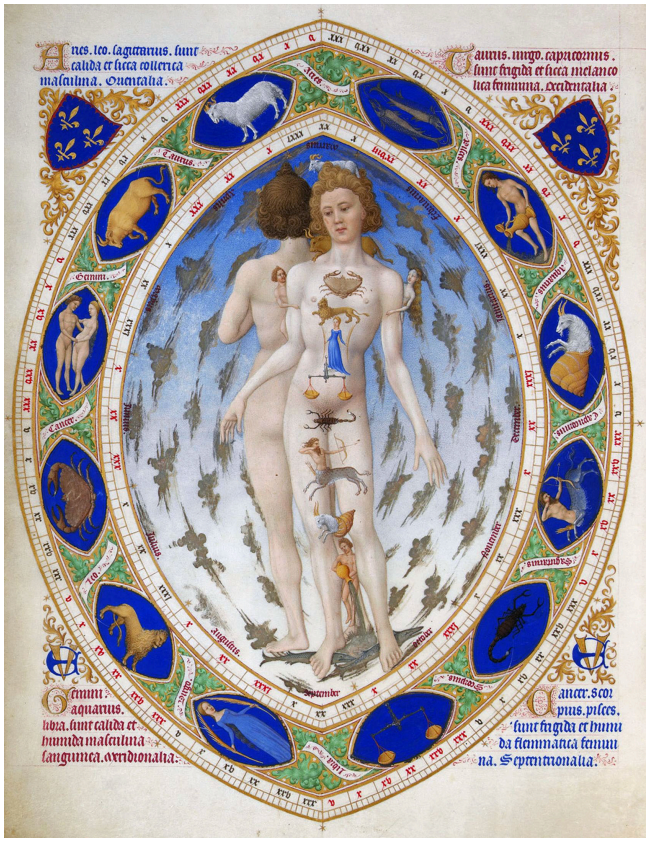
Simone Martini, The Annunciation, 1333, tempera on panel, 184 x 210 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The feminine ideal

> Have you seen that [Virgin] Annunciation that is in the cathedral, at the altar of Sant' Ansano, next to the sacristy?…She seems to me to strike the most beautiful attitude, the most reverent and modest imaginable. Notice that she does not look at the angel but is almost frightened. She knew that it was an angel…What would she have done had it been a man! Take this as an example you maidens!
> *—Bernardino de Siena [2]*

When the popular fifteenth-century preacher, Bernardino da Siena, wanted to impress upon his female listeners the importance of proper feminine behavior, he pointed them to the model of the Virgin Mary as painted by the Sienese artist, Simone Martini. At the moment the archangel Gabriel announces to Mary that she would bear the son of God, Mary's reaction is exemplary: she pulls her cloak tightly around her and recoils from the angelic intrusion in her private space. So important in this patriarchal world was the regulation of women to the domestic sphere, that even an emissary of God should be considered with caution. A renaissance woman's primary virtues were chastity and motherhood; her domain was the private world of the home. As noted by the scholar and artistic theorist Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *On the Family* (1435), "It would hardly win us respect if our wife busied herself among the men in the marketplace, out in the public eye." [3]

While gender roles were nuanced across European cultures, throughout the continent women's relegation to the domestic sphere was rooted in Christian tradition that placed blame for humanity's fall from grace upon Eve, the first woman. Eve was the temptress who led the first man, Adam, into breaking God's law, sentencing humankind to toil and death. Every woman thereafter was thought to live in the shadow of Eve's sin, justly sentenced to the pains of childbirth, the labors of motherhood, and submission to her husband.



Herman, Paul and Jean de Limbourg, Zodiacal man, from Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, 1413-16, ink on vellum (Musée Condé, Chantilly). The image is divided by quadrants marked by Latin inscriptions describing the properties of each sign according to the four humors.

The four humors

Women's subordinate role in renaissance culture was also tied to medical understanding of the human body inherited from ancient Greek and Roman traditions. Perhaps most influential was the ancient theory of the four humors. Originating in ancient Greece, humoral theory was thoroughly developed by the Roman doctor, Galen, whose writings were important to the medieval and renaissance world. According to Galen, it was the proper balance of four fluids called humors—blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile—generated through the processes of digestion that determined physical and psychological health. Each humor was associated with particular mental characteristics, making a person's psychobiology (the branch of science that deals with the biological basis of behavior and mental

phenomena) a product of his or her unique humoral composition, a model further nuanced by qualities of temperature and moisture also assigned to the various humors.



Albrecht Dürer, Adam and Eve, 1504, engraving, 25.1 x 20cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

German artist Albrecht Dürer's engraving of *Adam and Eve* includes numerous symbols associated with the four humors: a rabbit (blood), an ox (phlegm), a cat (yellow bile), and an elk (black bile). This image captures the moment just before the first man and woman broke God's law. All of the animals—all of the humors—are shown at rest, symbolizing humanity's perfect internal balance before the Fall from Grace.

Generally speaking, men and women were understood to be humoral opposites. Men were physiologically characterized by superior humors associated with heat and dryness, women by inferior humors associated with cold and wetness. These perceived differences were used to justify men's and women's social roles: a man's hot-dryness gave him the constancy necessary for public social and political life; a women's cold-wetness made her inconstant, accounted for her timidity, and explained menstruation and the pains of childbirth. As Alberti also noted in his writings on the family, "Women are almost all timid by nature, soft, slow, and therefore more useful when they sit still and watch over things." [4]



Guido Mazzoni, Lamentation, 1480s, Ferrara, Italy (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0) <https://tinyurl.com/y25sm7d3>

Women's assumed physiological inferiority to men also contributed to how they were thought to experience emotions. Women's cold-wet humoral nature made them more susceptible to emotions and less capable of managing their emotional behaviors in socially appropriate ways. In works of art like Guido Mazzoni's terracotta *Lamentation* tableau created for the Duke of Ferrara, biblical characters perform their sorrow over Christ's death in ways that reflect expectations for gendered emotional experience: the women are collectively far more violent than the men in their expressions of grief.

Titian's composed and contained Duchess Eleonora perfectly reflects the gendered ideal for a renaissance woman. Her youthful beauty, her curvaceous form suggesting the fertility of motherhood, and her careful containment within the domestic realm all communicate renaissance expectations of and ideals for femininity. It is rare in renaissance art to encounter women whose features do not reflect standards of youthful beauty and the relationship to women's primarily maternal role that they embody.



Titian, Portrait of Eleonora Gonzaga, c. 1537, oil on canvas, 114 x 103 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)



Titian, Portrait of Francesco Maria Della Rovere, c. 1537, oil on canvas, 114 x 103 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

The masculine ideal

> Fortune is a woman and if you wish to keep her under it is necessary to beat and ill use her; and it is seen she allows herself to be mastered by the adventurous rather than by those who go to work more coldly. She is, therefore, always woman-like, a lover of young men, because they are less cautious, more violent, and with more audacity to command her. *Machiavelli, The Prince [5]*

Men, who in renaissance Christian thought were created in the image of a male God, were believed to have a natural superiority over their female counterparts. Niccolo Machiavelli's famous text on statecraft, *The Prince* (1513), reflects the way gender roles were tied to notions of power: fortune is feminized, desirous of subjugation, while the worthy ruler is one who uses masculine aggressive force to subdue her. While not every man was expected to project the level of audacious dominance that bolstered princely authority, the masculine ideal was nonetheless one of forceful mastery.

While female virtue was tied primarily to sexual control and motherhood, male virtue was much more broadly defined. Men were expected to participate in all aspects of public life, to excel in learning, in their trade, in governance, and to do so with the aggressive and assertive behavior particular to their superior biological construction. Such qualities were communicated in art through figure types, costume, and movements that suggested these masculine ideals. As Alberti advised in his work on the family:

> The beauty of a man accustomed to arms . . . lies in his having a presence betokening pride . . . limbs full of strength, and the gestures of one who is skilled and adept in all forms of exercise. The beauty of an old man . . . lies in his prudence, his amiability, and the reasoned judgment which permeates all his words and counsel. *Leon Battista Alberti, The Family in Renaissance Florence [6]*

While Titian's portrait of Francesco Maria might be said to embody the ideal vigorous military man, Antonio Rossellino's marble portrait bust of the aged physician, Giovanni Chellini, presents the ideal sage elder. With his hollowed cheeks and

sagging flesh, Chellini is shown aged and worn, yet the delicate veins at his temple seem to pulse with life and his posture is erect and his body robust beneath his robes. If Francesco Maria is the man of action, the venerable physician represents the contemplative man still virile in flesh.



Antonio Rosselino, Portrait of Giovanni di Antonio Chellini da San Miniato, 1456, marble, H: 51.1 cm, W: 57.6 cm, D: 29.6 cm (Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

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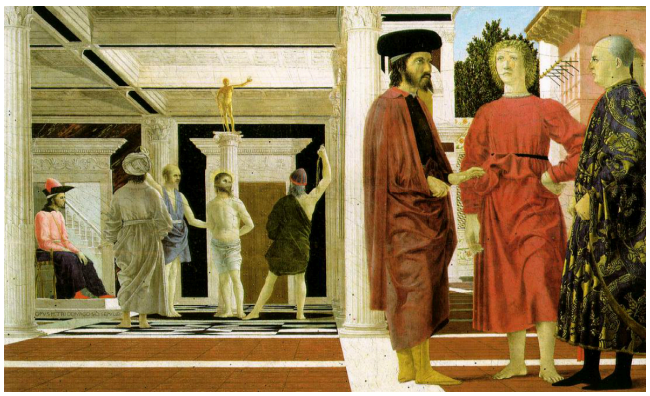
Jesus Christ himself, whose own life-giving flesh had important associations with femininity, was overwhelmingly depicted in art in ways that emphasized his male sex and his masculine capacity to nobly endure physical and psychological pain. The stoic grace with which Christ endures the whips and torments of his torturers in Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation* was a worthy model of noble, masculine strength. Indeed, even for women, the Christian imperative to model one's life after that of Christ meant adopting qualities of temperance, constancy, and endurance that were understood to be fundamentally masculine in quality.



Piero della Francesca, Flagellation of Christ, c. 1455-65, oil and tempera on wood, 58.4 × 81.5 cm (Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino)



Raphael, Portrait of Pope Julius II, 1511, oil on poplar, 108.7 x 81 cm (The National Gallery, London)

Gender roles constructed in and by art

Images helped to communicate ideas about gender roles and to model appropriate—or expected—gendered behavior. One's performance of femininity or masculinity was expected to conform with their age and social rank, as we see with Titian's portraits of Francesco Maria and Eleonora. At times art could mask realities of character that were inconsistent with social ideals. Raphael's sensitive portrait of the stooped, aged, and bearded Pope Julius II della Rovere conveys a quiet solemnity. The pontiff is shown as thoughtful, introspective, and serene. In reality, Julius was famously aggressive, nicknamed the "Warrior Pope" for his penchant for warfare. Julius was formidable in temperament, notoriously impetuous, indomitable and resolute. While these are certainly appropriate masculine qualities for some (a man in the position of his nephew duke Francesco Maria perhaps), they do not reflect characteristics expected of a pope who embodied the living image of Christ on earth.

The gender roles we encounter in renaissance art reflect ideas and ideals, not necessarily the reality of lived experience. Many women did indeed participate in public life, as the duchess Eleonora often did as ruler of Urbino during her mercenary husband's many travels. Both Titian's and Raphael's portraits remind us that gender is a carefully constructed performance.

Notes:

1. James Dennistoun, *Memoirs of the Dukes of Urbino*, vol. 3 (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1851), appendix XI, p. 437.
2. Quoted in Ronald Rainey, "Dressing Down the Dressed-Up: Reproving Feminine Attire in Renaissance Florence," in *Renaissance Society and Culture: Essays in Honor of Eugene F. Rice, Jr.*, ed. J. Monfasani and R.G. Musto (New York, 1991), p. 237 .
3. Leon Battista Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, trans. Renée Neu Watkins (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1969), p. 20.
4. Ibid., 207.
5. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. W. K. Marriott (London, 1958), p. 143.
6. Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, p. 115.

11.

Do you speak Renaissance?

A conversation

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Steven: We're in the Metropolitan Museum of Art looking at this tiny, little painting, but there's such a level of detail here, you could be lost in this painting for hours.

Lauren: We're looking at a painting of the Madonna and Child by the artist Carlo Crivelli from around the year 1480, and the painting has beautiful details, such a richness to the landscape that we're seeing and to the fabrics that we see throughout this painting.

Steven: We're seeing a really common theme. We're seeing the Virgin Mary holding the young Christ Child. He sits on a pillow, and is balanced on a ledge. And, this is a scene that we see over and over again, especially in Venice. It's worth noting that Crivelli is Venetian, although he spent most of his career south of Venice in The Marches.

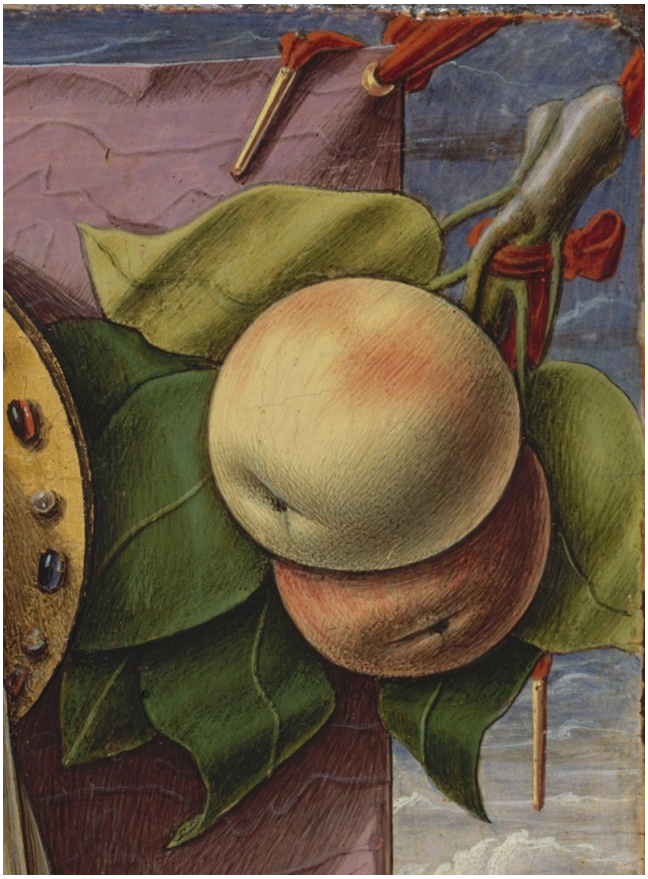
Lauren: Mary and Jesus are set before a parapet that is draped with this beautiful piece of yellow silk. Behind the Virgin Mary, we see another piece of silk in a lavender color, and it's being held up by red laces, that then are winding around branches from which are growing apples and a cucumber.

Steven: Almost everything in this painting is symbolic. We're treated to this lavish, beautiful detailed scene, but it's a painting that actually offers much more to people who speak the language of art in the 15th century.

Lauren: The apples are symbols of the Fall, for instance, or the sin of humankind, if you think about Eve being tempted in the Garden of Eden by the serpent with the Tree of Knowledge with the apple.



Carlo Crivelli, Madonna and Child, c. 1480, tempera and gold on wood, 37.8 x 25.4 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Detail of Carlo Crivelli, Madonna and Child, c. 1480, tempera and gold on wood (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Steven: Those red laces that hold up that beautiful pink, lavender Cloth of Honor almost looks serpentlike, as they reach over almost as if the ends of those laces are the heads of the serpent.

Lauren: And then another common symbol we see is the goldfinch, this little bird that the Baby Jesus is grasping to his chest, and the goldfinch is a symbol of redemption.

Steven: That plays in direct opposition to the apple: if Adam and Eve caused the Fall of man, in this Christian iconography, Jesus is the Redeemer.

Lauren: One of my favorite details in this painting is the fly on the lower-left, and it is actually another symbol of sin in this painting. The fly is actually painted in trompe l'oeil, or this trick of the eye, where its proportionate to us, the viewers, and not proportionate to the Virgin Mary and Child.

Steven: It's actually terrifyingly large in relationship to the Christ Child. In fact, it's as large as Jesus's feet!

Lauren: It's supposed to look like the fly has just landed on the surface of the painting, but it's another common symbol of sin in the Renaissance. By this point around 1480, you have the influence of northern, particularly Flemish painting, on parts of Italy, and we really get a sense of here in the background, in the landscape.



Detail of Carlo Crivelli, Madonna and Child, c. 1480, tempera and gold on wood (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Steven: The landscape, which we only see to the extreme left and right just peeking out at the edges of the Cloth of Honor (luxurious fabric often placed behind Mary and Christ), goes into this beautiful, deep space, and we're given pathways for our eye to travel. And, in that landscape, we actually see figures. These are clearly not modern, Western European figures.

Lauren: The figures that we see in the background are all wearing turbans. Now, at this point in the Renaissance, there is a trope of showing peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean wearing turbans because by 1480, the Holy Lands are controlled by Muslim powers. Using the turban was a convention for locating people in the Holy Lands. It became a symbol of "Others," so you not only see Muslims wearing turbans, but you also sometimes see Jews wearing turbans as well.

Steven: Although this may not be historically accurate, it is still a way of locating the Virgin Mary in the Middle East. The artist uses another device to speak of antiquity, and we see that in the ledge that the Christ Child sits on. We can just make out that there some relief carving on *our* side of that ledge, and that's mimicking ancient Roman motifs. So we have a geographic locating to the Middle East, and we have a temporal locating to the ancient world, although those symbols are separate.

Lauren: And another way that Crivelli locates this scene in the Middle East is the mantle worn by Mary. She's wearing this very elaborate damask textile, and while it's not uncommon to see that, this type of textile, the motifs that we're seeing on it, speak to an aesthetic that you would find on Islamic textiles, even if by this point you have Italian textile makers replicating this type of pattern from the Eastern Mediterranean.



Detail of Carlo Crivelli, Madonna and Child, c. 1480, tempera and gold on wood (The Metropolitan Museum of Art); Detail of textile fragment with Ogival pattern, from Egypt or Syria, silk or lampas, 14th century; and textile fragment from Italy, silk, first half of the 15th century (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, CCO 1.0)

Steven: This is such a complicated issue because we understand the Virgin Mary as having been very poor, but she is shown here in the most elaborate garb. That has to do, in part, with not only a way of symbolically representing the Virgin Mary's spiritual importance, but also because the East was associated with elaborate and very expensive textiles.

Lauren: We see that accentuated even by the halos, which are both done in gold, and they're decorated with pearls and precious gems.

Steven: And actually those halos also remind me of northern painting, and the way that material wealth was used as a means of representing divinity.

Lauren: One of the things that I'm always struck by when looking at this painting is the juxtaposition between the intense illusionism of things like the cucumber, and the apples, and even the textile that's hanging behind Mary—and their faces, or their bodies in general, where you have this flattening or this waxlike quality to the faces of both the Virgin Mary and Jesus.

Steven: The hyper-naturalism that we see in the representation, for instance, of the cucumber, which is often used as a symbol of resurrection, has always seemed to me in the work of Crivelli as a means of representing the truth, the veracity of what we're seeing. But there is a real distinction between forms like the cucumber and the flesh of the primary figures, and I'm not sure that we fully understand what that contrast is meant to represent. But perhaps it has to do with the apples and the cucumbers being of this earth and the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child, as being spiritual figures.



Detail of Carlo Crivelli, Madonna and Child, c. 1480, tempera and gold on wood (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Lauren: This painting was likely used for private devotion. It's on a small scale, it could easily be held, or used on a private altarpiece, say, in an elite home. This type of painting is really common in Crivelli's work overall.

Steven: Look at the hands that Crivelli has painted. Look at the delicacy with which the Virgin Mary holds the Christ Child. Her fingers are holding him in place, but if you look at her right hand, there's a shadow between her hand and Jesus's hip. The turn from her thumb to her forefinger mimics a side and creates a volume, it creates this marvelous sense of space but also a sense of the preciousness of the child that she holds.



Detail of Carlo Crivelli, Madonna and Child, c. 1480, tempera and gold on wood (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Lauren: Crivelli has also signed this painting using a trompe l'oeil piece of paper at the bottom of the painting, and it says, "Opus Karoli Crivelli, Veneti," which is locating this as done by Carlo Crivelli from Venice.

Steven: We can imagine somebody in a private home using this painting as a means of veneration. So, although the forms that we see here may be foreign to us, for the person who commissioned this in the 15th century, each of these elements would have had meaning and would have combined with this exemplary painting to produce a powerful, spiritual image.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/6QjPhteDMn8>

12.

How one-point linear perspective works

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation about linear perspective.

Beth: So this is a video about the elements of linear perspective with a little bit of history thrown in.

Steven: I love linear perspective.

Beth: It's hard not to love linear perspective. It's like this magic formula.

Steven: Well, look what even Paolo Uccello was able to do just a few decades after linear perspective was first discovered.

Beth: So linear perspective is a way of recreating the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface. And it's really accurate.

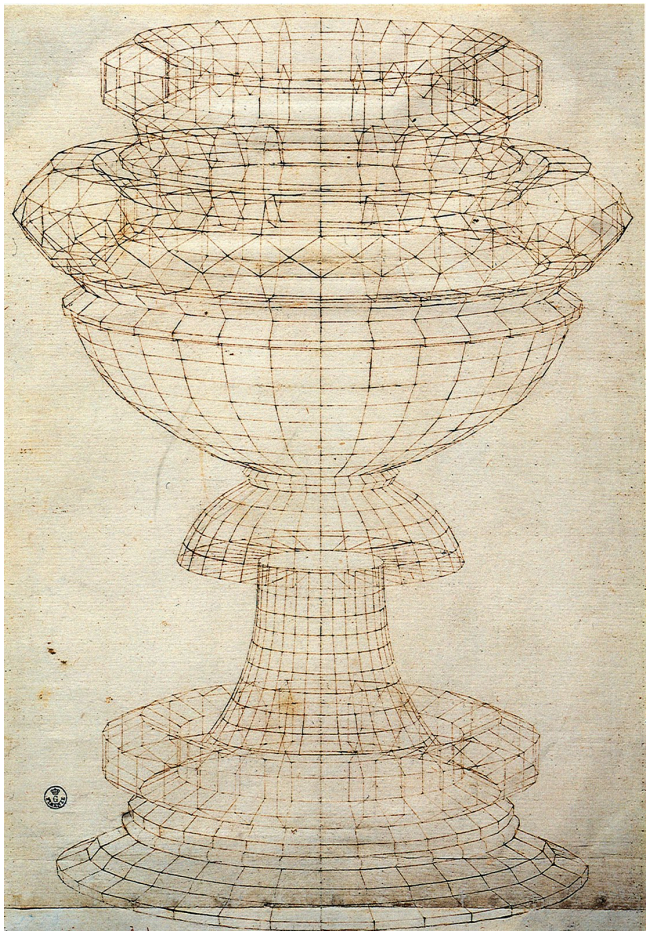
Steven: Well, look at this Paolo Uccello. Look at this *Study of a Chalice*. This wasn't done on a computer. This was done with pen and ink on paper.

Beth: No Photoshop!

Steven: No Photoshop.

Beth: So let's give a little bit of historical background, and then we'll talk about how it's done.

Steven: Okay, so let's start first with what the problem was.



Paolo Uccello, Perspective Study for a Chalice, c.1450, pen and ink on paper, 29 x 24.5 cm (Uffizi, Florence)

Beth: Here we have a painting from the early 1300s by an artist named Duccio, who's painting in Siena. And you can see that Duccio is interested in creating an earthly space for his figure of the Angel Gabriel and Mary, but that the space doesn't really make sense.



Duccio, Annunciation of the Death of the Virgin, 1308-11, tempera and gold on wood, 213 x 396 cm (Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena)

Steven: Okay, so what you're saying is that we have kind of a real room here. We can see the beams in the ceiling. We can see the architecture. We can see the doors. And so he's really interested in putting these figures in a real place. The problem is—and by the way, don't get me wrong, I love Duccio — but the problem is that Duccio is not constructing that architectural space in a way that looks logical to our eye.

Beth: And I think it probably wasn't a problem for Duccio, but it was a problem for artists about 100 years later who had a different goal. And their goal was a kind of really accurate realism on that flat surface.

Steven: Okay, but before we leave the Duccio, let's spend just a moment being kind of unfair and finding what's wrong.

Beth: Okay.

Steven: Okay, so for one thing, the beams of the ceiling right up here don't agree spatially with the seat that the Virgin Mary is on or with this little stand for the Bible that we see here, or, for that matter, with the lines that are constructed by the top of the capitals of these balusters. So none of this is really making sense.

Beth: Right. It's not a rational space. And there's this increasing interest in the 1400s in rationalism.

Steven: That's the period that we really call the Renaissance.

Beth: Right. The Early Renaissance. And so in Florence in 1420, Brunelleschi—and let's put up a picture of Brunelleschi.

Steven: Okay, so he's right here below, Filippo Brunelleschi.



Filippo Brunelleschi, Scul et Architetto (from Vasari, Lives), woodcut, c. 1568

Beth: And he discovers—or some would say rediscovers, because some think that maybe the ancient Greeks and Romans had this before—but he discovers linear perspective.

Steven: So he was a genius.

Beth: He was a Renaissance man.

Steven: He was an architect. He was an engineer. He was a sculptor. According to tradition, he had gone down to Rome, and he was studying ancient Roman buildings, ruins, and he wanted to be able to sketch them accurately. He developed this system, linear perspective, as a way of doing that.

Beth: In 1420 in Florence, he demonstrated this system. Fifteen years later, another brilliant Renaissance man, Alberti, codified what Brunelleschi had discovered. He explained the system of linear perspective for artists.

Steven: So he publishes a book called *On Painting* in 1435; we have a later version of that book illustrated here. And inside that book, he really gives the formula for linear perspective, and that's what we have here. Let's just spend a moment talking about how this system works.

Beth: Let's actually do a diagram of linear perspective.

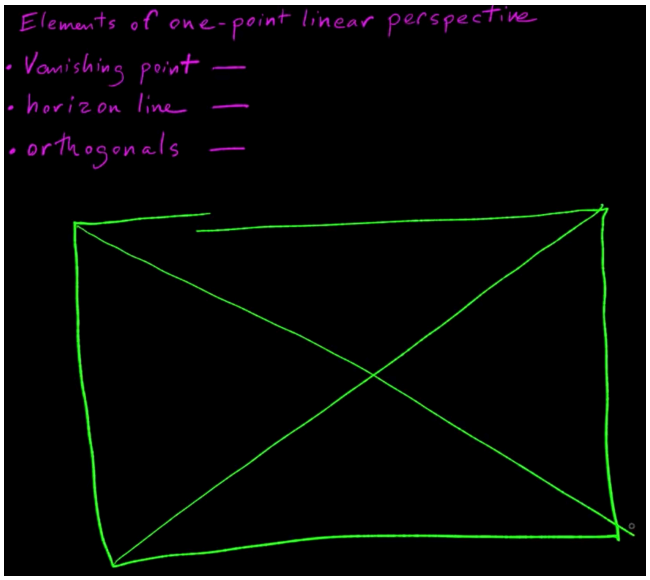
Steven: Okay. Now I cannot do Paolo Uccello's chalice, but I can draw a basic linear perspectival structure.

Beth: Go for it.

Steven: Okay. So first of all, we need to understand that one-point linear perspective, sometimes called scientific perspective, is made up of three basic elements. There's a vanishing point, there is a horizon line, and there are orthogonals. So let's start off with just creating a simple interior. I'm going to draw just a rectangle here.



Frontispiece of Leon Battista Alberti, La Pittura (On Painting), woodcut, 1547



Elements of one-point perspective (graphic: Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: So this is your painting. This is your flat surface.

Steven: That's exactly right. And I'm going to decide that the vanishing point needs to be pretty much in the middle.

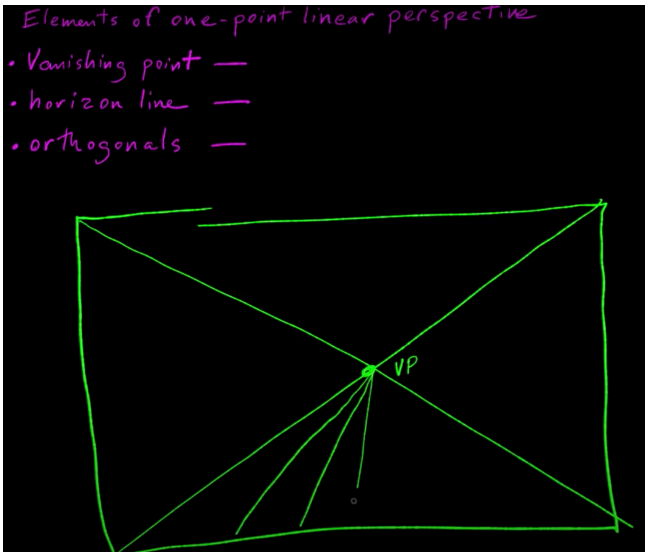
Beth: Okay.

Steven: So I'm putting the vanishing point right about here.

Beth: Okay

Steven: Okay? Now let's see.

Beth: Why don't you label that VP so we remember it's vanishing point.



Elements of one-point perspective, VP= vanishing point (graphic: Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

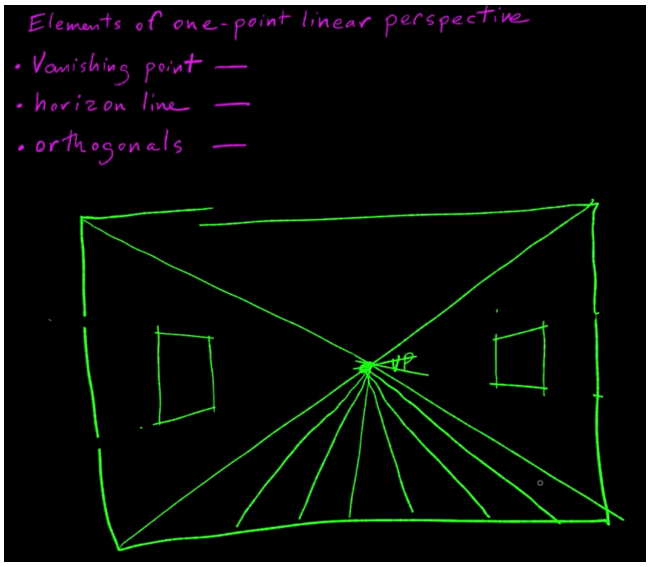
Steven: So that's the vanishing point. Now what I want to do is I want to create a series of rays that move down to the bottom line. And these, one could think of as kind of floorboards in a room, right? And artists had been able to do this long before linear perspective. Artists had never had a problem with this.

Beth: Right. Well, that's because they were constructing it intuitively. And intuitively, when you look around at the world, you see walls in a room that look as though if they continued they would meet. Or the floorboards look as though they would meet. So it's kind of intuitive.

Steven: So I'm actually going to add not only a floor to this room, but I'm going to put in a couple of windows. We'll just make it very simple here. So I'll put in a couple more verticals right here. And then I'm simply going to have all of this meet in the middle at that vanishing point. Now I'm going to use an eraser here just to clean this up just a little bit so we can get rid of some of the extraneous lines just to make things a little more clear. And voila. You can sort of see a window—

Beth: Okay, I've got a window.

Steven: —beginning to form. But now here's the problem: if you didn't want to have floorboards and instead you wanted to have a tile floor, you had a problem. Because you know intuitively the horizontal lines have to get closer together as they go back in space. The problem is it's hard to exactly figure out what those proportions are as they get denser and denser as they go back in space so that the floor doesn't look like it's popping up.



Elements of one-point perspective, VP= vanishing point (graphic: Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Which happened often, actually, in paintings from the Trecento. So the idea is that the tiles get smaller and smaller because things generally get smaller and smaller as they move away from us in space.

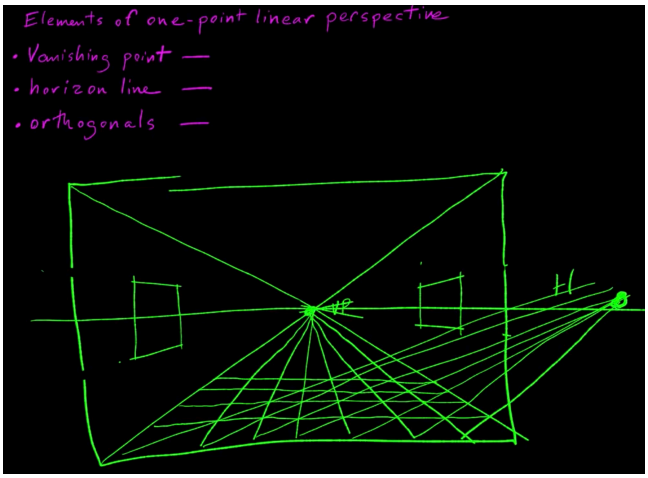
Steven: Or appear that way, at least.

Beth: Right.

Steven: So what Alberti wrote down in *On Painting* was that you need to have a second point in space outside of the picture plane that was at the level of your eye. So I'm just going to put it here. It's at the same level as the vanishing point, right? And so we would call this, of course, what? This is H. This is the horizon line. And I missed it, but there it is.

Beth: Okay.

Steven: And then what I would do—and I would, of course, do this more accurately with a ruler—is I would draw another series of rays from that second point—



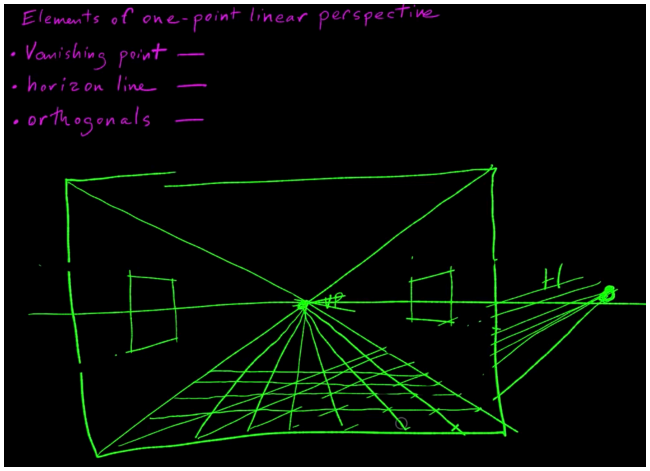
Elements of one-point perspective, VP= vanishing point, H= horizon line (graphic: Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: From the exterior point.

Steven: That's right, and have it connect to each of those floorboards, right? So as you can see, what's happening is that that angle becomes more extreme as I move across. Right? And I'm doing it freehand, so it's a little bit hard to see, but you get the point. Now, something really interesting just happened, which is that I can now create a horizontal line that is at that first intersection—do you see that right there?—going straight across.

Beth: I see it.

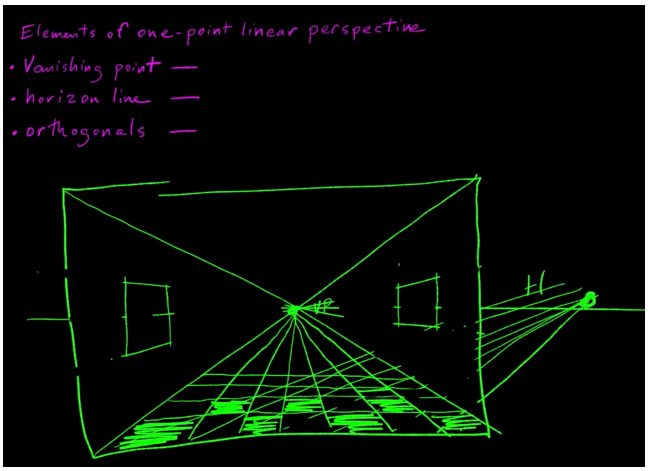
Steven: Then I can draw a second one at that second intersection right there, and so forth. And they get more and more compressed as I go back in space. The illusion should be, then, a kind of compression in space. So I think this will become more clear if I just do a little bit of erasing now.



Elements of one-point perspective, VP= vanishing point, H= horizon line (graphic: Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: While you're erasing, I want to talk about that word "illusion," because I think it's key to everything here. What artists are looking to do is to create an illusion of reality on this two-dimensional surface. Alberti said a painting should be like a window. So in a way, you don't see the two-dimensional surface. A two-dimensional surface becomes something you look through to a world that is a continuation of our own world. So the idea of the illusion being incredibly convincing was so important to the artists of the Renaissance, artists like Masaccio or later Piero della Francesca or Andrea Mantegna.

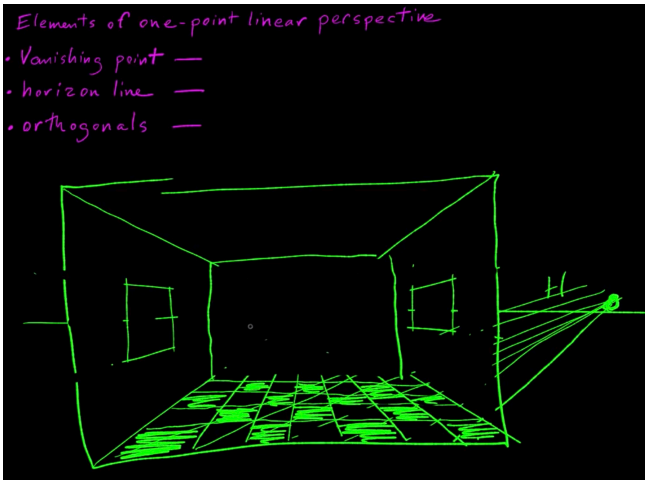
Steven: Now I'm just going to fill in a few of these tiles alternating so that you really can get a sense of that floor in space. Is that working?



Elements of one-point perspective, VP= vanishing point, H= horizon line (graphic: Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Even in this rough way, this is working, basically!

Steven: It actually couldn't be rougher, could it?! But I think it still makes the point. If I were then finally to get rid of these lines and in fact get rid of the vanishing point entirely, and instead now draw in a back wall, we have something that comes fairly close to looking like an interior space.



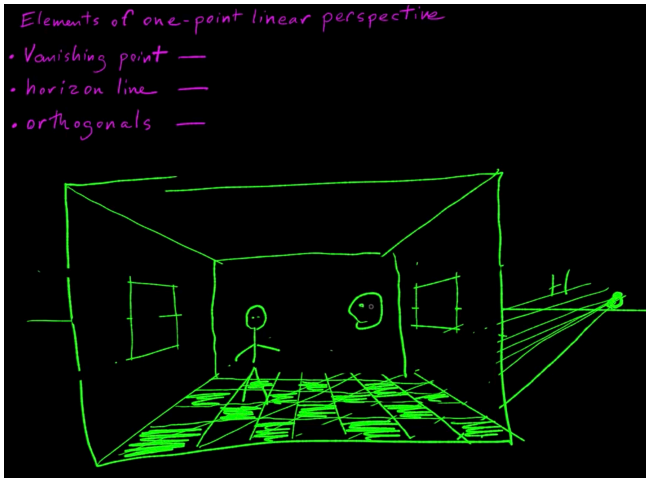
Elements of one-point perspective with VP removed, H= horizon line (graphic: Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Now what about putting figures in?

Steven: Ah. So now you're really asking for trouble here…

Beth: I'm sorry. Can you do that?

Steven: I don't know. Let's see. So if I were to draw a figure, what I would like to do is make sure that the eye level of the figure is approximately at the horizon line. So I would put that figure in just about here.



Elements of one-point perspective with figures added, H= horizon line (graphic: Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: And what if you put a figure more in the foreground or more in the background?

Steven: So if I put a figure that was more in the foreground, I would still want their eye level to be at that imaginary horizon line. But of course, now they would be larger.

Beth: Right. So I think this is the part that's counter-intuitive. The heads are on the same level, and it's the feet that are on different levels.

Steven: That's exactly right. And Alberti also said that that eye level, that horizon line would ideally also be the viewer's eye level so that the perspective would really work perfectly.

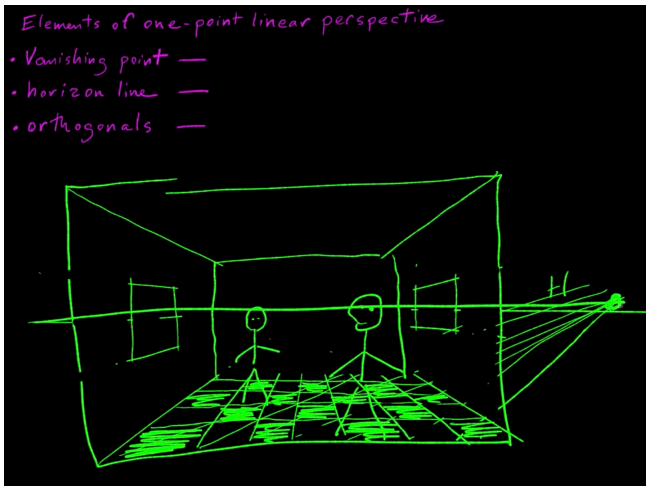
Beth: Okay, so we have orthogonals, the diagonal lines that meet at the vanishing point. We know the vanishing point is a point on the horizon line, and we understand how these correspond to the viewer and to creating an illusion of space.

Steven: Let's take a look at what somebody who can *really* draw does with this.

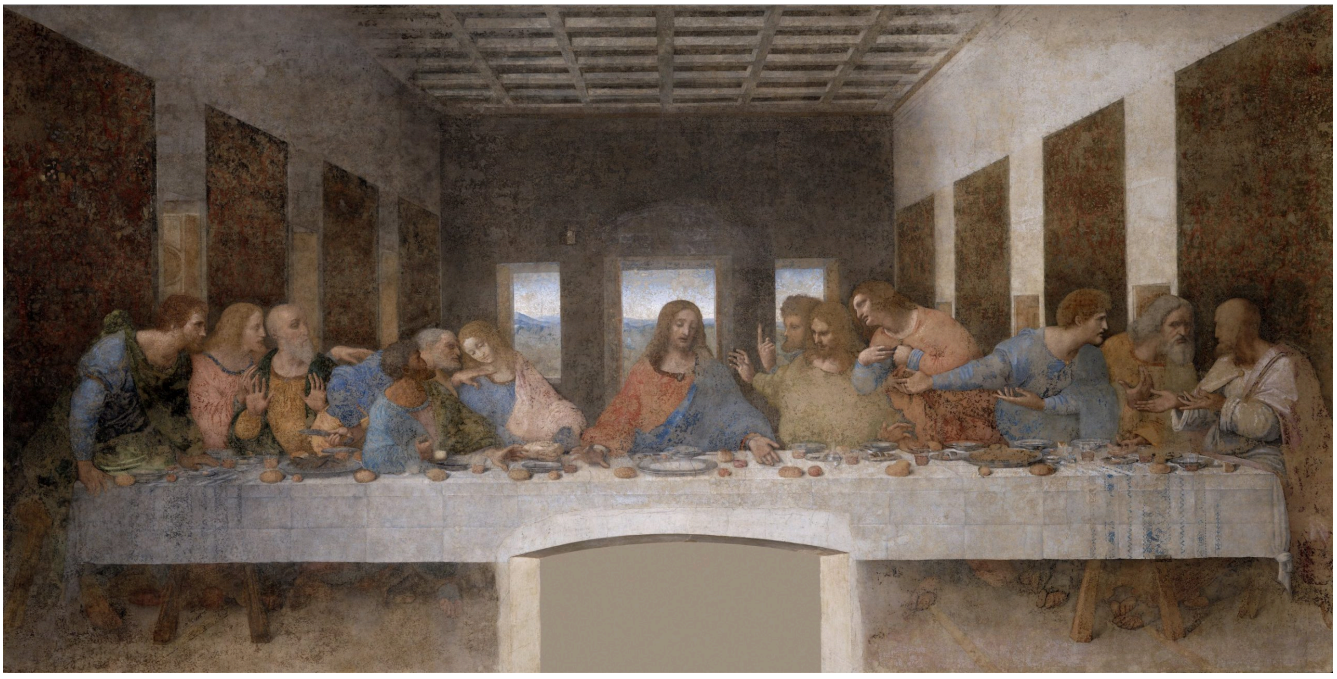
Beth: So not you!

Steven: Not me at all: Leonardo da Vinci.

Beth: Someone who can really draw….



Elements of one-point perspective with figures added, H= horizon line (graphic: Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Leonardo da Vinci, Last Supper, 1495-98, tempera and oil on plaster (Santa Maria della Grazie, Milan)

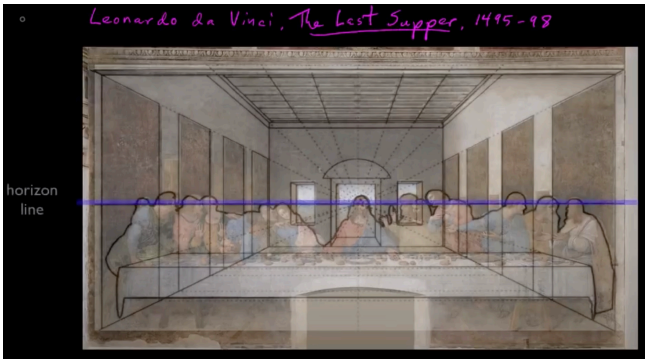
Beth: So here is Leonardo's *Last Supper*. Immediately, the interesting thing is that after Brunelleschi discovers linear perspective, artists like Masaccio begin to use it. But they realize that in addition to creating an illusion of space, it has a way of bringing the viewer's attention to the vanishing point. So artists begin to use it not just to create that illusion, but they begin to use it expressively. And that's what we really see here with Leonardo.

Steven: So not only is Leonardo creating this beautiful perspectival space, but he's also focusing our attention on Jesus Christ at the center who is the vanishing point.

Beth: Right. It brings our eye, our attention to the divine.

Steven: So we saw Leonardo's *Last Supper*, and we can certainly just intuitively make out the orthogonals and the vanishing point, but let's really look at the diagram.

Beth: Okay, here we are.



Perspective diagram of Leonardo, Last Supper, 1495-98 (Santa Maria della Grazie, Milan) (graphic: Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: So it's interesting. Their eye level all across is basically at the horizon line. And of course, we see the vanishing point, the point where all of the orthogonals intersect, which is right here. So we have all of these lines that are moving across the surface of this wall, and they are all bringing our eye right to Jesus Christ in the center.

Beth: And those lines are orthogonal lines. And there you have it.

Steven: That's how it works…

Beth: Linear perspective!

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/eOksHhQ8TLM>

II

Central Italy: Painting

13.

Gentile da Fabriano, 'Adoration of the Magi'

Dr. Joanna Milk Mac Farland



Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

When looking at Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi*, imagine yourself in front of it. Not standing in front of the painting in the bright Uffizi gallery, but in front of an altar in a dark sacristy, watching flickering candlelight dance on layers of silver, gold and paint that have been molded, incised, and glazed into glittering textures. The effect would be overwhelming. Only after this visual shock would you begin to look more closely, wondering what the painting is actually about, who could have painted such a thing, and—perhaps just as importantly for the Renaissance viewer—who could have possibly afforded it. The answers to these questions are complex and intertwined. Yet, with a little historical context, they can be found in the painting itself.

An altarpiece fit for kings

The altarpiece depicts several Gospel stories surrounding the birth of Christ as they were retold in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In the main panel, three Magi (wise men and kings believed to come from unknown, eastern lands) offer gifts to the newly born Christ child. Their adventure begins in the background: smaller scenes of the Magi fill an extraordinary landscape in the three arches above, allowing us to follow their journey in a cartoon-like, continuous narrative.



The three magi presenting gifts to the Christ child (detail), Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)



The magi entering Jerusalem (detail), Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)

At far left, they climb a mountain in search of the star they believed would fulfill an ancient prophecy telling of a great king. Following this star, the magi lead their impressive retinue to Jerusalem, shown at the top center of the painting (see image above), and then to the smaller town of Bethlehem at the upper right corner.

The main action of the panel then unfolds in the foreground, where the Magi finally arrive at the small cave where Joseph and Mary have been forced to take shelter with their newborn child. Haloed and resplendent, each king takes his turn offering a gift of gold, frankincense, or myrrh, removing his crown, and kissing the foot of the tiny baby.

As in earlier images of the Magi, they are accompanied by large numbers of courtiers and attendants on horseback as if they were emissaries from a foreign country. More than previous artists, Gentile used the journey of the Magi as an opportunity to flaunt his visual imagination and technical skill. The ‘kings’ do not wear ancient clothing, as one might expect from a biblical story, but imaginative costumes designed to look luxurious and vaguely exotic.

The royal retinue is bursting with varied figure types, intricately patterned brocades, and rare animals. Foreground figures are almost stacked on top of one another, as if the ground is tilted forward in order to fill a limited space with a maximum number of figures. Such decorative opulence is continued in the ornate, three-arched frame.



Magi (detail), Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)



Right foreground (detail), Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)

The altarpiece is not just visually busy, but also rich with narrative detail. The dog in the right foreground looks up in fear toward a horse that is about to carelessly step on him. At far left, two female attendants curiously (and somewhat rudely) inspect the precious gift the elderly king has already presented to the holy family.

Even the background includes stories-within-stories. Look for a lonely traveler being accosted by thieves, or for a leopard preparing to pounce toward a local deer he has just spotted from his seat on the back of a horse. These anecdotal, even humorous incidents invite the viewer to inspect each area of the painting carefully, discovering something new at each turn.

From Fabriano to Florence

This was the sort of visual abundance at which Gentile da Fabriano excelled. The artist's impressive skills were nurtured during his travels to artistic centers throughout Italy. As his name suggests, Gentile was from the town of Fabriano, over a hundred miles southeast of Florence. Years spent in the northern towns of Venice and Brescia in particular encouraged his love of courtly ornamentation and an interest in the close observation of plants and animals. These sojourns also helped build his reputation, and his arrival in Florence by 1422 at the height of his powers would have caused quite the tizzy among the city's artists and the elite families who patronized them.



Lorenzo Monaco, Madonna Enthroned (from a ten-part altarpiece), 1390-1400, 61 x 123.7 cm (The Toledo Museum of Art)

At the time, Florence was awash with creativity—a crucible of varying artistic styles. In the works of Lorenzo Monaco, the most successful Florentine painter in these years, an infusion of curving, northern European forms enlivened the inherited tradition of the previous century.

New directions were being pioneered in the practice of sculpture and architecture: Brunelleschi had just conducted his now famous experiment in perspective and the sculptor Donatello helped to revive a taste for classicizing figures and illusionistic depictions of space. The young Masaccio was a scant few years away from changing the history of art by exploring these innovations through the medium of painting.

Palla Strozzi

Into this moment of visual experimentation and change stepped Gentile da Fabriano, a virtual artistic celebrity throughout Italy and beyond. He soon received a prime opportunity to demonstrate his abilities to the city: a prestigious commission from Florence's wealthiest citizen, Palla Strozzi. Strozzi spent an unprecedented sum on the building and decoration of his family's chapel in the sacristy of the church of Santa Trinità. Sometime before 1423, the banker turned to Gentile for an altarpiece as part of this project. The Adoration of the Magi represents the result of this commission, showing us that Gentile knew just how to dazzle an expectant audience.



The patron, Palla Strozzi (detail), Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)

Although we are not sure why a scene of the Adoration was chosen for the painting, it seems likely that Palla saw the subject as an opportunity to display his status in other ways.

The courtly retinue of Gentile's painting reminded viewers of Palla's diplomatic credentials: the banker had travelled as a member of official Florentine visits to various cities throughout Italy. He even had himself depicted as one the Magi's courtiers. Just behind the third king, he stands holding a falcon—a reference to his family, since strozzieri was the Tuscan word for "falconer."

Other personalized symbols are cleverly included in the painting. The bridle on the white horse to the far right, for example, is decorated with a crescent moon, the central feature on the Strozzi coat-of-arms.



Right edge with frame (detail), Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)

A different kind of naturalism

Gentile's altarpiece visually announced the amount of gold his patron could purchase and the caliber of artist he could afford to hire. But it also displayed Palla's cultivated taste for the new and daring. For all of its apparent preoccupation with wealth and worldly status, the *Adoration* celebrated nature in a way that few paintings had before. People, animals and their movements are carefully observed. Flowers seem to burst forth from the pillars that bracket the frame (see detail above). The subtle modeling of figures' faces is quite different from the stark contours seen in paintings by popular Florentine artists such as Lorenzo Monaco. And Florentine viewers would surely have noted how fur and fabric were depicted using softer brush strokes than those they were used to seeing. More remarkably, the scenes within this complex structure create a sort of visual dissertation on different kinds of light and shadow. In the main scene, the famous star of Bethlehem illuminates surrounding trees, gilding the edges of their leaves and casting intricate shadows behind the heads of the maids at left.



Two attendants, the Madonna and Christ Child and St. Joseph (detail), Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)

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The small panels below the main scene (a supporting structure known as a predella) are even more experimental in their depiction of different kinds of lighting. The Nativity (image below) is imagined as a night scene with multiple sources of light: the supernatural radiance emanating from the small Christ Child, the brightness of the angel appearing to shepherds in the background, and the much softer glow of the moon at top left.



Nativity (predella), Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)

In the middle predella panel, the new family flees to Egypt against a landscape bathed in the blazing midday sun – a raised golden orb amid a blue sky showering the nearest hillsides in gold. The last panel shows Christ's presentation in the temple, the building's dark interior warmly lit by a wall lamp at its center.



The Flight into Egypt (predella), Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)

Gentile used real gold to achieve many of these subtle lighting effects, demonstrating his ability to combine intricate manipulation of precious materials with an interest in naturalism. Perfecting a technique that would be copied by many other artists, he layered gold leaf underneath layers of paint to lend brightly lit surfaces an added glow—an effect that would be more readily apparent in candlelight. This means precious metals are woven underneath the surface, on the surface, and protruding from the surface, like a tapestry made of paint and gold.

Looking again

To the modern viewer, Gentile's *Adoration* may seem too busy, too ornate and too crowded. Even art historians have sometimes had difficulties looking past its emphasis on patterning and flattened space to see how this painting and other works by Gentile contributed to the flowering of the arts in Early Renaissance Florence. Yet the altarpiece's very richness helped to insure its influence, allowing artists to draw different lessons from Gentile's painting techniques and visual interests. These contemporary viewers likely understood what present-day visitors to the Uffizi might forget: that the *Adoration* was not designed to be taken in at a single glance. If we remember this and try to look at the image the way it was meant to be looked at—again and again—it will reward each viewing.

14.

Gentile da Fabriano, 'Adoration of the Magi'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

This is a transcript of a conversation conducted at the Uffizi, Florence.

Steven: One of the wealthiest people in early Renaissance Florence, Palla Strozzi, commissioned Gentile da Fabriano to paint a magnificent altarpiece for his family's private chapel in an important church, Santa Trinita.

Beth: The subject is the Adoration of the Magi. The Magi are by legend the three kings who follow a star that leads them to Christ—who has just been born–to whom they present gifts and acknowledge Christ as King of Kings by removing their own crowns and placing them before Christ. This was commissioned by a man who was incredibly

wealthy: essentially the king of Florence, but Florence had no kings. Florence was a republic.

Steven: The city of Florence was an independent political entity that was controlled by the wealthy merchants of the city and the guilds.

Beth: The people of Florence were independent and proud members of a republic but then you had this enormous accumulation of wealth, especially in the early 15th century.

Steven: This painting is a perfect way of showing off that wealth. The artist, who came from northern Italy, settled in Florence in large part because there was money to be made there. There were patrons to be had there.

Beth: He was very handsomely paid for this altarpiece. We read one estimate that he was paid six times the annual wage of a skilled laborer for this one altarpiece.

Steven: His particular style is one of opulence. It's a bejeweled surface. There's gold. It's a perfect way for one of the leading families in Florence to show its importance.

Beth: The Strozzi family made their money primarily through banking—through handling gold. Although Palla Strozzi, the patron for this particular painting, ignored the banking business and was much more interested in the arts and humanist learning.

Steven: As we stand here in the Uffizi gallery in Florence, it's interesting to watch people look at this painting. These people are picking out the many anecdotes that you can recognize, very much the way people would have when the painting was first made. This is a real crowd-pleaser.

Beth: There's fun things to see.

Steven: We can make out the story of the Magi very clearly. It's really quite an inventive structure because you have a continuous landscape, but what we're seeing within it are a whole series of moments in time…

Beth: It's a continuous narrative.

Steven: In the upper-left corner, we can see the three kings, very distant, just under the star of Bethlehem over the sea. We understand this from the story to be in the East.

Beth: Which explains their attire. Then, in the central arch, we see the three kings entering Jerusalem where King Herod asked the three Magi to report back where they find this king that King Herod has heard will threaten his reign.

Steven: He would like to kill the child.

Beth: Yes.

Steven: …but of course doesn't let on. Then, in the right-most upper corner, we see the three Magi entering the city of Bethlehem. Then presumably, the scene that is laid out before us, is taking place there.

Beth: We get the sense of a crowd watching the three Magi approach Christ and Mary.

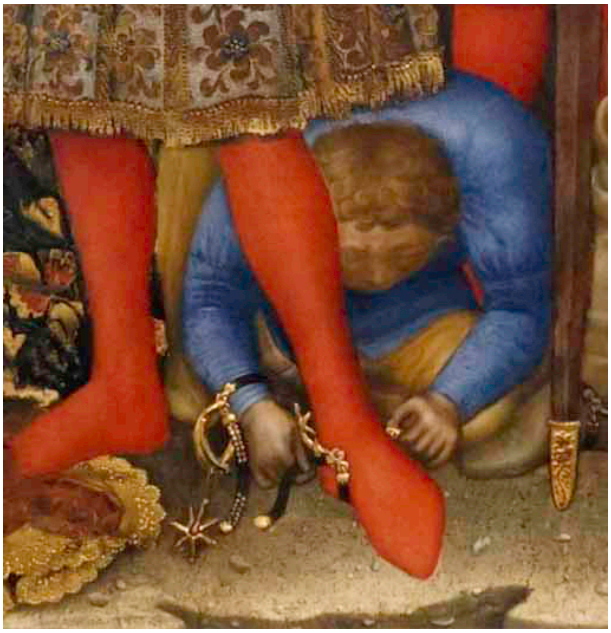


Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi (detail with Jesus and Melchior), 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Steven: The Christ Child is playful. Look at those feet! We see the three Magi in the process of bowing down before Christ. You can see that there are two attendants just behind Mary that are examining the first gift, and Joseph is standing just to Mary's left.

Beth: The spurs are being removed from the youngest Magi's ankles. He just gotten off his horse, and he's about to approach Jesus.

Steven: In fact, we see lots of pages. There is a sense of the courtliness of the scene. The spurs that you are talking about are really marvelous. They're actually built up to be three-dimensional and this is done with plaster that is then gilded, but what it makes it look like is that it's a solid piece of gold—that this is jewelry attached to the image itself.



Detail of Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Beth: You can see why that kind of treatment of the gold might appeal to as wealthy a patron as Palla Strozzi.

Steven: The style of this painting is generally referred to as International Gothic. This is the last moment of the Gothic before the Renaissance will develop.

Beth: That's because we don't see some of the things that we associate with the early Renaissance here. Unlike with Masaccio, who is painting just a few years after this, we don't see linear perspective. In fact, we see a building up by the figures pressed into the foreground.

Steven: The artist is avoiding the overlapping and obscuring of figures.

Beth: At the same time, we see foreshortening, which helps to create an illusion of space with the horse on the right for example or the horse behind who's facing us.

Steven: Of course, diminishing scale. The figures get smaller as we're meant to read them going further back in space. The artist may have been influenced by somebody like Ambrogio Lorenzetti, who had created an extensive landscape in the city of Siena.

Beth: The figures are still somewhat elongated, especially if you look at the Virgin Mary, although the artist is using modeling to describe her knees and her thighs. If she were to stand up I think we would see her as being tall and thin.

Steven: I think the emphasis here is on her elegance, her beauty as opposed to her anatomical accuracy…

Beth: …which would be a very Gothic thing and not a very Renaissance thing.

Steven: The main panel is set between smaller scenes. Above we have Christ Blessing, and then we have an Annunciation on either side. Below we have three predella scenes.

Beth: In the predella panels we see three scenes from Christ's childhood. On the left the Nativity, in the center the Flight into Egypt, and on the right the Presentation in the Temple.

Steven: Let's take a close look at the Nativity.



Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi (detail with the Virgin Mary in blue, Joseph in yellow behind her, Jesus on her lap being kissed by the king Melchior, with kings Casper stooping, and Balthazar standing), 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Beth: This has been called one of the first night scenes in art history. Lighting that comes from the moon and the stars, and the angels and the Christ child himself.

Steven: There's so many lovely details. Look for instance at the crown of peacocks worn by the figure on the right or the way in which the flowers in the frame push outward.

Beth: To me this painting is very much an accumulation of details. There's a lot to look at but it still resides in the late medieval Gothic tradition.

Steven: And is a reminder of the tremendous wealth that would make the Florentine Renaissance possible.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/4kbv2Gaw-9U>

15.

Gentile da Fabriano, 'Adoration of the Magi' (reframed)

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank

> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” […] 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. — *Matthew 2:1-2, 10-11, NIV*

The journey of the wise men

Brilliant golden brocades. Psuedo-Arabic. Turbans. Leopards and lions. Gentile da Fabriano’s *Adoration of the Magi* creates a dynamic visual narrative of the journey of the Magi to Bethlehem recounted in the Gospel of Matthew. The painting uses continuous narrative (depicting more than one moment of time within a single frame) to show us the moment the Magi first see the star announcing Jesus’ birth, their journey to Jerusalem, and then subsequent arrival in Bethlehem where they meet the infant Jesus. Three golden arches (forming part of the elaborate frame) differentiate the three narrative moments, although the final moment—when they arrive at the cave in Bethlehem where Mary, Joseph, and Jesus rest—spills across the foreground.



Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Here the Magi take turns kneeling before Jesus and presenting him with gifts (of gold and of aromatic tree resins, specifically frankincense and myrrh). In Gentile’s painting, the oldest Magi (eventually known as Melchior) is kissing Jesus’ foot, as the Christian messiah (Jesus) touches his head. The other two Magi (Caspar, middle aged; and Balthazar, young) prepare to do the same, holding their gifts aloft. All three Magi are elaborately dressed, and each one has a golden crown.

The Magi were thought to be from east of Europe (though the specific origins of each Magi are not noted in the Bible). By the later Middle Ages, the Magi were understood as standing in for the world, with each of them coming from Asia, Africa, and even Europe. By the fifteenth century, when Gentile was working, this image of a more globalized array of Magi had been widely adopted. It provided a lavish sense of different places, and allowed artists to show a variety of exotic luxury

goods. It also helped to give the impression of a united world under God.



Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi (detail with the Virgin Mary in blue, Joseph in yellow behind her, Jesus on her lap being kissed by the king Melchior, with kings Casper stooping, and Balthazar standing), 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Commissioned by Palla Strozzi, a wealthy banker and merchant, for his family's chapel for the Florentine church of Santa Trinità, the *Adoration of the Magi* speaks to the global flow of goods at this time, visual transculturation, as well as the European conceptualization of non-European places and peoples.



Interior of Santa Trinità, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Psuedo-Arabic

The haloes around the Madonna and Joseph are a brilliant gold, emphasizing their holiness. If we look closely at them, we notice the haloes also include what appears to be writing. This script is actually psuedo-Arabic—a script that approximates Arabic writing, but is not entirely correct. It suggests that the artist could not actually read Arabic; that said, he does include Arabic words as well. The haloes also include decorative rosettes separating each word. Psuedo-Arabic script doesn't only appear on Mary's and Joseph's haloes either. The young page, standing next to the white horse in the foreground, wears a sash written in the script. One of the female figures behind Mary, whose back is turned to us, wears a white shawl decorated with pseudo-Arabic writing. The sleeves of the youngest Magi suggest the script as well, written at the elbow. Here Gentile seems to write the word *al-ʿādilī* (The Just).[1]



Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi (detail with psuedo-Arabic script seen in Mary's halo and cloth at left), 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

But why would the artist include psuedo-Arabic in one of the holiest scenes from the life of Jesus? One possible reason is that other Italian artists similarly included psuedo-Arabic into their paintings—often on haloes or textiles—and Gentile was continuing this tradition. We find examples in the paintings of Duccio, Giotto, and Masaccio, and in sculptures like Verocchio's *David* and Filarete's doors for the Vatican. Gentile incorporated pseudo-Arabic into other paintings, such as his *Madonna of the Humility* (c. 1420) <http://www.culturaitalia.it/opencms/museid/viewItem.jsp?language=it&case=&id=oai%3Aculturaitalia.it%3Amuseiditalia-work_57318> and

Coronation of the Virgin (c.1420) <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/646/gentile-da-fabriano-coronation-of-the-virgin-italian-about-1420/>. It is likely more complicated than Gentile solely copying other artists however.



Bowl (Mamluk, Syria), 14th century, brass, incised and engraved, with traces of silver inlay, 7.62 x 16.51 cm (LACMA) <https://collections.lacma.org/node/204908>

It seems that artists like Gentile borrowed motifs and stylistic patterns from Ayyubid or Mamluk metalwork and textiles that they encountered first hand. These were highly coveted luxury objects and materials, and wealthy families—like the Strozzi—often owned examples. The city of Florence also had made several diplomatic missions to important Muslim trade areas, including one in 1421 to Tunis and another in 1422–23 to Cairo. They established a commercial treaty with the Mamluk sultan in Egypt, and opened a direct trade route to Alexandria via Pisa (which Florence captured in 1406) and Livorno (controlled by Florence after 1421). It has been suggested that these commercial ties may have stimulated even greater interest in luxury objects, like Mamluk brass objects, and the decorative schema found on them.

A third possible reason is that pseudo-Arabic connoted sacredness in some way. The city of Jerusalem (and the Holy Lands more generally) is in the eastern Mediterranean and in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries these areas were controlled by Muslim rulers. Perhaps the use of Arabic script was a way for artists like Giotto and Gentile da Fabriano to reference the Holy Lands within their paintings, or even to suggest the common heritage of Islam and Christianity.



Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi (detail), 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Wearing signs of "the east"

Besides the use of psuedo-Arabic, other elements of the painting point to Gentile's desire to call to mind "the east" and the exotic sense of the Holy Lands. Multiple figures in the painting wear turbans, a common visual sign that indicated someone from outside Christian Europe, typically someone of Middle Eastern descent. Caspar, the second Magi, wears one. They are used here to suggest the Holy Lands once again, as well as the eastern or non-European origins of some of the Magi. After all, the journey of the Magi takes them to Jerusalem and onto Bethlehem, and so the turban here communicates that the scene is outside of Christian territory, in a more exotic location.

Besides turbans, we also find figures, such as the Magi, wearing elaborate brocades, damasks, other silks, and velvets. Melchior wears a patterned garment of pearlescent white with golden accents, and above that a mantle of burnt siena accented with gold and silver. On both, rosettes and other floral designs animate the surface. Caspar wears a long tunic in black decorated with golden pomegranates.

While the pomegranate was a prominent Christian

symbol of rebirth, it was also common as a symbol of its eastern origins and it was a popular motif in Muslim textiles as well. Gentile also includes pomegranate trees in the painting to connote Jerusalem's and Bethlehem's eastern locales. Balthazar's outfit is similarly elaborate. His abdomen is covered in golden designs that almost mimic peacock feathers. His long and elaborate sleeves extend to his knees, and are enlivened by reddish flowers scrolling across the surface. Golden and silver fringe can be found on the edges of his entire outfit.

The exact origins of these textiles is difficult to pinpoint but they all evoke "eastern" patterns and textiles. They could have been acquired by trade from Muslim merchants, or produced in Italy. Cities like Venice, Genoa, and Florence became skilled centers of silk production, and their designs often mimic Muslim textile patterns. Such clothing (whether acquired from afar or made in Italy), was expensive, and was highly sought after by elites. The ornate appearance of the Magi's clothes in Gentile's painting does seem to suggest that they are men "from the east."



Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi (detail with page in the center and a leopard or cheetah in upper right. Note the use of pastiglia seen especially in the tack), 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

An exotic menagerie

As if the painting wasn't already a feast for the eyes, Gentile has also included a number of non-European or exotic animals into the riotous scene. Two monkeys sit atop a camel. We also find a lion eyeing two birds, and further below a leopard (or possible cheetah) amidst the tightly packed group of men. Animals from outside Europe (Asia, Africa, and eventually the Americas after 1492) were a constant source of interest for Europeans. They were collected, given as gifts, and sometimes even trained to join in courtly hunting expeditions.

Falcons were not necessarily an exotic predatory bird, but falconry had been heavily influenced by Arabian/Muslim traditions. Falcons were especially associated with Persian culture. New falcons acquired from distant lands also appealed to Italian elites. The man holding the falcon is possible a member of the Strozzi family (possibly Palla, the patron) because the Italian word for falconer is *strozziere*.



Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi (detail with animals), 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Wealthy individuals sometimes acquired exotic animals as a sign of their wealth and their interest in the natural world. Monkeys and apes were popular collectibles, and here they wear collars so as not to escape. Large cats, like the leopard and lion, were sometimes kept and trained for hunting, especially among the northern Italian courts. Exotic animals like camels were popular gifts.

The non-European animals in the painting also help to set the scene in a more exoticized eastern location. The horses are likely Arabian horses, acquired from Muslim trading partners. The camel's associations with the Holy Lands are mentioned in the Bible. While there is no peacock displayed in the painting, one man does wear a hat/

headdress made of its feathers. The peacock, as a symbol of resurrection, dated back to antiquity. Peafowl came from Asia, namely India, and the man's headgear helps to further associate his eastern origins.

And of course, some of these exotic animals had symbolic meaning that played a role in the painting. Matthew 19:24 famously notes that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Here, it might symbolically remind wealthy viewers, like the Strozzi, of this warning.

Material brilliance

The two most expensive materials used in this painting are lapis lazuli and gold. The Virgin Mary's robe is ultramarine, or a brilliant blue color derived from lapis lazuli. It came from mines in Afghanistan. It could only be mined five months out of the year too, increasing its monetary worth. At this time in the Renaissance, it was more valuable than gold. This is why artists like Gentile often reserved it for Mary's mantle, using other blue pigments throughout the remainder of the painting.



Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi (detail with Jesus and Melchior), 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Gold was also expensive, and Gentile has used a lot of it here. Palla Strozzi, wanting to advertise his wealth, would surely have been thrilled by the lavish use of the gold across the surface. Most gold came from west Africa, traded along caravan routes. Mali, which at one point had been ruled by the powerful and wealthy Musa Keita I (known as Mansa Musa in Europe) reputedly had an enormous amount of gold. When Musa Keita I traveled to Mecca on the hajj between 1324 and 1325 he flooded the market with gold and caused an economic collapse because the price of gold fell steeply.

Gentile doesn't just incorporate gold into his painting, he uses a technique to suggest an even greater abundance of the precious metal. He uses *pastiglia*, or raised gilt ornament, which we see on the crowns, swords, spurs, and even on some textiles. It gives these golden areas a three-dimensional quality because they are raised from the flat surface of the painting. Imagine the shimmering quality of all this gold and other material magnificence in the flickering candlelight of the Strozzi chapel!

[1] Ennio G. Napolitano, *Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions in Italian Art* (PhD dissertation, Otto-Friedrich-Universität, Bamberg), p. 99.

16.

Masaccio, 'Virgin and Child'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the National Gallery in London.

Steven: We're in the National Gallery in London, looking at Masaccio's *Virgin and Child*. When we're looking at paintings that are centuries-old, a lot can have changed.

Beth: In the case of so many paintings from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, we're looking at paintings that were parts of altarpieces that often had many, many panels.

Steven: You can have a single panel painting. If you have two panels that are hinged together at the middle, we call it a diptych. If you have three panels, it's a triptych, and anything more than that, we give up, and we simply call it a polyptych.

Beth: And that's because the prefix poly means many.

Steven: Scholars have reconstructed what this polyptych might have originally looked like based on those panels that have survived.

Beth: Often, panels for large polyptychs like this end up in different museums. What happened over the centuries is that the paintings were not particularly valued, they were taken apart, and when they're sold on the market, you can get more money by selling them individually.

Steven: Now, we have documents that tell us that this panel was originally part of a polyptych thar was for a church in the city of Pisa in Italy.

Beth: And we know that the painter was a wealthy notary, but although we have so much documentation about this commission, sadly there are still 10 panels that are unknown to us…



Masaccio, The Virgin and Child, 1426, tempera on poplar, 134.8 x 73.5 cm (The National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/EavTYa>

Steven: …that may have been lost permanently. But even when we look at this panel, which was featured as the central panel in the original polyptych, even here there are losses. This was intended for a church and churches were illuminated with candles and lanterns that threw off a lot of soot, which meant that people would periodically clean the paintings and do so not with the care of a modern conservator.

Beth: And that's evident if we look at the draperies of the angels. We can see areas of paint loss. We see that also in Christ's feet and in the Virgin Mary's left hand. But we're still so lucky to have what survives here, and there still is so much to see.

Steven: The largest figure by far is the Virgin Mary. She wears this beautiful, brilliant blue cloak with this red undergarment, which would originally have had silver underpainting that would have been quite luminous.

Beth: And there are other areas that were probably brightly painted and very decorative that are lost to us. For example, if we look at the wings of the two standing angels.

Steven: Look at the Christ Child. This is such a difference from the way in which he had been represented in earlier Italian paintings by Giotto or even earlier by Cimabue. Here, we see an infant that has baby fat, whose head is appropriately large in proportion to his body. This feels like a real child.

Beth: Well, look at the way that he eats the grapes out of his mothers hand. As he eats them, he keeps two fingers in his mouth, which just seems so characteristically child-like to me.



Masaccio, The Virgin and Child, detail, 1426, tempera on poplar, 134.8 x 73.5 cm (The National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/EavSPB>

Steven: The grapes have a more somber, symbolic meaning.

Beth: When we see grapes in Christian paintings, they'll almost always refer to wine and in Christian theology, the wine is during the mass, during the Eucharist, the blood of Christ. So, this is a reference to Christ's future death on the cross which makes it possible, according to Christian theology, the salvation of mankind.

Steven: And this perhaps explains Mary's somber expression. Masaccio, the artist, seems to almost be suggesting that Mary is seeing into the future, understanding her child's fate.

Beth: There's something, I think, important about the way that she holds him. In earlier paintings, Christ looks older, but he's also held in a way that seems very formal, as though Mary were holding up Christ to the viewer. But here, she's got her left arm under his bottom and his thigh and there's something very maternal and natural.

Steven: We associate this artist with the development of naturalism (the faithful representation of the natural world) in the Early Renaissance, clearly learning lessons that had originally been put forward by artist like Giotto, a century earlier. We only need to look, for instance, at the masterful use of light and shadow, or chiaroscuro, in the folds of the blue outer garment that is worn by the Virgin Mary.

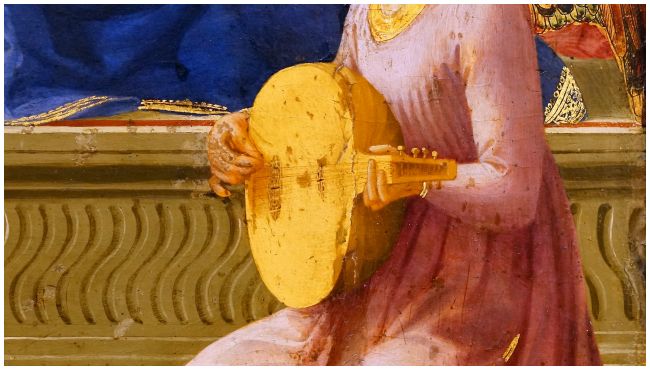
Beth: And you can see very clearly that the light is coming from the left, illuminating those draperies, casting them in shadows on the right. And that drapery is also helping to reveal the form of the body underneath. This is such an important part of the Early Renaissance, this interest in the human body, even when we are depicting divine figures.

Steven: The word "renaissance" refers to a rebirth of interest in the Classical world, in Ancient Greece and Rome. For Renaissance painters, that meant naturalistic depictions, representing the world that we see.

Beth: Now, you could say that Masaccio isn't doing that because we have a gold background—we don't have an earthly setting for these figures. But we have to remember that this is made for a chapel, within Santa Maria del Carmine Pisa (dismantled 1568). The way that it is painted is dictated by the patron, Ser Giuliano degli Scarsi da San Giusto, who may very well have specified the gold background, which would have shown off the patron's generosity toward the church and his own wealth. (Masaccio was paid 80 florins for the painting and Antonio di Biagio da Siena, 18 florins for the frame.)

Steven: But Masaccio has minimized the gold by creating a high back for the throne on which the Virgin sits. And if you look closely at that throne, you'll see classicizing columns, a clear reference to the interest at this moment in antiquity.

Beth: And there's yet something else we might not notice at first when we think about the influence of the Classical world—that pattern of wavy lines we see along the bottom.



Masaccio, The Virgin and Child, 1426, tempera on poplar, 134.8 x 73.5 cm (The National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/22JSQj5>

Steven: This pattern is called the strigil motif, and we think that Masaccio was borrowing it from ancient Roman sarcophagi, also a reference to Christ's eventual death and entombment.

Beth: The angels clearly stand behind the throne, and the other angels are in front of the throne, and there is that very characteristic interest that Masaccio has in creating an illusion of space, something that was key for the artists of the Renaissance.

Steven: Well look at the angels on the front step. They're both holding lutes at extreme angles from our perspective. We call this foreshortening.

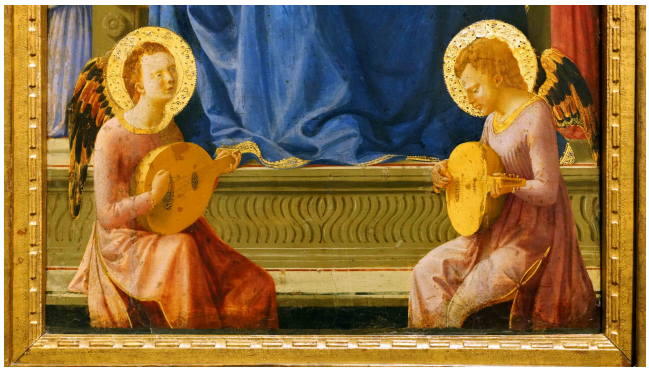
Beth: And it helps to create an illusion of depth there in the front.

Steven: It's *so* believable.

Beth: Once we approach this painting with the understanding that it's part of a larger altarpiece and was likely cut down, we begin to be able to see that. As we look closer at those angels, we can see that they were cut off at the bottom. Art historians believe as much as 25 centimeters has been lost from the bottom of this painting.

Steven: And look at the space on which the angels in the foreground sit. If you look very carefully, you can see a shadow that does not belong to either angel and we think was cast by one of the figures that was cut off that had originally stood at the left.

Beth: And there are other shadows here. For example, we can see that the Madonna herself cast a shadow. What better to convince us of the reality of these forms? It helps make it seem so believable and so real…



Masaccio, The Virgin and Child, 1426, tempera on poplar, 134.8 x 73.5 cm (The National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/EavT5g>

Steven: …and it will have a profound impact on the development on Renaissance art. When we think of the masters of the High Renaissance—Michelangelo or Raphael—they are all indebted to the work done by the earlier masters like Masaccio.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/4xFs8F7B2E4>



Gallery view of Masaccio, The Virgin and Child, 1426, tempera on poplar, 134.8 x 73.5 cm (The National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/22JSQio>

17.

Masaccio, 'Holy Trinity'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Steven: We're in Santa Maria Novella, an enormous Dominican church in Florence. We've just come in from a cloistered (enclosed) graveyard, and the first thing we see across this enormous expanse is Masaccio's *Holy Trinity* fresco, with the Virgin and St. John.



Masaccio, Holy Trinity with the Virgin and Saint John, c. 1427, Fresco, 667 x 317 cm, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2j6HaJG>

Beth: Although this painting has a long and complicated history of being moved and restored, the doorway we walked in and the view that we got was likely the view that the public got in the early 15th century when Masaccio painted it.

Steven: Much of the rest of the church has changed. There may have been an altar in front of this painting. To the right, there would have been an enormous *tramezzo*—that is, a screen that would have blocked access to the inner sanctum of the church.



Masaccio, Holy Trinity with the Virgin and Saint John, c. 1427, Fresco, 667 x 317 cm, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: The subject is the Holy Trinity. According to Catholic doctrine, God is God the Father, the Son (Christ), and the Holy Spirit.

Steven: This was a fairly standard motif: this elder figure that represents God the Father, the dove representing the Holy Spirit, and Christ on a crucifix. This is known as the Throne of Mercy. The idea is that this throne is the throne of judgment, and that through Christ, man can be saved.

Beth: On the side of the Holy Trinity, we see Mary. She gestures to Christ and God. She acts as an intercessor, an intermediary between us and the divine world, and points to Christ and God.

Steven: Opposite her stands Saint John.

Beth: All of those divine figures occupy the same space. Outside of that space, we see two kneeling figures, a man on the left, a woman on the right. These are the patrons who commissioned this fresco. If you look at them closely, you see that they look straight ahead…

Steven: …and slightly up.

Beth: They're in a position of prayer, of contemplation.

Steven: Below this, we have a memento mori—that is, a reminder of death. We see a tomb, two columns on either side, and between that, a sarcophagus. But laid on top of that is a skeleton. In back of it, as if carved into stone, is an inscription.

Beth: "I was as you are. And what I am, you soon will be." This is written in Italian, not in Latin, so not in the language of the church, but in the everyday language of the people of Florence. It is reminding us that our time on earth is short, and death could come at any time. We should be preparing for our salvation.

Steven: It's a reminder that this painting had multiple audiences. It had the Dominican clergy (friars) of this church. But there was a secondary audience, the lay people of Florence (the faithful, or laity) that were allowed into this part of the church.

Beth: We have to imagine the Dominican friars preaching in front of this image to the citizens of Florence, who would come specifically to hear that preaching. People would come to visit their loved ones in the cemetery, just outside in the cloister. They'd walk through the door, and they would see this image and make a connection between the death of their loved ones and their own mortality.



Masaccio, Holy Trinity with the Virgin and Saint John, detail, c. 1427, Fresco, 667 x 317 cm, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2j6HaWv>

Steven: Although this motif was common, almost anybody looking at this painting in the early 15th century would have recognized the changes that Masaccio has brought to this motif, principally, the Classicism of the architecture and the naturalism of the figures.

Beth: In most representations of this, Christ and God are placed in the mandorla, that is a kind of enormous almond-shaped halo that encompassed both figures and in that way, situated them in an otherworldly, heavenly space. But here, Masaccio has given us what looks like ancient Roman architecture. And in fact, Brunelleschi, the great early Renaissance architect, likely helped design the architectural framework that we see here. On either side, we see fluted pilasters, and those have Corinthian or composite capitals.

Steven: A pilaster is really a flattened column…

Beth: …one that's attached to a wall.

Steven: Above that is an entablature and a cornice with dentils, another ancient Roman motif.



Masaccio, Holy Trinity with the Virgin and Saint John, detail, c. 1427, Fresco, 667 x 317 cm, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

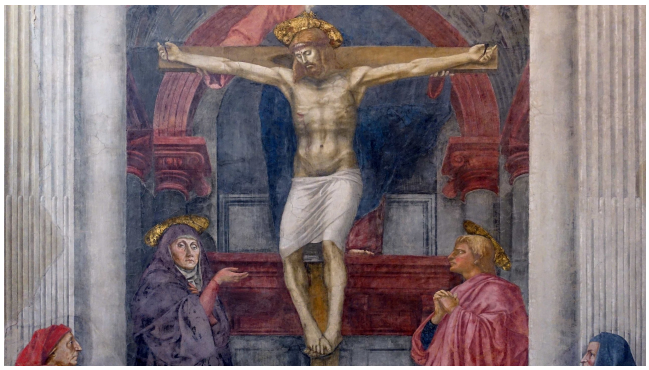
Beth: The figures of the Trinity are framed by a round arch, which is a Classical arch, not a pointed, medieval Gothic arch. That arch is carried by two attached columns with Ionic capitals. Everything that we're describing here is taken directly from ancient Greek and Roman architecture.

Steven: Behind the arch, we see a barrel vault that's defined by a beautiful series of coffers with alternating colors. At the very back of the space, we can see a secondary arch. So we have a very rational space, a measurable space, a space that makes sense.

Beth: And it makes sense precisely because Masaccio is using linear perspective. This is one of the earliest uses of linear perspective, rediscovered by Brunelleschi less than a decade before (c. 1420). Masaccio is using linear perspective to create a convincing illusion that this is not a wall but in fact the space of a chapel.

Steven: The linear perspective is made of three components, most importantly, a vanishing point. According to Alberti, a humanist who published a book called "On Painting" (1435) soon after this painting was made, linear perspective works best when the vanishing point is at the eye level of the viewer. And indeed, that is precisely where Masaccio has placed it. It's in the center of the composition, just a few inches above my eye level. From it radiate a series of orthogonals, or illusionistic diagonals that appear to recede in space. They are the agent that create the illusion of depth on a flat surface. And then the third piece is the horizon line, defined by that bottom step.

Beth: And Masaccio exploits chiaroscuro—that movement, or modulation, from light to dark—to create a sense of volume. So we see the ribcage lifted up. We see the muscles in the abdomen, the muscles in the arms. We sense the pull of Christ's weight from the cross. This interest in naturalistic human anatomy is a key feature of the early Renaissance.



Masaccio, Holy Trinity with the Virgin and Saint John, detail, c. 1427, Fresco, 667 x 317 cm, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Here again is a correspondence with the work of the architect and sculptor Brunelleschi, who produced a wooden crucifix (c. 1410-15) that is also in Santa Maria Novella and which, like the painted rendering before us, expresses the artist's careful observation of the human body and understands it responding to gravity, a reminder that Christ here is human: he has suffered, has died. And both Brunelleschi and Masaccio could look back a century to another great Italian master,

Giotto, and his massive Crucifixion (c. 1288-89). He was perhaps one of the first artists to begin to think about the representation of the human body, using light and shadow to define its forms, and to begin to pay attention to the anatomy of the body, to render Christ as physical.

Beth: One of the most remarkable things to me is God's foot. There, we have a perfectly foreshortened foot and therefore, a sense that God is standing. To me, that epitomizes what the Renaissance is about—this interpretation of divine figures as having all of the qualities that human beings have.

Steven: There is this wonderful conflict between the visionary and the actual.

Beth: So although the laity couldn't go beyond the *tramezzo*, Masaccio is giving the public a taste of what's beyond by quoting some works of art in the Strozzi Chapel.

Steven: In that chapel, above the altar, is an image of God. And then, just before the chapel and below, there's a tomb with a fresco of the Lamentation. So there is a correspondence, perhaps even a deliberate quote, in Masaccio's painting in the public part of the church.

Beth: What we're seeing is this very frontal image of God, of the Divine, presenting to us the sacrifice that God has made on our behalf. It's remarkable that this has survived, and we get to see it in its original location.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/mdd7LhVx00o>

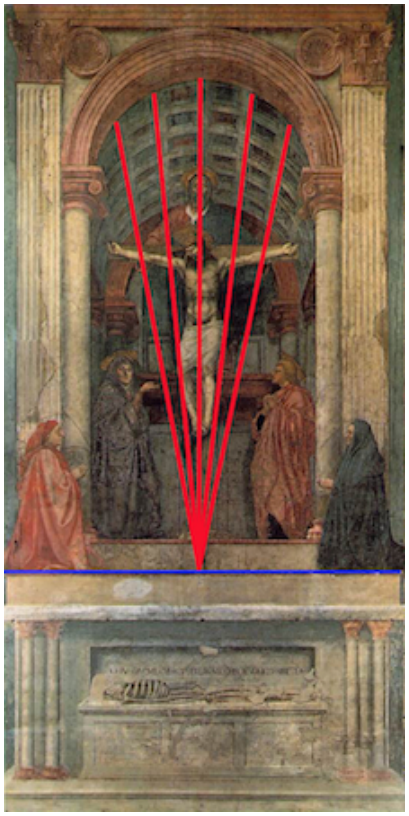


Viewer in front of Masaccio, Holy Trinity with the Virgin and Saint John, c. 1427, Fresco, 667 x 317 cm, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

18.

Masaccio, 'Holy Trinity'

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Perspective diagram of Holy Trinity, Masaccio, Holy Trinity, c. 1427, Fresco, 667 x 317 cm, (Santa Maria Novella, Florence, Italy)

Masaccio was the first painter in the Renaissance to incorporate Brunelleschi's discovery, linear perspective, in his art. He did this in his fresco the *Holy Trinity*, in Santa Maria Novella, in Florence.

Have a close look at the painting and at this perspective diagram. The orthogonals can be seen in the edges of the coffers in the ceiling (look for diagonal lines that appear to recede into the distance). Because Masaccio painted from a low viewpoint, as though we were looking up at Christ, we see the orthogonals in the ceiling, and if we traced all of the orthogonals, we would see that the vanishing point is on the ledge that the donors kneel on.

God's feet

Our favorite part of this fresco is God's feet. Actually, you can only really see one of them.



Left: Masaccio, Holy Trinity, c. 1427, fresco, 667 x 317 cm (Santa Maria Novella, Florence); right: Masaccio's Holy Trinity with the figures labeled

God is standing in this painting. This may not strike you all that much when you first think about it because our idea of God, our picture of God in our minds eye—as an old man with a beard—is very much based on Renaissance images of God.

So, here Masaccio imagines God as a man. Not a force or a power, or something abstract, but as a man. A man who stands—his feet are foreshortened, and he weighs something and is capable of walking. In medieval art, God was often represented by a hand, as though God was an abstract force or power in our lives—but here he seems so much like a flesh and blood man. This is a good indication of Humanism in the Renaissance.



View of nave of Santa Maria Novella, Florence with Masaccio's fresco on the left wall (photo: Trevor Huxham, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/j22JVk>

Masaccio's contemporaries were struck by the palpable realism of this fresco, as was Vasari who lived over one hundred years later. Vasari wrote that "the most beautiful thing, apart from the figures, is a barrel-shaped vaulting, drawn in perspective and divided into squares filled with rosettes, which are foreshortened and made to diminish so well that the wall appears to be pierced."[1]

The architecture

One of the other remarkable things about this fresco is the use of the forms of classical architecture (from ancient Greece and Rome). Masaccio borrowed much of what we see from ancient Roman architecture, and may have been helped by the great Renaissance architect Brunelleschi.

Coffers – the indented squares on the ceiling

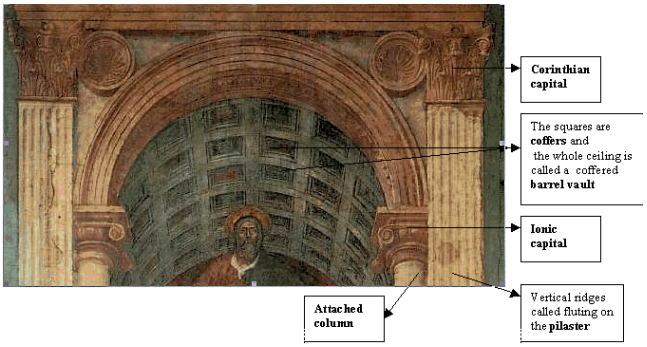
Column – a round, supporting element in architecture. In this fresco by Masaccio we see an attached column

Pilasters – a shallow, flattened out column attached to a wall— it is only decorative, and has no supporting function

Barrel Vault – vault means ceiling, and a barrel vault is a ceiling in the shape of a round arch

Ionic and Corinthian Capitals – a capital is the decorated top of a column or pilaster. An ionic capital has a scroll shape (like the ones on the attached columns in the painting), and a Corinthian capital has leaf shapes.

Fluting – the vertical, indented lines or grooves that decorated the pilasters in the painting—fluting can also be applied to a column



Holy Trinity with architectural elements labeled (detail) Masaccio, Holy Trinity, c. 1427, fresco, 667 x 317 cm (Santa Maria Novella, Florence, Italy)

1. Vasari, "Masaccio" in *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects the Artists* (first published in 1550 in Italian) <http://members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariMasaccio.html>

19.

Masaccio, 'The Tribute Money'

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker





Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence (left); Brancacci Chapel, with frescoes by Masaccio and Masolino, c. 1424-7, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence (right) (photos: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The *Tribute Money* is one of many frescoes painted by Masaccio (and another artist named Masolino) in the Brancacci chapel in Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence—when you walk into the chapel, the fresco is on your upper left. All of the frescoes in the chapel tell the story of the life of St. Peter. The story of the *Tribute Money* is told in three separate scenes within the same fresco. This way of telling an entire story in one painting is called a continuous narrative.



Masaccio, Tribute Money, 1427, fresco (Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jHV1Qv>

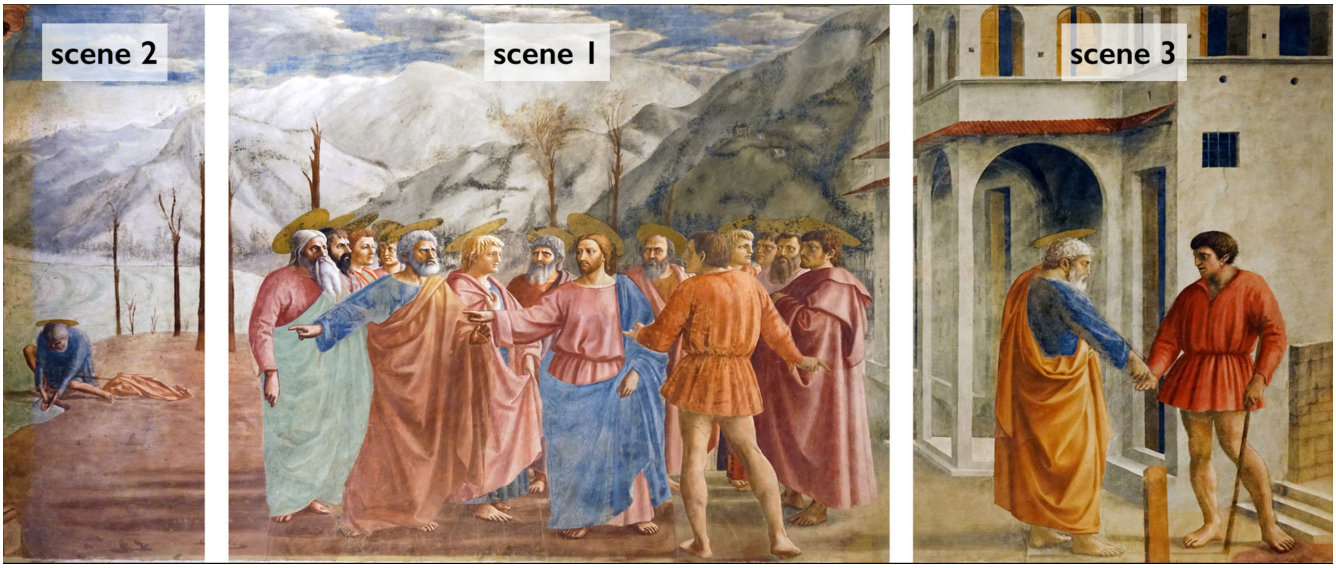


Christ, apostles, and tax collector (detail), Masaccio, Tribute Money, c. 1427, fresco (Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC-BY-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jHV1RN>

A story unfolds and a miracle is performed

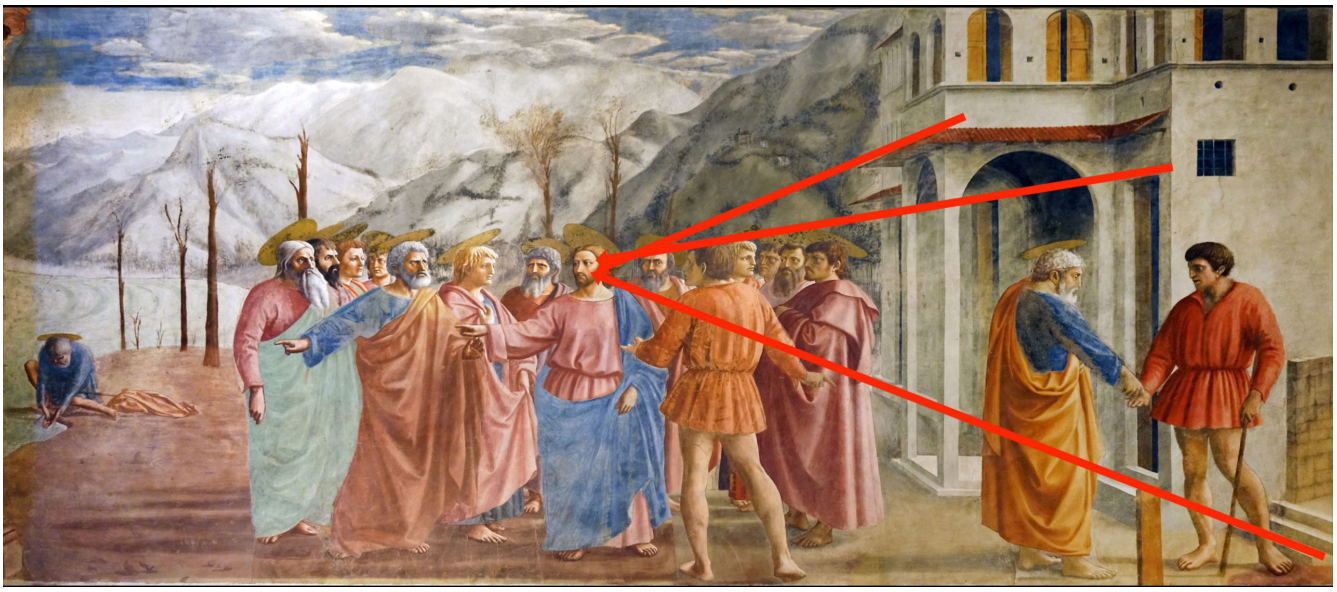
In the *Tribute Money*, a Roman tax collector (the figure in the foreground in a short orange tunic and no halo) demands tax money from Christ and the twelve apostles who don't have the money to pay.

Christ (in the center, wearing a pinkish robe gathered in at the waist, with a blue toga-like wrap) points to the left, and says to Peter "so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours" (Matthew 17:27). Christ performed a miracle—and the apostles have the money to pay the tax collector. In the center of the fresco (scene 1), we see the tax collector demanding the money, and Christ instructing Peter.



Masaccio, Tribute Money, 1427, fresco (Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

On the far left (scene 2), we see Peter kneeling down and retrieving the money from the mouth of a fish, and on the far right (scene 3), St. Peter pays the tax collector. In the fresco, the tax collector appears twice, and St. Peter appears three times (you can find them easily if you look for their clothing).We are so used to one moment appearing in one frame (think of a comic book, for example) that the unfolding of the story within one image (and out of order!) seems very strange to us. But with this technique (a continuous narrative)—which was also used by the ancient Romans—Masaccio is able to make an entire drama unfold on the wall of the Brancacci chapel.



Linear perspective diagram, Masaccio, Tribute Money, c.1427, fresco (Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0). Christ is the vanishing point. Note too, the use of atmospheric (aerial) perspective in the mountains in the distance.

In the central, first scene, the tax collector points down with his right hand, and holds his left palm open, impatiently insisting on the money from Christ and the apostles. He stands with his back to us, which helps to create an illusion of three dimensional space in the image (a goal which was clearly important to Masaccio as he also employed both linear and atmospheric perspective to create an illusion of space). Like Donatello's *St. Mark* from Orsanmichele in Florence, he stands naturally, in contrapposto, with his weight on his left leg, and his right knee bent. The apostles (Christ's followers) look worried and anxiously watch to see what will happen. St. Peter (wearing a large deep orange colored toga draped over a blue shirt) is confused, as he seems to be questioning Christ and pointing over to the river, but he also looks like he is willing to believe Christ.

The gestures and expressions help to tell the story. Peter seems confused and points to the lake—mirroring Christ's gesture; the tax collector looks upset, and has his hand out insistently asking for the money—he stands in contrapposto with his back turned to us (contrapposto is a standing position, where the figure's weight is shifted to one leg). Only Christ is completely calm because he is performing a miracle.

Look down at the feet—how the light travels through the figures, and is stopped when it encounters the figures. The figures cast shadows—Masaccio is perhaps the first artist since classical antiquity to paint cast shadows. What this does is make the fresco so much more real—it is as if the figures are truly standing out in a landscape, with the light coming from one direction, and the sun in the sky, hitting all the figures from the same side and casting shadows on the ground. For the first time since antiquity, there is almost a sense of weather.

20.

Masaccio, 'The Tribute Money' in the Brancacci Chapel

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence.

Steven: We're in the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine in a chapel within the church, which is called the Brancacci Chapel. It is completely filled with fresco and also a tempera painting. On the left, in the upper register, is a painting by Masaccio—actually two paintings. One is the *Expulsion from Eden*, and to its right is a much larger painting, the *Tribute Money*.

Beth: And the chapel is filled with people here to see Masaccio's great masterpiece.



Masaccio, Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden and The Tribute Money, c.1426–27, fresco (Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jHYBAQ>

Beth: Masaccio painted a few of the scenes here of the life of St. Peter, but the rest of the chapel was largely painted by one of his contemporaries, Masolino. But it's Masaccio who we are here to see.

Steven: So let's talk about the *Tribute Money* first. It's a pretty complicated scene, but it's a story from the New Testament that tells of Christ being confronted by a tax collector who works for Rome. The problem is that Christ has renounced all worldly possessions; he doesn't have any money to pay.

Beth: Right, Christ and the apostles have no money to pay the tax collector, who we see here in the center in orange, with his back to us…

Steven: …and with a short skirt, unlike the other figures, who are more fully closed.

Beth: Christ and the apostles have halos, and we can identify the tax collector because he doesn't have a halo. He's also making gestures demanding money. The tax collector is standing in this lovely contrapposto (the shift of weight of a standing figure onto one leg resulting in an asymmetrical realignment of the entire body).

Steven: And some art historians have suggested that he may have been painted from a Roman sculpture.

Beth: The contrapposto could also have come from Donatello, a contemporary sculptor.

Steven: Absolutely.

Beth: Christ directs St. Peter to go get money to pay the tax collector from the Sea of Galilee—from the mouth of a fish. So Christ performs a miracle. The apostles will indeed be able to pay the tax collector, because the money will appear in the mouth of the fish that we see St. Peter getting on the far left. And then on the far right, we see St. Peter paying the tax collector. So we've got three different moments of time.

Steven: In the New Testament, Christ says "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and render unto God what is God's," in a sense saying, Caesar minted this money, we can give it back to him, it's not important—what's important is the soul.

Beth: There's a really specific Florentine context for this. The Florentine government had just initiated a new tax called the Catasto, which was an income tax. I think this was seen, by the Florentines, as an idea that Christ was condoning that kind of civic responsibility.

Steven: I'm really interested in how complicated that story is and yet how clearly Masaccio is able to convey it. Our eye goes not to the left of scene first—which presumably would be where we would start, we read from left to right—but instead goes to Christ in the center. All of the apostles' attention and tax collector's attention is on Christ. And so our eyes go to Christ as well. Christ points to Peter, who in turn points almost incredulously to the Sea of Galilee.

Beth: Right, you want me to go to get the money from where?

Steven: And that of course moves our eye left, over to where we see Peter again. We can recognize it is Peter even though his face is so foreshortened. He's taken off the red garb, presumably not to get it dirty or wet as he kneels.

Beth: You can see him just opening up the mouth of the fish.

Steven: I love it, it's so literal.

Beth: It's very sweet. Masaccio is also separating that scene on the left so we read it as a separate scene, because he's put St. Peter way into the background.



Masaccio, Tribute Money, c. 1426-27, fresco (Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jHV1Qv>

Steven: And there really is background—it's been accomplished in a number of different ways. This is lovely, atmosphere prospective that allows us to move back from mountain to mountain as the sky gets lighter.

Beth: Masaccio's created a deep illusion of space here. So the figures are really in a very believable landscape, not only atmosphere perspective but also linear perspective is employed on the right. We can see the orthogonals in the rather classical looking building on the right.

Steven: In fact, sometimes I've suspected the only reason that there's a building in this painting at all is because Masaccio is so interested in linear perspective. This is one of the first surviving examples of the employment of linear perspective in a painting, like we have in the *Holy Trinity* (Santa Maria Novella) just a year or so earlier. Christ's head is the vanishing point in his use of linear perspective. So not only is all the attention paid to Christ by his apostles, but the very structure of the painting brings our eye there.

Beth: So you look at Christ, he looks very calm. You follow his gesture over to St. Peter, and St. Peter is looking agitated and annoyed.

Steven: He does look grumpy, doesn't he?

Beth: And in disbelief! Then you see this circular gathering of the apostles around them and you start to register their reaction. Some of them looking like, "ooh, what's going to happen next?"

Steven: Apprehensive.

Beth: Some of them look a little bit more calm. But in all of that, Christ remains central and calm in this moment when he performs a miracle.

Steven: It really is a kind of conversation.

Beth: It's all this gesturing to tell the story.

Steven: Really activating the story, absolutely. I love also the contrast between certain apostles. For instance, you're absolutely right. Peter looks like he's angry and is not sure if he should actually be protecting Christ from the tax collector or not whereas John, next to him with blond hair, is such a passive face—and so, so calm. I can't help but think that Masaccio put those faces together in order to achieve the greatest contrast.

Beth: I think there's no question. I mean, Masaccio is thinking about every possible way he can make this image seem real. And I think that the space to a 15th-century viewer looked incredibly realistic.

Steven: The use of light and shadow is really picking up on Giotto's achievement of the previous century, but pushing it forward dramatically. To me I think the element that adds the greatest realism are those cast shadows on the ground.

Steven: Yes, they're amazing!

Beth: They're so believable. I mean you really get a sense of these figures standing in a landscape. The light hitting them from the right, which is, by the way, the same direction as the real light in the chapel. There's a window over to the right…

Steven: …just over the altar.



Brancacci Chapel and altar with tourists, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: If you follow those shadows back, if you look down at the ground, they give you an alternation of light and dark that helps establish a foreground and background.

Steven: I have to say, I'm really taken with representation of the feet. We talked about the sense of mass and volume in the figures. But all these figures seem so planted.

Beth: Well I love their feet. They're so grounded. If you look, for example, at the left foot of the tax collector, you'll see that the left side of his ankle is in shadow. But the front part of his left foot is in the sunlight. So Masaccio takes such careful attention with light and shadow. And look at those foreshortened halos that Masaccio has employed so that they're not those flat, gold circles that we see elsewhere.

Steven: Well, they're foreshortened, just like Peter's face on the left of the painting.

Beth: Except a halo isn't a real thing!

Steven: So in a sense, he is taking this symbol of spirituality and treating it as if it were a solid in the world. It is this funny moment in the 15th century when the symbolic traditions of representation that have been handed down from the medieval era are coming into contact with a kind of naturalistic facility and an interest in naturalism. And so you get these very funny relationships.

Beth: Mmm. So Masaccio really is giving us a masterpiece of illusionism—the illusion of space, the illusion of volume. To me the figures are just fully human in a way that I think about, say, Donatello's figures at Orsanmichele. They have psychological depth.



Christ, apostles, and tax collector (detail), Masaccio, Tribute Money, c. 1426-27, fresco (Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC-BY-SA 2.0)

Steven: What is it about the Florentine culture that is allowing for this kind of fully human expression? This city is one of the great centers of humanism, of looking back to Classicism—and certainly we see that in a number of direct ways here. But more than that, it's this ennobling of the human experience that I think is so central to the license that Masaccio is taking with these frescoes.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/oDPNSPbjzQ8>



Toursits viewing Masaccio, The Tribute Money, c. 1426–27, fresco (Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC-BY-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jHV1Ge>

21.

Masaccio, 'Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden,' in the Brancacci Chapel

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in the Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence.

Steven: In the Brancacci Chapel in Santa Maria del Carmine just to the left of Masaccio's great painting, *The Tribute Money,* is another painting by Masaccio, the *Expulsion from Eden*.

Beth: The frescoes in this chapel all tell the story of the life of St. Peter, except for the Expulsion. We could ask, what is the Expulsion doing here? This is the story of Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden. They've eaten the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, and God has discovered that transgression and has banished them from Eden. We see a foreshortened angel.

Steven: That's an armed angel, it looks like the marshal to me…

Beth: Chasing them out of the Garden of Eden!

Steven: They're being evicted.

Beth: What follows from this is that mankind knows sin…

Steven: …and death.

Beth: Exactly. This is the moment from which everything else comes in terms of the Catholic understanding of man's destiny.



Masaccio, Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy, c. 1424-27, fresco, 7 ft x 2 ft 11 in (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jHYBq4>

Steven: That's right, because it is from this fall from grace that Christ is required.

Beth: It makes Christ's coming necessary to redeem us, but it also makes necessary the Church that St. Peter founds. Sometimes, Mary and Christ are seen as the second Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve, who caused the fall into sin, and Mary and Christ, who make salvation possible.

Steven: That idea is something that everybody in this church would be familiar with. I love the architecture on the extreme left. The gate of heaven itself, that they've just left, reminds me of the indebtedness that Masaccio has to people like Giotto in the previous century, where architecture is sometimes used simply as a foil, as a kind of stage set.

Beth: There's so much emotion.



Masaccio, Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, detail, Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy, c. 1424-27 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Steven: I'm especially interested in the contrast of emotion. Adam is covering his face, there is a kind of shame and a real awareness of his sin. His body is exposed to us and actually, *that*'s interesting. This whole chapel was fairly recently cleaned, and for a very long tim,e there was a vine that covered up his genitals.

Beth: That someone had painted over.

Steven: That's right, long after. But we've been restored to the original nudity that Masaccio gave us, which is absolutely era appropriate. Yet he's not covering his body—he's covering his face; it's a kind of internal sense of guilt. Whereas Eve, she seems to have been taken directly from the ancient Classical prototype of the modest Venus. She's shown in a beautiful contrapposto covering herself; it's her shame that seems more physical, but because her face is exposed, we can see the real pain that she expresses through it.

Beth: You said beautiful contrapposto, but I think about contrapposto as a standing, relaxed pose, and these figures are in motion.

Steven: They are, they're moving forward.

Beth: Masaccio is first artist in a very long time to attempt to paint the human body naturalistically.

Steven: Yup.

Beth: And as a result he hasn't quite gotten all of it perfectly.

Steven: No, there's some awkward passages there.

Beth: Yeah, Adam's arms are a little bit too short, Eve's left arm is a little bit too long. Given that Masaccio's the first artist to really attempt this naturalism in a thousand years, some of that is to be forgiven.

Steven: I have to say that I think he's done an extraordinary job. If you look at Adam's abdomen, for example, it is really beautifully rendered. There is a physicality here, there's a sense of weight and there's a sense of musculature that I can't remember seeing in earlier painting.

Beth: Masaccio is employing modeling very clearly, from light to dark. He's so interested in modeling because that's what makes the forms appear three dimensional, and also that foreshortened angel is helping to create a sense of space for the figures to exist in—even though, as you pointed out, that architecture is more symbolic than real.

Steven: Yeah, it's just totally schematic isn't it?

Beth: Yeah.

Steven: A couple of changes that are probably worth noting: one is that you can really see the *giornata*. You can see that Adam was painted separately from Eve, and you can see the darker blue and back of Adam that really highlight those different patches of plaster.

Beth: Those were not differentiable in the 15th century.

Steven: Right—that's changed over time.

Beth: By giornata you mean the different days, the different parts of the fresco were painted in?

Steven: Right, *giornata* means a days work.

Beth: This is *buon* (true) *fresco*, which means that it was painted onto wet plaster so an artist could only do a small section at a time because the plaster would otherwise dry.

Steven: Other changes that have taken place in the painting that I think are worth noting are that the sword and the rays of light that are emanating from Eden are now black, but that's oxidized silver, and it would have been very shiny initially. I think it's important also to note that the *Expulsion* is the first scene that we look at as we enter into this Chapel—they literally walk into this story. Almost like a panel in a cartoon, it is leading our eye from left to right so that we can read through this story of St. Peter.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/hMzFbORRiss>



Masaccio, Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, 7 ft x 2 ft 11 in, c. 1424-27, with Tribute Money, c. 1426-27, Brancacci Chapel (Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jHZrEg>

22.

Fra Angelico, 'The Annunciation and Life of the Virgin' (c. 1426)

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Fra Angelico, The Annunciation and Life of the Virgin (in the predella), c. 1426, tempera on wood, 194 x 194 cm (Museo del Prado, Madrid)

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Prado.

Steven: We're in the Prado in Madrid, and we're looking at Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*. Now, the *Annunciation* by Fra Angelico that most people are familiar with is a fresco that's in San Marco, in Florence. This is a painting that was made for a church not far from Florence—

Beth: In Fiesole.

Steven: It is extraordinary in that the frame is original, and so not only do you have the main panel, but you've got the predella underneath with all of its original framing elements. I'm not sure that I've ever seen that.

Beth: These things were often taken apart and sold in pieces. We have an Old Testament scene of Adam and Eve being cast out of the Garden of Eden—or the Expulsion—by an angel, and actually that scene is joined to the Annunciation scene because in the upper left, we see the hands of God releasing this divine light and a dove, which you can see just to the left of the column—

Steven: The Holy Spirit.

Beth: —which is the Holy Spirit.

Steven: So we have actually the Fall, and then the reason for Christ's existence.

Beth: And Adam and Eve, as the precursors to Mary and Christ. So the man and woman, who caused the Fall from Grace, and Mary and Christ, who make salvation possible.

Steven: And then we have God, the Father, looking down in an almost classical relief sculpture in the center just above that column. The predella below is the very condensed series of scenes of the life of the Virgin Mary, from her birth to her marriage to Joseph, to the Visitation—

Beth: Through to her death.

Steven: —through to her death. That's right. And

they are really meant, in a sense, the literal support for this later story. So stylistically, one of the things that I find quite important is the sense of quiet and solemnity that Fra Angelico was able to achieve. You have the angel, who is bowing below Mary. His hands are crossed, which is a symbol of respect, of prayer. Mary reflects that with her own hands. I'm really taken by the *density* of the Garden of Eden. All of that fruit, those flowers, that wonderful, sort of anti-perspectival field of flowers below the feet. And then you have this piece of stark architecture—they are both too large for the space that they occupy.

Beth: Absolutely. I think if Mary were to stand up, she would hit her head on the ceiling.

Steven: I think so, but none of that is really important, because this is a kind of reverential and invented exploration of beauty as a way of representing the divine.

Beth: So this is painted contemporaneous with Masaccio painting the Brancacci Chapel. So we have two radically different approaches going on in Florence at the same time. And I think that's a good reminder that not everything in the Renaissance is this linear movement toward naturalism, but this variety of styles.

Steven: Whereas Masaccio was looking for a very, almost mathematically, accurate rendering. Here we can see an artist who's looking to celebrate the decorative as a way of expressing the moral—

Beth: The spiritual

Steven: —and the spiritual. Absolutely.

Beth: And if you look, there's no cast shadows. There's not that kind of intense modeling that we see with Masaccio. There's not a lot of specificity to the faces and individuality in the faces—

Steven: But there is specificity to the decorative. Look at the wings of the angel, for example.



Fra Angelico, The Annunciation and Life of the Virgin (in the predella), detail, c. 1426, tempera on wood (Museo del Prado, Madrid)

Beth: Or the gilding of their haloes.

Steven: Or just the foliage in the Garden. It's quite sumptuous, isn't it?

Beth: It is.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/6lH7zWK_SAg>

23.

Fra Angelico, 'The Annunciation' (c. 1438-47)

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Museo Nazionale di San Marco in Florence.



Michelozzo di Bartolommeo, Cloister, Convent of San Marco, Florence, 1437-44 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/aFTwiT>

Steven: We're in the large complex that is the convent of San Marco in Florence, and we're standing in one of the cloisters. It's a beautiful space with frescoes and all of the lunettes and a large fresco by Fra Angelico of the Crucifixion. The monastery itself is Dominican—one of the begging orders. This is a space where people would have given up their worldly possessions and traded them in for a life of prayer and solitude.

Beth: It's a famous place, largely because this is where Fra Angelico spent most of his life and where he painted a whole series of frescoes that we're going to go take a look at.

Steven: As we walk past the second cloister on the left and the refectory—which includes a large fresco by Ghirlandaio of the Last Supper—we walk up the stairs, we pass numerous family crests of the Medici, which reminds us that they were the dominant patrons of this convent.

Beth: In fact, Cosimo di' Medici had a cell of his own that he used on occasion.

Steven: When we get to the top of the stairs, we can see down two long hallways.

Beth: About every ten or so feet, there's an opening with a small wooden door into a small cell that would've been a space for a monk to sleep, but also a place for prayer and meditation. On the walls are frescoes by Fra Angelico and his followers.

Steven: This must be freezing in the winter; there's no insulation whatsoever.

Beth: No.

Steven: Let's turn our attention to the large fresco at the top of the stairs though. It's really a masterpiece.

Beth: This one is quite large and has figures that are life-size. It starts about four feet off the ground, so we look up at the scene of the Annunciation.

Steven: It also allows us to see this fresco much more close up than we'd normally be able to in a large basilica environment.



Fra Angelico, The Annunciation, c. 1438-47, fresco, 230 x 321 cm (Convent of San Marco, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: That's true. We're not far away the way we might see an altar.

Steven: It's just a beautiful image, but it's also very spare, and the spareness seems to really be fitting for this monastic space.



Fra Angelico, The Annunciation, c. 1438-47, fresco, 230 x 321 cm (Convent of San Marco, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jLeaN7>

Beth: Right, and the actual loge (or open porch-way space) that the Madonna and the angel Gabriel occupy seems to match the cloister that we were just in and the windows that we see around us—we see in the room behind Mary. It really feels as though Mary and the angel Gabriel are in a space very much like the one that the monks themselves inhabited, which must have helped them to think about this moment of the Annunciation.

Steven: This is the Annunciation. Our archangel Gabriel has appeared to Mary to announce to her that she'll be bearing God. What's interesting is that in many paintings of the Annunciation, you would expect to see a lot of other kinds of accoutrements. You would expect to see white lilies as a symbol of her virginity, you would expect to see her having been interrupted reading her bible, expressing her piousness, and some art historians have suggested that some of these symbols are missing because the monks already know the story well. This painting doesn't have to be as didactic as it might have to be if its audience were a lay audience in a church.

Beth: It gives room to the monks themselves to fill in the rest of the story for themselves. I think that's one way in which it was an aid in prayer. It was so simple and so spare, not only this fresco, but the ones in the cells, too, that it would not interfere with the monks' own imaginings.

Steven: There's two things that I think are worth pointing out, which helps understand this fresco within the context of these hallways on the second floor of the monastery. For one thing, as we look down the hallway, we see doors that are too small for this space, and there's a kind of interesting relationship between the receding doors and the receding orthogonals that we see down the hallway on the left and the loge of the columns on the left is leading to a doorway that is visually too small also. There's a nice compliment that exists there. The other thing is that the vanishing point seems too high, and the floor seems to be too steep, but when you look at this fresco as you ascend the staircase, it makes more sense, you're seeing it at an extreme—

Beth: From far below.

Steven: That's right, at an oblique angle. I think it's really important to understand this painting not in

the isolation of a reproduction, but spatially in the context of San Marco.

Beth: I think that's true. There's really no atmospheric perspective.

Steven: That raises another interesting issue here, which is there's real ambiguity in the space of this painting. We've got that flatness on the left side, this insistence on the two-dimensionality of the forest, of the lawn. Then, there's ambiguity on the right side as well. There is some reference to linear perspective, but at the same time, the figures are much too large for the space.

Beth: Right, if Mary stands up she's going to hit her head on a ceiling! For Masaccio, the space and the scale of the figures would really have to be perfectly aligned. I think that there are a number of ways that Fra Angelico is balancing competing needs. For example, if we think about light, which is one of the things that was so important for Masaccio—just 20 years or less before this was painted—we do see light coming in from the left.

Steven: Yes, from the upper left.

Beth: When you look at the columns, they're clearly modeled. We can see shadowing on the right.

Steven: Especially in the groin vaults.

Beth: But I don't see cast shadows from the columns. Maybe there is a little bit of one in that one on the left.

Steven: Very soft.

Beth: But there is more of a shadow that Mary casts on the right.

Steven: In the earthly sphere.

Beth: And the angel Gabriel doesn't seem to cast a shadow. If you look at their haloes, he's using those flat round haloes, like we saw in the 1300s, and not those more shortened haloes, that we see Masaccio use.



Fra Angelico, The Annunciation, c. 1438-47, fresco, 230 x 321 cm (Convent of San Marco, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jLeavy>

Steven: There does seem to be a willful kind of historicizing in that sense, or a kind of not complete acceptance of the fully earthly rendering that is so prominent in Florence in the 15th century and especially at this moment.

Beth: It's almost totally aware of Masaccio and what we might call the most "advanced" humanist styles, but also an unwillingness to go that far, holding to more conservative or traditional aspects in some ways. It does seem to make sense, given the monastic environment that we're in and also Fra Angelico's own spirituality.

Steven: That kind of tension really speaks to these developing techniques as having a spiritual or even political dimension—and that these were things that could be chosen.

Beth: There were lots of styles that were available in the 15th century in Florence depending on a whole lot of things.

Steven: There's also subtlety, for example, we were talking about the spareness of this painting. There are areas where the artist allows himself to really create a very decorative set of forms. For instance, look at Gabriel's wings. Not only are they just beautifully detailed, but if you look really carefully—and this is something that doesn't come across in photographs—he must have used a kind of mica or some sort of mineral that really catches the light, because as you walk past this fresco, it picks up light and twinkles.

Beth: It does, it sparkles a little bit, especially in the darker paint. Look at how Mary and the angel look similar, both idealized but with a lack of specificity.

Steven: The faces, although they're generalized, are very specific in certain ways as well, especially around the eyes, which are actually the most detailed part of the entire painting.

Beth: You really feel, even though they're separated by this column, that their gazes meet and are locked in place. The way that Mary bends forward a bit and accepts her responsibility that Gabriel's announcing to her feels very, very serious to me.

Steven: Very solemn. Should we go and take a look at some of the cells?

Beth: Sure.

Steven: We're looking one of the very small monks cells. It's a small dorm room, really, and what do you say? Maybe eight by—

Beth: Ten feet?

Steven: Ten feet, not even.

Beth: It's very small, with a window and covered by a barrel vault. On the wall opposite the doorway is a fresco by Fra Angelico of another Annunciation scene, this time even more spare—we don't have the garden that we saw in the Annunciation scene in the hallway.



Fra Angelico, The Annunciation, c. 1440-41, fresco, cell 3, 190 x 164 cm (Convent of San Marco, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jLeaJ4>

Steven: We have the archangel Gabriel this time standing and Mary, on a small stool kneeling, although her body is so elongated it's actually hard to tell where her knees would be, where the lower part of her body is.

Beth: And like all the other frescoes in the cells, Saint Dominic is included, although you can see he's very carefully put outside the space that Mary and the angel Gabriel occupy.



Fra Angelico, The Annunciation, detail, c. 1440-41, fresco, cell 3, 190 x 164 cm (Convent of San Marco, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Very much like *we* are as we gaze into this cell—so he's a witness, as we're a witness.

Beth: Exactly. He's in a way a kind of stand-in for us, a way for us into the painting.

Steven: I am struck by the way in which the architecture depicted within this smaller fresco is such a beautiful complement to the spare space that we're in. To think about this as a painting that a monk would have lived with for much of his life. This is something he would have gone to sleep with, he would have prayed with, he would have woken to—and that this was the single bit of ornament in this room. The convent of San Marco is well known, not only for the extraordinary frescoes by Fra Angelico, but also by another resident.

Beth: We're talking about Savonarola, who was a fervent religious leader in the late 1490s in Florence.

Steven: He was actually the prior of this convent, that is, he was in charge, and he was zealous about renouncing the luxuries of the mercantile culture that Florence had developed. His religious beliefs became stronger and more radical and came into increasing conflict with the wealth and artistry of the city.

Beth: He denounced the humanist culture of Medici Florence.

Steven: It's interesting, because the Medicis were originally his sponsors, his patrons…

Beth: He advocated a book-burning and the burning of what he considered luxury items.

Steven: This was called the Bonfire of the Vanities, and it took place just outside of the Signoria, where we think paintings, books, and articles of luxury, including clothing, were burned.

Beth: There was a brief period when Savonarola actually took over the government of Florence.

Steven: He was ultimately excommunicated by the pope, but refused to abide by the excommunication, which put Florence in real jeopardy.

Beth: His advocacy of a really spare and ascetic lifestyle made things very difficult in Florence economically. The economy was based on trade and luxury goods.

Steven: And the manufacture and sale of luxury goods, that's right. You can see that this conflict would have ultimately created a backlash, and it did.

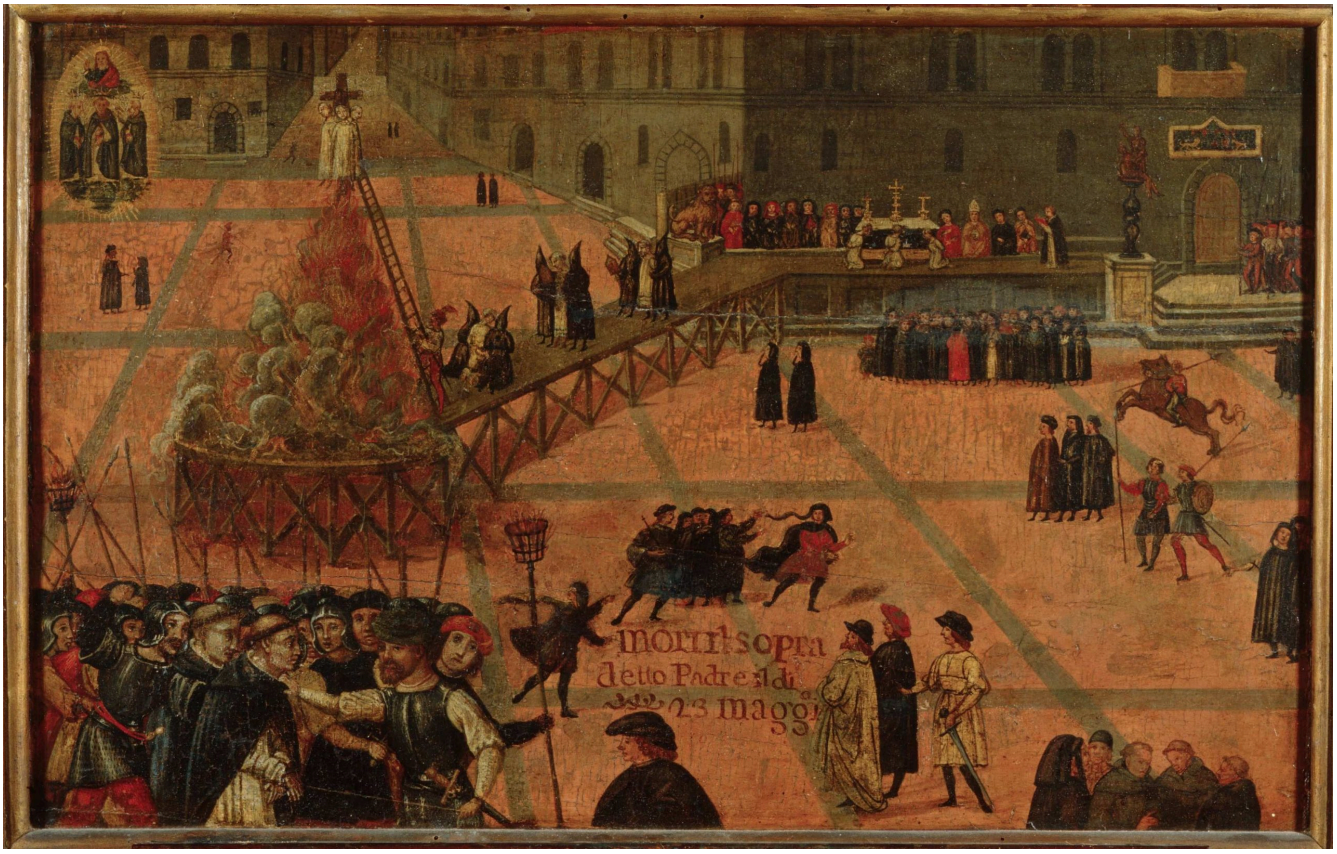
Beth: San Marco was stormed and—

Steven: And Savonarola was taken prisoner and would ultimately be hanged with two of his compatriots until he was *almost* dead, at which point a large fire was set below him, and they were burned to death.

Beth: It's hard to remember those kinds of details sometimes when you walk through and you look at these lovely paintings to remember this as not just a place where tourists visit, but a place that had a real role in Florence's history in the 15th century….

Steven: ….and a kind of religious intensity that I think is difficult to remember. Certainly, that story speaks to it and to its excesses and its dangers.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/3B-V_pG3HPQ>



Filippo Dolciati, Execution of Girolamo Savonarola, 1498 (Museo di San Marco, Florence)

24.

Paolo Uccello, 'Battle of San Romano'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Paolo Uccello, Niccolò Mauruzi da Tolentino at the Battle of San Romano, c. 1438-40, egg tempera with walnut and linseed oil on poplar, 182 x 320 cm (National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jJyjmU>

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the National Gallery, London.

Steven: Niccolò da Tolentino, the Florentine commander, rises up on his charger. He wears no helmet. This is a painting about the Florentine victory over the Sienese that was part of a broader conflict with the city of Lucca.

Beth: Of course, the Italian city states were always at war with one another, and this painting of the Battle of San Romano is actually one of three panels of this subject that were meant as a set. One of the others is in the Uffizi in Florence and the other is in the Louvre in Paris.

Steven: And they're large paintings, so you really feel as if the battle is in front of you.

Beth: So imagine the three together, all in the Medici Palace. These paintings were a favorite of Lorenzo de' Medici, who actually had them forcibly removed from the home of the family that had commissioned them in Florence and brought

to the Medici Palace—which you could do if you were Lorenzo de'Medici, basically the ruler of Florence! It is the scene of a battle, but to me, the painting is about two competing elements of painting in Florence in the first half of the 15th Century.

Steven: Paolo Uccello, the artist, was very much a product of International Gothic—of this late strain of Gothic style that really emphasized pattern and the decorative. On the other hand, he also lived in Florence when Brunelleschi lived there and had developed linear perspective. This radically modern approach to representing space in painting and so you have a painting that is about another kind of conflict. I think that is exactly right, the conflict between the idea of surface decoration and the ability to render deep space.

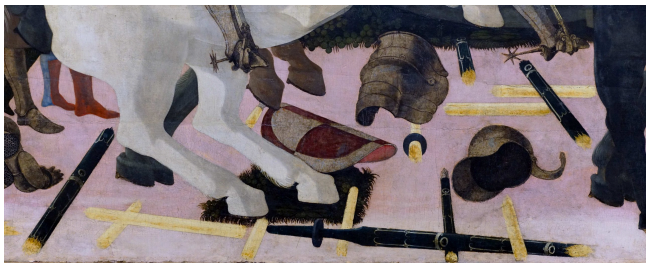


Paolo Uccello, The Battle of San Romano, detail, probably c. 1438-40, tempera on poplar, 182 x 320 cm (National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: So you have many, many decorative elements here that are in line with that International Gothic style, from the pattern on the commander's fabulous turban, to the gold decorations that we see on the bridles and the saddles of the horses or even those decorative curving shapes of the armor. At the same time, we have a mathematical illusion of space created with linear perspective being applied in the oddest way with the orthogonals created by the lances that have fallen to the ground.

Steven: So on the one hand, all that decorative metalwork, for instance, in the bridles really pushes up against the surface of the painting and denies depth. On the other hand, you have exactly the opposite thing happening with all of the debris of the battle that's fallen below the horses. Look at the way those fragments of lances, for instance, create almost a kind of chess board…

Beth: …that conflicts with the background where we see vegetation, that creates a flat, tapestry-like pattern behind that also denies an illusion into space.



Paolo Uccello, The Battle of San Romano, detail, probably c. 1438-40, tempera on poplar, 182 x 320 cm (National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Look at the specific information that the artist has given us. Look at the bridle gear or even the straps at the back of the armor. One of my favorite areas is, if you look in the background and you look at some of the smaller figures that play against that monochromatic field, you can see archers with crossbows who are reloading their weapons by pulling on them at their feet.

Beth: So these two tendencies that we see in Florentine painting, of the decorative and the scientific, come together in Uccello's *Battle of San Romano*.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/p8Vasl3L5p8>



Paolo Uccello, The Battle of San Romano, detail, probably c. 1438-40, tempera on poplar, 182 x 320 cm (National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jJCGH8>

25.

Fra Filippo Lippi, 'Madonna and Child with Two Angels'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Uffizi in Florence.

Beth: We're in the Uffizi looking at Fra Filippo Lippi's, *Madonna and Child with Angels.* It's so fun to see this painting after coming from the first room in the Uffizi, which has three giant paintings covered in gold—from the 1300s—of the Madonna and Child.

Steven: Those are so solemn and so steeped in the medieval tradition, and this is so playful.

Beth: Here, in the 15th century, we have a Madonna and Child that's really humanist in its approach.

Steven: It's interesting because the other paintings really are very somber, but there is a somber note here, too, in Mary's foreknowledge of the fate of her son. Nevertheless, the rest of the painting feels very playful, and even her youth and beauty really carry the day.

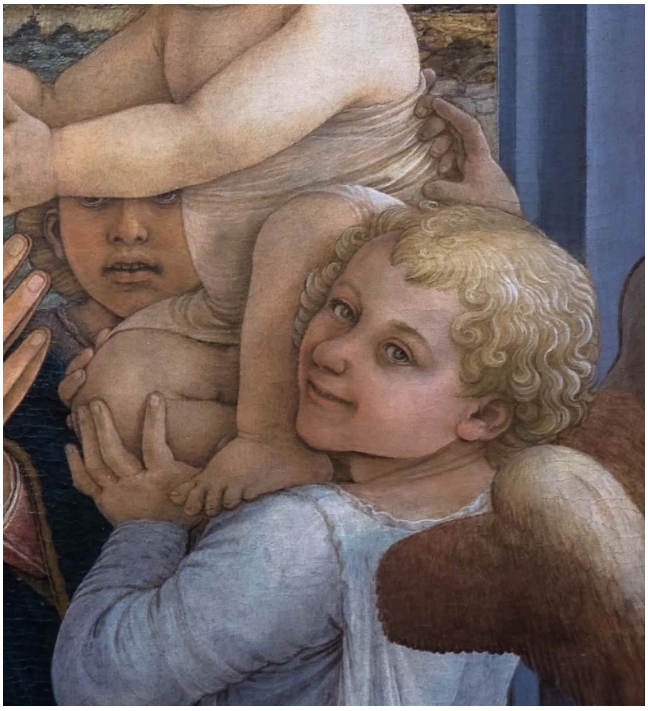
Beth: Gone are those Byzantine elongations of the face and the hands. She looks like a real woman who you might see on the streets of Florence. A very beautiful woman, but a real woman nonetheless. Not only that, but the angels look like children that you might see playing on the streets of Florence. It always has seemed to me as though Lippi, when he wanted a model for the angels, went out and found a couple of kids playing in the street, and brought them into his studio and made them pose. Look at that "angel" in the foreground, who supports the Christ Child and turns around and looks up at us with a really playful smile.

Steven: It's almost mischievous.



Fra Filippo Lippi, Madonna and Child with Two Angels, c. 1460-65, tempera on panel, 95 x 63.5 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

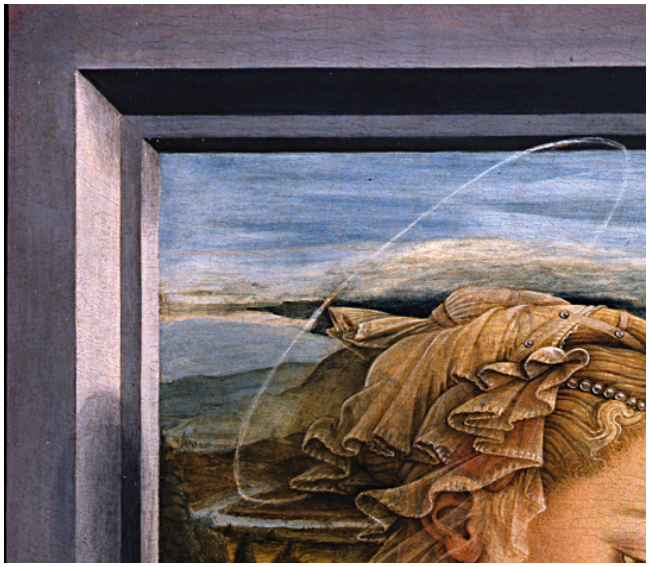
Steven: Lippi is actually being incredibly mischievous himself. When we look at the other angel, it's only the lower half of his face peeking out below Christ's arms. It's sort of ridiculous—you would never have an artist during the medieval period doing something like that.



Lippi, Madonna and Child with two Angels, detail, c. 1460-65, tempera on panel (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

Beth: Look what's happened to Mary's halo. Here we are, moving toward the High Renaissance, where we'll have the complete disappearance of the halo with Leonardo da Vinci, but with Fra Filippo Lippi, the halo is becoming just a simple circle that we can just barely make out above Mary's face and also around Christ. Those obvious symbols of divinity, of holiness, I think felt very much out of place for Fra Filippo Lippi, who wanted to create an image of the Madonna and Child with angels that looked very earthly and very natural and very real.

Steven: The frame on this window almost becomes the frame of the painting itself. It seems to me that there's this self-conscious aligning of the frame of the painting and the frame of the window. There's the conceit that the landscape is seen through a window, but I think that Lippi's suggesting that the frame of the canvas is a frame that we look into, as if we look into the window as well.



Filippo Lippi, Madonna and Child with two Angels, detail, c. 1460-65, tempera on panel (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

Beth: And that landscape behind the Madonna, rendered with atmospheric perspective, also looks very real. If we think back to the Cimabue or the Duccio Madonnas, with that flat gold background—the gold of a heavenly space—Lippi's Mary is very much represented as a figure who we can relate to here on earth. My favorite passage in the painting is actually the translucent fabric that she wears in her hair and the amazing lines and curves as that winds down around her neck and comes down in front of her. Even with the curls that we see in Christ's hair, there's this love of beautiful curling shapes. We know that Fra Filippo Lippi was the teacher of Botticelli. When I look at that, I can see…

Steven: …that emphasis on the decorative.

Beth: And on beautiful, sinous lines. There's a kind of sensuality here that I think is hard to deny. Clearly, yes, the Madonna and Child with the angels, but a real love of the beauty of the things that we can see with our eyes.



Detail, Fra Filippo Lippi, Madonna and Child with Two Angels, c. 1460-65, tempera on panel, 95 x 63.5 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/Ly2-n1KqNko>

26.

Fra Filippo Lippi, 'Madonna and Child with Two Angels'

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

In this painting by Fra Filippo Lippi, *Madonna and Child with Two Angels*—a variation on the Madonna and Child Enthroned (see Giotto or Cimabue) that artists have been painting for hundreds of years—halos virtually disappear.



Fra Filippo Lippi, Madonna and Child with Two Angels, c. 1460-65, tempera on panel, 95 x 63.5 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Mary's hands are clasped in prayer, and both she and the Christ child appear lost in thought, but otherwise, the figures have become so human that we almost feel as though we are looking at a portrait. The angels look especially playful, and the one in the foreground seems like he might giggle as he looks out at us.

The delicate swirls of transparent fabric that move around Mary's face and shoulders are a new decorative element that Lippi brings to Early Renaissance painting—something that will be important to his student, Botticelli. However, the modeling of Mary's form—from the bulk and solidity of her body to the careful folds of drapery around her lap—reveal Masaccio's influence.

The changing status of the artist

Fra Filippo Lippi was an important painter after the death of Masaccio in 1428 (remember Masaccio dies at the young age of 27). Here's a great story told by Vasari about Lippi, who was also a monk:

> It is said that Fra Filippo was so lustful that he would give anything to enjoy a woman he wanted if he thought he could have his way, and if he couldn't buy what he wanted, then he would cool his passion by painting her portrait and reasoning with himself. His lust was so violent that when it took hold of him he could never concentrate on his work. Because of this, when he was doing something for Cosimo de' Medici, Cosimo had him locked in so he wouldn't wander off. After he had been confined for a few days, Fra Filippo's amorous, or rather animal, instincts drove him one night to seize a pair of scissors, make a rope from his own bedsheets, and escape through a window to pursue his own pleasures for days on end!

So Lippi runs away from his patron, "to pursue his own pleasures," but he HAD to run away since Cosimo (his patron) had him locked up! Now, could you lock up Picasso and say "you must finish this painting by next week?" Of course not, art is not made that way—according to our contemporary understanding of art, artists need to be inspired; they can't be ordered to create, the way you would order a pizza or a birthday cake.

What Vasari's story is really about is a change in the status of the artist—and a related change in the way people are thinking about art. Art is beginning to be thought of not just as something made by a skilled worker, but something that comes from an "inspired" place—from someone who is especially gifted. According to the rest of the story, Cosimo de Medici (Lippi's patron) learned that artists need to be treated with respect—a sign of the changing status of the artist in the Renaissance—from skilled laborer to respected professional and intellectual.



Detail, Fra Filippo Lippi, Madonna and Child with Two Angels, c. 1460-65, tempera on panel, 95 x 63.5 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

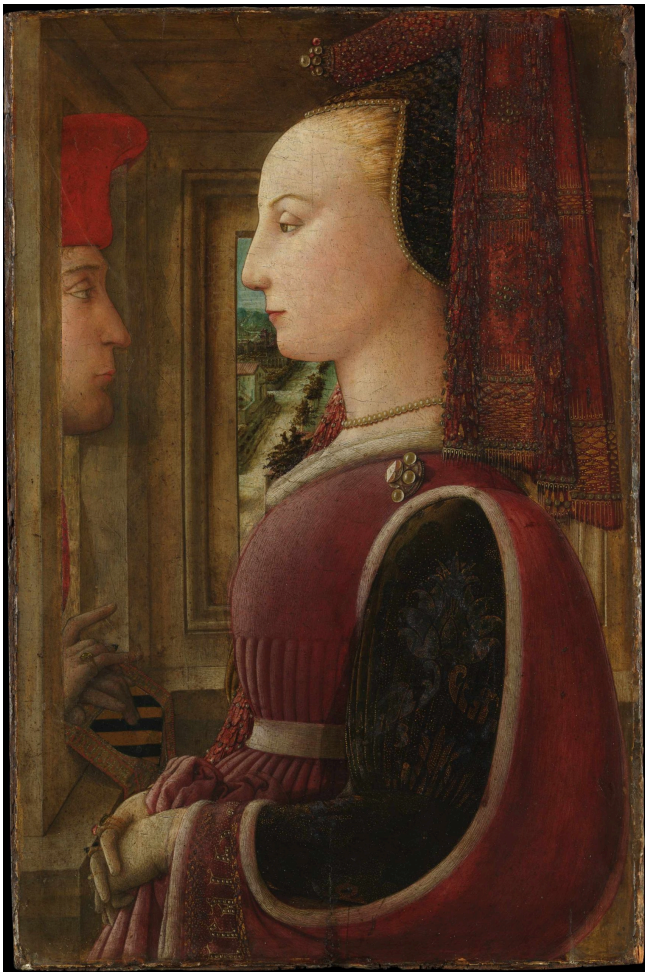
27.

Fra Fillippo Lippi, 'Portrait of a Man and Woman at a Casement'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. David Drogin

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fra Fillippo Lippi, Portrait of a Man and Woman at a Casement, tempera on wood, c. 1440 (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Beth: This is a really strange painting, I think, with this man sticking his head into this room and this woman taking up this space He looks very stiff. Every time I see it at the Met, I pause in front of it because it seems so odd.

David: It is a very unusual painting to our eyes. At the time, it was painted around 1440, it was actually very innovative for the Italian Renaissance. This is exactly the period when portraiture emerged in Italy as its own independent type of painting.

Beth: How come there weren't portraits before?

David: Well, there were portraits before that but they were usually integrated into larger compositions, like a historical or biblical narrative. It's around 1440 in Florence and Ferrara and north central Italy that portraiture becomes its own type of painting.

Beth: So before that, a person could appear in a painting as a donor.

Beth: In a way, this painting is typical of early Renaissance portraiture because we see the main subject—the woman—in profile. The profile is the standard format because it was part of the revival of Classical antiquity. Of course, many coins and metals had survived from ancient Greece and Rome, and they show people in profile, so that's the format painters and sculptors chose in the beginning.



Gallery view of Fra Fillippo Lippi, Portrait of a Man and Woman at a Casement, tempera on wood, c. 1440 (Metropolitan Museum of Art) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/6HJjG5>

Beth: There's a kind of formality and seriousness to that pose that I think is important for them, right?

David: Absolutely. Since the sitter is represented in profile, not looking out at the viewer, the artists were really limited in terms of how they could represent a person's facial expressions or character, and so the way that was usually done was mostly through symbolism. Rather than using facial expressions to describe what someone's interior characteristics and personality was like, they would use symbols and iconography. Like here, for instance, we see the very pale skin, representative of purity; the very expensive clothing, representative of her wealth. Generally, female beauty was taken as a real sign of interior virtue. So we're supposed to understand that she is very virtuous from the way that she looks.

Beth: And it was considered to be very beautiful to have a very high forehead, wasn't it?

David: They plucked their hairline, yes. It's worth noting in terms of this being a representation of a woman that this is probably one of the very first Italian Renaissance wedding portraits. These kinds of portraits were used in arranged marriages to introduce the man to his fiancée. They probably never met before, but her family or his family commissioned Fillippo Lippi to paint this portrait to show the husband-to-be what she looked like.

Beth: So this is interesting, also, from the point of view of it being a a portrait of a woman—she's very much in an enclosed space, whereas the man is outside of that space.

David: He's in the outside, public realm. She is confined to the domestic sphere. She's also represented very passive, very object-like. In a way, she's just another beautiful object, like her fancy brooch or her fancy clothes, that he's looking inside at and appreciating.

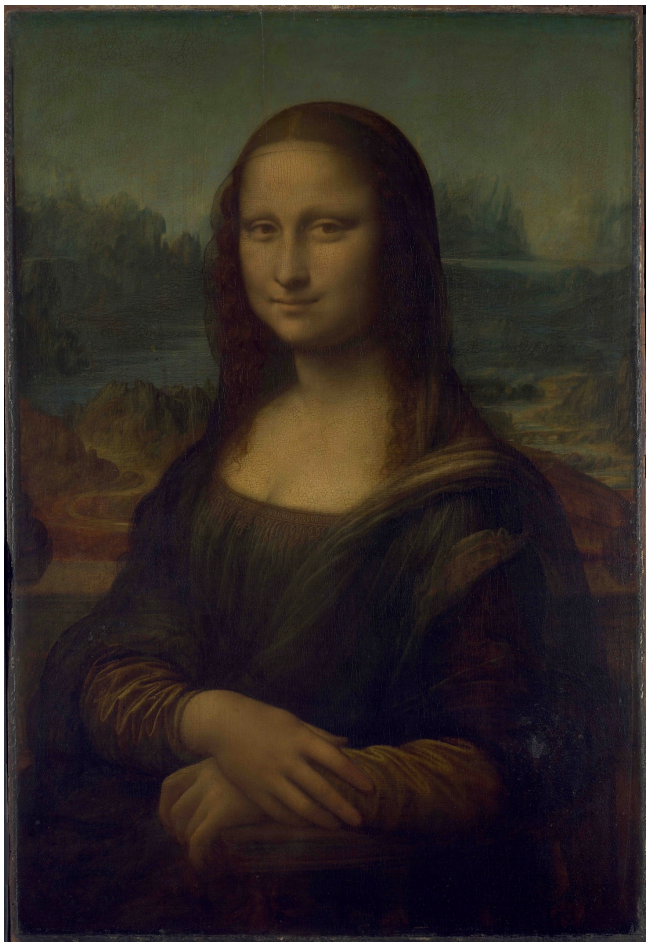
Beth: Literally, she was property.

David: Absolutely. When a woman married a man in the Renaissance, she and all her belongings became the legal property of her husband.

Beth: Let's look at another example of a portrait of a woman—a *famous* portrait of a woman, from, what, about 50 or 60 years later? With the *Mona Lisa*, in the High Renaissance, Leonardo does something really very different than Fra Fillippo Lippi did, because we really see her face here.

David: Sure. Here, Leonardo did something rather revolutionary for portraiture of women. He's turned her so that her face is looking out at the viewer. This is what we call a "three-quarter profile," that's not entirely frontal, but there is a direct engagement. Rather than sitting there passively, not returning the viewer's glance, the Mona Lisa looks us right in the eye and engages with us, almost as an equal rather than as a passive object. Because she looks us right in the face, Leonardo takes the opportunity to suggest what she's like, to suggest her personality through her enigmatic facial expression. You'll notice she's not wearing any jewelry. Her clothing is not that particular. She doesn't have a fancy headdress. Leonardo is giving up, he's not using iconography and symbolism to describe what someone is like, but he's actually representing what someone might be like. Now, what we should understand is that this painting was probably painted for her husband, and that might explain why she's positioned and looking the way she is. If you look at the chair, you'll see that she's actually sitting sideways out on a balcony, and yet her face turns toward us. So maybe the suggestion is that the Mona Lisa was sitting in her chair on the balcony, her husband approaches, and she turns and looks at him, and this is the expression on her face—of recognition and intimacy. This is *not* a wedding portrait. This is for a couple that is already married. When we look at this, we should imagine the husband standing in front of it. Then it makes a lot more sense.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/wf8L9AZa2H4>



Leonardo da Vinci, Mona Lisa, c. 1503–1506, oil on wood (Louvre, Paris)

28.

Domenico Veneziano, 'Saint Lucy Altarpiece'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Domenico Veneziano, Saint Lucy Altarpiece (Madonna and Child enthroned with St. Francis, John the Baptist, St. Zenobius and St. Lucy), c. 1445, tempera on wood, 209 x 213 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2iXh7ZF>

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Uffizi in Florence.

Steven: We're in the Uffizi, looking at Domenico Veneziano's *Saint Lucy Altarpiece*. The artist was actually a Venetian, but he made this for a Florentine church. Originally, there were five small predella panels underneath…

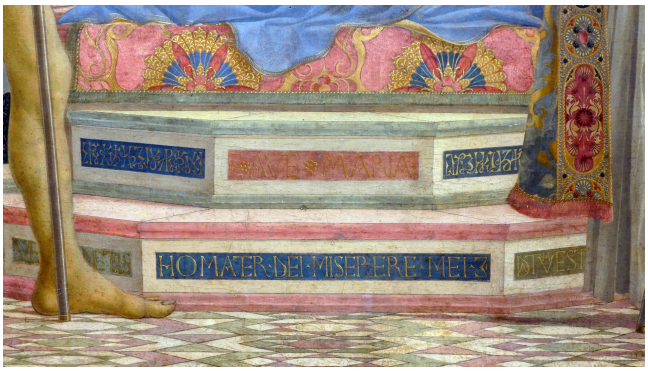
Beth: …that are now in different museums. One of the most interesting thing about this painting is that it's a new type of altarpiece. Usually, an altarpiece would have an elaborate gold frame with subsidiary figures in separate panels, but here, the different saints occupy the same space as the Madonna, so there's less emphasis on elaborate gold frames and the carpentry and carving involved in making those and more emphasis on the figures and the believable space that they occupy.

Steven: That's what I was going to say! When

I look at this, this is a remarkably "occupiable" space. In other words, I feel like I could walk around without hitting my head on the architecture, which was so often the case in the previous century.

Beth: If you think about Masaccio's *Holy Trinity* as the first really believable space created by the use of linear perspective, just 20 years before, this is in a way a much more complex space. The greens and the rose colors and the white marble remind me of so much architecture that we've seen, like the Duomo here in Florence.

Steven: It's true; there really is attention to the architectural space. I'm really taken with the severely foreshortened tile on the floor, which is a tour de force expression of linear perspective, saying, "Well, I can do far more than a straight line of tiles on this floor."



Domenico Veneziano, Saint Lucy Altarpiece, detail, c. 1445, tempera on wood, 209 x 213 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2iXevEy>

Beth: Look at John the Baptist's feet, so firmly on the ground… and his foreshortened right foot. There's a cast shadow behind him—also the influence of Masaccio. To me, this brings together so much of what Masaccio and Brunelleschi did in the 1420s and '30s.

Steven: There's also a kind of specificity in the rendering of the figures. Lucy, at the extreme right, is so beautiful and in a perfect profile, almost as we would expect a Renaissance portrait. The figure next to Lucy is Saint Zenobius, one of the few saints associated with Florence. Christ is a real child here. There is an understanding of the anatomy of an infant, with its babyfat and that large head, and there's a real sense of his mother's delicate touch. Look at the way her finger just comes under his toe. It's really just lovely, whereas John the Baptist, he looks tough. It's so interesting to see these figures all in one space. Think about the figures chronologically. You have the Virgin Mary and Christ, who lived roughly 1500 years before this was painted, and Francis, who would have lived just a few hundred years before this was painted.



Domenico Veneziano, Saint Lucy Altarpiece, detail, c. 1445, tempera on wood, 209 x 213 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2iXiEWf>

Beth: Right. Domenico Veneziano is mixing saints up from all different time periods and bringing them together into this one space.

Steven: And that's really the definition of the phrase often used for these kinds of paintings, which is "sacra conversazione"—that is, to bring figures from different historical periods together into an altarpiece environment.

Beth: And "sacra conversazione" means "a sacred conversation."

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/-yfjQGg-aMA>

29.

Antonio Pollaiuolo, 'Battle of Ten Nudes' (Battle of Nude Men)

Christine Zappella

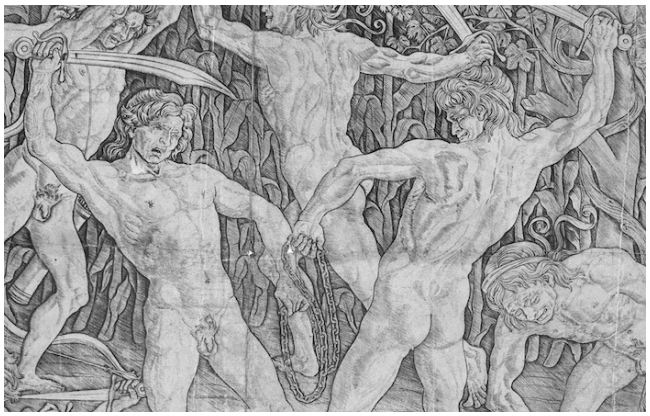


Antonio Pollaiuolo, Battle of Ten Nudes (or Battle of Nude Men), c. 1465, engraving, 15-1/8 x 23-3/16" / 38.4 x 58.9 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Antonio Pollaiuolo's *Battle of Ten Nudes* has been called the single most important engraving in European history. Clearly based on classical antiquity (the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome), the print is monumental in size (approximately 15 x 23 inches) and, because of its shallow space, resembles ancient Roman relief sculpture. In the picture, five men wearing headbands fight against an equal number of men without headbands. The battle is set in front of a wall of lush vegetation.

Art historians disagree about whether the print depicts a particular scene from mythology or classical history, but some have suggested that it simply shows gladiators. This is because in the central pair, the men are gripping a chain, a common weapon of gladiatorial combat.

The print is exceptional for many reasons. To begin with, over fifty copies of it exist, an extraordinarily high number for a work of art over 500 years old. Additionally, it is believed that Pollaiuolo engraved the print completely by his own hand, and for this reason, the sign set in the far left of the vegetation bears his name (most often the artist's composition would be engraved by a printmaker).



Detail, Antonio Pollaiuolo, Battle of Ten Nudes (or Battle of Nude Men), c. 1465, engraving, 15-1/8 x 23-3/16" / 38.4 x 58.9 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Pollaiuolo's print is, however, important mostly because it shows a new conception of the human body. As many art historians have noted, the Renaissance started much earlier in the fields of sculpture and architecture than it did in painting and drawing. So although Donatello had created his nude *David* decades earlier, the nude had yet to be mastered in a two-dimensional form. Not everyone was taken with Pollaiuolo's print, and

it is believed that Leonardo da Vinci criticized it, saying that the bodies looked like "bags of nuts." Pollaiuolo's nudes may be overly muscular, but they were probably the most naturalistic human bodies created in Italy up to that point.



Detail, Antonio Pollaiuolo, Battle of Ten Nudes, c. 1465, engraving, 15-1/8 x 23-3/16" / 38.4 x 58.9 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Vasari, the great sixteenth-century Florentine artist and art historian, wrote that Pollaiuolo's understanding of the nude body resulted from his dissection of cadavers. This became a common practice in Florence, and it is reported that a sculpture of the crucified Christ in Santo Spirito was a gift from a very young Michelangelo to the priest there, who basically let him rob graves for the purpose of dissection.

Pollaiuolo's bodies are also derivative of ancient Roman art, an indication that he was looking at the classical past for inspiration, an essential hallmark of the Renaissance.

Because Pollaiuolo was trained as a goldsmith (this was true of many artists of the Renaissance including Ghiberti and Brunelleschi), he was very skilled in working with metal. Apart from its conception of the nude, the print also showcases the artist's technical ability, especially in the modeling, or contouring of light and dark, used to create volume in the men's bodies.



Attributed to Michelangelo, Crucifix, polychrome wood, 1492, 142 x 25 cm (Santo Spirito, Florence)

Although to the modern viewer, the fight between the ten men may look stiff and posed (although, a particularly vivacious passage can be found in the bottom left hand corner, where the man on the ground fiercely strains against the man pressing his head into the ground), later works by Michelangelo and Leonardo owe much to it. It is impossible to think that either Michelangelo's *Battle of the Centaurs* (below) and *Battle of Cascina* or Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari* could have existed without the prototype of Pollaiuolo's *Battle of Ten Nudes*.

This print is an engraving. That means that with a sharp tool, Pollaiuolo scratched the drawing into a sheet of metal. Ink was then applied to the metal surface and subsequently wiped off, leaving only the incised lines filled in. A piece of moist paper was then set over the plate, which was sent through rollers so that the wet paper could "suck up" the ink. At the end, the sheet of paper was peeled off,

and the image that resulted was the mirror image of what Pollaiuolo drew.

In fact, art historians have identified that two stages of the print actually exist. This means that at some point, the metal plate wore down, and the artist had to recarve some of the details back into the plate. The result is that, over time, two different images were pulled from Pollaiuolo's one plate.



Detail, Antonio Pollaiuolo, Battle of Ten Nudes (or Battle of Nude Men), c. 1465, engraving, 15-1/8 x 23-3/16" / 38.4 x 58.9 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Detail, Michelangelo, Battle of the Centaurs, c. 1492, marble, 84.5 x 90.5 cm (Casa Buonarroti)

Because prints were collected like modern day baseball cards, engravings of *The Battle of Ten Nudes* ended up all over Europe, and many other artists copied it. Although people in other parts of Europe might read about the great sculptures and buildings being constructed in Florence, Pollaiuolo's print was an actual piece of the Florentine Renaissance that they could hold in their hands. Prints like this did much in helping to spread the Renaissance throughout Italy and to the rest of the world.

30.

Perugino, 'Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter'

Dr. Shannon Pritchard

Pietro Perugino's *Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter* is an exemplar of Italian Renaissance painting. The work was part of a large decorative program commissioned by Pope Sixtus IV in 1481 for the walls of the Sistine Chapel (the name "Sistine" being derived from Sixtus' own name), which was then, as it is today, the pope's private chapel in the Vatican, in Rome. This large scale fresco, measuring 10'10" x 18', is part of the New Testament narrative cycle depicting events from the life of Christ on the north wall of the chapel (the south wall illustrates the Old Testament life of Moses).



View of the north wall of the Sistine Chapel with Perugino's Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peteroutlined in red, 1481-83, fresco, 10' 10" x 18' (Vatican, Rome) (photo: Clayton Tang, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The painting shows the moment when Christ, standing in the center dressed purple and blue garments, gives the keys of the heavenly kingdom to the kneeling St. Peter.



Perugino, Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter, Sistine Chapel, 1481-83, fresco, 10 feet 10 inches x 18 feet (Vatican, Rome)

This episode comes from the Gospel of Matthew (16:18-19) as Christ said to Peter: "And I tell you that you are Peter (*Petros*), and on this rock (*petra*) I will build my church… I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven…." The pair of gold and silver keys became Saint Peter's attribute (an attribute, in this sense, is an object associated with a saint that aids the viewer in identifying the saint).

Sometimes called the Prince of the Apostles, Peter was originally known as Simon and was a fisherman. He was given the name Cephas (in Aramaic) or Petros (in Latin) by Christ, which is translated as Peter and means rock (*petra*). Christ's words, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church…. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, will be loosed in

heaven" (Matthew 16:13-20). Catholics therefore see the apostle Peter as the first in the long succession of Popes. The absolute authority of the papacy, even its power to excommunicate, rests on the charge Christ gives to St. Peter. According to tradition, St. Peter was crucified upside down in Rome, and buried under what is now the site of The Basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican.

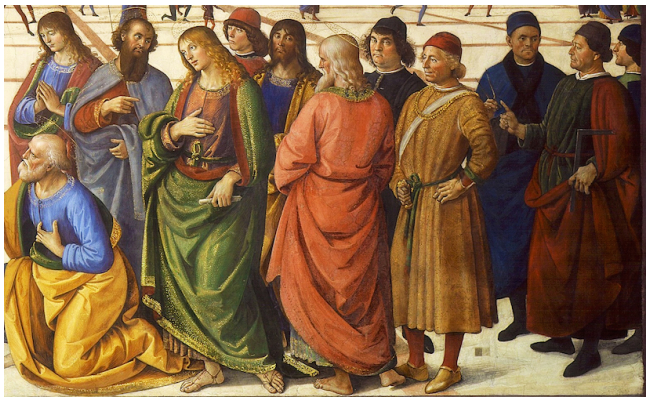
The Renaissance ideal

The figures

Perugino pulled out every pictorial device in his painter's arsenal to construct an image that is reflective of Renaissance ideals: figures, balance, harmony, and three-dimensional space. To begin with, see that the pictorial field has been clearly delineated into three distinct planes: foreground, middle-ground and background. In the foreground, on either side of Christ and St. Peter—are the other eleven Apostles. The apostles are the twelve closest followers of Jesus, including Saint Peter, Saint Andrew, Saint James (the Greater), Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Thomas, Saint James (the Lesser), Saint Jude, Saint Philip, Saint Bartholomew, Saint Matthew, Saint Simon, and Judus Isacariot who was replaced by Saint Matthias. The apostles are sometimes referred to as disciples.

You can identify them easily since they are the figures dressed in classicizing tunics and robes. Each has been carefully rendered as a distinct individual. Perugino harmonizes the figures through repeating colors and postures. Notice how blue, yellow, and green are repeated throughout the group in a way that draws the viewer's eye back and forth across the foreground.

Let's also look at the postures of our Apostles. At the left and right edge of the Apostolic group is a figure with his back to the viewer, looking toward the central action. This effectively draws our eye to the center as well. The next figure over on both sides, faces out towards us, and their poses are mirror reflections of one another. Perugino's harmoniously balanced grouping of historical figures provides visual interest for the viewer.



Right side (detail), Perugino, Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter, Sistine Chapel, 1481-83, fresco, 10 feet 10 inches x 18 feet (Vatican, Rome)

However, there is one element that is incongruous with the rest, which is the addition of contemporary Roman and Florentine men at the far edges of the groups on either side of Peter and Christ. These figures are clearly not part of the biblical figures based on their dress— and there is even a portrait of the artist himself, who looks directly out to the viewer on the right hand side (the fifth figure from the right edge—see the image above) ! The inclusion of the artist and / or contemporary people associated with the project was common during the Italian Renaissance, and in this case, Perugino's presence acts as his visual signature to his work.



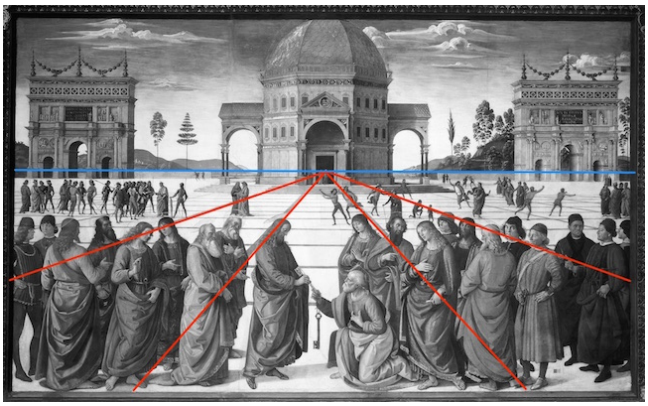
Left side (detail), Perugino, Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter, Sistine Chapel, 1481-83, fresco, 10 feet 10 inches x 18 feet (Vatican, Rome)

In the middle-ground, the figures are much smaller than those in the foreground, suggestive of their spatial distance. Not merely passersby, these figures are part of two additional stories from the life of Christ.

On the left is the Tribute Money from the Gospel of Matthew (17:24-27) where the Roman tax collector demands Christ pay the Emperor's tax. (This scene was famously represented by Masaccio in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence). On the right is the Stoning of Christ from the Gospel of John (8:48-59). The addition of these two scenes creates a pictorial device known as a continuous narrative, where two or more related events are shown occurring simultaneously in one composition.

The space

The background is comprised of three architectural structures at the edge of the open piazza (plaza), with an ideal landscape extending far into the distance behind. In order to create such a believable sense of three-dimensional space, Perugino utilized two types of perspective.



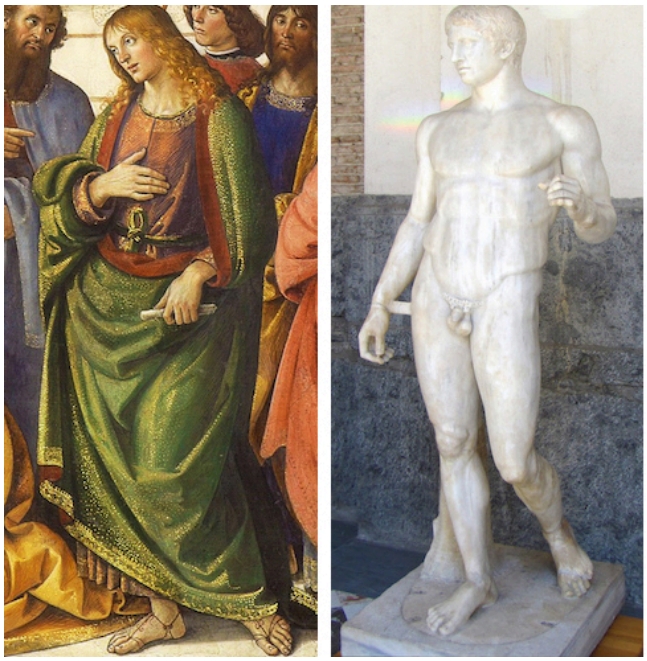
Perspective diagram, Perugino, Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter, Sistine Chapel, 1481-83, fresco, 10 feet 10 inches x 18 feet (Vatican, Rome)

The first, one-point linear perspective, creates a believable three-dimensional space using a system of orthogonals (diagonal lines seen on the pavement—in red in the diagram above) that recede into space, converging at one point known as the "vanishing point" (which in this case is in the doorway of the central building)."

The vanishing point is located along a horizontal line, the "horizon line," which establishes the boundary between land and sky (the blue line in the diagram above). Notice how all of the figures maintain a proportional relationship to each other as they recede into this space.

The second type of perspective Perugino used is atmospheric perspective, which is literally the effect of the atmosphere on objects observed in the distance, causing them to diminish in appearance through a bluish-gray haze, as seen in the mountains in this case.

The influence of classical antiquity



Left: Apostle standing in contrapposto (detail) Perugino, Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter, Sistine Chapel, 1481-83, Rome and right: Roman copy of Polykleitos, Doryphoros (Spear-Bearer), c. 450-40 B.C.E.

Contrapposto

One of the defining characteristics of the Italian Renaissance was the interest in all aspects of classical antiquity (ancient Greece and Rome),

especially its art and architecture. That interest in manifested in Perugino's fresco in two different ways. One is his use of contrapposto (Italian meaning "counter-pose") for some of the foreground figures.

This pose (seen in the figure above) was known in the Renaissance through copies of the ancient Greek sculpture, the *Doryphoros* (above right). When standing in contrapposto, one leg bears all of the person's weight while remains relaxed at the knee, producing a very natural stance (notice how often you stand in contrapposto every day!).

Architecture

The second nod to antiquity is in the architecture. The central "temple" in the background of Perugino's fresco is based on the Florence Baptistery, which was believed at the time to have been an ancient Roman temple.

And at either side of the piazza are representations of the Arch of Constantine (in Rome). The arch commemorates Constantine the Great, the Roman emperor who legalized Christianity in 314. Famously converting to Christianity on his deathbed in 336, he effectively became the first Christian Roman emperor. Moreover, Constantine founded St. Peter's Basilica, the site of Peter's burial and the location of Perugino's fresco. Thus, the inclusion of the Arch of Constantine was an important reference to the history of Rome, and St. Peter and the basilica.



Left: Arch (detail), Perugino, Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter, Sistine Chapel, 1481-83, (Vatican, Rome); right: Arch of Constantine, 315 C.E., Rome (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

31.

Ghirlandaio, 'Life of the Virgin'

Dr. Sally Hickson

A treasure house of Renaissance art

The Church of Santa Maria Novella, adjacent to the train station of the same name, is a treasure house of Florentine art of the Renaissance.



Leon Battista Alberti, Santa Maria Novella façade, 1458-70, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

So much so, that visitors to the church—seeking the great Renaissance artists Uccello and Masaccio and the wondrous frescoes in the "Spanish Chapel"—are sometimes prone to overlook the magnificence of its main altar chapel (or chancel), painted by the absolute master of Florentine fresco, Domenico Ghirlandaio and his workshop. Known as the Tornabuoni chapel (for the family that commissioned the paintings), the frescoes were once the culmination of the pilgrim's journey down the central nave and through a large wooden choir (an area for seating for the clergy and choir), which funneled the traveler through the final third of the journey to deliver them at the doorstep of Ghirlandaio's glorious vision (the painter and author Vasari tore the choir down in the sixteenth century—as it turns out, he wasn't much one for preserving material culture).

A banker's commission

At the time of this commission, the Tornabuoni were the chief Florentine banking rivals of the Medici. Like the Medici, they employed this kind of sacred patronage to expiate themselves against charges of immoral luxuriousness and wealth, as well as to quell suspicions of usury (charging interest, which was considered a sin). The irony, of course, is that a fresco insurance policy as grand as this one was only obtained at great cost, and was intended to attract maximum public attention.



View down the nave, Santa Maria Novella, looking toward the Tornabuoni Chapel (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The extravagant "humility" of rich patrons (the Medici, the Tornabuoni and others), adorning the city with thinly-veiled monuments to themselves,

came to be considered a demonstration of virtuous public service, celebrated as civic *magnificenza*. I suppose Donald Trump may see himself in the much the same way, scattering his showy, shiny monuments across America.



Domenico Ghirlandaio, Portrait of the Donor Francesca Pitti-Tornabuoni, c. 1485-90, fresco (Cappella Maggiore, Santa Maria Novella, Florence)

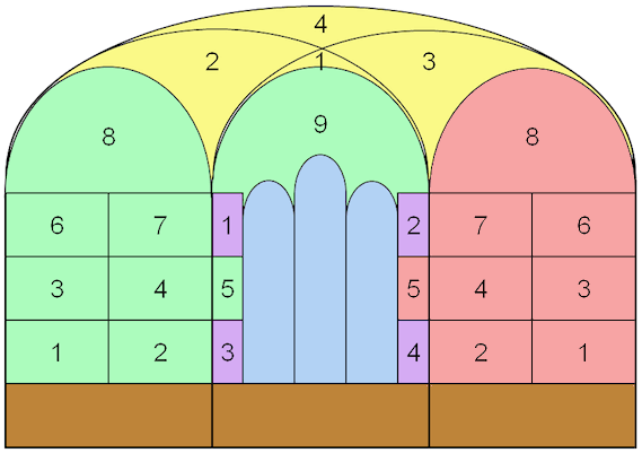
The Bible in Florence

Ghirlandaio loved Florence and fresco, and he adored the world and all of its charms. In contrast to the solid, stoic and severe formal classicism of the earlier generation of Alberti, Brunelleschi and Masaccio, Ghirlandaio loved form, color, variety, narrative and the quotidian (everyday) details of Florentine daily life. Although the primary narratives depicted in the Tornabuoni Chapel are scenes from the Life of John the Baptist and from the Life of the Virgin, these biblical scenes unfold in the streets of Florence, often staged in what appear to be temporary stage-sets, theatrical triumphal arches and temples, strewn with various bits of ancient Roman bric-a-brac, hastily assembled for the biblical actors. When you peer through the arches of these Lego-land wonders, you see the solid, sturdy, stone medieval façades of Florence—no matter where he goes in his imagination, for Ghirlandaio, Florence is the whole world. The conflation of time past and time present in the frescoes is also underscored by the inclusion, in many scenes, of late-fifteenth-century members of the Tornabuoni family in the biblical subjects, floating across the stage like ghostly apparitions. For over 500 years these vivid frescoes have played across the walls of the chapel like a continuously looping documentary film, chronicling the living history of Florence.

The painter

Domenico Ghirlandaio is often given rather short shrift by art historians existing, as he did, suspended between the austere Albertian mathematical rationalism of the fifteenth century and the agonized, self-flagellant extravagances of Michelangelo, to whom he served as painting master before he took up residence in the Medici garden. Trained in the family workshop, Ghirlandaio was an acknowledged fresco expert, and while his style is sometimes dismissed as “prosaic,” I find it happily idiomatic, clearly reveling in the quotidian joys of observing the world around him—which is not to say that he lacked imagination. He had a distinct penchant for embellishing severe classical architectural settings with fanciful, fluid and flirtatious decorative flourishes and then peopling them with the most extraordinarily vivid and lively figures.

Every picture tells a story: The narratives



Tornabuoni Chapel, in green: stories of the Virgin Mary; in red: stories of St. John of the Baptist; and in violet: episodes of the Lives of Dominican Saints and the two patrons. In yellow on the ceiling: the four evangelists. (Photo: Sailko, CC BY 2.5)

The overall narrative program of the chapel is relatively simple, covering the two lateral walls, and part of the rear wall (around and above the magnificent stained-glass windows) in superimposed registers, culminating in frescoes of the Four Evangelists on the ceiling.

Facing into the chapel, the frescoes to the viewer's left tell the story of the life of the Virgin, to whom the church is dedicated, and those on the right, the story of the Life of St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of Florence. Both of these narratives feature birth scenes; the birth of John the Baptist, the Birth of the Virgin, the Nativity of Christ. The message is clear—three mothers, two sons, two dispensations. John's fate, as the last Prophet of the Old Testament and first Apostle of the New Testament, is to recognize Jesus as the Messiah—this translation from old to new is the lynchpin that holds the cycles together.



Domenico Ghirlandaio, Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni, 1489-90, mixed technique on panel, 77 x 49 cm (Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid)

The fact that some of these biblical births are attended by prominent and highly recognizable female members of the Tornabuoni family reveals at least two subtexts behind this natal cycle—in the first instance, it's about dynasty, continuity, and the perpetuation of the Tornabuoni family. But there is a sad and ironic touch to this dynastic documentary; in the birth scenes of St. John and of the Virgin, a cortege of court ladies is led into the scene by the wife of Lorenzo Tornabuoni, the solemnly beautiful Giovanna who sadly died In childbirth while Ghirlandaio was painting this cycle (a lovely portrait of Giovanna by Ghirlandaio, left). The frescoes are, therefore, touching commemorative tributes to Giovanna, mingling the joys of birth with the sadness of death and the hope for eternal salvation.

The life of the Virgin

Among the many lovely aspects of the life of the Virgin, the loveliest is the story of her conception, born of a kiss between the aged Joachim and the long-barren Saint Ann, as they linger by the city gate. Ghirlandaio places this close encounter of the biblical kind at the top of a staircase inside what appears to be a contemporary Florentine palace, where it gives way seamlessly to the contiguous *Birth of the Virgin*, easily the best-known scene from the chapel.



Domenico Ghirlandaio, Birth of the Virgin, c. 1485-90 fresco, 24' 4" x 14' 9" (Cappella Maggiore, Santa Maria Novella, Florence)

St. Anne props herself up in her fifteenth-century platform bed, in a luxuriously paneled room topped by a continuous frieze of illusionistically "carved" chubby, churning dancing putti. Midwives in the foreground pour water from an elegant pewter jug into a pewter basin, preparing baby's bath. The baby is a wriggling delight, held by a midwife and facing toward the still-floating Giovanna Tornabuoni, accompanied by her usual female entourage, all sumptuously dressed in high fifteenth-century Florentine style. Their presence is a reminder of the customary visits made by women of aristocratic families on the occasion of a birth.



Left to right: Giovanna Tornabuoni, midwives with baby, St. Anne (detail), Domenico Ghirlandaio, Birth of the Virgin, c. 1485-90, fresco, 24' 4" x 14' 9" (Cappella Maggiore, Santa Maria Novella, Florence)

We next proceed through the *Presentation of the Virgin*, fluttering up the stairs to the high priest, her marriage to Joseph, the *Nativity* and, on a different note, the *Massacre of the Innocents* (showing the execution of all young male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem ordered by King Herod to avoid the loss of his throne to a newborn King of the Jews whose birth had been announced to him by the Magi). But even here, in a scene of violent infanticide, Ghirlandaio can't shed his delight in fluttering, colorful sinuous draperies and an over-abundance of happy detail, which tends to highlight the ghoulishness of the dismembered baby parts strewn across the foreground, as though the putti of the Virgin's chamber (see the *Birth of the Virgin* above) had crumbled from the walls.



Domenico Ghirlandaio, Massacre of the Innocents, c. 1485-90, fresco (Cappella Maggiore, Santa Maria Novella, Florence)

The life of Saint John the Baptist

There are a number of frescoes depicting standard scenes associated with the life of the Baptist—chiefly his wanderings in the desert, during which he realizes his avocation, and his subsequent Baptism of Christ. But people sometimes forget that John, like Christ, was the result of a miraculous pregnancy. His parents, Zachariah and Elizabeth, had no children, but God heard Zachariah's prayers and the elderly Elizabeth found herself pregnant, three months in advance of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary (the moment when Mary conceives Christ). The cycle therefore features the lovely moment of the *Visitation*, when Elizabeth and Mary encounter each other while pregnant and the unborn John "leaps up" in his mother's womb in recognition of the presence of Christ (Luke 1: 39-45).



Domenico Ghirlandaio, The Visitation, c. 1485-90, fresco (Cappella Maggiore, Santa Maria Novella, Florence)

In his typical fashion, Ghirlandaio sets this encounter in a hybrid city setting; the women stand just inside a medieval wall and the Virgin faces toward the gliding and omniscient presence of Giovanna Tornabuoni.



Left to right: Mary, Elizabeth, two attendants, Giovanna Tornabuoni, and two more attendants (detail), Domenico Ghirlandaio, The Visitation, c. 1485-90, fresco (Cappella Maggiore, Santa Maria Novella, Florence)

On the far right is the profile of a gleefully festooned triumphal arch. In this confrontation of architectural styles, medieval and Renaissance, the old medieval world gives way to the newly reborn "Roman" present, a trope Ghirlandaio borrowed from contemporary Netherlandish art. St. John the Baptist has his own lovingly detailed birth scene, complete with a rushing female figure carrying a birth tray of fresh fruits and replenishing foods to the new mother, the ever-watchful Giovanna Tornabuoni in the foreground.



Domenico Ghirlandaio, Zaccariah Writes the Name of John, c. 1485-90, fresco (Cappella Maggiore, Santa Maria Novella, Florence)

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Among the other scenes here, the one in which *Zaccariah Writes the Name of John* is the most unusual. At the moment of the angel Gabriel's announcement of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Zaccariah asked for a sign as proof; because he had spoken doubtfully, he lost the power of speech, regaining it only after writing on a tablet, at Elizabeth's urging, "His name is John" (Luke 1:18-22). The emphasis in this scene on written evidence is, perhaps, an allusion to the world of documents and contracts that characterized the Tornabuoni banking world.

The altar wall

On the lowest register, the altar wall features kneeling portraits of the donors, Giovanni Tornabuoni and his wife Francesca Pitti. In the upper registers, around and above the triple-mullioned stained-glass windows, we see the *Annunciation* and *St. John in the Desert*, then scenes from the lives of two prominent Dominican saints, appropriate in a Dominican church. In one, Saint Dominic Tests Books in Fire and in the other we see the Death of Saint Peter Martyr. The cycle on this wall culminates in a *Coronation of the Virgin with Saints*.

Again, for Ghirlandaio, God is clearly always in the details. The Saint Dominic scene depicts a moment in the saint's fight against the Cathars (who professed a belief in the dualistic principles of good and evil, God and Satan, in opposition to the monotheism of the Catholic faith), in which only his books survived a test of fire when thrown into the flames alongside the Cathar's "heretical" texts.



Domenico Ghirlandaio, Annunciation, c. 1485-90, fresco (Cappella Maggiore, Santa Maria Novella, Florence)



Death of Peter Martyr (left), Saint Dominic Tests Books in Fire (right), fresco, c. 1485-90 (Cappella Maggiore, Santa Maria Novella, Florence)

This is interesting because of its juxtaposition with the *Death of Peter Martyr*; a preacher from Verona whose family was sympathetic to the Cathar cause. He returned to orthodoxy when he met Saint Dominic. As Shakespeare says, "the truth will out." I have no idea why late-fifteenth-century Dominicans were concerned with the Cathars, but it's possible that the reference to Catharism here was intended by the Tornabuoni to "out" rival merchant families in Florence, like the Pulci, whose ancestors were associated with the Cathars. Thus the personal is intertwined with the political, all interwoven into the marvelous textures of Ghirlandaio's Florence.

32.

Cassone with the Conquest of Trebizond

Elaine Hoysted



Marco del Buono Giamberti and Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso, Cassone with the Conquest of Trebizond, 1460s, tempera, gold and silver on wood, 9 1/2 x 77 x 32 7/8 inches / 100.3 x 195.6 x 83.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

All the items a bride would need

As one of the few cassoni (marriage chests) to survive intact from the fifteenth century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Cassone with the Conquest of Trebizond provides us with the opportunity to understand Renaissance Florentine social and political ideals and attitudes. Cassoni (also called forzieri in Florence) were expensive, lavishly decorated chests which accompanied a bride to her new marital home. These chests were given to the bride by her parents as their contribution to the wedding. Carrying precious textiles and goods such as expensive clothing, jewelry and accessories, the chests contained many of the items the bride would need and use in her new home. The cassone was carried alongside the bride accompanied by her father and family through the streets of Florence, an important part of the ritual of marriage. It served to demonstrate the wealth of the family to the city's citizens, displaying their power and influence.



Side panel with the family emblem (imprese) of the Strozzi family, Marco del Buono Giamberti and Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso, Cassone with the Conquest of Trebizond, 1460s, tempera, gold and silver on wood, 9 1/2 x 77 x 32 7/8 inches / 100.3 x 195.6 x 83.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Each of the main surfaces of the chest were decorated, often with painted horizontal panels depicting narratives (*istorie*) taken from such sources as Greek and Roman mythology, the Old Testament and fourteenth-century literature (for example the work of Boccaccio and Petrarch were particularly popular). The Metropolitan's Cassone stands out due to the choice of subject matter on the front panel (above)—depicted a contemporary historical event, the Conquest of Trebizond (in present-day Turkey) as well as for the two artists involved—Marco del Buono Giamberti and Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso.

Emblazoned on each of the side panels of the chest (left) is the family emblem (*imprese*) of the Strozzi, an ancient and noble Florentine family with strong political influence. The emblem, comprised of a falcon/hawk perched on a caltrop (a spiked metal device that when scattered on the ground in battle, caused the enemy's horses to trip and fall), would have been immediately identifiable to those on the streets of Florence. This symbol therefore served to identify the family involved and the conspicuous expenditure of the Strozzi, reinforced by their numerous artistic and architectural projects in the city such as Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi.*



View showing the decoration of the interior, Marco del Buono Giamberti and Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso, Cassone with the Conquest of Trebizond, 1460s, tempera, gold and silver on wood, 9 1/2 x 77 x 32 7/8 inches / 100.3 x 195.6 x 83.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The inside of the cassone provides insight into the role of women in Florentine society and the expectation that they bear children. Often the inner lid of cassoni were decorated with the representation of an erotic and sensuously nude reclining male or female figure. It was believed at this time that in order to conceive a beautiful (preferably male) child, women should surround themselves with beautiful and stimulating art works. In the case of the Metropolitan Cassone, the inside of the lid and the back panel (above) are decorated with painted imitations of textile designs—pomegranate-style velvets with metal-thread brocading and two heights of silk pile. The extravagance of the decoration mirrors the expensive nature of the objects which it housed. Of particular interest is the pomegranate motif and its relationship to the bride's role as a wife and mother. In Renaissance society pomegranates were recognized as symbols of fertility. Each time the newly-married woman opened up the cassone, she

saw this symbol, reminding her of her prescribed role in marriage.

The back view of the cassone appears to be unfinished. The reason for this becomes apparent when the location of the piece is taken into consideration. The chest was placed in the private bedchambers of the wife—usually at the foot of the bed. As it was placed in this manner, the back panel was not on display and therefore the finish was not seen as a priority by the workshop, certainly not to the same extent as the rest of the piece. This demonstrates that both the patron and artists attempted to reduce the cost of the work where possible, preferring to concentrate the lavish decoration and finish to the areas which would be visible to the public when carried through the city and to the eyes of the couple when installed in their home.

The front panel of the cassone was originally thought to present a contemporary historical event—the fall of the city of Trebizond (modern-day Trabzon in Turkey) at the hands of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II in 1461. Located on the southern coast of the Black Sea, Trebizond was considered at the time as the last outpost of the Byzantine Empire and its surrender signaled the end of that Empire. The victory of the Ottoman Turks (Muslims) signified the serious threat they now posed to Europe. Therefore this event was of particular relevance to contemporary Florentines, especially those from the elite class such as the Strozzi.



Back view, Marco del Buono Giamberti and Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso, Cassone with the Conquest of Trebizond, 1460s, tempera, gold and silver on wood, 9 1/2 x 77 x 32 7/8 inches / 100.3 x 195.6 x 83.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Front Panel depicting the Conquest of Trebizond, Marco del Buono Giamberti and Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso, Cassone with the Conquest of Trebizond, 1460s, tempera, gold and silver on wood, 9 1/2 x 77 x 32 7/8 inches / 100.3 x 195.6 x 83.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Constantinople (detail of front panel), Marco del Buono Giamberti and Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso, Cassone with the Conquest of Trebizond, 1460s, tempera, gold and silver on wood (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

In the top left corner of the painted panel, the walled city of Constantinople is represented (above). In the top right (below), dominating a hill is the city of Trebizond. In the middle and foreground, a battle scene is portrayed. Opulently-dressed soldiers whose costumes are decorated in the expensive medium of gold leaf fight on foot and on horseback.



City of Trebizond (detail of front panel), Marco del Buono Giamberti and Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso, Cassone with the Conquest of Trebizond, 1460s, tempera, gold and silver on wood (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Outside Trebizond's walls, the Ottoman encampment and the copious amount of gold leaf utilized to depict it, stands out from the rest of the scene. Mehmed II is seated on a triumphal chariot pulled by two white horses in the bottom right, demonstrating his importance in the scene as the victorious leader. The abundant use of gold leaf shows the patron's wealth and recalls the similar treatment of the theme of opulence as seen in Da Fabriano's Strozzi Altarpiece.

New interpretation



Mehmed II seated on a triumphal chariot pulled by two white horses (detail of front panel), Marco del Buono Giamberti and Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso, Cassone with the Conquest of Trebizond, 1460s, tempera, gold and silver on wood (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Recent analysis of the cassone and particularly the costumes of those depicted in this panel revealed that it is in fact the Ottoman forces who are being vanquished. It is now believed that the artists deliberately conflated two historical events within the one scene: the fall of Trebizond in 1461 and a battle which took place in 1402, when the Ottomans were defeated at the hands of the famous Mongol Emperor Bayezid I and his troops at Ankara. By conflating these two events in this manner, the artists visualized the idea that the Ottomans were not invincible and although they had brought about the fall of the Byzantine Empire, they could be defeated once again. The panel therefore reinforced the belief that the Ottomans were no match for the might of the armies of mainland Europe.

Although an object destined for the private bedchambers of a newly-married couple, the *Cassone with the Conquest of Trebizond* brings together successfully the prescribed domestic duties and political concerns of fifteenth-century Florentines.

33.

Sandro Botticelli, 'La Primavera' (Spring)

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Sandro Botticelli, La Primavera (Spring), 1481-82, tempera on panel, 80 x 123 1/2" (203 x 314 cm) (Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2ezMayY>

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Uffizi, Florence.

Steven: We're looking at one of the great Sandro Botticelli paintings and also one of the most enigmatic, *La Primavera.*

Beth: …which means "spring." In the center, we see Venus in her sacred grove looking directly out at us.

Steven: The figures in the foreground are parted to allow Venus an unobstructed view of us, and for us to look back at her and perhaps even to enter into the space.

Beth: The trees around her part to show us the sky, so there's almost a sense of a halo around her.

Steven: It's true, there's a half circle. Actually, I read that as almost architectural, almost as an apse, and it reminds us that usually what we would find in a space like this from the Renaissance would be the Virgin Mary in an ecclesiastic environment, but here we have a natural or mythic environment and we have Venus.

Beth: Right. I mean, here we are: we're in the Renaissance. One definition of the Renaissance is that it's a rebirth of ancient Greek and Roman culture, and here we have an artist who's embracing a pagan subject—the subject of Venus—and also other elements from ancient Greek and Roman Mythology.

Steven: Lots of ancient Greek and Roman figures.

Beth: We have the Three Graces on the left.



Sandro Botticelli, La Primavera (Spring), detail of Three Graces, 1481-82, tempera on panel, (Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: So, let's talk about who they are for just a second. This is a subject that was very popular in Roman statuary, and it provided an opportunity for a sculptor to show the human body from three sides simultaneously—that is, you multiply the figure and you just turn them slightly each time so that you really see a figure in the round.

Beth: And then on the far left, we have the god Mercury. He's put away his weapon.

Steven: He's at peace in her garden.



Sandro Botticelli, La Primavera (Spring), detail of Mars, 1481-82, tempera on panel, (Uffizi, Florence)

Beth: Who wouldn't be at peace in her garden? Look at it. It's fabulous and we're not sure exactly what he's doing, he's got a stick in his hand. He may be pushing away the clouds that appear to be coming in from the left.

Steven: Only a sunny day in paradise.

Beth: Absolutely. And then on the right, we have three more figures, Zephyr, a god of the wind, who is…

Steven: ….that's the blue figure…

Beth: …who is abducting the figure of Chloris, who, you can see, has a branch with leaves coming out of her mouth that collides with the figure next to her, who is the figure of Flora. So they may be one in the same person.



Sandro Botticelli, La Primavera (Spring), detail of abduction of Chloris, 1481-82, tempera on panel, (Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: In other words, the actual abduction of Chloris might actually result in Flora, and what Flora is doing here is she's reaching into her satchel that is full of blossoms, which she seems to be strewing or sewing on this, sort of, carpet of foliage below. This is, after all, "Primavera." This is spring.

Beth: Spring.

Steven: Yeah.

Beth: So there's a sense of the fertility of nature.

Steven: There's one other figure, who is Venus's son, just above her—blindfolded. This is, of course, Cupid, who's about to unleash his arrow on one of the unwitting Graces. Of course, he doesn't know who he's going to hit, but we can sort of figure it out!



Sandro Botticelli, La Primavera (Spring), detail of Cupid, 1481-82, tempera on panel, (Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Typical of Botticelli, we have figures who are elongated, weightless, who stand in rather impossible positions. Things that we don't normally expect from Renaissance art.

Steven: So, this really is at odds with many of the traditions that we learn about when it comes to the 15th century. This is not a painting that's about linear perspective. There's a little bit of atmospheric perspective that can be seen in the traces of landscape between the trees, but beyond that, this is a very frontal painting. It's very much a frieze, and it very much is referencing what we think might be a literary set of ideas. Art historians really don't know what this painting is about, and we've been looking for texts that it might refer to.

Beth: And, in a way, it doesn't really matter to the throngs of people who come to see it and to me because it's incredibly beautiful and it may be that *because* it has no specific meaning, it's easier for us in the 21st century to enjoy it.

Steven: There are lots of passages here that are just glorious. If you look at the diaphanous quality of the drapes that protect the Graces, for instance, and the tassels there, they're just beautiful. I'm especially taken where the hands of the Graces come together in those three places, creating a kind of wonderful complexity and beauty and just a kind of visual invention that is playful and an expression of a kind of complex notion of beauty. One of the ways in which this painting is understood is it's possibly as a sort of neo-Platonic

treatise or a kind of meditation on different kinds of beauty.

Beth: Venus herself is astoundingly beautiful. She tilts her head to one side and holds up her drapery and motions with her hand and looks directly at us. And in a way, it's impossible not to want to join her in the garden.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/qwZn852brII>



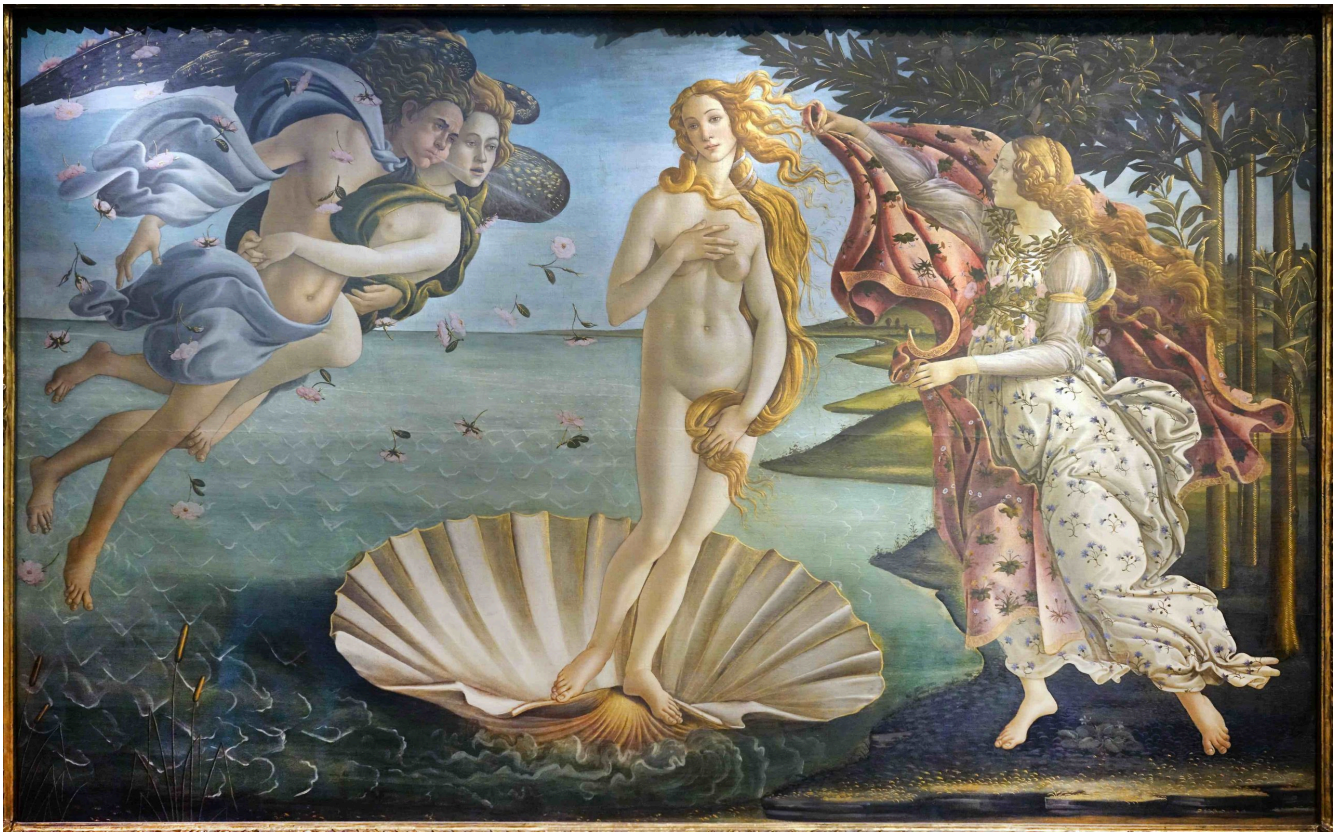
Sandro Botticelli, La Primavera (Spring), detail of Venus, 1481-82, tempera on panel, (Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

34.

Sandro Botticelli, 'Birth of Venus'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus, 1483-85, tempera on panel, 68 x 109 5/8" (172.5 x 278.5 cm) (Galeria degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jJyvqA>

This is a transcript of a conversation conducted in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy.

Beth: We're in probably the most crowded gallery at the Uffizi here in Florence. This is the room that contains Botticelli's fabulously beautiful *Birth of Venus*.

Steven: And you can hear the hubbub around us. But it's interesting that the *Birth of Venus* is a painting that we actually know very little about. We don't know who it was painted for. We don't know where it was originally intended to be seen; the subject—a full length, nude female—is highly unusual, especially for the fifteenth century.

Beth: We do see nudes in medieval art and even in Renaissance art before this. But the nudes are usually Adam and Eve.

Steven: And beginning in the fifteenth century, artists do begin to experiment with introducing heroic male nudity within a biblical context. Think, for instance, of Donatello's *David*. But here we have something exceptional. This is an almost life-size, full-length, female nude that is fully pagan in its subject matter. (Pagan here refers to the polytheistic religion of the ancient Greek and Roman world.)

Beth: Pagan and undoubtedly, the goddess of love (Venus). Although the artists of the Renaissance are looking back to ancient Greek and Roman sculpture, many of which were nudes, they've in the past transformed them into a Christian biblical subject. Here Venus remains Venus.

Steven: In fact, nudity in Christian art was often an expression of something traumatic. We see Christ almost nude on the cross. Or we see the sinful being led into hell. What makes this painting so exceptional is that it is perhaps one of the first almost life-size representations of a female nude that is fully mythological in its subject matter.

Beth: She covers her body very much the way Eve covered hers when she was expelled from the Garden of Eden, but here we have a gesture of modesty, not one of shame. Venus floats on a seashell. She's born from the sea.

Steven: And because we're talking about Classical mythology she can be born fully grown.

Beth: And here she is blown by the west wind Zephyr, and we see his body entwined with the body of Chloris.

Steven: On the right, we see an attendant who is ready to wrap the newborn goddess. Although, all of these figures clearly represent Botticelli's incredibly sophisticated understanding of the human body. Look at the wonderful sway of Venus or the complex intertwining of the two figures on the left. Despite the fact that we see a very deep space the canvas feels flat. This is the result of a number of things. For one thing, the emphasis on pattern. Botticelli has strewn the left side of the canvas with flowers which are very close to the foreground. On the right side, we have flowers again but now, they're part of the dress worn by the attendant and part of the cloth that she carries. The rhythmic alternation of light and dark in the scallop shell seems to push the back forward. Even the little v's that refer to the waves of the sea create a sense of two-dimensionality. So that the entire canvas, although depicting a deep space is also so heavily patterned that it reminds us of its own two-dimensionality.



Zephyr and Chloris, detail of Botticelli, The Birth of Venus, 1483-85, tempera on panel (Galeria degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: The figures all occupy the same plane. That is, one figure isn't behind another or deeper in space than another, and so it does read very "flatly." I would also argue that although Botticelli does have an understanding of human anatomy—and we can see that clearly in the body of Venus or in the figure of the west wind, or the way that we see the drapery wrapping around the figure of the nymph on the right the figures are weightless—they don't stand firmly on the ground the way that we often expect Renaissance figures to stand. The figure of Venus forms this serpentine shape that actually, I think, would be an impossible way to stand.

Steven: Certainly when you're surfing to shore on a seashell. Look, for example, at the way that the artist has highlighted her golden hair with actual lines of gold, gold that also appears in the foliage

to the upper right and that can be seen in the trunks of the trees that form the grove at the right.

Beth: As Venus tilts her head slightly, her hair blows in the wind and surrounds the curve of her body…and is brought down in front of her to cover her modestly. Although there may be meaning behind this painting that connects Classical mythology to certain Christian ideas via a philosophy called Neoplatonism (a philosophy that holds that there is a single supreme source of goodness in the universe from which all other things descend, and to which they can be reunited), what we're looking at essentially is still a beautiful and erotic image. This is a celebration of both beauty and of love, and we can think about that in both a secular context and a Christian one.



Detail of Botticelli, The Birth of Venus, 1483-85, tempera on panel (Galeria degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Watch the video <https://youtu.be/K6PBfbkMzFU>.



Crowd in front of Botticelli, The Birth of Venus, 1483-85, tempera on panel, 68 x 109 5/8" (172.5 x 278.5 cm) (Galeria degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jJzjYs>

35.

Botticelli, 'Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo il Vecchio de' Medici'

Dr. Rebecca Howard



Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo the Elder, c. 1474, tempera on panel, 57.5 x 44 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

When browsing a museum, I'm sure we've all experienced the strong desire to touch a work of art (we know we shouldn't, but I think we can admit we've all wanted to). Well, Sandro Botticelli's *Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo il Vecchio de' Medici* was *made* to incite touch, or at least to make viewers think about touch and physical experience.

Seeing Botticelli's *Portrait of a Man* reproduced online, in the pages of a book, or even when walking past it in Florence's Galleria degli Uffizi, where it is protected by a layer of glass, modern viewers may miss a key aspect of the painting. However, the typical fifteenth-century viewer of this portrait likely would have been able to touch the object itself, and at the very least could easily draw from memory the experience of handling an object much like the medallion held by the portrait sitter, as portrait medallions were frequently dispersed and collected among the upper classes.



Sandro Botticelli, detail of Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo il Vecchio de' Medici, c. 1474, tempera on panel, 57.5 x 44 cm (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: dvdbramhall, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/21zK1BJ>

Upon closer inspection, you'll notice that this isn't a two-dimensional portrait painting, but a multimedia work. The sitter is indeed painted quite naturalistically, so he looks three-dimensional, as though he could potentially exist in our world. The medallion that he holds, however, *actually is three-dimensional*. This portrait, like many paintings in fifteenth-century Italy, is painted with tempera on a wood panel. In this case, a hole has been cut in the panel, where the sitter appears to be holding the medallion, and a copy of a real portrait medallion has been inserted into that space.

This pseudo-medallion is not actually made of metal, as a true medallion is, but it is instead built of *pastiglia*, a paste or plaster, made with gesso and built in low relief. In this portrait, the *pastiglia* medallion has also been gilded, or covered in a thin layer of gold leaf, to mimic the appearance of a gilded bronze medallion. Because the image and text on this pseudo-medallion exactly mimic the orientation of Cosimo's portrait on real medallions from this period, it is possible that Botticelli used the impression of an existing medallion to make a mold, or had access to a mold used to create such medallions.



Cosimo de' Medici, c. 1480–1500, bronze medal, made in Florence (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

Who is this man?

Well, we don't know, despite much scholarly speculation over the years. We can discern that he is certainly intending to associate himself with one of the most powerful families in Italy at this time, the Medici. He does so by holding a large *copy* of a real, existing portrait medallion—an object that would have been made in multiples, circulated, traded, and collected by humanists and upper-class members of Renaissance society.

The young man in Botticelli's portrait looks directly out at the viewer and appears proud of his connection to the object that he holds. He displays the large medallion right over his heart, an organ that was associated with the creation of lasting memories and the storage of sense impressions. The sitter is dressed as a humanist, a learned member of Florentine society.



Left: Cosimo de' Medici, c. 1480–1500, bronze medal, made in Florence (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London); right: Trajan Denarius, Roman Dacia, 107 C.E. (Roman Numismatics Collection; photo: courtesy of James Grout/ Encyclopedia Romana)

The medallion, as a copy of a real object, shows the profile view of Cosimo il Vecchio (the Elder), with Latin text arching above his portrait. The text makes reference to Cosimo il Vecchio as *pater patriae*, or "Father of the Fatherland." This phrase indicated the political power of the Medici, which began during Cosimo's lifetime. The format of the pseudo-medallion is drawn from coins and medals of Greek and Roman antiquity, thereby effectively associating Cosimo with great rulers of a learned past, a past that Renaissance humanists hoped to emulate.

Who were the Medici?

Why would someone in Renaissance Italy want to be associated with the Medici family? And why Cosimo il Vecchio, in particular? The Medici were the most powerful family in Florence, and remained one of the most influential families in Italy—and Western Europe more broadly—throughout the Renaissance. Even though Cosimo il Vecchio was deceased by the time of this portrait, he was remembered as the de-facto "father" of the wealthy banking, mercantile, and political family. Beginning with Cosimo and his political rule, the Medici helped to make Florence the cradle and birthplace of the Italian Renaissance, as they were responsible for financially supporting many advances in the arts and humanities. By 1475, when this portrait was painted, the grandsons of Cosimo, Lorenzo and Giuliano, were co-rulers of Florence. Just a few years later, in 1478, Giuliano was killed in the Florentine Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (the *Duomo*) during the assassination plot known as the Pazzi Conspiracy. At this time, Lorenzo il Magnifico (the Magnificent) de' Medici became head of the family and the Medici rule in Florence.

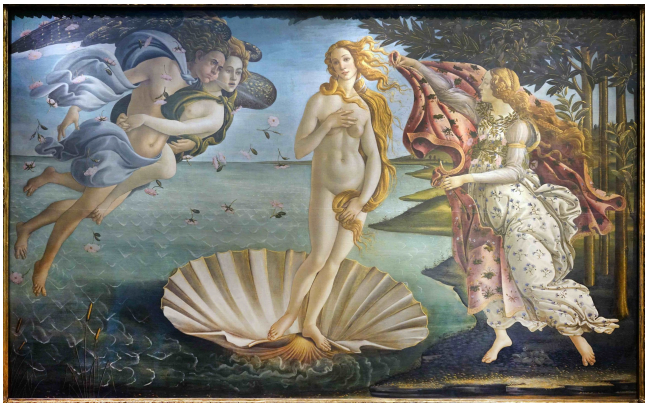
Lorenzo, in particular, surrounded himself and filled his court with artists, architects, writers, and other humanist scholars. Sandro Botticelli was one of these, looked upon quite favorably by Lorenzo and given numerous commissions during his time as a court painter for the Medici. This portrait was thus created during one of the great heights of Medici Renaissance power and influence. In just a few decades, in fact, two members of the family would become popes—Pope Leo X (Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici) and Pope Clement VII (Giulio di Giuliano de' Medici). In short, if one had the ability to claim even a tangential connection to the Medici family, it would only make sense to document that connection for eternity in a work of art, such as our *Man with a Medal*.



Sandro Botticelli, Adoration of the Magi, c. 1475–76, tempera on panel, 111 x 134 cm (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence). A self-portrait of Botticelli appears on the far-right side; he is the man looking out at viewers and dressed in golden robes.

Botticelli, the Medici, and Renaissance portraiture

And, again, Botticelli was able to claim just such a connection himself. In fact, the artist famously includes his self-portrait in an image of the *Adoration of the Magi*, also painted around 1475. The Medici were known to frequently associate themselves with the three kings as a way of showing their loyalty to the Christian faith and their will to also gift expensive things to Christ (carried out in the Renaissance by way of commissioning religious works of art and architecture). As such, many recognizable portraits of Medici family members can be found in the *Adoration of the Magi*. Botticelli perpetually commemorates his connection to this powerful family by adding his own portrait to the group.



Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus, 1483-85, tempera on panel, 68 x 109 5/8" (172.5 x 278.5 cm) (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jJyvqA>

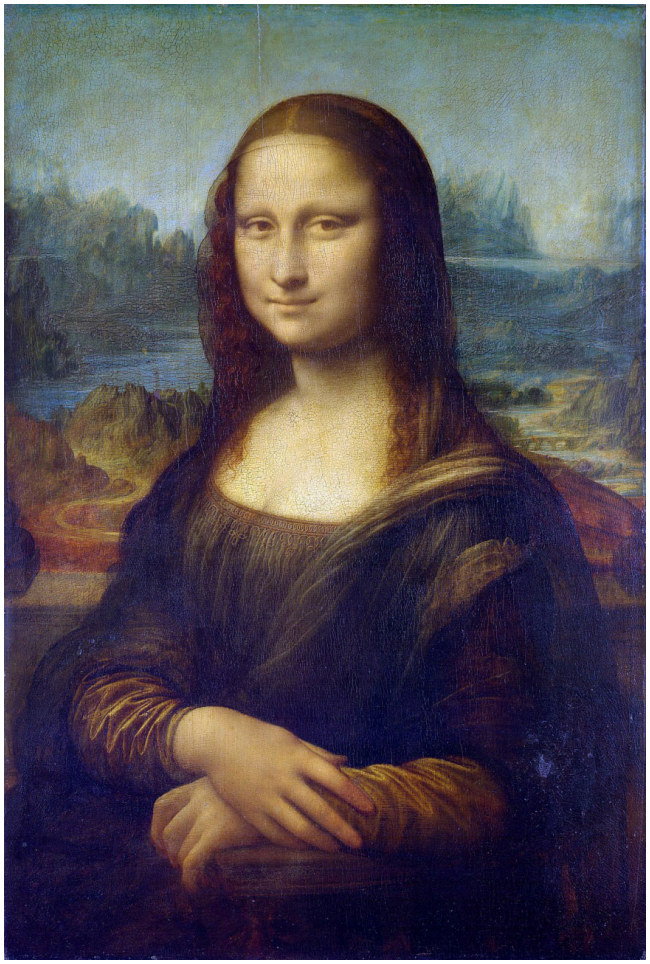
The best-known works by Botticelli are religious and mythological scenes, such as his *Birth of Venus*, which can also be found in the Uffizi Gallery. However, Botticelli was also widely celebrated for his technical abilities in the genre of portraiture. In the last quarter of the fifteenth century, artists were continually working towards creating ever more communicative and naturalistic portraits.



Two examples of northern renaissance portraits. Left: Jan Van Eyck, The Arnolfini Portrait, 1434, tempera and oil on oak panel, 82.2 x 60 cm (National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); right: Petrus Christus, Portrait of a Carthusian, 1446 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Moving away from the classically-inspired strict profile format and turning to a three-quarter twist of the body inspired by Flemish portraiture, artists like Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, and Antonello da Messina were revolutionizing the entire genre of portraiture.

Painters from regions north of the Alps created portrait likenesses that turned toward their viewers and appeared to make eye contact, ultimately inspiring Italian artists, already heavily invested in naturalism, to do the same. In addition, Leonardo da Vinci's portraits, as well as many of Botticelli's, also began to incorporate more of the body (consider, for example, how a viewer sees the entire turn of the *Mona Lisa*'s upper body, even the placement of her hands), thereby adding an even greater sense of physical presence to the sitters.



Leonardo da Vinci, Portrait of Lisa Gherardini (Mona Lisa), c. 1503–05, oil on panel, 30-1/4" x 21" (Musée du Louvre)



Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo the Elder, c. 1474, tempera on panel, 57.5 x 44 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

A truly unique portrait

Botticelli's *Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo il Vecchio de' Medici* is particularly special because it incorporates the "old" format of portraits in its medallion—those in strict profile, meant to reference similar objects from antiquity—along with the newly popularized approach that captured more lively and communicative sitters, sitters that make eye contact with their viewers. Here, Botticelli's young man looks directly out at us, capturing our attention and thereby directing it to what he holds. We feel as though he is speaking to us, asking us to touch this three-dimensional medallion and to remember his status, amplified by his ties to this important family. The artwork combines old and new, painting and sculpture, to create one of the most unique and enthralling portraits of its time.

36.

Portraits and fashion: Sandro Botticelli, 'Portrait of a Young Woman'

Dr. Lane Eagles



Sandro Botticelli, Portrait of a Young Woman, c. 1485, tempera on wood, 61 x 40.5 cm (Pitti Palace)



Piero del Pollaiuolo, Portrait of a Woman, c. 1480, tempera on wood, 48.9 c 35.2 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Portraits and fashion

Sandro Botticelli is best known for his masterpieces *The Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*, but during his prolific career, Botticelli also painted several portraits of contemporary Renaissance Florentines — including *Portrait of a Young Woman*, currently held in Florence's Pitti Palace.

Portraits of early modern women are especially important art historical survivals, because less information is known about women's lives in this period. Although the figure in Botticelli's *Portrait of a Young Woman* lacks flashing jewels and eye-catching brocades (as featured in this portrait by Pollaiuolo), likenesses such as this one elucidate upper-class women's daily lived experience. While Botticelli's *Portrait of a Young Woman* may strike modern viewers as simple, the picture showcases early modern Florentine gender roles through its depiction of dress.

Dressing down



Men conducting business (detail), in Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Effects of Good Government in the City , fresco, 1338 (Palazzo Pubblico, Siena)

Depicted clothing provides key iconographic clues for art and fashion historians. During the Renaissance, clothing signaled social rank, marital status, and gender differentiation. Public dress for the upper classes was ostentatious, expensive, and designed to be attention grabbing, with intricately patterned and brightly dyed silks. However, indoor clothing was much simpler, especially for women.



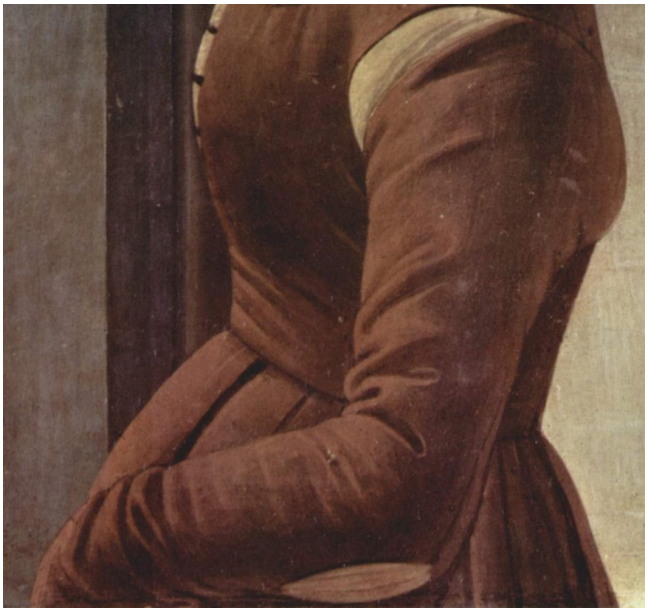
Detail, Sandro Botticelli, Portrait of a Young Woman, c. 1485, tempera on wood, 61 x 40.5 cm (Pitti Palace)

Florentine Renaissance women and men lived in very different worlds. Generally, men supervised the public-facing business domain, while women oversaw the management of the domestic sphere. While there were many exceptions to this dichotomy, upper-class wives usually oversaw the daily running of the household.

Indeed, it is safe to assume the woman in Botticelli's painting is married, based on her dressed-down, indoor style. Her bound-up hair, for example, was a typical hairstyle for married women (unmarried women commonly wore their hair down). Further, this figure is doubtless an upper-class woman, based on the sturdiness of her gown and its fine details (and, of course, because her family was wealthy enough to commission a portrait from a famous painter).

Clothing and status

While the dress in *Portrait of a Young Woman* is unassuming, it is not cheap. The overgown—the outermost dress layer—is tailored from a plain brown material, possibly cotton. Using a heartier textile assured the gown would last for years of indoor wear. This dress was designed for supervising the home, including tasks like instructing servants and overseeing deliveries. It was meant to be moved in. The figure's waist is encased in deep pleats. Her skirts push forward, and are so full with extra fabric that she has shoved her hands into their depths via pockets. Her brown locks are swept up in a simple cotton cap.



Detail, Sandro Botticelli, Portrait of a Young Woman, c. 1485, tempera on wood, 61 x 40.5 cm (Pitti Palace)

Clues confirming the figure's high status embellish the plain outfit. A black ribbon necklace, possibly ending in an unseen cross pendant, (a popular accessory at the time), hangs from her neck. This woman wears at least one undergown, which can be seen peeking from the edges of her neckline, beneath the frontal laces. The undergarment has also been pulled out from sleeve gaps at the arm seam and elbow. A sheer lace partlet modestly covers her shoulders, and a translucent material, possibly silk or more lace, completes the bonnet to shield her hair, a symbol of wifely rejection of vanity.

The woman stands before a frame, possibly to a door or a window, a device which confirms the figure is pictured indoors — adhering to cultural norms. Although married Renaissance women were generally associated with indoor spaces, upper-class wives still led vibrant social lives. This plain brown dress, as typical private daywear, would have been appropriate garb for hosting friends and relatives at home. While much subdued as opposed to the type of costume an upper-class woman would adopt for public outings, the outfit worn by *Portrait of a Young Woman* provides viewers with an intimate glimpse into the Renaissance home.

"I Could Not See Her to My Satisfaction"

It is possible the woman pictured in Botticelli's *Portrait of a Young Woman* is Clarice Orsini, a daughter of the noble Roman Orsini family. In June of 1469, at the age of nineteen, Clarice Orsini married the *de facto* prince of Florence, Lorenzo the Magnificent de'Medici. The Medici were merchant bankers and the most powerful family in Florence, so a marriage into a prominent and aristocratic Roman family served to further solidify their planned dominance of Tuscany. If the figure in *Portrait of a Young Woman* is indeed Clarice Orsini, Botticelli, as a Medici court painter, was tasked with creating a humble portrait of Lorenzo de'Medici's virtuous wife assuming appropriate, indoor female gentility.

As with most political marriages, Clarice and Lorenzo's bond was arranged by the couple's parents. Lucrezia de'Medici, Lorenzo's mother and the matriarch of the Medici family, wrote letters to her Florentine kin when she visited Rome to meet with Clarice's parents and assess the girl's aptitude towards a union with her son. In March 1467, Lucrezia reported back to her husband Piero de'Medici about the potential alliance between the

Medici and Orsini. In the letter, Lucrezia segments the shy Clarice to her smallest attributes, describing her hair color, hands, and posture to Piero. Lucrezia wished to know whether the prospective adolescent bride seemed physically qualified for childbearing and furthering of Medicean lineage. Indeed, Lucrezia complains *twice* in the same letter that she could not get a clear look at Clarice's body during her visit.

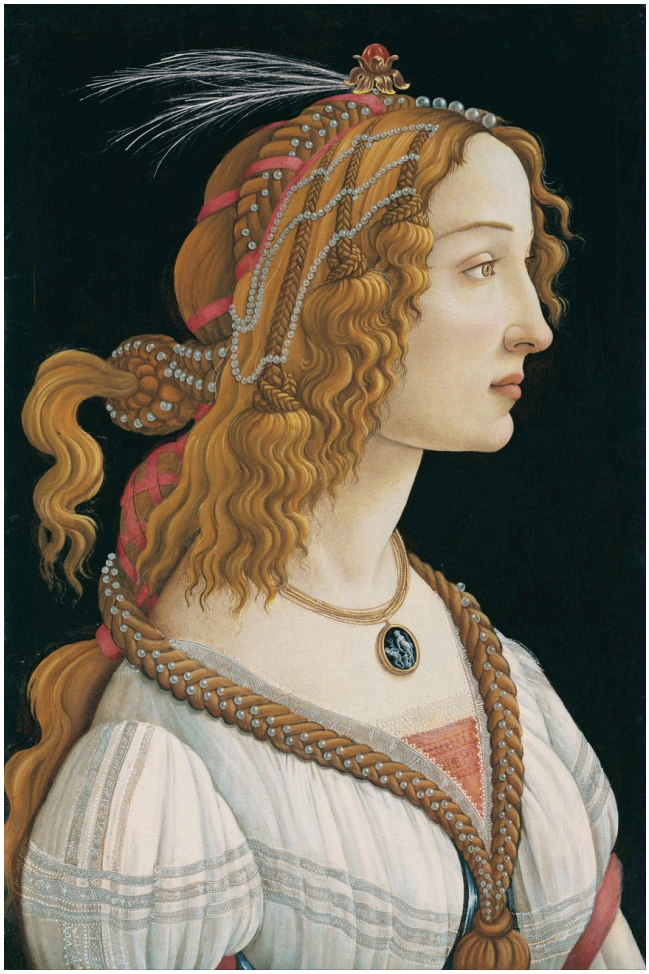


Bust of Lorenzo de' Medici, 15th-16th century (National Gallery of Art)

The Medici mother grumbles that her intense parental vision was impeded by a Roman *lenzuolo* (a long, breezy cloak) Clarice wore, objecting:

> in this dress she seemed to me handsome, fair, tall, but being covered up I could not see her to my satisfaction. —*Lucrezia Tornabuoni and Cesare Guasti, Tre lettere di Lucrezia Tornabuoni a Piero de' Medici ed altre lettere di vari concernenti al matrimonio di Lorenzo il Magnifico con Clarice Orsini ricordo di Nozze nel gennaio 1859, ([Cesare Guasti] per Felice Le Monnier, 1859), p. 9.*

A few lines later, Lucrezia continues to decry her inability to speculate on the girl's form, lamenting "her bosom I could not see, as here the women are entirely covered up, but it appeared to me of good proportions." Lucrezia's letters clarify how important clothing and beauty was to the political and social movements of the Renaissance world. The Medici matriarch's concern proved needless, as Clarice gave birth to ten children, six of whom survived into adulthood. One of Clarice's sons even grew up to be Pope Leo X.



Sandro Botticelli, Portrait of a Young Woman, 1480–1485, tempera on wood, 82 cm × 54 cm (Städel Museum)

Fantastical Beauty

The intimacy displayed by the figure's dress is rare for the period, and offers a unique glimpse into how public and private notions of Renaissance

womanhood diverged. Comparing Botticelli's *Portrait of a Young Woman* (possibly Clarice Orsini) with another, slightly earlier painting, also entitled *Portrait of a Young Woman*, clarifies the wide range of female beauty standards in Renaissance Florence.

While Botticelli depicts Clarice Orsini in indoor garb, this young lady, in stark contrast, is portrayed in fantastical dress. Fantastical dress is an imagined clothing style, depicted in images as even more ostentatious than common public wear. Some scholars have linked fantastical dress to Florentine public processions, which often included a costume element called "disguisement."[1]

In this *Portrait of a Young Woman*, Botticelli has broken with strict profile to give the viewer a hint of the sitter's left hazel eye. Lace detailing enlivens her white gown with its pink undergarment. The figure's neck is long and slender, and her forehead is elongated with thinly-plucked eyebrows, both of which were considered attractive physical attributes at the time.



Sandro Botticelli, Portrait of a Young Woman, 1480–1485, tempera on wood, 82 cm × 54 cm (Städel Museum)

Her hair is blonde, the shade considered most beautiful for women in the period, which is why many Renaissance depictions of Mary show the Mother of God with golden-colored hair. Sprays of feathers spring from the broach in the figure's hair, and pearls (symbols of chastity and sometimes pregnancy) dot the hairstyle. With its braids, ribbons, curls, and intricate knotting, it is unlikely this coiffure could have been achieved in reality.

A fabled beauty

Some scholars believe the woman pictured in this image is Simonetta Vespucci, another contemporary Florentine woman associated with the Medici family. Simonetta Vespucci was the "it-girl" of Quattrocento Florence, considered one of the most beautiful women in the city. Both Medici male heirs, Lorenzo de'Medici the Magnificent and his younger brother Giuliano de'Medici, publicly declared their admiration for Simonetta.

Signs identifying Simonetta's connection with the Medici are found in the figure's jewelry; the cameo hanging from her neck depicts a scene of the Greek god Apollo flaying Marsyas for displeasing him. The Medici, possibly Lorenzo himself, owned a very similar cameo.



Sandro Botticelli, Portrait of a Young Woman, 1480–1485, tempera on wood, 82 cm × 54 cm (Städel Museum)

In 1476, Simonetta Vespucci died tragically young at the age of twenty-two, likely of tuberculosis. The entire city of Florence mourned her loss. Botticelli, therefore, may have created this likeness posthumously. After her death, Botticelli created many similar portraits of fantastically beautiful young women, which also may or may not portray Simonetta Vespucci.

Indeed, some scholars even believe Venus and Flora in the *Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*, respectively, were also inspired by the real-life Florentine beauty queen. When creating his compositions such as the iconic *Birth of Venus*, Botticelli often collaborated with the Medici court poet, Poliziano, who wrote many versus praising Simonetta Vespucci's beauty.

Types of beauty

Both of the Botticelli portraits discussed in this essay — of young, Florentine women — showcase wildly different visual conceptions of Renaissance female beauty. Together, the images tell a story about legacy, patriarchy, and two women deeply connected to and beloved by one of the most powerful and influential dynasties in early modern Europe.

Notes:

1. Charles Dempsey, "The End of the Masquerade," *Inventing the Renaissance Putto* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001), 203-208.

37.

Perugino, 'Decemviri Altarpiece'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in the National Museum of Umbria.

Beth: We're in the National Museum of Umbria in Perugia, looking at a special exhibition that has united two works of art that are normally separated, but which were meant to be together. This is an altarpiece by Perugino, the great artist from Perugia.

Steven: The painting was taken by Napoleon in 1797 when he invaded northern Italy, and so this is an extraordinary event. These objects have not been together since.

Beth: Napoleon's armies confiscated thousands of works of art in the territories that he conquered.

Steven: Now he did this in order to, as the revolutionaries said, "liberate" work of arts from oppressive regimes— that is, from nobles and kings and monasteries and churches, and bring it on to what they considered the free soil of post-Revolutionary France. The very best works would end up at the Louvre in Paris and works not selected were sold or warehoused or simply lost. And so it was in the early 19th century that many works that had been in their original locations were dislocated and ended up in museums across Europe and the United States. After Napoleon was defeated, the decision was made that the British would not take the French booty but instead Wellington said these works must be returned to their original locations. But not all of the works ended up where they were supposed to go.

Beth: The Pope put the sculptor Canova in charge of returning the works of art to Italy, and this painting ended up in the Vatican Museums, but of course the frame and the top image were here in Perugia—so for the last 200 years, they've been separated thanks to Napoleon.



Pietro Perugino, Madonna and Child with Saints Herculaneum, Constantius, Lawrence, and Louis of Toulouse (known as the Decemviri Altarpiece), 1495, tempera on wood, 193 x 165 cm (Vatican Museums); above Perugino, Man of Sorrows, 1495 (Cappella dei Priori within the Palazzo dei Priori, Perugia) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jaCi6x>

Steven: And Perugia, of course, was dismayed that the painting was in the Vatican and asked for its return; it wasn't until this year—2019—and only for a special loan show that this painting and frame and the upper painting have been reunited. After the exhibition in Perugia ends, the ensemble will travel to the Vatican for a second showing.

Beth: But in Perugia, we have the great fortune of seeing this work in the location for which it was made. This is an important space for the city of Perugia, the place of the seat of government…

Steven: …and perhaps even more important, in a room that is a chapel. In fact, we had to wait a few minutes before we could come into this room because a mass was being said here.



Perugino, Decemviri Altarpiece, 1495, tempera on wood, 193 x 165 cm, exhibited at the Cappella dei Priori within the Palazzo dei Priori, Perugia. The fresco cycle by Benedetto Bonfigli depicts two Patron Saints of Perugia, St. Herculanus and St. Louis of Toulouse and was created between 1454 and 1480 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2j8fm9g>

Beth: And around the walls here, we see fresco scenes that are important to the civic life, the religious life of Perugia and its governing Council of Ten. In fact, this is known as the "Decemviri Altarpiece," or the Altarpiece of Ten Men. The original commission was intended to feature the ten men, but the commission went through various phases, and this is what we have in the end.

Steven: The circumstances of this painting remind us of the importance of place.

Beth: There's a civic pride that's associated with Perugino, with this altarpiece, in this important space in this town hall in the center of Perugia. We often think about Perugino as the teacher of the great artist Raphael, but Perugino was such an amazing artist in his own right.



Perugino, Decemviri Altarpiece, detail with Virgin and Child, 1495, tempera on panel (Vatican Museums) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2j8biAV>

Steven: Perugino has created an ideal and yet completely convincing space. He's given us this elaborate classicizing throne on which sits the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child, surrounded by four local saints with just a hint of this expansive landscape and this glorious open sky.

Beth: There's that Renaissance interest in figures who are very real, who are three-dimensional and who have weight—the drapery describes the form of the body underneath and the figures are in correct proportion. There's this fascinating thing that happens in the Renaissance, of locating the transcendent in the earthly.



Raphael, The Small Cowper Madonna, c.1505, oil on panel, 59.5 x 44 cm (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)

Steven: It's so clear that Raphael paid attention to Perugino. There's a softness, a sweetness, a quietness that exists in Perugino's work and that Raphael adopts.

Beth: So what we have together in this altarpiece is the Madonna enthroned in heaven—the sacra conversazione, with saints brought together in a unified space around the Virgin and Child—and then above that, Christ standing at his tomb, displaying the wounds of the crucifixion, the promise of salvation, of life after death… Napoleon's confiscation of works of art forever changed the cultural landscape of Europe.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/H3dIzSpPL28>



Perugino, Man of Sorrows, from the Decemviri Altarpiece, 1495, tempera on wood (Cappella dei Priori within the Palazzo dei Priori, Perugia) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

38.

Piero della Francesca, 'The Baptism of Christ'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the National Gallery, London.

Beth: We're looking at a very large panel painting by Piero della Francesca of the Baptism of Christ. This is a typical subject that we see a lot.

Steven: But not a typical treatment. Piero was one of those Renaissance artists that I think the modern era has loved in part because of the emphasis on geometry and a kind of abstraction of space and form.

Beth: He really stands out as having a really unique style in the early Renaissance. It's defined by a kind of stillness of the figures, a kind of quietness.

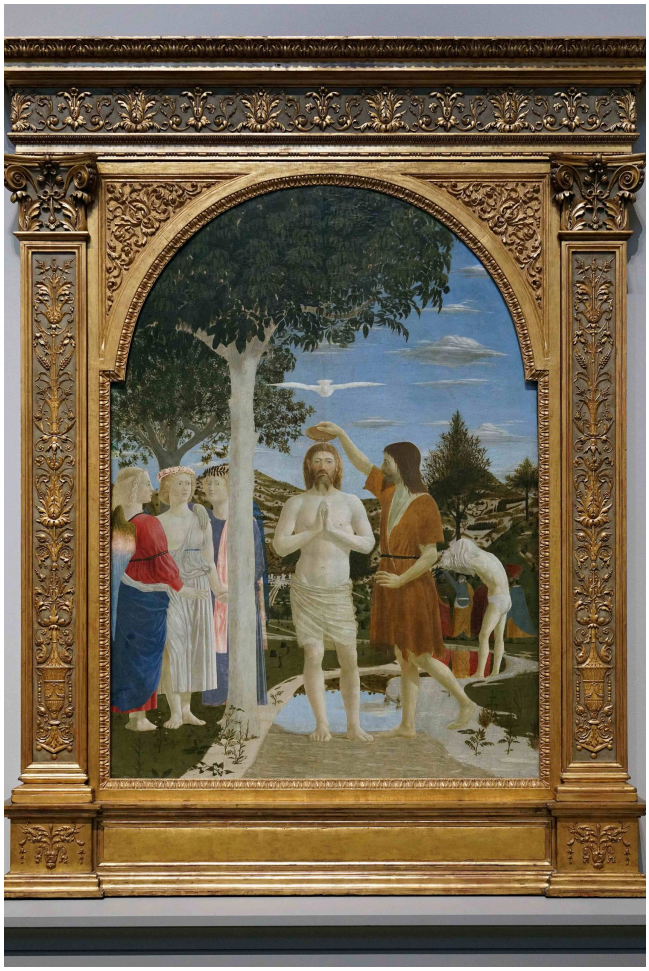
Steven: It has all of the characteristics of an ideal moment. This is the moment literally the moment when John allows the water to pour from that bowl onto Christ's head and would be that moment when the Holy Spirit in the form of the dove appears.

Beth: John is so ever so gently and tentatively pouring that water over Christ, who of course Christ asked John to baptize him and John at first refused and Christ insisted because John said, "No you should baptize me."

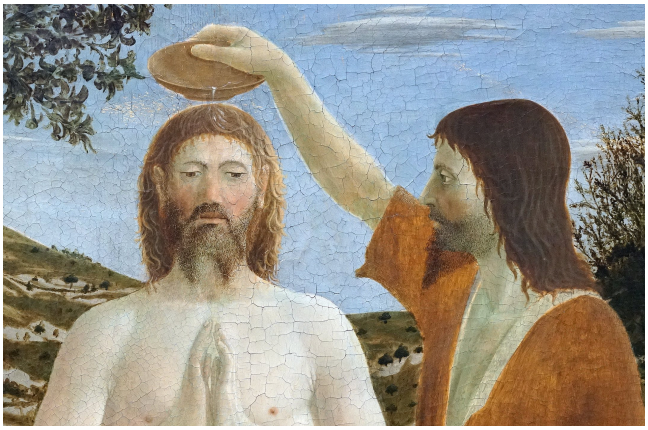
Steven: The angels on the left look equally concerned and there is a kind of tentativeness. Look at the focus in John's eyes.

Beth: The sort of tentativeness is expressed in his left hand.

Steven: Yes, oh absolutely, and you can see that in the hands of the angels as well.



Piero della Francesca, The Baptism of Christ, 1450s, tempera on wood, 167 x 116 cm (National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



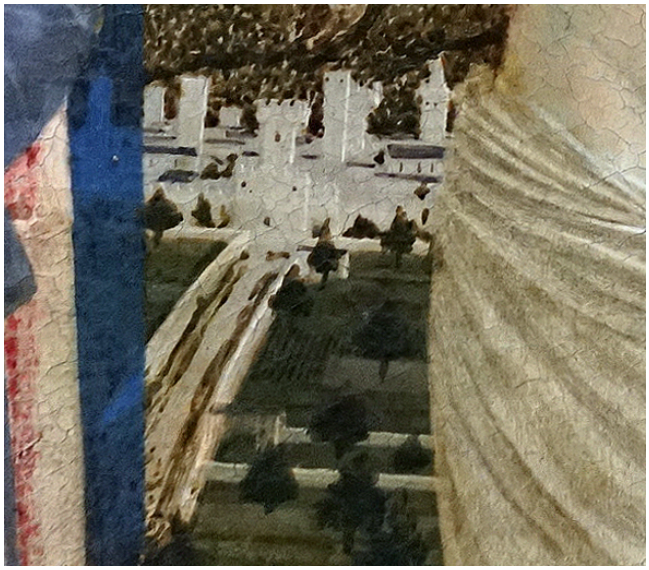
Piero della Francesca, The Baptism of Christ, detail, 1450s, tempera on wood (National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: There is a kind of stillness and sense of linearity to the figures. Christ occupies the exact center of the composition directly under the dove. He stands in a lovely contropposto with his hands in prayer.

Steven: There is a really strict geometry. You have the verticality that you already mentioned. But not only is there bilateral symmetry of Christ's body in the center of the canvas but of John being quite strayed of the angels very erect, the tree, all the trees. Then there is a series of perfect horizontals. Look at the way that John's belt continues the movement of the man who is taking off his shirt to the right, moves across Christ's waist and picks up the belt of the middle angel. So you have a kind of perfect horizontal that moves across that is echoed by the horinzontality of the dove, whose line is continued by the clouds, and then there are a series of circles. The painting itself is an arch but that arch of that circle is picked up and continued by the arc of the top of the cloth that covers Christ's waist and then by John's hand and arm and even by the sort of line that is created as the man pulls his shirt over his head so that you've got really this sort of continued negative arc or the bottom of the arc of the circle.

Beth: This love of geometry. We know that perspective was something that Piero also was really interested in and wrote a treatus about. This interest in the mathematical foundations of beauty and harmony is something that we really see very broadly in the early renaissance.

Steven: I think that there is an additional kind of peculiarity, which has to do with the placement. Clearly this is not the middle east. The hill town that we see just below Christ's elbow is clearly of Tuscany.



Piero della Francesca, The Baptism of Christ, detail, 1450s, tempera on wood (National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Maybe even where Piero was from, which was Borgo Santo Sepolcro.

Steven: That's right but we have a reference to the river Jordan in back of Christ, which is in and of itself a sort of peculiar almost minimized and abstracted into a little stream that almost seems to stop, as if it's a little pathway actually, going back a kind of reflective pathway.

Beth: There is a kind of intentionality here and a kind of formality that I think is very appealing in the 21st century.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/qv2K1yk0LCE>



Piero della Francesca, The Baptism of Christ, 1450s, tempera on wood, 167 x 116 cm (National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jHmZij>

39.

Piero della Francesca, 'Flagellation of Christ'

Christine Zappella



Piero della Francesca, Flagellation of Christ, c. 1455-65, oil and tempera on wood, 58.4 × 81.5 cm (Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino, Italy)

The subject of the *Flagellation*

Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation of Christ* is proof that, sometimes, good things really do come in small packages. Despite the panel's size (only 58.4 cm × 81.5 cm), the painting has been a mainstay in the last century in discussions of Quattrocento (fifteenth century) painting. An early example of the use of oil paint—though Piero used both tempera and oil in its execution—the work depicts the moment in Christ's Passion when he was whipped before Pontius Pilate. Though the New Testament says very little about this moment, mentioning only that Pilate ordered Christ to be flogged, later Christian writers wrote much about the event and even speculated about the number of lashes Christ received. Though the New Testament does not say that Christ was tied to a column while being whipped, during the fifteenth century this became a convention in depictions of the scene, which Piero here follows.

A masterpiece of the early Renaissance

This painting is a masterpiece of the Early Renaissance. The figures are expressive; especially noteworthy is the face of the bearded man in the foreground. They are also given real volume through the use of modeling (the passage from light to dark over the surface of an object). True to Humanism, the painting shows a preoccupation with the classical world, as seen especially in the architecture and inclusion of the golden statue in the background. Above all, Piero's obsession with perspective (the naturalistic recession in to space), is evident. In fact, the artist was the author of a treatise on perspective, entitled *De Prospectiva Pingendi* (*On the Perspective of Painting*) and was also known as a mathematician and geometer.

Who are the men in the foreground?

But Piero della Francesca's picture is also highly unusual. The flagellation, which is the gruesome main event, takes place in the background, while three extraneous men are painted prominently in the foreground. Piero uses two main devices to further emphasize the division of subjects. The first is setting. While the flagellation takes place inside of a covered courtyard with dramatic black and white checked tiles, the men are outdoors standing on the reddish tiles that pervade the scene. The second is the use of the orthogonal lines of the perspective, which divide the painting in

half, and also delineate the interior and exterior space.

Not only is the painting strange because Piero marginalized the primary subject, relegating it to the back of the painting, but also because art historians cannot agree on who the three men in the foreground are. Theories abound.

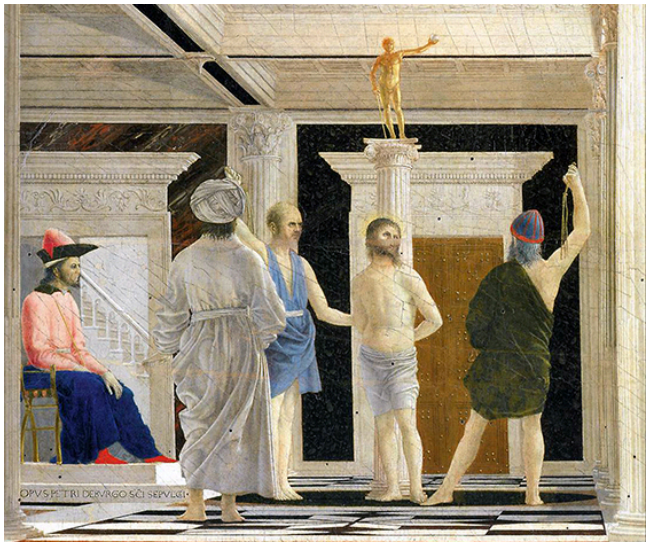


Three men in foreground (detail), Piero della Francesca, Flagellation of Christ, c. 1455-65, oil and tempera on wood, 58.4 × 81.5 cm (Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino)

The traditional identification of these three men is that the young man in the center is Oddantanio da Montefeltro, ruler of Urbino, flanked on either side by his advisors. All three of these men were killed in a conspiracy. In this case, it is suggested that the patron of the painting was Federigo da Montefeltro (who was later immortalized in a famous diptych by Piero) to commemorate his brother's death and compare his innocence to that of Christ.

Art historian Marilyn Lavin offered another notable interpretation of the painting. She suggested that the two older men are Ludovico Gonzaga and a friend, who had both recently lost their sons, symbolized by the young man in the center. The painting in this case would compare the pain that the two fathers felt to that of Christ during his Passion.

Other art historians have suggested that the painting is an allegory for the suffering of Constantinople after its fall to the Muslims in 1453. In this view, the two men watching the flagellation are Murad II (the Islamic sultan who waged a decades-long war against Christianity), and Byzantine Emperor John VIII Palaiologos (against whom that war was waged). The emperor had gone to the 1438 Council of Florence to ask for protection from the Muslims, but received no aid. The three enigmatic men, then, represent nobles who stood by and let the Christian nation be destroyed.



Christ tied to a column, being flogged by two men (detail), Piero della Francesca, Flagellation of Christ, c. 1455-65, oil and tempera on wood, 58.4 × 81.5 cm (Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino)

Still another interpretation suggests that the key to understanding the painting lay in the lost inscription on the frame, which putatively said, "Convenerunt in unum," or "They come into one." This is a line from the Bible that was traditionally read each year on Good Friday, the day that commemorates Christ's Passion. "They" would refer then to the Sanhedrinists, or councilmen of Israel, who were present during Christ's suffering. In this way of looking at the panel, Piero did not include a contemporary political message, but rather painted a narrative that is true to the text, and depicts exactly what it purports to, the flagellation of Christ.

No definitive interpretation

The enigmatic nature of Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation* underscores the fact that works of art, regardless of their age, continue to engender interesting art historical research. In the case of this painting, it is unlikely that a definitive interpretation will ever be accepted, as there is little documentation to support a single argument. Perhaps this ambiguity is partially why the painting continues to intrigue, and, almost 600 years later, grants multiple entry points to the viewer, drawing him into Piero's fictional world.

40.

Piero della Francesca, 'Resurrection'

Christine Zappella



Piero della Francesca, The Resurrection, c. 1463-65, fresco, 225 x 200 cm (Museo Civico, Sansepolcro, Italy)

Saved from destruction

Although Da Vinci's *Last Supper* is perhaps the most famous fresco that was nearly destroyed during World War II, the people of the Italian town Sansepolcro in Tuscany contend that they, in fact, hold the most important work spared in the war. For this, they can thank commanding British artillery officer and great appreciator of art, Tony Clarke, who was supposed to raze the city, but defied orders—having read Aldous Huxley's comment that Sansepolcro was home to the best painting in the world. Huxley, of course, was referring to Piero della Francesca's famed fresco, *The Resurrection*.

A relic of the holy sepulcher

Piero painted this fresco around 1463 in the civic hall of Sansepolcro, which had been occupied by the Florentines but was recently returned (the Italian city-states were often at war). The subject matter then—the triumphant Christ arising from his tomb the third day after his death—may be a reference to the triumph of the town itself, which was named after the Holy Sepulcher (Sansepolcro in Italian, and the Holy Sepulcher is the tomb that Christ was buried in). The presence of the large stone in the lower right hand corner of the fresco supports this, as it possibly represents the relic of the sepulcher (the burial place, in this case of Christ) putatively brought to Sansepolcro by the saints who founded the town, Arcano and Egidio.



Piero della Francesca, The Resurrection, c. 1463-65, fresco, 225 x 200 cm (Museo Civico, Sansepolcro, Italy)

An interest in more than naturalism

Unlike other paintings by Piero (*The Flagellation* for example), *The Resurrection* is less interesting iconologically than it is formally; that is, art historians are less concerned about what it might mean than what it actually looks like. Although *The Resurrection* is often depicted by having

Christ emerge from a cave from which a boulder has been "rolled away," Piero instead chose to show Jesus stepping out of a Roman sarcophagus. In the foreground of the painting, the Roman soldiers ordered to guard the tomb have all fallen asleep. The position of their bodies is quite interesting. The reclining soldier certainly could never actually maintain that pose while sleeping in real life, and his comrade next to him, holding the lance, doesn't even have legs. These two details show that Piero was more concerned about achieving a pleasing composition than being true to life.

Also noteworthy is that, although we know that Piero was the author of a major treatise on perspective and was also a mathematician and geometer, the painting contains two vanishing points (the point at which all the lines of the painting should converge). On one hand, we see the faces of the soldiers from below, but on the other hand, the face of Christ is painted straight on. If the perspective were consistent throughout the painting, we would see all the faces from the same vantage point. Again, Piero has sacrificed realism for effect.



Piero della Francesca, soldiers (detail), The Resurrection, c. 1463-65, fresco, 225 x 200 cm (Museo Civico, Sansepolcro, Italy)

A self-portrait?

Perhaps the most striking feature of Piero's fresco is the physical reality of the people he paints. Piero has been lauded as one of the first painters of the Renaissance to capture realistic faces that show emotion. In fact, Giorgio Vasari, the great sixteenth-century art historian and painter, reported that the face of the soldier in brown armor was a self-portrait of Piero. Although there is no way of knowing if this is true—and Vasari is known for not always being accurate—his inclusion of this detail underscores the fact that Piero's human figures are not just made-up "types," but contain a spark of individuality that makes them feel like they are based on observations from real life. This is one of the major differences between Renaissance and Medieval art, and is partly why Piero is considered one of the great early Renaissance painters.



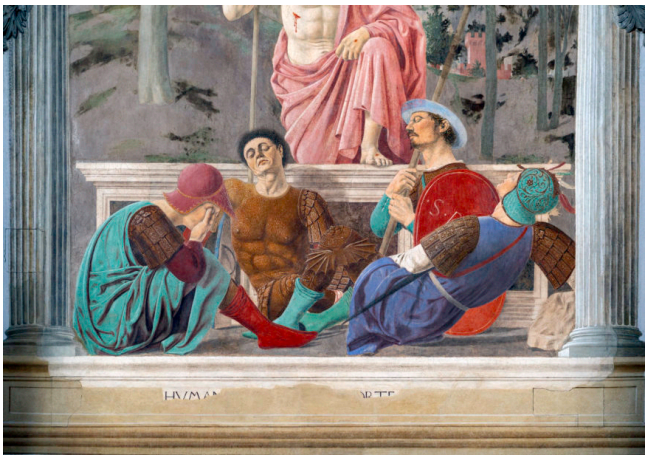
Piero della Francesca, Christ (detail), The Resurrection, c. 1463-65, fresco, 225 x 200 cm (Museo Civico, Sansepolcro, Italy)

Geometry and mass

Piero has organized the figures so that an isosceles triangle is formed from the top of Christ's head, through the soldiers, to the lower corners of the paintings. In addition, a tree is placed almost-symmetrically on either side of Jesus. This emphasis on geometric order and harmony is typical of the Renaissance, as best exemplified by paintings such as Raphael's *School of Athens*, and Leonardo's *Last Supper*.

Also characteristic of Piero's work is the mass of the bodies, an effect achieved in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most obvious is the stalwart pose of Christ, who appears anchored to the tomb by both his left leg and the flag in his right hand. At the same time, he seems to actively be using the flagpole and the hand on his knee to raise his other leg out of the tomb. The flexed muscles of his abdomen also emphasize the reality of Christ's body, which is physically engaged despite the serenity of his face.

The complex positioning of the soldiers' bodies also adds to this feeling of mass. Piero overlaps the men, intertwining their feet, so that they appear to exist in real space. The abdomen of the soldier in brown also echoes that of Christ, lending him an even greater sense of realism. The soldier all the way to the left, whose body is curled almost into a ball and whose face is hidden, is reminiscent of a similar figure in Giotto's *Lamentation*, who is also used at the corner of the painting to anchor the eye and add weight to the composition.



Piero della Francesca, soldiers (detail), The Resurrection, c. 1463-65, fresco, 225 x 200 cm (Museo Civico, Sansepolcro, Italy)



Mary and Christ from the Lamentation (detail), Giotto, Arena (Scrovegni) Chapel, 1305-06, fresco, Padua (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Thanks, Tony

Not many of Piero's paintings have survived, and those that have are scattered around the globe; few are in major museums. However, it is certainly worth the train ride from Florence to see this gem of the early Renaissance. And when you do, be sure to remember to thank Tony Clarke, without whom this painting would have become a pile of dust.

41.

Piero della Francesca, Portraits of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker





Piero della Francesca, Portraits of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino, Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza, 1467-72, tempera on panel, 47 x 33 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Uffizi, Florence.

Beth: We're in the Uffizi looking at two portraits that were once joined as a diptych, so they would have been connected by a hinge. This is the Duke and Duchess of Urbino – Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza.

Steven: Now she had just died, and this was a

commemorative portrait—that is, a way that he could remember his his wife. We think it was actually painted by Piero della Francesca, possibly from a death mask that had been made of her.

Beth: Look at how dressed up she is.

Steven: They are both very formal.

Beth: It reminds me of the fact that we're so used to photographs being taken of us from the time we're very little.

Steven: It's true, this was a very privileged thing. Only the extremely wealthy could have an image that could outlast them.

Beth: I'm also reminded that women used to pluck their foreheads. It was considered to be especially beautiful to have a very high forehead.

Steven: You often see this in Northern European painting. It's important to remember that Federico da Montefeltro actually brought Northern painters—that is Flemish painters—down to his court. In fact, Piero who is an Italian painter, seems to have borrowed that Northern interest perhaps not only in the high forehead but also in the great intricacy and specificity of the landscape. We have this wonderful atmospheric perspective.

Steven: One of the other characteristics that I also think is so interesting here is the very strict profile in which both figures are rendered. The formality that you were talking about comes through because of the profile. This is based on a coinage from ancient Rome which, by the way, the humanists of the Montefeltro court and other humanist courts at this time were actively collecting. When you think about a rendering of Caesar or even on modern coinage, you generally have a perfect profile, and you see that here. The one interesting detail is that the portraits are almost always facing right and here, the duke is facing his wife—facing left.



Jean Hey, Portrait of Margaret of Austria, c. 1490, oil on oak panel (The Metropolitan Museum fo Art)



Ancient Roman coin with portrait of the Emperor Augustus <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/84/Augustus_with_Agrippa_Obverse.jpg>

Beth: Actually we know that he had suffered wounds on the right side of his face; he was missing an eye.

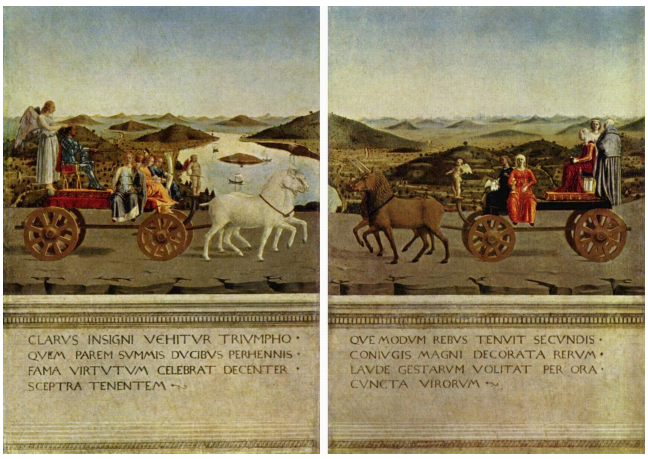
Steven: That's right, and part of his nose was missing.

Beth: That may be another reason why we only see the left side of his face. But there is that formality and power that comes from the profile pose, but also from the bird's-eye view of the landscape, so that the figures tower over the landscape.

Steven: So there really is symbolism in this painting. And there is also symbolism *outside* of this painting as well. You had mentioned that this was a diptych. When this painting was closed, you would actually only see the exterior. The exteriors are painted as well.

Beth: Let's go have a look.

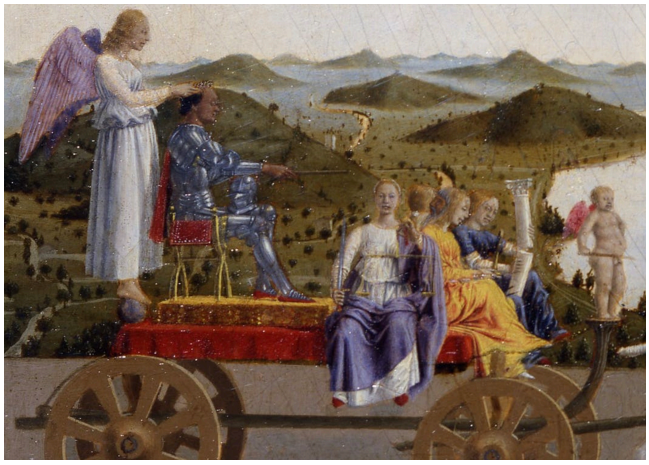
Steven: So there is a lot of symbolism on the outside of this painting, on its covers, you could say. You have two triumphal chariots, which is an image that comes from ancient Rome as well. On both of them, we can see the people that are portrayed on the inside of the painting.



Piero della Francesca, Verso of Portraits of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino, Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza, 1467-72, tempera on panel, 47 x 33 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

Beth: That's right. On the back of Battista Sforza's portrait, we see her borne in a triumphal chariot surrounded by figures who represent her virtues. And the same with the duke. Also below that, we have these inscriptions in Latin.

Steven: Now, the classical inscription refers specifically to the virtues that are represented on those triumphal chariots. One example can be seen on the duke's chariot which shows, facing us, sitting, but fully-frontal, a personification of justice.



Piero della Francesca, Detail of verso of Portrait of the Duchess of Urbino, Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza, 1467-72, tempera on panel, 47 x 33 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

Steven: You can see she is holding the scales of justice in her hand as well as a sword. On the female portrait the cart is being drawn not by horses but by unicorns. It's really a fanciful landscape that they are in as well there is this real sense of imagination an attempt to invent a kind of iconography, that ennobles the figures represented.

Beth: And we have that typical Piero della Francesca sense of geometry and formality which, I think, complements the portraits themselves.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/XIkryXkz8a4>

42.

Luca Signorelli, 'The Damned Cast into Hell'

Dr. Shannon Pritchard

Imagine being confronted by this scene—men and women screaming, their nude bodies contorted in pain as they are tortured by garishly colored demons.



Luca Signorelli, The Damned Cast into Hell, 1499-1504, fresco, 23' wide (San Brizio chapel, Orvieto Cathedral, Orvieto, Italy) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Off to the side, a fiery pit awaits these unfortunate souls. Fragmented bodies of those already consigned to the flames are visible through the acrid smoke.

Above, demons and humans tumble through the sky. Standing next to them on small clouds are the three archangels, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, fully clad in suits of armors, drawing the swords at their sides. Although you might be wondering, what on earth is going on here—to a fifteenth century-viewer it would have been quite obvious.



Naked men and women screaming while being attacked by demons (detail), Luca Signorelli, The Damned Cast into Hell, 1499-1504, fresco (San Brizio chapel, Orvieto Cathedral) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Left: Façade of Orvieto Cathedral, Orvieto, Italy; Right: view into the San Brizio Chapel in the Orvieto Cathedral (photos: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Three archangels, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, clad in armor, observe as humans and demons tumble through the sky (detail), Luca Signorelli, The Damned Cast into Hell, 1499-1504, fresco (San Brizio chapel, Orvieto Cathedral) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Painted by Luca Signorelli from 1499 to 1503 in the San Brizio Chapel in the Cathedral in Orvieto, Italy, the fresco represents one part of the End of Days narrative, when Christ returns to judge mankind—and to separate those who will go to heaven (the blessed) from those who will go to hell (the damned). An account of this event is found in the Gospel of Matthew (25:31-46), which reads in part:

> But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. Before him all the nations will be gathered, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left; Then the King will tell those on his right hand, 'Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world… Then he will say also to those on the left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels;…These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

In this passage the sheep are the faithful who have followed Christ in a sin-free life and the goats were those who did not. This subject was a popular visual means of illustrating the rewards and punishments that awaited the lay person at the end of time. It was most often depicted in a single composition, such as in Giotto's *Last Judgment* fresco in the Arena Chapel.

Here we see Christ enthroned in the top center, flanked by the Apostles on either side. In the lower portion of the composition are representations of the two sides—the "sheep" and the "goats." On Christ's right hand side (the left side of the viewer) are the Elect, those who have been chosen to go to Heaven, some of whom are still emerging from their tombs, while on his left hand side, we see the Damned, those who have been consigned to the fiery pits of Hell and are being tortured by demons. Giotto's *Last Judgment* was placed over the door into the chapel, thus providing visitors who were leaving a clear visual message.



Giotto, Last Judgment, c. 1305, fresco, 1000 x 840 cm (Arena Chapel, Padua, Italy) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jsqwKM>





Left: Inside the San Brizio Chapel; Right: The damned being carried across the river to the underworld (detail), Luca Signorelli, The Damned Cast into Hell, 1499-1504, fresco, 23′ wide (San Brizio chapel, Orvieto Cathedral, Orvieto, Italy) (photos: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In the case of the San Brizio Chapel, the entire chapel was used to represent this subject, not just one wall, and this was a rather unique situation. The subject was divided into six large, individual scenes including *The Elect being called to Heaven*, the *Resurrection*, the *Deeds of the Antichrist* and the *Apocalypse*. The *Damned* is located next to the altar wall—where we see another fresco, those consigned to Hell being carried across the river to the underworld (above).



Humans being tortured by demons in the foreground (detail), Luca Signorelli, The Damned Cast into Hell, 1499-1504, fresco (San Brizio chapel, Orvieto Cathedral) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

One of the most striking aspects of Signorelli's fresco is his representation of the nude figure. In fact, the *Damned*, along with its companion scene of the *Elect* (directly across the chapel on the opposite wall) seem to have been a means for Signorelli to explore the multitude of attitudes and positions possible in the human body. In the *Damned*, the brightly colored demons are pushing, pulling, tying up, and exacting all manner of physical torture on the sinners whose bodies are equally contorted, struggling to break free. The figures are all quite muscular, even hyper-muscular in some cases.

The interest artists had during this period in the study of the human figure was certainly driven, at least in part, by their interest in the classical past. As the Renaissance is the period of the "rebirth" of classical antiquity, artists looked to those exemplars of the past as ideals. For example the contrapposto stance of the famous *Doryphorus* statue from Greece influenced most painters and sculptors of the period. There was also a general desire to understand the workings of the human body, and we can definitely perceive such interest in other similar works.



Antonio Pollaiuolo, Battle of the Nudes, c. 1470-95, engraving, 41.6 x 59.4 cm (The British Museum) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

For example, Antonio Pollaiuolo's large engraving, *The Battle of the Nudes*, is one of the most important works of the period. In it, Pollaiuolo shows ten nude, male figures battling each other in a fantastical landscape. Notice the two men in the foreground are in the same pose, but reversed. This way Pollaiuolo could show both the front and back side of the same position. The other figures in the background assume equally exaggerated poses and dynamic movements, illustrating the flexing of muscles as the body engages in battle. This if very much in line with what Signorelli achieved in his fresco.

Perhaps the artist most associated with the study of the male nude figure is Michelangelo and it has been suggested by scholars that he may have been influenced by Signorelli's figures in some of his works. And indeed shortly after the completion of the San Brizio chapel, Michelangelo produced one of the most influential works of the period, *The Battle of Cascina*, 1504-06.

In this large scale cartoon (a preparatory design for a fresco), which only survives in copies, we see many of the same interests as in Signorelli's *Damned*. Michelangelo presented figures from a variety of different angles and complex positions as the soldiers rise to put on their armor and fight the oncoming enemy. And in both Signorelli's and Michelangelo's works, the artists were also interested in rendering various states of emotion. In both we see several figures with mouths open in exclamation along with general expressions of anxiety and fear.



Aristotele da Sangalla, Battle of Cascina (after a lost Michelangelo), 1504-06, oil on panel (Holkham Hall, England)

In the end, when looking at Signorelli's fresco, it is hard not to be amazed by the sheer volume and mass he was able to achieve in representing the figures three-dimensionally. The acidic coloration of the demons adds to the sense of complete chaos and upheaval. And in the midst of all of this action, we may even see the artist himself.



Expressions of anguish and fear (detail), Luca Signorelli, The Damned Cast into Hell, 1499-1504, fresco (San Brizio chapel, Orvieto Cathedral) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

If you look closely at the center of the composition, there is blue demon with a white horn who grabs a woman around her waist, and we see her struggle against her captor. That this is the artist's self-portrait has generally been accepted. What remains unknown is the identity of the woman he grabs although she appears twice more in the fresco…can you find her?



Luca Signorelli, The Damned Cast into Hell, detail, 1499-1504, fresco, 23′ wide (San Brizio chapel, Orvieto Cathedral, Orvieto, Italy) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

III

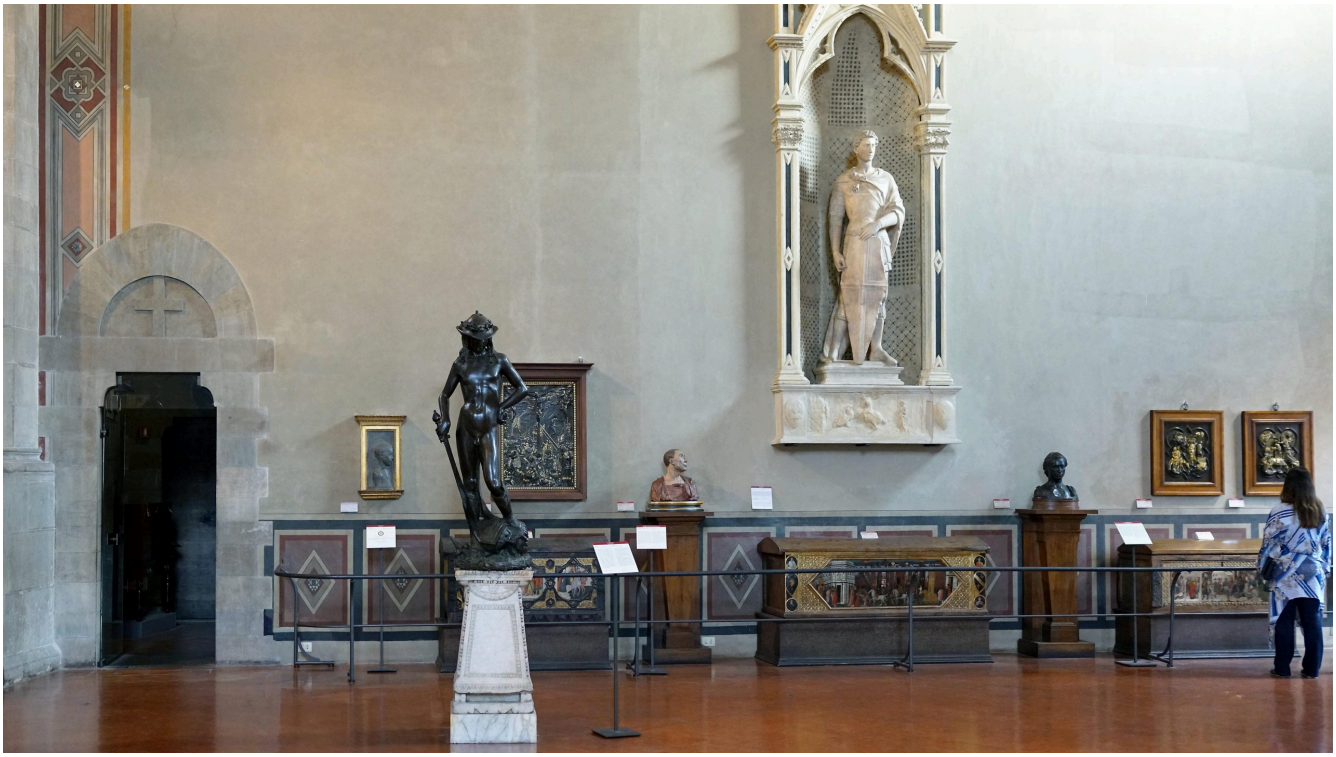
Central Italy: Sculpture and Architecture

43.

Filippo Brunelleschi and Lorenzo Ghiberti, 'Sacrifice of Isaac'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Gallery view of the Bargello, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-SA 2.0)

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Bargello, Florence.

Steven: We're in the Bargello, in Florence, and we're looking at the so-called "competition panels."

Beth: Art historians often see this as the beginning of the Renaissance. In 1401, the Cloth Guild of Florence decided to commission a second set of doors for the Baptistry of Florence.

Steven: Now there are three doorways in the Baptistry. The first set of doors had been made by Andrea Pisano in the 14th century, and the Cloth Guild wanted to create a second set of door. These were enormous bronze doors, and this was a huge civic undertaking and extremely expensive.

Beth: The Baptistry is historically the most important building in Florence, and in an effort to find the best sculptor, the Cloth Guild held a competition.



Filippo Brunelleschi and Lorenzo Ghiberti, Sacrifice of Isaac, competition panels for the second set of bronze doors for the Florence Baptistery, 1401-2 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Steven: The only two that survive of the seven entries are by Brunelleschi and Ghiberti.

Beth: The Cloth Guild, when they held this competition, were very specific about what they wanted. They allocated a certain amount of bronze, they told the sculptors they had to sculpt the Old Testament subject of the Sacrifice of Isaac, they dictated the number of figures and what should be included….

Steven: The only other thing that I remember is that the Cloth Guild actually dictated was that all the panels had to bee contained within a quatrefoil, that is this Gothic shape.

Beth: It's really fun to look at both of these panels and to think about why the Guild chose the one they did, and which one was better and for what reasons. In this story God commands Abraham to kill his only son Isaac—to sacrifice Isaac.*Steven*: You have to remember that Abraham went for a very long time in his life with no children and so his son meant everything to him.*Beth*: His son was a miracle.

Steven: Now God is commanding him to murder his son, and Abraham is taking God's words very seriously. This is a moment of crisis, a moment of faith. Will he allow everything in his life to be subserving to God's will?

Beth: So, Abraham takes Isaac to the mountain where God has told him to go and takes a knife to Isaac's throat and is about to kill his son, when an angel appears and stops him. God provides a ram instead for Abraham to sacrifice, so Isaac is spared and Abraham is spared this terrible fate of having to slay his only son.

Steven: I'm particularly fond of the way the Angel flies in in both panels to save the day.

Beth: In the Ghiberti, it's far less dramatic. We have an angel foreshortened coming out towards us, but in Brunelleschi's version, the angel is grasping Abraham's hand and literally stopping

him in the very moment when the knife meets Isaac's throat.

Steven: There's also a kind of intensity with Isaac's head pushed back by Abraham, and so there is a kind of violence that seems to be in process. In the Ghiberti it's interesting, the angel is separated, there isn't the same continuity of form.

Beth: I think there's more complexity in Ghiberti's emotionally—Abraham looks reluctant, this isn't something he wants to do, the knife back is pulled back, he is looking at Isaac but there is a sense of unwillingness, it's like a second of pausing because of this terrible thing that he has been commanded to do.

Steven: It's interesting that the Ghiberti panel shows us a full nude and presents that nude to us in the most direct way, whereas in the Brunelleschi, the figure is up on one knee and has a loin cloth and is twisted and distorted as opposed to this classicizing beauty that we see in the Ghiberti.

Beth: It's a direct quote from ancient Greek and Roman sculpture, and it is really very beautifully done.

Steven: There is also an interesting corollary in both panels in terms of the physical relationship of the father and the son. In the Ghiberti, you have the gentle arching, whereas in the Brunelleschi, you have a diagonal that is more energized and more violent as well. To me, the Brunelleschi is a little scarier…

Beth: It is scary!

Steven: Well, apparently the Guild agreed.

Beth: There's no written record of why they chose what they did.



Filippo Brunelleschi, Sacrifice of Isaac, competition panel for the second set of bronze doors for the Florence Baptistery, 1401-2, Bargello, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Steven: That's right, but ultimately it was Ghiberti who got the commission, although some accounts say that they both won. It was Ghiberti who was actually chosen to carry out the commission.

Beth: In the Ghiberti, you have that rocky mountain that unifies the scene…

Steven: …and seems to flow down almost like water from the upper left to the lower right.

Beth: There's a sense in the Brunelleschi more of separate parts being assembled, and in fact, Brunelleschi cast many parts of this separately and then put them together, and the Ghiberti is cast only from two pieces of bronze.



Lorenzo Ghiberti, Sacrifice of Isaac, competition panel for the second set of bronze doors for the Florence Baptistery, 1401-2, Bargello, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Steven: There maybe one other element that helped to sway the decision, and that is that the Ghiberti used less bronze than the Brunelleschi. And remember, bronze is extremely expensive. When you multiply this to all of the panels of the door, that would have been significant. In any case, in the end, Ghiberti gets the commission, and he produces the doors and they are such a triumph that he is ultimately commissioned to produce a third set of doors. Brunelleschi, for his part, will take this opportunity to move beyond sculpture, go to Rome, and study ancient Roman architecture and ancient Roman sculpture. He'll of course come back to Florence—triumphant ultimately—with major commissions like the Cathedral Dome.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/uvgBSJPiQ8Y>

44.

Lorenzo Ghiberti, 'Gates of Paradise,' east doors of the Florence Baptistery

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence.

Steven: We're in Florence at the museum of the works of Cathedral (Duomo), and we're looking at Ghiberti's "Gates of Paradise."

Beth: Although we're in the museum for the works of the Duomo, these doors were not for Florence Cathedral. These doors were for the Baptistery, an incredibly important building in the city's history. So the heart of Florence is the Cathedral and the Baptistery—these two buildings stand side by side. The Baptistery was the place where the citizens of Florence would be baptized. Like many baptisteries, it is an octagonal building. They were called the "Gates of Paradise" because they were so beautiful. This goes back to Michelangelo, who referred to them this way, but of course this is legend.

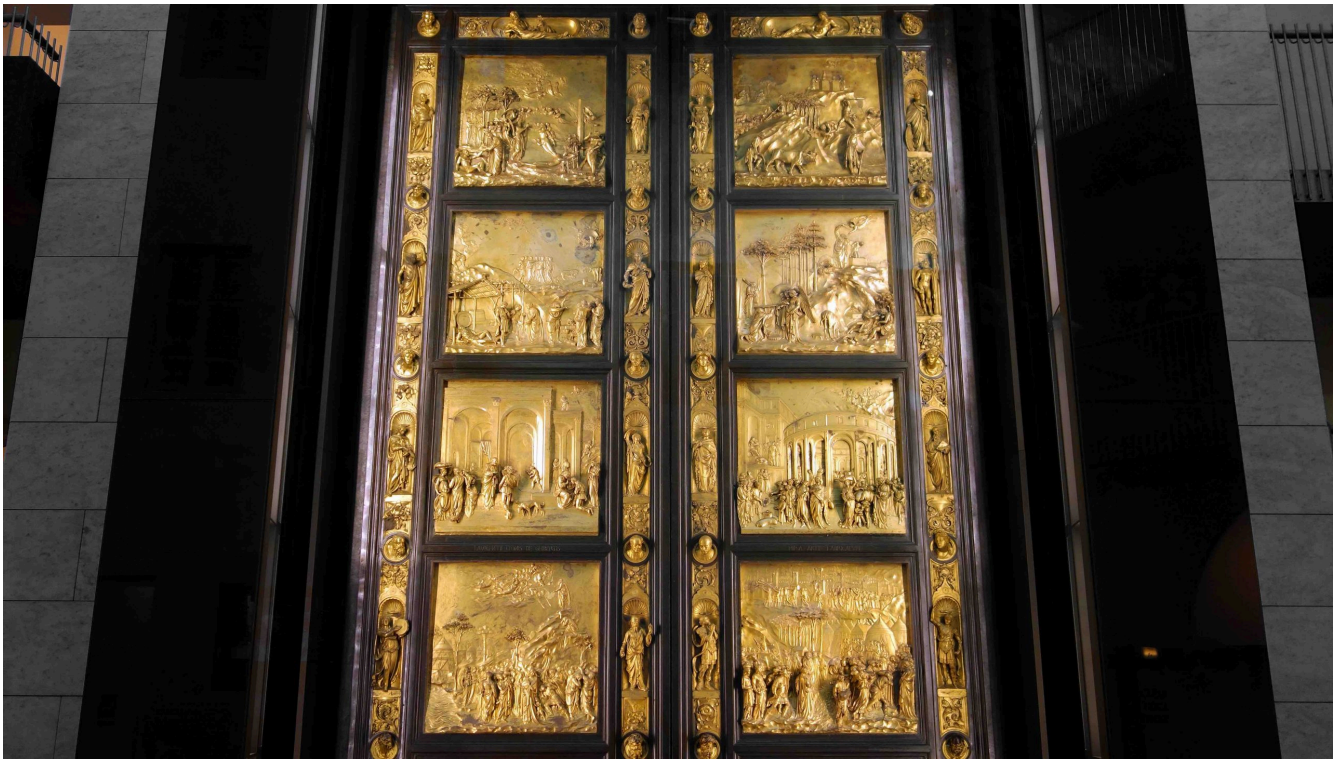
Steven: Well, he said that these doors were so beautiful that they could actually be the doors of heaven itself. This was the final set of bronze doors to be cast for the Baptistery. The first set were coming out of the medieval tradition.

Beth: They were by Andrea Pisano, and the subject of those doors was the life of St. John the Baptist—and that makes sense for a baptistery.

Steven: The second set of doors were by Ghiberti, but at the beginning of his career. He had won a competition that had come down to him and Brunelleschi, and he was victorious and would go on to cast, quite famously, this extraordinary earlier set of doors. When those were finally finished, he received this commission.



Lorenzo Ghiberti, "Gates of Paradise" with viewer, East Doors of the Florence Baptistery, bronze, 1425-52 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/pWEBTs>



Lorenzo Ghiberti, "Gates of Paradise," East Doors of the Florence Baptistery, bronze, 1425-52 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/phfn9u>

Beth: Even though these doors by Ghiberti were intended for the north side, when they were done they were considered so beautiful that were placed on the east side facing the Cathedral itself, a place of honor.

Steven: Now the doors have recently been conserved and they are spectacular. Only a few years ago, they were black with grime, but now all that original gilding is visible, all of the extraordinary detail here is visible. And we can see why the Florentines wanted to move them to the most prominent place…

Beth: …and why Michelangelo referred to them as the Gates of Paradise! Now, we should say first, too, that this was commissioned by the wealthiest of the guilds of Florence. So this was commissioned by the Guild of Wool Merchants. We might wonder why so much energy was spent on doors.

Steven: Doors historically have been the place where one focuses sculptural attention. If you look at medieval cathedrals, the doors are often surrounded by the most elaborate carving. But if you go all the way back to the Classical tradition, if you go back to Ancient Rome, there is a great tradition of bronze doors—

Beth: Right, so we have the great bronze doors on the Pantheon…

Steven: And it makes sense that the Florentines would want bronze doors in this tradition on the Baptistery, since the Florentines believed that their Baptistery had ancient roots—that it was a Classical Roman building. So, when we walk up to the doors, the first thing I notice is just how big they are. Now, these are very different from the earlier doors, which were much more Gothic in their design. And most specifically, each of the main scenes were in the shape of quatrefoils—that is, they had four corners and four lobes.

Beth: But here, instead of those quatrefoil shapes, Ghiberti is giving us ten square scenes.

Steven: Well look how these square panels are really pictorial spaces. They are allowing us to look into an infinitely deep space. If we compare these to the earlier quatrefoil forms, what I see is a sculptor who's trying to fit into a predefined space. Whereas here, there is now this confidence, this Renaissance notion that the artist is capable of creating an entire world within that space.

Beth: Before, you basically had a ledge with some figures on it and a schematic architectural setting. Here, you're right, the artist can open up that space and make it deep, make it wide, and really create a virtual reality—that idea of the picture as a window that was so important in the Renaissance.

Steven: Well so much had happened in the periods since Ghiberti's first commission.

Beth: Well, Brunelleschi had developed linear perspective, this mathematical way of constructing a really convincing illusion of space in relief sculpture or in painting.

Steven: You call this "relief sculpture" and in fact, some of the primary figures are almost in the round. They're almost free-standing figures. But then as we move back into the pictorial space, figures get smaller and they get shallower, until figures are only described by lines that are cut into the surface.

Beth: That way of creating an illusion of space goes back to Donatello's relief sculpture of St. George and the Dragon (c. 1416). It's a kind of relief called *rilievo schiacciato*, or flattened relief.

Steven: So we have this transition from the full sculptural form to what becomes almost drawing.

Beth: Everything here is not only about an illusion of space, but also about an illusion of reality in terms of the figures. They move gracefully and stand in contrapposto. There's an ease of the figures that is so different then the Gothic doors that became before them.

Steven: These ten scenes are Old Testament. They are from the Jewish Bible, from the Book of Genesis. They start with the Creation of Adam, the Creation of Eve, the Fall. They show Noah… and then, perhaps most famously on these doors, the scene of Esau and Jacob.



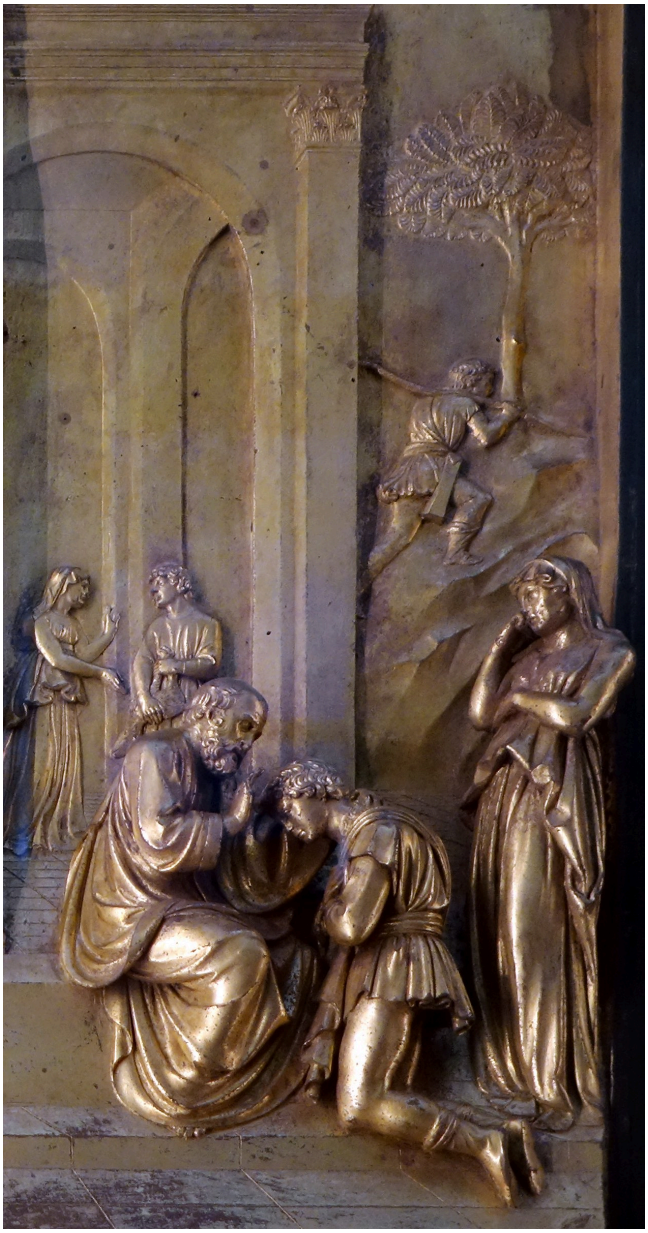
Lorenzo Ghiberti, Esau and Jacob panel, "Gates of Paradise," East Doors of the Florence Baptistery, bronze, 1425-52 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Right, so Esau and Jacob were two brothers, the sons of Rebecca and Isaac. So we've got seven different moments of this story within a single frame.

Steven: And the scene starts in the extreme upper-right corner, where we see God appearing to Rebecca. She's pregnant, and she's asking God, why is there so much turmoil in my womb?

Beth: Why do my two future children seem to be already fighting, and they're not even born yet? And God answers and says, those two children represent two nations and two peoples, and the younger will supplant the older. This is of course the opposite of the way things were, the older son would normally inherit. So in the very next scene, Rebecca gives birth to these twins, Esau and Jacob.

Steven: And then just to the right, we see a significant moment in the story. Esau has gone hunting—he likes to go hunting—and he's come back really hungry. He goes to his brother Jacob, who's about to eat a bowl of stew, and says, "Can I have the stew, I'm famished?" The brother says, "I'll give you my stew if you give me your birthright."



Lorenzo Ghiberti, Detail of Esau and Jacob panel, "Gates of Paradise," East Doors of the Florence Baptistery, bronze, 1425-52 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: So Esau, not being very clever, sells his birthright, right? He sells his inheritance for a bowl of stew.

Steven: Then in front, we see Isaac sending his son Esau out to hunt for him. Isaac likes the meat that Esau brings back, and he also tells him, "When you come back I will give you my blessing."

Beth: We see Esau going out hunting in the right edge of the panel.

Steven: And in fact, Esau is Isaac's favorite.

Beth: And Rebecca's favorite is Jacob.

Steven: So what's next?

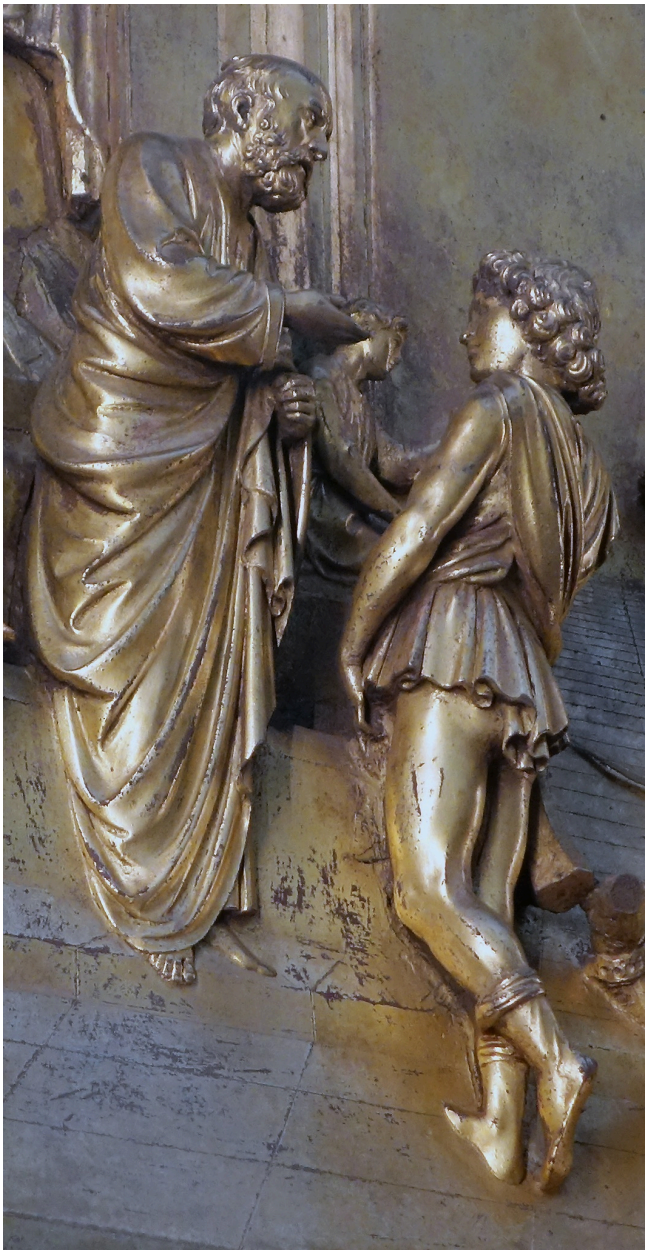
Beth: In a way the climax of the story is next: Rebecca says to Jacob, "While your brother's out hunting I want you to bring me a couple of goats. I'm going to make the stew for your father. And you're going to bring him that stew and you're going to trick Isaac into thinking that you're Esau and have him give *you* his blessing." That is, instead of the older son, Esau.

Steven: And in the lower right, we see Isaac blessing Jacob thinking he's blessing Esau.

Beth: Rebecca and Jacob have tricked Isaac into blessing the wrong son.

Steven: This is a pretty complicated story and yet, the artist has been able to delineate it quite clearly. This Early Renaissance moment is so proud of their knowledge of the Classical tradition and of their ability to reinvent it. Look at the clarity of the line. Look at the clarity of the geometry. All of that would have signaled the return to the Classical tradition…

Beth: …and the round arches, and the plasters with Corinthian capitals, and the way that the figures stand in contrapposto….



Lorenzo Ghiberti, Detail of Esau and Jacob panel, "Gates of Paradise," East Doors of the Florence Baptistery, bronze, 1425-52 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: What that does is it sets up a stage set, where this complex narrative can be clearly represented.

Beth: And within the space it's constructed by linear perspective. We see the orthogonals, those diagonal lines that recede into space, in the floor…

Steven: I also see them in the arches.

Beth: They lead to a single vanishing point in the middle distance. This is a masterpiece of Early Renaissance clarity in terms of the space, Early Renaissance interest in the human body… Look at that figure of Esau, he stands in this lovely contrapposto. That space is so believable, everything that we expect about the Early Renaissance is here.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/fWkewBPMKEk>



Lorenzo Ghiberti, Esau and Jacob panel, "Gates of Paradise," East Doors of the Florence Baptistery, bronze, 1425-52 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

45.

Filippo Brunelleschi, Dome of the Cathedral of Florence

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Florence Cathedral (Duomo) and Bell Tower (Campanile) shot from the Uffizi, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/aGBGbp>

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in Florence.

Steven: We're in Florence and we're standing outside of the Duomo—

Beth: —the cathedral of Florence, and we're looking up at Brunelleschi's dome.

Steven: It's huge. Until St. Peter's, it was the highest dome that had ever been raised. And in its width, it was as wide as the Pantheon.

Beth: Almost.

Steven: If you think about the Duomo itself, it had been planned in the 14th century.

Beth: The plan was to build a dome that had a span nearly equal to that of the Pantheon.

Steven: And of course, the Pantheon had been built in the ancient world, and that technology had largely been lost.



Brunelleschi's model of his proposed dome, Duomo Museum, Florence (photo: Douglas F. Smith, CC BY-NC 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/Anc4uU>

Beth: Right, so first and foremost what Brunelleschi did was an amazing engineering achievement. The challenge was: how to build a dome this wide without wooden centering? Generally, when you build an archway—and the dome is really just an arch—

Steven: In the round.

Beth: —in the round— you put up a wooden framework.

Steven: So this is the wood to actually support the dome until it can be locked in place by the keystone.

Beth: Exactly. So you don't even really need mortar to hold it together because you've got the keystone.

Steven: The problem is that this was so big, they couldn't actually get enough lumber and lumber that was strong enough to hold the thing up until they could lock it in place.

Beth: And so there was no way to do wooden scaffolding or centering to hold it up as it was being built. So how do you build this dome that inclines inward and not have it fall down?

Steven: There's two problems. You've got that issue, and then you have the problem of it wanting to splay outward.

Beth: A dome exerts pressure not only down, but down and *out*. One of the biggest challenges is how to raise the dome and deal with that downward and outward pressure—not cracking the walls underneath.

Steven: Now, in the ancient world, for the Pantheon for example, they had dealt with that by just creating sheer bulk. In other words, the walls got to be 10 feet thick.

Beth: I think, actually in the Pantheon, they're something like 20 feet thick of concrete…



Interior of the Pantheon, Rome, c. 125 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: But Brunelleschi couldn't do that here. So what he's done instead is, first of all, he made the decision to make the dome as light as possible. And that means that it's basically hollow. It's a double shell. Within the shell is a staircase that snakes around that allows one to actually get to the top. And if you look, you can see people just below the lantern, up at the top of the dome, taking in the view of the city.

Beth: He also created ribs…

Steven: …which are doing a lot of the weight bearing.

Beth: And then in between each of the major ribs, which are visible on the outside, there are two within that we can't see.

Steven: Those are actually locked in place by a series of horizontals as well. So there's this whole skeletal structure that's actually holding this piece together. I think, most importantly, he was able to develop a system where, as the dome was being raised up, as each course of stone and brick was added, it was actually locking itself in place, so it was self sustaining.

Beth: Another way that Brunelleschi dealt with the downward and outward thrust was to create chains inside the dome made out of stone and wood, locked together with iron, like a girdle, to hold the dome in and to counter that downward and outward thrust.

Steven: You might think of an old-fashioned wooden barrel that has a couple of iron rings around it to help keep the wood together.

Beth: Brunelleschi created cantilevered scaffolding.

Steven: That could rise as the building went up.



Filippo Brunelleschi, Dome of the Cathedral of Florence, detail, 1420-36 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Filippo Brunelleschi, Duomo Tribune (SW) with pulley, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/aGBGAF>

Beth: And so the workmen had a place to work. Brunelleschi also built new kinds of pulleys and hoists to bring up his heavy, massive pieces of stone to the top of the dome. So he created this ox hoist—just these remarkable machines that no one had ever seen before.

Steven: He actually even designed a special barge to go down the Arno to be able to bring the materials to the city itself. If you think about the sheer quantity of material that had to be imported, and had to be hoisted up, and had to be put in place, it is just this remarkable project.

Beth: Bricks that had to be created, stone that had to be quarried and brought here, platforms for the workmen to work on, machines to hoist everything. And I think it was Alberti who said something like, what Brunelleschi did, he did without–

Steven: –without a precedent.

Beth: Without having any example to lean on.

Steven: Utter invention. Now, we think that Brunelleschi may have gone to Rome and may have studied ancient architecture as well as sculpture there, but there is no precedent in the ancient world, even, for what Brunelleschi accomplished here.

Beth: Now, it's important to say that the dome is not hemispherical, like the dome on the Pantheon.

Steven: It's actually kind of tall.

Beth: Right. It's kind of pointed. In a way, it has more of a Gothic shape than a Classical shape. But in that way, it matches the Gothic church itself. If you look closely, you can see these exedrae, or blind tribunes, that Brunelleschi added around the outside of the dome. They actually look very Classical compared to the Gothic church there. In fact, look like Roman triumphal arches. So there's this curious Classical moment here in an otherwise very Gothic church.

Steven: And it's a church that is not only Gothic, but really referring back to the Tuscan Romanesque tradition, especially in terms of the polychromy, the colored marbles, which Brunelleschi also carries up into the barrel just below the dome itself. But ultimately, you've got Brunelleschi, who, through his engineering genius, is solving a problem that the Western tradition had never been capable of solving before: how does one span this enormous space? And in order to do it, he's surpassing the ancients that he's even here paying reverence to.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/TQ8F_yPwqzA>



Filippo Brunelleschi, Dome of the Cathedral of Florence (with visitors), 1420-36 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/aGBGYa>

46.

Brunelleschi, Old Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at San Lorenzo, Florence.



Brunelleschi, Old Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence, begun c. 1421 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We're in San Lorenzo in Florence in the Old Sacristy. That's a room that is traditionally used in a church for the priest to vest, that is to put on the garments for a religious ritual, but in this case, it was intended to be a mausoleum for the founder of the Medici dynasty.

Beth: Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici, who is buried here, along with his wife. In the early 1400s when a group of people decided to rebuild the church that was here, the families contributed money.

Steven: It wasn't that they were chipping in. Each was in control of its own chapel.

Beth: Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici decided to pay for the building of the sacristy.

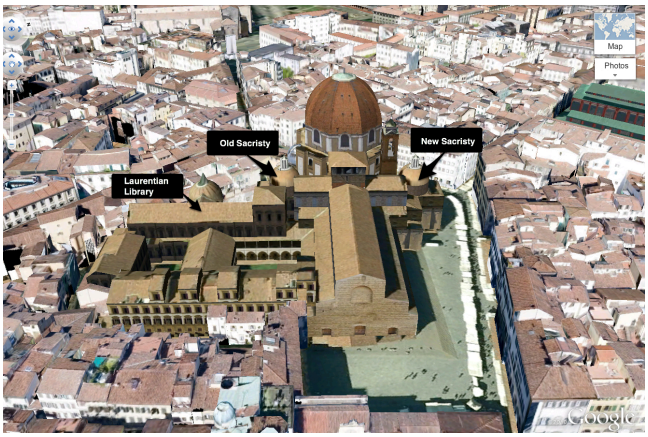
Steven: He got a bigger space.



Tomb of Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici, Old Sacristy, San Lorenzo (photo: Sailko, CC-BY-3.0)

Beth: He got a bigger space, he paid more money, and he hired Brunelleschi—he was smart. We should say that when you enter the church, the sacristy is off the left transept. It's now known as the Old Sacristy.

Steven: Because Michelangelo designed the New Sacristy.



Map with images of the Cathedral of Florence and San Lorenzo (Map, © Google)

Beth: Here, we are in Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy, which is the epitome of Renaissance architecture.

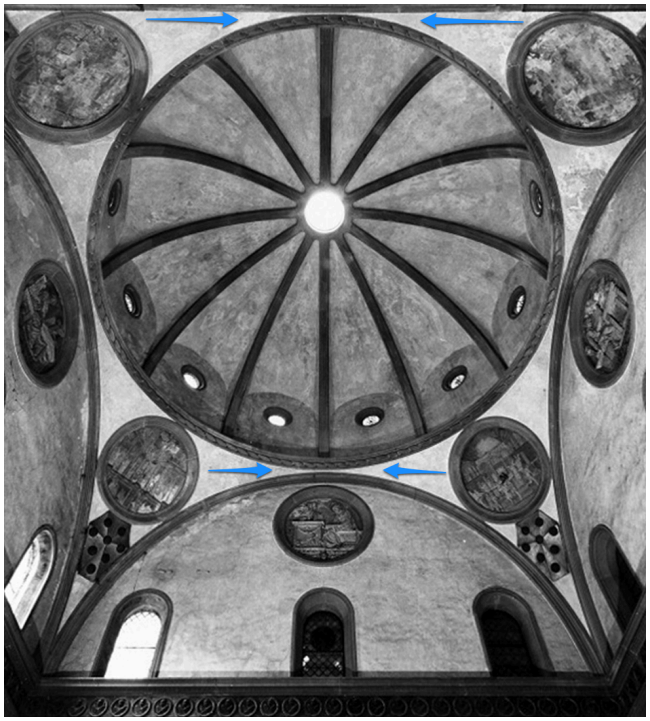
Steven: Brunelleschi's done some extraordinary things here. First of all, there's a sense of solemnity, of calmness, that is in part a result of the extraordinary sense of geometry here and order and rationalism—so many of the characteristics that we associate with 15th-century Florentine Renaissance thinking, with humanism.

Beth: Instead of the mysterious, soaring spaces of a Gothic church, we have a space built on the fundamental geometric shapes of the square and the circle and a sense of clarity…

Steven: …this notion of geometry having a philosophical importance. Of course, this is a burial site, so the idea of the eternal—the idea, in fact, of resurrection—is crucial here. The room itself is a perfect square. In fact, one could argue it comes close to being a cube. Then its surmounted by this beautiful hemispheric dome. One of the ways in which art historians understand this is that the circle is a reference to the spirituality and geometry of heaven.

Beth: If you think about a circle, it has no beginning and no end, like God…

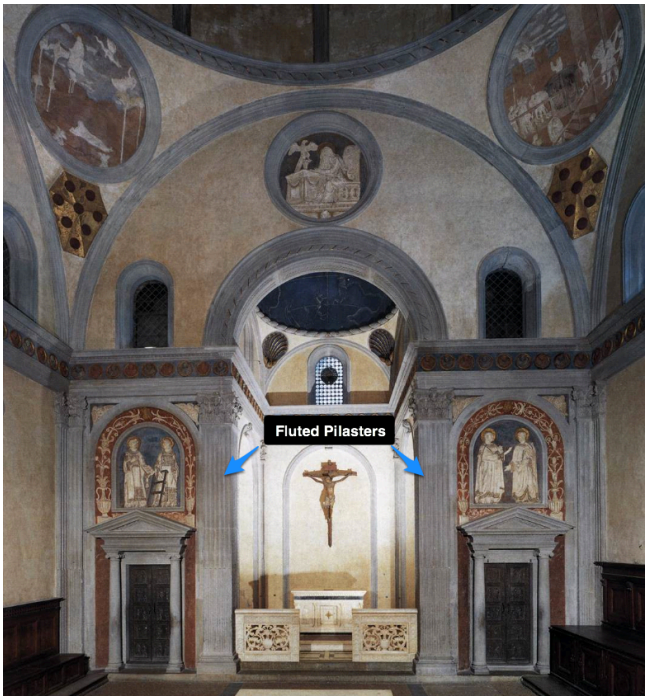
Steven: …whereas we inhabit the much more rectilinear space, the earthly space, the space of gravity. How do you get the circle down to the square that is the room itself? He's done this by borrowing a technique that we find in Byzantine architecture, in thinking about Hagia Sophia, which is to use a pendentives. In this case, Brunelleschi's created these perfect hemispheres, these perfect half circles that rise up but don't quite touch the bottom of the dome, which creates a sense of lightness. It is this sort of tension between that circle and that square that so informs this entire room, but it also informs its symbolism. At the same time, it's all just the colors.



Digram of the dome and pendentives, Brunelleschi, Old Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence, begun c. 1421 (graphic: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: The gray-ish green of the Pietra serena, which Brunelleschi and Michelangelo both used a lot, stone that was local to Florence…

Steven: …and that frames these broad, open planes of a cream-colored stucco that really helps to emphasize the geometry of this space.



Brunelleschi, Old Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence, begun c. 1421 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: It sort of outlines the squares and rectangles and semi-circles and circles, so you really *read* the geometry. One of the things that's remarkable about Brunelleschi is that he is clearly borrowing so many forms from ancient Greek and Roman art—he pilasters and the fluting and the capitals and also this kind of rational approach to architecture—but he's combining those elements and using them in a new way.

Steven: He is, he's using it almost as a license to begin to construct a kind of rationalism that was for his modern world. Brunelleschi had gone to Rome and actually studied antique architecture, so we can certainly see that influence, but you've seen nothing like this in Rome. This is a Renaissance room.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/jYZ71Zma9Gc>

47.

Brunelleschi, Pazzi Chapel

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at Santa Croce, Florence.

Steven: One of the great Renaissance spaces is the Pazzi Chapel at Santa Croce, and we're sitting in it, and we're sitting on a bench that lines the wall because this was originally used as a chapter house.

Beth: Meaning a meeting room for the monks of Santa Croce.



Filippo Brunelleschi, Pazzi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence, begun 1420s, completed 1460s (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jNqoHu>

Steven: And so they would have sat right where we are sitting.

Beth: Just off the cloister…

Steven: …which is the traditional place for the chapter house.



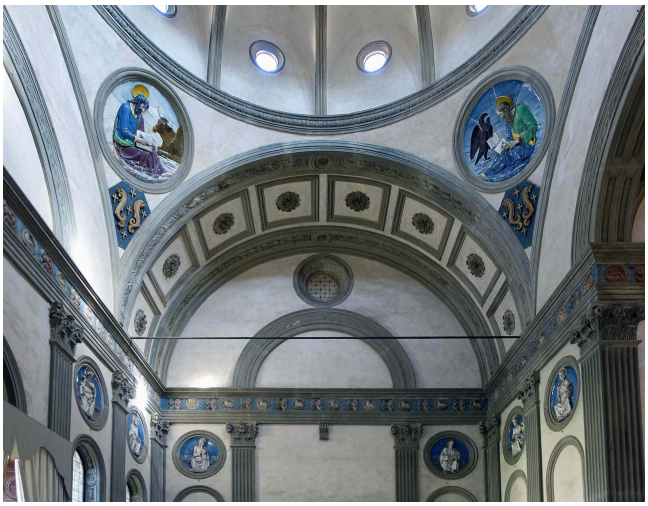
Filippo Brunelleschi, Pazzi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence, begun 1420s, completed 1460s (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jNqoiw>

Beth: So we're really looking at something that is a true Early Renaissance work of architecture by Brunelleschi—although it was completed after his death—and we see all of those elements that we come to expect of Brunelleschi: the use of pietra serena, the grayish-green stone that articulates the decorative elements on the walls.

Steven: But it also articulates the walls themselves, and the space and the dominance of a kind of perfect geometry.

Beth: We immediately have a sense of rectangles and squares and circles and semicircles, but my overwhelming feeling on walking in was that I was almost walking into an ancient Roman temple.

Steven: Ah, okay; so this is very close to a central planned space—that is to say, something like the Pantheon, and there is an attention to the kind of perfect geometries and centrality that we really do associate with the ancient world. So I think you're right, I think he's working very hard to create this Classicism, this revival of the standards and the ideas of ancient Rome.



Filippo Brunelleschi, Pazzi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence, begun 1420s, completed 1460s (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jNqoLa>

Beth: Lovely fluted pilasters, long walls, and the hemispherical dome with an oculus in the center, and windows piercing its sides—so you have this really lovely light that comes into the chapel, a dome on pendentives, and in the pendentives, those triangular spaces that the dome rests on. We see roundels…

Steven: Terracotta, and these would have been made by Luca della Robbia, who had recently perfected the ability to fire at a high-enough temperature to vitrify the glazes he used, what we consider modern glazes.



Filippo Brunelleschi, Pazzi Chapel, detail of Luca della Robbia roundel, Santa Croce, Florence, begun 1420s, completed 1460s (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: There really is that sense of a centrally planned space—Brunelleschi's wanting to create a space that wasn't a basilica, this is a chapter house and not a church, but still that desire to work with a centrally-planned space. This becomes even more important in the High Renaissance, for artists like Bramante and Leonardo da Vinci.

Steven: You walk into this space and you have this overwhelming feeling that you are in a completely constructed, ordered, designed environment. This is a space that is rational, where everything is subservient to the overall design conception. We've been talking about this space as if it were a central plan, but it's not quite.

Beth: No.

Steven: It is a little bit broader than it is long, and when you look up at that central dome, which is clearly dominant, there are small barrel vaults on either side.

Beth: He took a rectangular space and made it, as much as possible, into a square with a dome on top; two little barrel-vaulted spaces on either side.

Steven: And that's emphasized not only by the geometry of the vaulting, but also of the geometry of the paving. The dome clearly constructs the space and does give it that overwhelming feeling of Classicism.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/LKv0hRyiGCY>



Filippo Brunelleschi, Pazzi Chapel, with Luca della Robbia roundels, Santa Croce, Florence, completed 1460s (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jNrcu6>

48.

Brunelleschi, Santo Spirito

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

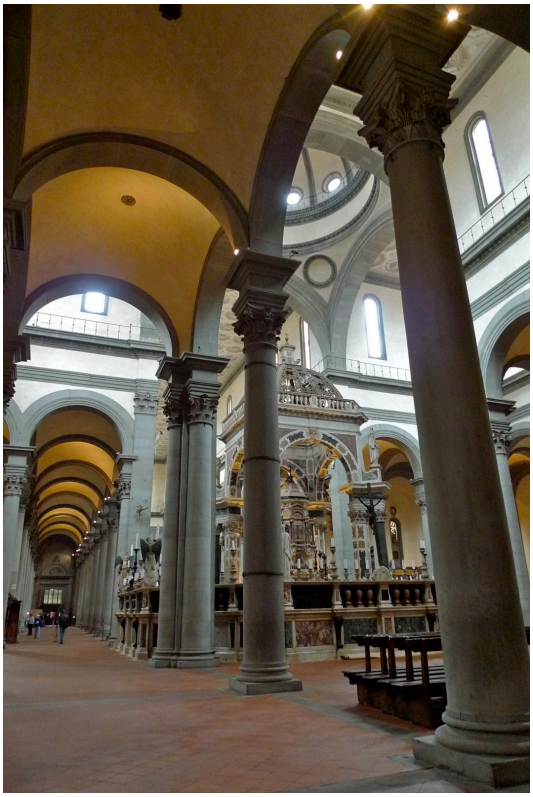
This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at Santo Spirito, Florence.

Steven: We've in Santo Spirito, one of Brunelleschi's last churches; in fact, I believe only one column was raised by the time he passed away.

Beth: And we see a lot of the same things that we see in the Old Sacristy or in the Pazzi Chapel by Brunelleschi: the use of this dark grayish-green pietra serena that creates the columns and the mouldings and the cornices. Just yesterday, we were in the Laurentian Library, designed by Michelangelo, which also has these white walls and the pietra serena and is also a very muscular, energetic space, and when we're here today in Santo Spirito, I can really see that Michelangelo was building on what Brunelleschi did.



Filippo Brunelleschi, Santo Spirito, Florence, 1428-81 (photo: Carlo Rosa, public domain)



Filippo Brunelleschi, Santo Spirito, Florence, 1428-81 (photo: Leonardo Bonnani, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

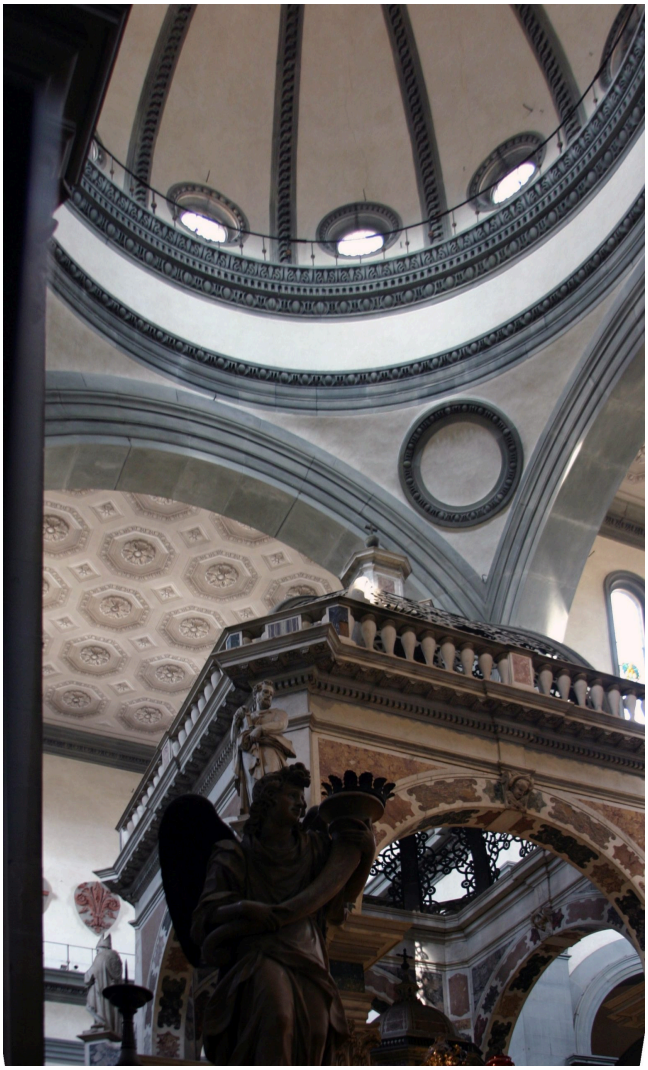
Steven: There is a kind of willingness to allow what would formally have been the trim of the wall to become a visual force in itself.

Beth: The church is a basilica in its plan, with a dome over the crossing, but Brunelleschi, showing his typical interest in geometry, used the square that forms the crossing as the basic unit of measurement throughout the church.

Steven: There's also a relationship between those widths and the elevation of the church. Rigorous continuity in the geometry throughout…

Beth: …a sense of circles and semi-circles and squares and rectangles that all relate to one another.

Steven: Brunelleschi has created a mathematical system that is so self-evident and makes so much sense that there aren't other options.



Filippo Brunelleschi, Santo Spirito, Florence, 1428-81 (photo: Miles Berry, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/ckr7o>

Beth: The mathematics determine the space. I think that that idea of beauty residing in the relationships between the parts of the church—not in any one feature but in those proportional relationships—is something that is very important to Brunelleschi and is also something that Brunelleschi is deriving from his study of ancient Roman architecture.

Steven: This is a building that feels to me to be about the relationship also between the line of the pietra serena and the plane of the stucco in between, but unlike some of Brunelleschi's earlier work, the pietro serena has expanded; it's become more muscular.

Beth: You can see the pietra serena expanding, almost as if it's growing over the arches, so it almost reaches the stringcourse moulding below the cornice.

Steven: There seems to be that expansion of the pietra serena in the stringcourses above; in the extra cornices that exist above each of the capitals of each of the columns; and even at the bases of the column, the pietra serena seems to expand outward into the paving itself until the pietra serena is no longer functioning, really, as line against plane, but becoming a kind of sculptural form. In fact, it gives the entire church a kind of visual density.

Beth: It's a space that has a tension between energy in the pietra serena and the simplicity of the spatial elements. I think it's also really important to talk about how Classical this looks; we really have a sense of being in an ancient Roman building, but there is a kind of severity here. We don't see fluting in the columns or in the pilasters.

Steven: And the pietra serena's tone is a serious tone. This church is one of the great expressions of Early Renaissance architecture. It's sometimes seen as a summation of the vocabulary that Brunelleschi created over his lifetime, which was revolutionary.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/ggpKKlsaeac>



Exterior of Santo Spirito, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC-BY-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/5DDhtH>

49.

Orsanmichele and Donatello's 'Saint Mark'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at Orsanmichele, Florence.

Steven: We're on the first floor of Orsanmichele, which is this extraordinarily complicated and important building. It's a granary and it's odd to think of a granary right in the middle of town.

Beth: Well, we don't often think about granaries! Granaries were a place to store grain.

Steven: But this was incredibly important because there were years when a town might be under siege and you couldn't get to the fields, or there might be bad harvests.

Beth: Right, so right here on the first floor of Orsanmichele, there was a grain market and it was open.

Steven: And then upstairs there were the storage areas, and those are huge spaces.

Beth: So this was, at one point, a church, and then became a granary, and there was an image of the Madonna that was located here that was believed to have miraculous powers and at some point it burned, and then another image of the Virgin was created that also had miraculous powers…

Steven: I think we're up to the third version. This was by Bernardo Daddi, but it's surrounded by this extraordinary altar, which was by Orcagna, who we generally think of as a painter.



Orsanmichele, Florence, 1349 loggia (1380-1404 upper stories) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/CVUmqA>



Tabernacle and Baldacchino, 1352-59, Orsanmichele, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

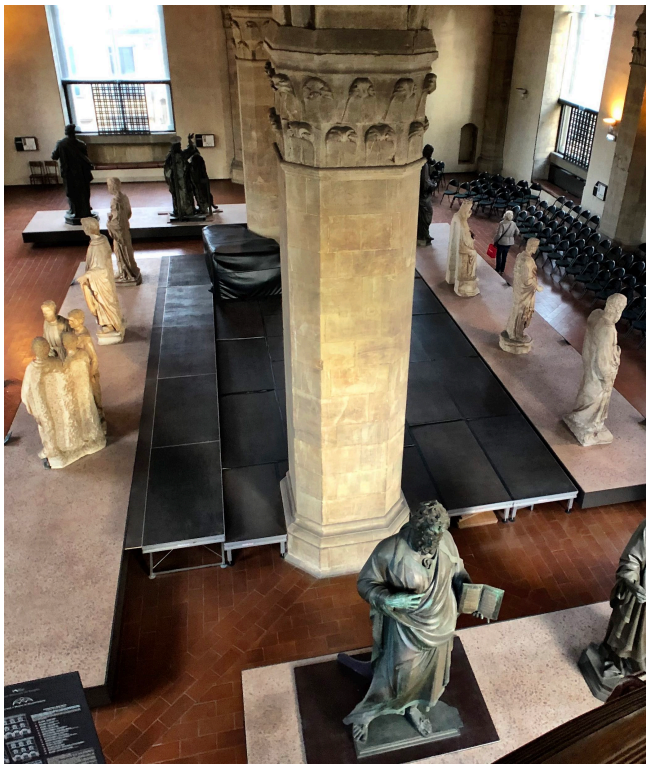
Beth: It's an amazing tabernacle housing this miraculous image of the Virgin, so we have to imagine that this space was once open.

Steven: Okay, so the walls that are there now were not there originally. This was really a part of the city. The city, in a sense, flowed through it. I think it's important to think about this place as an intersection of the spiritual—it was a church— and of the sort of everyday business of the city: it was a granary. Even its location—its midway between the great cathedral, the Duomo, and of the town hall, the Palazzo della Signoria.

Beth: It's here that the first Renaissance sculptures were created for the niches on the outside of this building. It's in this context that the first, really humanist Renaissance sculptures are born.

Steven: Let's go upstairs because sculptures that used to be in the niches are now all protected in the area that once held the grain.

Beth: We enter a large open space, filled with sculptures—the monumental figures that stood on the outside of Orsanmichele.



Orsanmichele Museum, Florence (photo: aiva, CC BY 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2eQetAG>

Steven: So now, if you go outside, you see casts of the originals, which are here because it's safer, to protect them from the elements.

Beth: In the very early 15th century, the guilds of Florence each were responsible for completing a figure for a niche on the outside of Orsanmichele; they each commissioned a sculptor of their choice. We're sitting in front of Donatello's *Saint Mark*, commissioned by the Linen Drapers Guild. Donatello gives us this Classical figure.



Donatello, St. Mark, 1411-13, marble, 93" (236 cm) (Orsanmichele, Florence) (photo: virtusincertus, CC BY 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/Gt2dF8>

Steven: So, what is Classical about it? I mean, the first thing your eyes see, of course, is this incredible contrapposto that comes through even under that heavy cloth. I mean, look at the way, for instance, that his right engaged leg, the drape falls down, almost as if that's the fluting of the column.

Beth: And we can see his left knee pressing through the drapery, so Donatello is really reviving contrapposto, which hasn't been seen in Western art in a thousand years.

Steven: But it's so beautifully handled. You have the sense of the absolute stability of this figure, and yet the sense of his movement.

Beth: The thing that's most impressive is the psychological intensity of this figure, which is really overwhelming. There's a sense almost as though, along with the contrapposto, he's going to move *and* he's going to speak. There's a real sense of the dignity of Mark here, and I think, by extension, that sense that one has in the Florentine Renaissance of the dignity of man, of human beings.

Steven: There's a kind of intensity. There's a kind of focus. There's a kind of deep human sense of understanding in that face, in the just little bit of the furrow of the brow that you can see and the way that the head is cocked slightly, and it's off-center in terms of the shoulders, turning back around, and there's an interior awareness, a kind of interior intelligence that comes through so starkly.

Beth: At the same time, without a halo.

Steven: Yes.

Beth: I have no doubt that this is someone who sees something that ordinary human beings don't see, when you look at his eyes, he is, in a way, seeing past us.

Steven: So isn't that the core of the story of the Florentine experience in the 15th century? You have this intensely devout culture and yet at the same time, you have a culture that is beginning to really celebrate human experience, the individual and the idea of the rational.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/-V51ZjxFeH4>

50.

Nanni di Banco, 'Four Crowned Saints'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at Orsanmichele, Florence.



Nanni di Banco, Four Crowned Saints, c. 1410-16, marble, figures 6' high, Orsanmichele Museum, Florence (photo: Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Steven: We're on the second floor of Orsanmichele, and we're looking at one of the most famous sculptures that used to be on one of the exterior niches but has been brought inside to keep it safe. This is Nanni di Banco's *Four Crowned Martyrs (Saints)*. These are four ancient Roman sculptors who are asked by the Roman Emperor, Diocletian to create a sculpture of a pagan God. They refused and were put to death. But the moment that Nanni di Banco has chosen to depict is the moment when they are coming to the realization that this will be their fate.

Beth: This is commission by the Stonemason's Guild. Each skilled had a niche on the outside of the Orsanmichele and chose a sculptor to represent their patron saint. This is unusual in that we have four figures instead of a single figure in the niche—and figures that are so human in their interactions.

Steven: It's almost as if there's a negotiation going on between them, as if they are thinking deeply about the consequences of the decision that they are in the process of making. It is a deeply human experience.

Beth: Instead of having a single thoughtful figure like Donatello's *Saint Mark*, we have figures who are looking at each other and gesturing.

Steven: Look at the vividness of the interaction. As the man on the right is speaking, his mouth is open. There's that wonderful dark shadow and that really deep carving. And all of them are paying attention, not necessarily focused on him visually, but we can see them listen in the most engaged way. This is an extraordinary expression of what stone can do. And this was of course for the stonemasons themselves. This guild is showing the nobility of their profession, that stone can get to the heart of what it means to be human, and in a noble way, to live up to one's belief.

Beth: Being a sculpture in the early 15th century in Florence meant looking back at the ancient Greek and Roman sculptures—it's in sculpture that we see the revival take place. Artists like Donatello and Nanni di Banco, and then later on soon with Masaccio, we'll see that looking back to ancient Greek and Roman culture. But this looks *so* ancient Roman to me. The faces look like figures from ancient Roman Republican statues. They are wearing these Roman togas. Several of them stand in contrapposto, especially this one second from the left, where we can really see his knee pressing through the drapery and a sense of his hips and really a body.



Nanni di Banco, detail of Four Crowned Saints, c. 1410-16, marble, figures 6' high, Orsanmichele Museum, Florence (photo: Salko, CC BY-SA 3.0)



Copy of Nanni di Banco, Four Crowned Saints, exterior of Orsanmichele, Florence, c. 1410-16, marble (photo: Catherine Walsh, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/heYpWn>

Steven: There's a kind of empathy that I feel for these figures that is intensified because it is these four men. Think about Florence in the 15th century, which was really thinking about its sense of community. They took decisions together. Whether or not they were going to act we ask to the Milanese for example. This notion of doing things together,and doing things for the group was absolutely central to the specific nature of this city.

Beth: With Donatello's Saint Mark, you have the dignity of the individual, which was a very important part of humanism. Here you have the importance of the relationships—the importance of the group in Nanni di Banco's *Four Crowned Saints*.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/LPZ5C3CgavE>

51.

Donatello, 'St. Mark'

Dr. David Boffa

A humorous anecdote

The sixteenth-century artist and art historian Giorgio Vasari gives us a humorous anecdote about Donatello's *Saint Mark*. Supposedly, when the patrons first saw the statue standing on the ground they were displeased with it, but Donatello convinced them to let him install it in its niche, where he would finish working on it. The patrons agreed, the statue was installed, and Donatello covered it up for fourteen days—pretending to work on it but in reality not touching it. When it was finally uncovered, everyone viewed the statue with wonder. The only difference was the installation of the work in its proper context. The artist had included distortions to account for the sculpture being seen from below (in its original location its base would be just above the height of an average person—see image at the bottom of this page). Some of these distortions include a torso and neck that are slightly longer than expected, which would be visually corrected when viewed from below (and the neck is hidden by a flowing beard).

Although Vasari's story is apocryphal, the visual evidence does suggest that Donatello—in this work and others—was keenly interested in viewer perception. This sensitivity to audience and the ability to manipulate his viewers through his works in stone and bronze are part of what makes him such a distinctive figure—and part of why his *Saint Mark* still has the ability to astound us with its power and expressiveness.



Donatello, Saint Mark, 1411-13, marble, 93" (236 cm) Orsanmichele, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

This over-life-size marble, carved from a single, shallow block of stone, portrays the evangelist Saint Mark standing on a pillow, holding a book in his left hand, staring intently into the distance. (The evangelists were the writers of the four gospels included in the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). Rendering a convincingly soft pillow in marble is a testament to the sculptor's mastery of the material (and perhaps a reference to the patrons, which we'll get to later).

Apart from this gaze, his face is defined by a long, intricately carved beard whose wavy curves reach down to the base of his neck. The rich folds of the toga he wears convey the expressiveness of fabric—bunching up at his waist, for instance, and falling dramatically around his legs—while also responding to and suggesting the body underneath. Note, for example, how his left knee—slightly forward—pulls at the garment, and how even when the fabric is piled up, as it is on his hip, it manages to convey the body's physicality. Consider the extraordinary skill in turning hard stone into something that looks like soft, malleable fabric.

Contrapposto

Saint Mark's stance is classic contrapposto—an Italian word loosely translated as "contrasted" or "opposed" and that refers to a naturalistic way of portraying the human form that originated in ancient Greece. Saint Mark supports his weight primarily on his right leg, a point emphasized by the strong vertical lines of the toga over that leg—lines that seem to mimic the fluting on Greek and Roman columns. The saint's hips are at a slight angle and his left leg, bent at the knee as though about to step forward, is far more relaxed. His upper body is the opposite: the left arm is engaged in holding his book—a reference to his status as one of the authors of the Gospels—while his right arm hangs loosely at his side. The slight curve to the body, and the use of both active and relaxed elements, gives the figure an easy, natural gracefulness that reflects how a human would actually stand, and makes it appear as though the saint is caught in the act of stepping out of his niche.



Donatello, Saint Mark, detail of book, 1411-13, marble (Orsanmichele, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

All of these formal elements—the scale, the expressive carving, the interest in the body, the contrapposto—are aspects we have come to associate as new developments in the art of the Early Italian Renaissance.

The commission and setting

Donatello's commission for *Saint Mark* was part of a broader campaign to adorn the exterior of Orsanmichele in Florence, Italy. Orsanmichele is and was a building with both civic and religious importance for Florentine citizens. Though constructed in part as a grain warehouse and used as such for decades, Orsanmichele was also a significant site of pilgrimage and religious devotion, due to the presence of a miracle-working image of the Virgin and Child. Plans to decorate the exterior of the building date back to 1339, when the Silk Guild (the *Arte della Seta*, then

known as the *Arte di Por Santa Maria*) proposed that they and the other major guilds of Florence adorn the external piers of the building with tabernacles (or niches) and life-sized (or bigger) sculptures of saints. The project was slow to get off the ground—only a few works were completed before it came to a stop—but it was revived in the early fifteenth century. At this point, the city government legislated that the guilds had to decorate their tabernacles within ten years or give up their rights to do so.



Reproduction of Donatello's St. Mark (1411-13, the original is now in the museum inside) in its original location in a niche at Orsanmichele, Florence, 1349 loggia (1380-1404 upper stories) (photo: Shirley de Jong, CC BY-NC 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/praM9T>

Orsanmichele was so important to the city that a guild's ability to commission an artwork for it was considered an honor—if an expensive one. Although the legislation wasn't strictly enforced, it did inspire a flurry of activity and commissions around Orsanmichele—of which Donatello's *Saint Mark* was one example, commissioned by the Linen Weavers' Guild (the *Arte dei Linaiuoli*). Other noteworthy sculptures from this period include Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1414 and Saint Matthew, c. 1420, Nanni di Banco's *Four Crowned Saints*, c. 1415, and Donatello's *Saint George*, c. 1415.



Donatello, Saint Mark, detail of face, 1411-13, marble (Orsanmichele, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Orsanmichele projects provided an opportunity for the guilds to compete with each other, each one commissioning a more luxurious or impressive sculpture. Competition of all sorts—between patrons, artists, even art forms themselves—is a consistent theme of the Renaissance, and in the opening years of the fifteenth century this was on display as guilds vied for public attention and praise via their Orsanmichele commissions. For example, the Cloth Merchants' Guild (the *Arte di Calimala*) commissioned Ghiberti's *Saint John the Baptist* in bronze rather than marble—a far more costly decision intended to show off the guild's wealth and outdo its rivals.



St, Mark (reproduction), in his original location, Orsanmichele, Florence, 1349 loggia (1380-1404 upper stories) (photo: Stefan Bauer, CC BY-SA 2.5)

Unfortunately, all of the original statues on Orsanmichele—fourteen works—have been placed in either the building's museum or the Bargello museum. The sculptures in the niches are copies. The result is that we can now view Donatello's *Saint Mark* at ground level—exactly as he did not intend it to be viewed!

The artist

Donatello—whose full name was Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi—was born around 1386 in Florence to a middle-class family. He probably trained as a goldsmith as a young man, and eventually spent some time with two of the most important artists of the fifteenth century: Filippo Brunelleschi and Lorenzo Ghiberti. He went with the former to Rome in the opening years of the century, and he spent time in Ghiberti's workshop from about 1404 to 1407.

By the time of the *Saint Mark* commission, Donatello had already completed or was at work on several other notable public sculptures, including his marble *David* (1408-9), *Saint John the Baptist* (1408-15), and *Saint George* (c. 1410-15, also for Orsanmichele). These early works—especially *Saint John*—already exhibit some of the hallmarks of Donatello's style, including a realism informed by Classical (ancient Greek and Roman) art and a certain psychological intensity. In subsequent decades he would execute original monuments that later generations have come to view as landmarks in Renaissance art: these include the bronze relief of the *Feast of Herod* for the baptismal font in Siena's baptistery (c. 1425); the *Equestrian Monument of Gattamelata* in Padua (c. 1450, the earliest surviving Renaissance equestrian monument); and the *Judith and Holofernes* (c. 1460), now in Florence's Palazzo Vecchio. These works had an impact not only on his peers but on later sculptors, as well—including on Michelangelo, who can be considered the High Renaissance artistic heir to Donatello. Thanks to a career that spanned over sixty years of activity (Donatello lived until 1466) and that resulted in radical works for major cultural and artistic centers—including Florence, Siena, Padua, and Rome—Donatello became an artist whose fame and impact equaled if not surpassed that of his teachers.

52.

Donatello, 'Saint George'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Donatello, Saint George, c. 1416-17, marble, 214 cm high (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2iYL1sW>

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Museo Nazionale del Bargello.

Steven: We're in the Bargello in Florence, looking up at Donatello's *Saint George*.

Beth: Saint George was a Christian solider who saved a town by killing a dragon after 15,000 townspeople converted to Christianity.

Steven: Now this Saint George was not originally here. This was on the exterior of a building just a few blocks away called Orsanmichele.

Beth: Orsanmichele is an incredibly important building when we think about the beginnings of the Renaissance in Florence—it's there that we find the first truly Renaissance style sculptures. Many of the guilds of Florence were responsible for commissioning their patron saint for a niche on the outside of Orsanmichele.

Steven: Guilds were collectives that were formed out of skilled occupations.

Beth: Like unions today. But they were very powerful in Florence and often took part in the building campaigns, the efforts to embellish the city in the 14th and 15th century. The Guild of Armorers and Sword Makers commissioned Donatello to sculpt Saint George, their patron saint.

Steven: Florence was fairly unique in that it was a republic, and there was a growing sense of civic pride: pride in one's city, pride in one's historical roots, which the Florentines believed were Ancient Roman. So this is a sculpture that was made for the city, but it was paid for by the guild of armorers and sword makers. So it's no surprise that we see a shield and a hand that probably originally held some sort of blade.

Beth: There are drill marks on his head that indicate he also likely wore a helmet or wreath of some sort, also made out of metal.

Steven: So this can be seen a little bit as an advertisement.

Beth: It's really important to understand this moment of intense civic pride, but one where there's no real distinction between the religious-spiritual aspects of the people of the city and the government of the city. These were often joined in the great civic projects that took place in Florence in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Steven: Well, it's like Orsanmichele had several purposes. It was a church, but it was also a granary that helped to feed the city.

Beth: So this idea of the secular and the spiritual coming together.

Steven: This sculpture was for the outside, so this was public art. This was art that you passed as you walked along the streets. So many sculptures at Orsanmichele and in other parts of Early Renaissance Florence depict figures at this scale as old, wizened prophets. But here we have such a youthful figure, who's a pillar of strength and determination.

Beth: He is a soldier-saint, and that's so clear when we look at him: in the pose of his body, this sense of facing the future with his left hand coming across his body, his left foot forward…he seems to be moving out of that niche.



Donatello, Saint George, c. 1416-17, marble, 214 cm high (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: It's not quite what we would call contrapposto, that is, the Classical representation of a figure whose body shifts as he bears his weight on one leg.



Donatello, Saint George, c. 1416-17, marble, 214 cm high (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Here, the weight is on both legs, but his left hip juts forward, creating this wonderfully subtle sense of movement and the potential for action. Look at the diagonal of the right bottom quadrant of the shield and the way that it echoes the line of his right leg—that line is picked up past his hip by the cloak that comes from behind.

Beth: Although the figure is fully clothed and wearing armor, we still have a sense of a body underneath there, and we can see Donatello's understanding of human anatomy, we can see the ligaments in his neck and his collarbone.

Steven: But mostly what I see is Saint George himself looking out above us, looking to his, and his city's future.

Beth: His body seems to speak of bravery, but if you look closely at this face, his eyebrows are knit together, there are wrinkles in his forehead, and there's a real sense of anxiety and uncertainty about what's to come and so you feel this figure marshaling his courage to face the fierce dragon.

Steven: Like so many of Donatello's best sculptures, this is an expression of the outward physical form, but it's also portrait of the interior, of the psychological, of the emotional.

Beth: This is a figure who is fully human. We've left behind the elongated, expressionless transcendent figures from the early Gothic period (such as at Chartres Cathedral). Here, we have a figure who has emotional depth that is really something that Donatello and the Early Renaissance is known for. When we think about freestanding sculpture, we often think about sculpture that we can walk around. This is made for a niche, so Donatello knew that we were never to see his back, yet there is the sense that he could walk away. There's this independence from the architecture. This movement toward freestanding sculpture is an important development in Early Renaissance sculpture, but it's not only in the figure of Saint George that Donatello is so inventive; we have to look, too, at the way that he utilized the entire niche. In the low-relief sculpture below, we see a princess—a woman—observing Saint George slaying the dragon.



Donatello, Saint George, detail of relief, c. 1416-17, marble (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: She stands on the right; the figure of Saint George on horseback and the dragon are in the middle; and on the left, there's a cave.

Beth: What Donatello is doing here is bringing the kind of inventiveness that we see in painting in the Early Renaissance—-creating an illusion of space—to relief sculpture.

Steven: We can see that in the very levels of the depth of the carving. Saint George, his horse, the dragon, and the female figure are carved in relatively high relief, whereas the cave and this wonderful receding colonnade on the right are carved in low relief so that there's a distinction that's built in. It begins to create the variety of form that is an equivalent to the complexity of painting.

Beth: It's almost atmospheric perspective. In addition to the colonnade on the right, there are trees and a sense of a landscape in the background where the carving is even shallower and incised into the stone. This is an entirely new way of thinking about relief sculpture. Where before we had a flat background with figures that emerged from there, here Donatello is thinking about that background of the sculpture as a surface for creating an illusion of space. And this technique is called *rilievo stiacciato*.

Steven: When I look at that female figure, I'm reminded of ancient Greek maenads (female followers of Bacchus).

Beth: The artist of the early Renaissance are looking back to the naturalistic art of ancient Greece and Rome.

Steven: And Donatello was actively trying to study the art of antiquity. It's entirely possible that there was in fact a relief carving of a maenad that he would have been able to see.

Beth: Look at that female figure. She stands in lovely contrapposto, her clothing clings to her body just the way it would on an ancient Greek or Roman sculpture.

Steven: But I think it's important for us to go a step further and to think about why Classicism was important to Donatello—why it was important to artists in the early 15th century in Florence.



Donatello, Saint George, detail of Maenad, c. 1416-17, marble (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Well, there's a new emphasis on the pleasures of this world. Sometimes we think about this as part of the humanism of the Renaissance. This interest in the secular world.

Steven: And the ancient Greeks and the ancient Romans were unparalleled in their observation of the human body, of the natural world, and their ability to replicate it. Framing that central relief, we have two shields with the emblems of the Armorers' Guild. You can see as sword, you can see armor—it's a reminder of who paid for this, a reminder that this functions both as an expression of a city but also of the place of the armors within it. It's a reminder to us of the deep civic pride that existed in Florence in the 15th century.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/UAQsYoYZfxs>



Donatello, Saint George, detail of relief, c. 1416-17, marble (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2iYL1KV>

53.

Donatello, 'Feast of Herod'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Siena Cathedral, or Duomo.

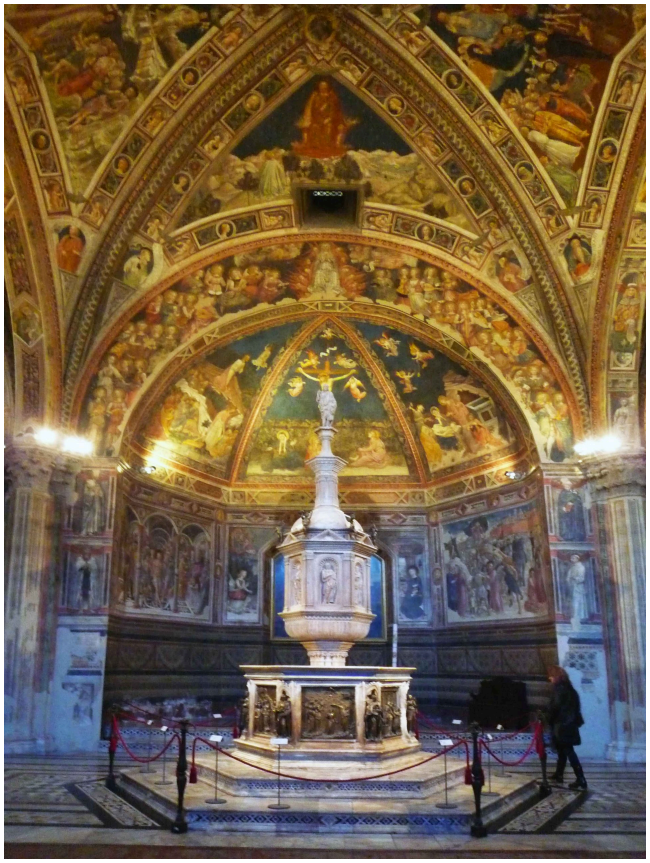


Baptistery of Saint John, Siena Cathedral (East Facade) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/c5KkcS>

Steven: We have walked from the Duomo around to its back and at its back is a very large building, which is, in part, its Baptistery.

Beth: Like the cathedral itself, this has a surface of black and white striped stone and different colored marble on the outside, but also fresco on the ceilings and walls.

Steven: The baptismal font stands in the middle of the building itself. It is quite large.



Baptismal font, Baptistry of Saint John, Siena Cathedral (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: It's very classical in its form. It's got six sides with six bronze reliefs at the base, separated by angels and figures of virtues. The top part of the font, we see a very classical structure with niches, with sculpted figures, surmounted also by a frieze and pediments.

Steven: The bronze plaques themselves are from the 15th century, and they are by a variety of artists. Some are local Sienese artists, but there are at least a couple of identifiable Florentines: there's Ghiberti and the most famous image here is by Donatello. That's the *Feast of Herod*.



Donatello, Feast of Herod, panel on the baptismal font of Siena Cathedral, Siena, Italy, Gilded bronze, 1423-27 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/c5Kj6W>

Beth: It's interesting to think about the city states vying for the best artists and Siena inviting the great Florentine artist Donatello to do a bronze panel for this baptismal font.

Steven: Some art historians have suggested that Donatello was brought in kind of to goad Ghiberti into getting his work done. Apparently, he had received a commission and hadn't done the work.

Beth: This idea of setting up artists to compete to get the best results and to get them on time was something that we see also in Florence.

Steven: The image by Donatello is an amazing one. The story is horrific. It speaks of King Herod, who has ordered a henchman and assassin to bring him the head of John the Baptist on a plate.

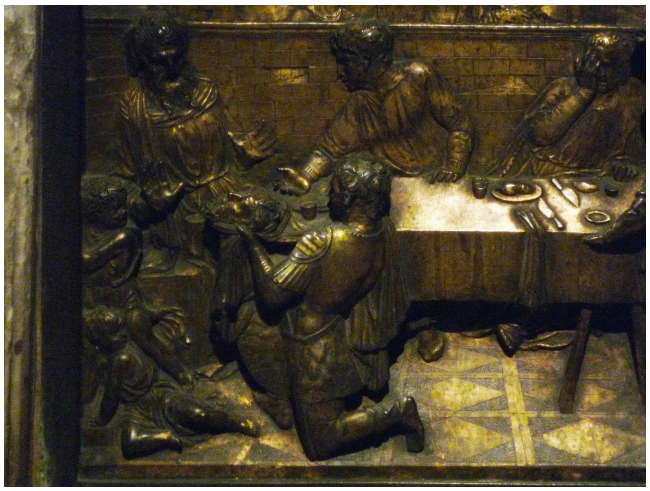
Beth: He does that because of Salome. Salome offers to dance for King Herod if he will grant her a request; after she dances for him, she requests the head of Saint John the Baptist.

Steven: It's a salacious story, but also, of course, from the Christian perspective, a really horrific one. On the left of the panel, we see the head of John the Baptist on a platter being presented by the assassin to King Herod himself, who, with several children, look horrified. They back away, his hands are up, a surprised revulsion at the actual sight of this head.

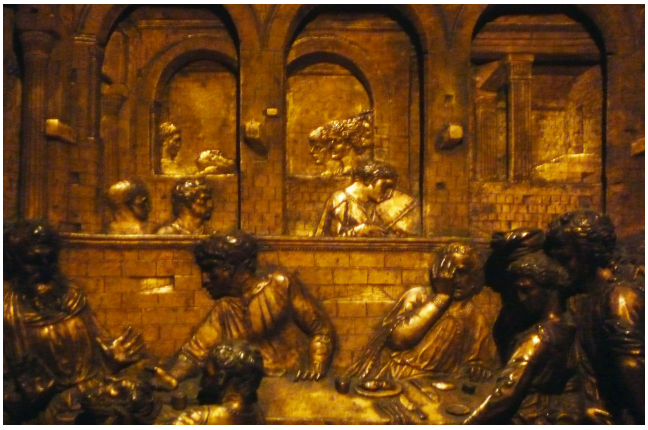
Beth: Yeah, they turn away and almost move outside of the bronze panel.

Steven: On the right side, you can see Salome herself and she's in a sensuous s-curve that really speaks to her dance…

*Bet*h: …and to Donatello, looking back at ancient Greek and Roman sculpture, she's very classicizing. We have a continuous narrative here because in the distance, we see the head of Saint John the Baptist being brought, and in the foreground, we see that head being presented to King Herod. In typical Donatello fashion, we have an incredible illusion of space and Donatello using high relief and very low relief to convey a very convincing illusion of space.



Detail of Herod and Head Of John, Donatello, Feast of Herod, c. 1423-27, gilded bronze, 23.5 x 23.5 inches, relief plaque, baptismal font, Baptistry of Saint John, Siena Cathedral (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Detail of architecture, Donatello, Feast of Herod, c. 1423-27, gilded bronze, 23.5 x 23.5 inches, relief plaque, baptismal font, Baptistry of Saint John, Siena Cathedral (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: He's aided in the illusion of space by the use of a linear perspective, which is almost unheard of in relief carving, but by parting the two groups of figures, he's exposing the tile floor, which is giving us clear indications of orthogonals moving back in space.

Beth: This panel dates to just about the time that Masaccio was creating *The Holy Trinity*, so both artists were utilizing Brunelleschi's discovery of linear perspective to create an illusion of depth.

Steven: This is just a few years, after all, after Brunelleschi really develops—or rediscovers—linear perspective and its principles.

Beth: We know that Donatello, if we look at the figures at Orsanmichele, was really interested in the human psyche. We really see that interest in human emotion here and the drama, the narrative of the story.

Steven: Look at the figure just in back, who holds that hand to the face and just can't even bear this sight, it is so terrible. This is a story that's appropriate in that it is of the death of Saint John the Baptist, but we see actually, a family coming in now with a baby and this is clearly a joyous moment. It's such a contrast with the image that we're seeing here… Oh, we're actually being asked to leave. The baby is apparently going to be baptised (!).

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/J9_ouZpBknM>

54.

Donatello, 'Madonna of the Clouds'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Donatello, Madonna of the Clouds, c. 1425-35, marble, 33.1 x 32 cm / 13 1/16 x 12 5/8 inches (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/C2mPMJ>

Steven: We're in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and we're looking at Donatello's *Madonna of the Clouds*. It's this small marble relief.

Beth: It's square, which is unusual, and it's what historians call a "rilievo schiacciato." When we say relief, you might have been thinking about a sculpture that had figures that stood out more from the background, but this is a flattened relief, where there's only the few millimeters that come up from the background of the marble.

Steven: And yet, what I find so remarkable is that Donatello is able to achieve a great sense of depth, despite, or perhaps, because of, the flatness of the relief carving.

Beth: This is a technique that he developed very much to help to create and illusion of space—something that was so important to early Renaissance artists.

Steven: Looking at this carving, I'm reminded of the extraordinary strides of naturalism that took place in the 15th century, developed by artists like Donatello, by Masaccio, by Mantegna and others.

Beth: I think, very much, Donatello wants to convince us of the realism of this scene.

Steven: Well, look at Mary, she's got real volume, real weight; her right leg seems to fall open towards us. There really is this sense of mass and volume, even though it's this little piece of marble carved just millimeters deep.

Beth: Donatello spent so much time on those folds of drapery that really show the form of the body underneath but that also take on a lovely life of their own as they swoop up and around Mary's thighs, or around her shoulders, or that headress that she wears, where the folds flip over one another. The curves, the rhyming curves of the drapery, echo the form of the clouds below. Mary, in a way, becomes one with the heavens.

Steven: There are these beautiful, intimate passages. Look at the way that the body relates to

that drapery, the way it sort of falls over it, and you really get a sense of Donatello's paying attention to ancient Greek and Roman sculpture. Her left foot pulls the drapery forward and makes it taut and creates that wonderful sense of volume.

Beth: Or we could look at her right hand. The tips of Mary's fingers go into the drapery, and we get a sense of the drapery pulling around her hand.



Detail of Donatello, Madonna of the Clouds, c. 1425-35, marble, 33.1 x 32 cm / 13 1/16 x 12 5/8 inches (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Or her other hand, which clasps Christ and especially his shoulder, in the way that she presses flat his flesh.

Beth: There's no other reaason to do this than to convince us of the naturalism of this.

Steven: Except that here she is on a cloud-like space that almost looks as if it's a kind of stream, on the one hand is naturalism, but on the other hand, she's surrounded by these little angles with halos.

Beth: But that's exactly what the early Renaissance is, right? It's this odd combination of realism—of paying attention to the body, of paying attention to an illusion of space, of paying attention to human emotion. We certainly see that here in the relationship of Mary and Christ, this kind of tenderness. We pay attention to all of those for real human experiences, but at the same time, we're looking at a spiritual scene.

Steven: Look at the variety of kinds of carving that are in this small piece of marble. Mary's face is the most deeply carved of anything on this panel. You have a deepest shadow that's outlining her profile. It reminds me of an ancient Roman cameo—the way that she's in perfect profile but also the way that the shadow outlines that face.

Beth: There's also shadow by her eyes and her nose; it creates a sense of sadness as she tips her head forward toward Christ.

Steven: There is a sense of melancholy throughout this entire image. These are not joyous angels. There's clearly a sense of the eventual tragedy.



Detail of Donatello, Madonna of the Clouds, c. 1425-35, marble, 33.1 x 32 cm / 13 1/16 x 12 5/8 inches (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Detail of Donatello, Madonna of the Clouds, c. 1425-35, marble, 33.1 x 32 cm / 13 1/16 x 12 5/8 inches (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Well, she looks as though she's protecting him; she encloses him within the form of her body and brings him towards her, what seems to be a protective gesture.

Steven: She is monumental. Christ is monumental. The angels that surround them immediately are fairly substantial, but Donatello is able to achieve a real sense of depth by reducing the scale of the angels as we move back in space and also by reducing the depth of the carving so that the angels in the upper-left corner are carved in the most shallow possible way.

Beth: Look at, for example, the angel on the upper right, the tip of her wing is not even carved, it seems to just move back into space. There is this sense of atmosphere that these figures seem to exist in.

Steven: And yet, Donatello was a able to achieve this extraordinary expressiveness in just millimeters.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/q3N1IqBoKSo>

55.

Donatello, 'David' (bronze)

A dialogue

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

The following is a composed dialogue.



Donatello, David, c. 1440, bronze, 158 cm (Museo Nazionale de Bargello, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jjshsV>

Steven: Seeing Donatello's *David* in the Bargello in Florence makes me realize just how different it is from the later, more famous version of *David* by Michelangelo. It feels so much more intimate and so much less public.

Beth: Well, it is MUCH smaller! After all, this one is only about five feet tall—that's a few inches shorter than me. And Michelangelo's *David* is more than three times this size!

Steven: Because of the small size, and perhaps also because of the warm tones of the bronze, this sculpture seems so immediate and beautiful and vulnerable.

Beth: Yes, and of course, Michelangelo's marble sculpture WAS a public sculpture—it was meant to go in a niche high up in one of the buttresses of the Cathedral of Florence, commissioned by the Office of Works for the Cathedral. We don't know who commissioned Donatello's *David*, but we do know that it was seen in the courtyard of the Medici Palace in Florence, a much more private and intimate setting.

Steven: This intimacy is not simply a result of the nudity, but also of the emotional experience Donatello renders through the face and even the stance of the body—and it's so unexpected in the telling of the story of David and Goliath! I would expect rather a triumphal victorious figure, maybe holding the sword and the enemy's severed head aloft… Instead, here is a thoughtful, quiet, contemplative face.

Beth: I don't know, he doesn't look so contemplative to me—instead he seems proud of his victory over the giant Goliath—which is strange since the story is very much about how

David defeats Goliath because he has God's help—he doesn't do it on his own!

Steven: Really? Look at his calm, downcast eyes… the lids are half closed. That is not the usual expression of victory. Note that the facial muscles are totally relaxed, the mouth is lightly closed though there is the slightest hint of a smile—and yes, that is subtle pride, but to me this is the face of interior thought not exterior boasting. It's as if he is coming to terms with the events that have taken place, including God's intervention, here Donatello foreshadows the wisdom that will define his later reign as king.

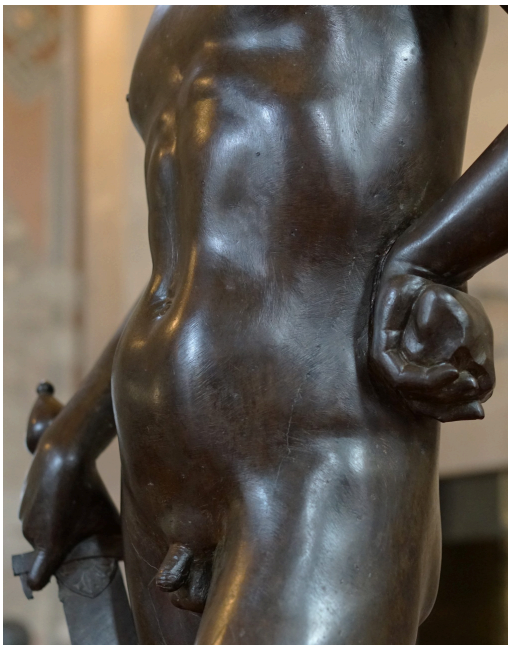


Goliath's head (detail), Donatello, David, c. 1440, bronze, 158 cm (Museo Nazionale de Bargello, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jjshDX>

Beth: Fair enough, perhaps it's primarily his pose that speaks of pride to me. The relaxed contrapposto and the placement of his left hand nonchalantly on his hip feels to me like confidence and pride. His right hand holds the sword that he used to cut off Goliath's head, which we see below, resting on a victory wreath. The gruesome head seems to conflict with the sensuality and beauty of the young David.

Steven: Agreed. There is a certain swagger in that stance and the horrific contrast to the head of Goliath is wild and unnerving. But the contrapposto is also Donatello's swagger, the sculptor's rendering of David offers the most complete expression of this natural stance since antiquity. We know he was studying ancient Roman art with his friends, Masaccio and Brunelleschi and it's worth noting that he reclaims more than just the classical knowledge of contrapposto, he has also reclaimed the large-scale bronze casting of the ancient world. It must have been such an extraordinary revelavation for a culture that until this moment, had not seen human-scaled bronze figures.

Beth: It IS amazing how Donatello, after a thousand years, reclaims the ancient Greek and Roman interest in the nude human body. Of course, artists in the middle ages, a period when the focus was on God and the soul, rarely represented the nude. Donatello does so here with amazing confidence, you're right. In fact, this is the first free-standing nude figure since classical antiquity, and when you consider that, this achievement is even more remarkable! But let's face it, there's an undeniable sensuality here that almost makes us forget that we're looking at an old testament subject.



Torso and left hand (detail), Donatello, David, c. 1440, bronze, 158 cm (Museo Nazionale de Bargello, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Donatello's figure of David is almost too sensuous for the subject being represented. In some sense this isn't really a Biblical representation at all; Donatello seems to have used the excuse of the boy who eschews armor in order to represent not the Judaic tradition but instead the ancient Greek and Roman regard for the beauty of the human body and he uses the classical technique of lost wax to cast the form. Then, just like the Greeks and Romans, he worked the bronze to smooth the seams and the surface and to cut in details such as in the hair.

Beth: I think it's important to stress that this figure is free-standing. Sculpted figures have finally been detached from architecture and are once again independent in the way they were in ancient Greece and Rome. And because he's free-standing, he is more human, more real. He seems able to move in the world, and of course the contrapposto does that too. It's easy to imagine this figure in the Medici palace garden, surrounded by the ancient Greek and Roman sculpture that they were also collecting. I wish I could go back in time to Florence in the 1400s, to this remarkable moment, to witness the rebirth of Humanism.

Steven: I'd love to meet the artists and thinkers of the era but am not at all sure that I would find their world hospitable. Disease, want, cruelty, and a permanent hierarchy among social strata defined the period—not to mention the terrible position women found themselves in. You can go, I'll stay here in the 21st century thank you!

Beth: Like David, Florence was the underdog that withstood repeated attacks from Milan and yet, like young David, thanks to God's favor, Florence was victorious (or at least that's how the Florentines interpreted these events!). And as a result, many Florentine artists will tackle this subject.

Steven: True, and each one will have to grapple with Donatello's great achievement.

David and Goliath

The subject of this sculpture is David and Goliath, from the Old Testament. According to the story, Israel (the descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) is threatened by Goliath, a "giant of a man, measuring over nine feet tall. He wore a bronze helmet and a coat of mail that weighed 125 pounds." Goliath threatened the Israelites and demanded that they send someone brave enough to fight him. But the entire Israelite army is frightened of him. David, a young shepherd boy, asserts that he is going to fight the giant, but his father says, "There is no way you can go against this Philistine. You are only a boy, and he has been in the army since he was a boy!" But David insists that he can face Goliath and claims he has killed many wild animals who have tried to attack his flock, "The LORD who saved me from the claws of the lion and the bear will save me from this Philistine!" They try to put armor on David for the fight, but he takes it off. David faces Goliath and says to him,"You come to me with sword, spear, and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD Almighty—the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied." David kills Goliath with one stone thrown from his sling into Goliath's forehead. Then he beheads Goliath.

The people of Florence identified themselves with David—they believed that (like him) they defeated their enemy (the Duke of Milan) with the help of God.



Detail of Donatello, David, c. 1440, bronze, 158 cm (Museo Nazionale de Bargello, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Donatello, David, c. 1440, bronze, 158 cm (Museo Nazionale de Bargello, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jjvgfM>

56.

Donatello, 'David' (bronze)

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.

Steven: We're in the Bargello in Florence, in an enormous vaulted room. This is a building that was used for judicial purposes. Now it's a museum. And it holds Donatello's *David*, one of the most important sculptures of the early Renaissance

Beth: Important because it was the first free-standing nude sculpture since Classical antiquity. Quite an achievement.

Steven: So for a thousand years, the Christian West had looked to the soul as the place to focus. The body was seen as a path to corruption, and so it was not to be celebrated. What we're seeing here is a return to Ancient Greece and Rome's love of the body, its respect for the body, which is so evident.

Beth: It really is. Donatello's looked back in ancient Greek and Roman sculpture also for the position that David is standing in, the position of contrapposto, which is a very relaxed pose where the weight is placed on one leg, the other leg is bent. And the figure has—because of contrapposto–a sense of movement. In the Renaissance, this figure looked remarkably alive, given the way that medieval sculpture had looked for so long.

Steven: It's detached from any kind of figural group or any kind of architecture. And so there really is a sense of autonomy, as if this figure could move forward of its own accord. The figure is referencing the Classical in another way as well in its very material nature. This is bronze, largely copper, with a little bit of tin added to it to give it strength.



Donatello, David, c. 1440, bronze, 158 cm (Museo Nazionale de Bargello, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jjvgfM>

Steven: And it's actually hollow, it's created through a technique which is known as lost-wax casting, which the Ancient Romans and the Ancient Greeks before them had employed, and which had been used throughout the medieval period but not at this scale. And it was just in the early Renaissance that artists are beginning to re-explore how to create bronze sculptures that are this large.

Beth: David is very young, and it's hard not to see a kind of sensuality in the way that David puts his hand on his hip and looks down. The fact that he's wearing boots and a hat and is otherwise nude…there's a kind of eroticism here.

Steven: And that's especially evident if you look at the fact that David is standing on the now-severed head of Goliath. In fact in his right hand, he's holding Goliath's own sword, which David has used. But because he's standing on that head that pushes his leg up, one of the wings of the helmet is just riding up the inner thigh—-perhaps a little too high, in fact. So there really is a kind of overt sexuality here. And it's so interesting because it's at odds with the civic symbolism of this sculpture. This was a sculpture that was really important to the city of Florence. And yet, it has this very intimate quality to it.

Beth: It was the seen in the 1460s in the Medici garden. Although we're not exactly sure who commissioned it, it's likely that it was a Medici.

Steven: So the Medici palace had a large entrance way, and there was a kind of axes that allowed you see directly into the garden. And this would have been visible in the center of it.

Beth: That's right. It's really important for us to remember that to the Florentine people, this wasn't just King David from the Bible. There were all sorts of associations. First of all, David in the biblical story defeats his enemy—even though he's the underdog—he defeats his enemy with God's help. The Florentine people felt very much identified with David because, like David, they had defeated their enemy or they—this is how they saw it—they had defeated their enemy, the Duke of Milan, in this early 15th century, with the help of God. In fact, they felt blessed and chosen by God, and the heirs of the ancient Roman Republic, so the subject of David represented Florence, the Florentine Republic.



Donatello, David, detail, c. 1440, bronze (Museo Nazionale de Bargello, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jjshDX>

Steven: So Goliath in a sense takes on the role of the Duke of Milan. Milan was significantly stronger than Florence, which was a mercantile culture, as opposed to a military power. And Florence was, of course, a republic whereas Milan was an autocracy—-that is, it had a single ruler.

Beth: And so David became a symbol of the Florentine Republic. Anyone looking at this sculpture in the Medici garden in the 15th century would have understood David as a reference to the liberties and the freedoms that were so cherished by the Florentine people, and had been threatened by the Duke of Milan.

Steven: On the other hand, you could say that the Medici were usurping this civic symbolism for themselves in some ways. And in fact, when the Medici were run out of town, this sculpture was actually taken to the Signoria—-that is, to the town

hall—-and made a public sculpture. So there is really the sense of the investment of this culture in this story.

Beth: Right. And so by having it in the Medici garden, appropriating this symbol of the city and all that was great about the city, the Medici were appropriating that for themselves.

Steven: So here in this sculpture is this embodiment of the promise of a long rule. David will grow up to be king, to have been enormously wise. And in a sense, it was a perfect kind of story for the Medici to put forward as a representation not only the city, but specifically of their own rule within the city.

Beth: Right. So they're sort of identifying themselves as the city of Florence—identifying themselves with youthfulness, with King David, and with all that's great about the Florentine Republic.



Detail of Donatello, David, c. 1440, bronze, 158 cm (Museo Nazionale de Bargello, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jjwsLX>

Steven: And although this is a sculpture that's about war, the symbols are clearly about David and peace, and the Medici and peace. David wears a soft hat as opposed to the helmet of war that Goliath wears. David has severed Goliath's head with Goliath's own battle-hardened sword. If you look at that sword closely, you can see that there are notches out of it. It's been in many, many battles. David needs to borrow it in order to sever that head. But in David's other hand, in his left hand, he holds a rock—-presumably, the rock that he used in the slingshot to actually fell the giant in the first place. But I think it's interesting that Donatello here, a sculptor, is actually portraying that rock as, in a sense, the opposing weapon to the sword. That is a material that Donatello, as a sculptor, often carves. He works in marble as often as he does in bronze, perhaps more often. And so are these, in a sense, the two weapons of the two cities? Either the violence of Milan versus the culture of Florence?

Beth: The iconography, all of the meanings: David and what that meant to the city of Florence, that eroticism, or even the homo-eroticism….art historians are not really sure about all of those meanings for the 15th century Florentine people. Some art historians have even suggested that the identification of this figure as David is not even completely secure, that it could also have been read as Mercury. And so we see it in a complicated way, and it's quite likely that the people of Florence, in the 15th century, saw it in a complicated way and had multiple readings of it.

Steven: It's an important reminder that art history itself is a process of trying to restore meaning and understand meaning through the lens of time. And—

Beth: It is, after all, 600 years old.

Steven: That's right. Nevertheless, it is one of the great sculptures that really embodies so many of the ideals and concerns of the 15th century.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/6kUUJJV_MNA>

57.

Donatello, 'Equestrian Monument of Gattamelata (Erasmo da Narni)'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Donatello, Equestrian Monument of Gattamelata (Erasmo da Narni), 1445-53, bronze, 12' 2" high, Piazza del Santo, Padua (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/e5pa6R>

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in Piazza del Santo, Padua.

Beth: We're standing in the square outside of the Church of San Antonio in Padua, looking across a traffic circle at Donatello's great equestrian monument, *Gattamelata (Erasmo da Narni),* from the mid-15th century.

Steven: Donatello had spent a good deal of time

in Rome, was up in Padua for about 10 years, and worked on a number of important commissions, but this is clearly his most famous.

Beth: And it's important to note that Donatello was twice in Rome, because he got to see the great equestrian sculpture of Marcus Aurelius.

Steven: This is really important, and I think it's a little bit difficult for us to understand how extraordinary that ancient sculpture must have seemed. You know, by the late medieval period and the beginning of the Renaissance, when Donatello was alive, you had a culture that had forgotten how to cast bronze at a large scale. In other words, they could look at a sculpture from antiquity that they couldn't make any more.

Beth: That certainly seemed like a challenge, and Donatello took up that challenge. Can we, a thousand years later, make a monumental bronze sculpture, an equestrian sculpture?

Steven: Well, an equestrian sculpture is especially difficult. Just look at the *Gattamelata* for a moment. You have this massive horse, you have this mass of the human body, and all of that rests on four slender legs.

Beth: And to show off, you would want to raise one of the legs of the horse, as the sculptor did for Marcus Aurelius. Donatello was clearly ambitious in wanting to do that, but he didn't go all the way in that direction and, instead, he's got the left hoof up on a cannonball.

Steven: Although, if you look at that left foreleg, it is so delicately placed on that cannonball, it's actually a very small point that is able to anchor the sculpture, and so it can't really support that much weight, so he's gone pretty far.

Beth: So this is a type of sculpture that was lost not only because of the loss of the knowledge of how to cast bronze in this size, but also because this is a type of monument that didn't really interest the Middle Ages. This is a monument that commemorates a great man, commemorates an individual.

Steven: It commemorates a great man in *our* world, a recent figure—and, right, this is antithetical to the medieval celebration of, perhaps, royalty.

Beth: Or saints, as you would get in the Middle Ages. This is not a saint. This is a very talented military captain, or a *condottiere*, a kind of hired military captain that was very common at the time.



Donatello, Equestrian Monument of Gattamelata (Erasmo da Narni), 1445-53, bronze, 12' 2" high, Piazza del Santo, Padua (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: And a man who was hired by Venice—which is a city only about a half hour from Padua—that was responsible for Venice actually gaining this territory, that is, solidifying its foothold on *terra firma*, outside of the lagoon.

Beth: Right. In the early 15th century, Venice captured more and more towns on the mainland

and Padua was one of them. So we're looking really at a military commander who captured Padua. Now, the monument was commissioned by Gattamelata's family. By the way, Gattamelata means "honeyed cat." I don't think we know the origin of that nickname, but it sounds to me like something perhaps that his soldiers called him.

Steven: His real name was Erasmo da Narni.

Beth: His family had him buried inside this important Church of Saint Anthony—this is a major pilgrimage church—and then asked the Venetian government if they could put up a monument to him outside and, obviously, the Venetian government agreed. The monument commemorates an individual but also speaks to the greatness of Padua, the greatness of Venice.

Steven: He is placed just outside of this enormous church and so there's this way that civic pride is contextualized within this religious society. Donatello's work is just a tour de force, there's a kind of sensitivity in the handling of both the figure and of the horse. They are both independent figures that are responding to the world around them, in their own way, so that the man stands fully in control, in charge. He has baton in hand, he looks outward; the horse is also enormously powerful and looks down at us, turns, and seems so animated.

Beth: You can see Donatello taking up the challenge and then surpassing the ancient Romans. When we look at the Marcus Aurelius, it is a figure that has nobility but lacks military strength and power or doesn't project that as much as we have here. Gattamelata sits up in his stirrups, presses down; his body is vertical, balanced by the horizontal of the horse. As we're looking from this vantage point outside the church, you can see the horse turning to its left—almost posing—and the beauty of the horse showing off its own valor.

Steven: Well, the horse seems to be aware that we're looking at it.



Equestrian Sculpture of Marcus Aurelius, c. 173-76 C.E., bronze (Capitoline Museums, Rome) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Donatello has clearly studied the anatomy of the horse, the same way that we know Donatello was studying human anatomy at the time. That interest in naturalism is so evident here.

Steven: It's such a culmination of the ideas of the Early Renaissance. Look, for instance, at the broad face of the horse, and look at the way that you can see some of the veins and the nostrils are flared. This is clearly based on direct observation. The same way that Donatello was concerned with contrapposto in the human body, we have the real movement of a horse through time, through space…

Beth: A monument that epitomizes Renaissance humanism in its commemoration of the achievements of an individual and in recalling, and even surpassing, that ancient past.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/6dWHPHELCKU>



Donatello, Equestrian Monument of Gattamelata (Erasmo da Narni), 1445-53, bronze, 12' 2" high, Piazza del Santo, Padua (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

58.

Donatello, 'Mary Magdalene'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript conducted at Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence.

Steven: We're in the museum of the Duomo in Florence and we're looking at a Donatello. It's not marble, it's not bronze… it's wood. It looks so frail. It's a sculpture of Mary Magdalene.

Beth: It's a very difficult sculpture to look at because it's ugly. Mary Magdalene is shown as a hermit with her hands about to be clasped in prayer, and she's old and wrinkled. Her body is exposed to us. She's got these muscular arms.

Steven: But thin also.

Beth: The skin on her chest and neck and her face looks like the skin of an old woman. It's difficult to look at.

Steven: I think it's difficult because there is a whole series of contrasts that we're not used to seeing in sculpture. You have a body that clearly was once very beautiful. She's got high cheek bones, she's tall and graceful. But you're right—the body has weathered. This life has taken its toll. And it's almost as if she's wasted away. All that's left is a pure spirituality, the kind of pure faith. She's clothed only in her very long hair, which is one of her attributes. When we see a woman by, for instance, Christ's feet, with long red hair ,we know that's Mary Magdalene. Here, that hair has grown out. In fact, even her belt is actually her hair wrapped around her.



Donatello, Mary Magdalene, c. 1455, wood, 188 cm (Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/C2vC8c>



Detail of Donatello, Mary Magdalene, c. 1455, wood, 188 cm (Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: I think it's so interesting the choice of materials. I started out by saying this is wood. There's something about the organic quality of wood—its frailty, it's ability to soften, to rot—that seems somehow appropriate.

Beth: Actually I'm amazed that it's in as good condition as it is given the fact that it's wood.

Steven: Now if you look, you can see that it's been painted and it's been gilded. You can see that long hair had been painted red and gold, and there are traces of that that are still left. There's a look on her face, which is so intense, and yet at the same time, almost as if she has left this earth already.

Beth: I see this very much as part of Donatello's interest in the specifics of an individual, just like we saw with the Prophet Habakkuk (Lo Zuccone). This really intense specificity that's so different than the Gothic and the medieval, and a deep sympathy for humanity that comes out of humanism of the Early Renaissance.

Steven: His sympathy is infectious. There's however a kind of power here as well. Her hands are so long and so elegant, they almost create a kind of cathedral as she brings them together. She is the church itself in some ways—she's an enormously important figure. She sees Christ first when he is resurrected. She is the figure that sees him crucified, that doesn't run away as so many of his followers did.

Beth: And she's someone who makes a very direct choice to leave a worldly life, to leave a life of the sensuality of the world for the spiritual.

Steven: Think about how important that is as a message in Florence in the fifteenth century, when you have a culture that has put an enormous emphasis on material luxury. Here is somebody that functions as a conscience to the city. You know, there's something else that's interesting though. This is a late sculpture by Donatello. He's left behind the proportional accuracy of, say, Saint Mark. This is a figure that is almost Gothic again in the length of her body. There is a willingness here to put front and center this spirituality and the symbolism of the figure as opposed to emphasizing the anatomical accuracy.

Beth: Although she still stands in contrapposto—still there is that attention to the body that can only come from the Early Renaissance.

Steven: It is Donatello in a sense playing loose with his own rules.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/-UZuG3XpAd0>

59.

Alberti, Palazzo Rucellai, Florence

Christine Zappella



Leon Battista Alberti, Palazzo Rucellai, oblique view, c. 1446-51, Florence (Italy) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/qeaVVQ>

Humanist architecture for a private home

By 1450, the skyline of Florence was dominated by Brunelleschi's dome. Although Brunelleschi had created a new model for church architecture based on the Renaissance's pervasive philosophy, Humanism, no equivalent existed for private dwellings.

In 1446, Leon Battista Alberti, whose texts *On Painting* and *On Architecture* established the guide- lines for the creation of paintings and buildings that would be followed for centuries, designed a façade that was truly divorced from the medieval style, and could finally be considered quintessentially Renaissance: the Palazzo Rucellai. Alberti constructed the façade of the Palazzo over a period of five years, from 1446-1451; the home was just one of many important commissions that Alberti completed for the Rucellais—a wealthy merchant family.

Three tiers

Like traditional Florentine palazzi, the façade is divided into three tiers. But Alberti divided these with the horizontal entablatures that run across the facade (an entablature is the horizontal space above columns or pliasters). The first tier grounds the building, giving it a sense of strength. This is achieved by the use of cross-hatched, or rusticated stone that runs across the very bottom of the building, as well as large stone blocks, square windows, and portals of post and lintel construction in place of arches.

The overall horizontality of this façade is called "trabeated" architecture, which Alberti thought was most fitting for the homes of nobility. Each tier also decreases in height from the bottom to top. On each tier, Alberti used pilasters, or flattened engaged columns, to visually support the entablature. On the first tier, they are of the Tuscan order. On the second and third tiers, Alberti used smaller stones to give the feeling of lightness, which is enhanced by the rounded arches of the windows, a typically Roman feature. Both of these

tiers also have pilasters, although on the second tier they are of the Ionic order, and on the third they are Corinthian. The building is also wrapped by benches that served, as they do now, to provide rest for weary visitors to Florence.

The Palazzo Rucellai actually had four floors: the first was where the family conducted their business; the second floor, or piano nobile, was where they received guests; the third floor contained the family's private apartments; and a hidden fourth floor, which had few windows and is invisible from the street, was where the servants lived.



Alberti (?), Loggia Rucellai (now glassed in), c. 1446-51, Florence (Italy) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/pWFevb>

The loggia

In addition to the façade, Alberti may have also designed an adjacent loggia (a covered colonnaded space) where festivities were held. The loggia may have been specifically built for an extravagant 1461 wedding that joined the Rucellai and Medici families. It repeats the motif of the pilasters and arches found on the top two tiers of the palazzo. The loggia joins the building at an irregularly placed, not central, courtyard, which was probably based on Brunelleschi's Ospedale degli Innocenti.

The influence of ancient Rome

In many ways, this building is very similar to the Colosseum, which Alberti saw in Rome during his travels in the 1430s. The great Roman amphitheater is also divided into tiers. More importantly, it uses architectural features for decorative purposes rather than structural support; like the engaged columns on the Colosseum, the pilasters on the façade of the Rucellai do nothing to actually hold the building up. Also, on both of these buildings, the order of the columns changes, going from least to most decorative as they ascend from the lowest to the highest tier.

The Palazzo Rucellai has many features in common with the Palazzo Medici, which was constructed a few years before, not far from Alberti's building. The Palazzo Medici is also divided into three horizontal planes that decrease in heaviness from bottom to top.



Michelozzo, Palazzo Medici, 1445-60, Florence (Italy) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

But there are subtle differences that betray the intents of the patrons. The bottom tier of the Palazzo Medici, built for Cosimo il Vecchio de' Medici by Michelozzo, resembles the stone of the Palazzo Vecchio (below), the seat of the political power of Florence, with which Cosimo intentionally wanted to associate himself. It also employs the same type of windows.



Arnolfo di Cambio (initial design), Palazzo Vecchio, 13th and 14th centuries, Florence (Italy) (photo: Colby Blaisdell, CC BY 2.0)

Because Michelozzo used this medieval building as a model, whereas Alberti looked to ancient Rome, the Palazzo Medici is not truly Humanist in its conception and lacks the geometric proportion, grace, and order of the Palazzo Rucellai. The top tier of the Palazzo Medici is almost entirely plain, whereas Alberti continued to use architectural features for ornamentation throughout his design.

The main difference between the Palazzo Rucellai and other palazzi was Alberti's reliance on ancient Rome. This may have reflected Giovanni Rucellai's pretensions for his family. Rome was the seat of the papacy, and though Rucellai was not a cleric, he claimed to have descended from a Templar. The Palazzo Rucellai went on to influence the design for the homes of many clerics, such as the famous Palazzo Piccolomini that was built for Pope Pius II in Pienza by Bernardo Rossellino.



Leon Battista Alberti, Palazzo Rucellai, c. 1446-51, Florence (Italy) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/qbWXUw>

60.

Alberti, Palazzo Rucellai

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is a conversation conducted outside the Palazzo Rucellai in Florence.

Steven: Just a few years after the Medici Palace was completed, and only a few blocks away, one of the other wealthiest families in Florence built a palace.

Beth: Well, there was a whole boom in palace building after the Medici built their palace. And so we're looking at the Palazzo Rucellai, whose architect was the famous Leon Battista Alberti. Now Alberti was a brilliant humanist. He wrote an important book on architecture, in addition to his famous book on painting.

Steven: Alberti's *On Architecture* is probably the most important treatise on architecture after the *Ten Books of Architecture* by the ancient Roman Vitruvius.



Leon Battista Alberti, Palazzo Rucellai, c. 1446-51, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/pWPaGR>

Beth: Right, which had only been discovered a few decades earlier. So there's this whole revival of ancient Roman architecture. And we see that a little bit in the Medici Palace, but we see it really here in the Rucellai Palace by Alberti.

Steven: What's fascinating is that Alberti is looking back to Vitruvius's ancient work, seeing this standardized vocabulary, and employing it in a self-conscious way that is announcing its historicism.

Beth: Announcing its looking back to ancient Roman architecture. Alberti had been in Rome, he had studied ancient Roman architecture.

Steven: And the Classicism is not coming through only in the individual elements, but also in the emphasis on measure and harmony. Giovanni Rucellai came from a wealthy Florentine family, of wool manufacturers.

Beth: Like most wealthy Florentines, that's how they made their money.

Steven: At this particular moment in Florentine history, it was important that Rucellai express his loyalty to the Medici family. Alberti was clearly referencing the Medici Palace, and you can see that in the organization of the facade, into three primary stories. But there are also really important differences, and you can see that especially in the masonry. For example, this building is much more delicate; gone is that heavy, dark, rusticated masonry that we saw in the earlier building.

Beth: Right, that gave the impression of the Medici Palace as being almost like a fortress, and recalling the Palazzo Vecchio.

Steven: This building feels much more intellectual in its geometry, its lightness, its sense of the cerebral.



Alberti, Palazzo Rucellai, right side, c. 1446-51, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/qeaYHJ>

Beth: So we see more Classical elements here than we saw in the Medici Palace. We have pilasters, rounded arches—although we did see that also in the Medici Palace. But in between the stories, instead of just a string course, we have more Classical entablature, which gives us a sense of horizontality, and which is filled with decorative patterns, between the ground floor and the first floor. We see a Medici device of a diamond ring with three feathers coming out of it, and between the second floor and the third floor, we see a device of the Rucellai family, of a sail that appears to be blowing in the wind.

Steven: If you start at the bottom, just like the Medici Palace, there are benches on the ground floor, which is an invitation for the citizens of the city to come and rest.



Alberti, Palazzo Rucellai, detail with frieze of Rucellai sails, c. 1446-51, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: So the ground floor very much feels like the ground floor. It has a sense of weightiness that comes from that diamond pattern.

Steven: And as you move up the façade, there are three sets of pilasters. Each with different capitals. At the bottom, you see variations of the Tuscan traditions, or of the simplest, the heaviest. Above that, a form of the Ionic, and then at the top, Corinthian.

Beth: And we see that differentiation of orders also if we go to the Colosseum in Rome, where at the bottom we have the Tuscan. The middle story is decorated with the Ionic order, and at the top with the Corinthian. So, Alberti is clearly looking at ancient Roman architecture.

Steven: But the building's emphasis is not vertical, even though you've got the pilasters moving from top to bottom, because those pilasters are interrupted by these very elaborate entablatures that really emphasize the horizontality, the grounded quality of the building.

Beth: Now the building was never finished. About two-thirds of what Alberti intended is there, You can see it's unfinished on the right side, so there would have been a third entrance.

Steven: Alberti did more than simply the façade. The structure was remodeled on the inside, joining a number of pre-existing independent structures.

Beth: Now Alberti may also have designed the loggia that is caddy-cornered to the Palazzo, the palace. This is an open space, with round arches and beautiful columns with Corinthian capitals and pilasters on the interior wall—also very Classicizing. This loggia may in fact have been built to commemorate a wedding between a member of the Medici family and the Rucellai family. So a joining of these two powerful Florentine families.



Alberti (?), Loggia Rucellai, oblique view, c. 1446-51, Florence Italy (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/pWFevb>

Steven: Actually it's important to note that it's no longer an open loggia, it's now got a glass covering, and it's actually a shoe store. But originally, it would have been an open space that would have protected people as they walked through. It reminds us that even the palace is seen as a kind of civic good—this was adding to the beauty and harmony of the city.

Beth: Well, we can see the building of the Palazzo, of the loggia, of this piazza in front, as part of the beautification of the city that happened in the fifteenth century. That civic pride that led the people of Florence to be interested in beautifying their city, with great works of sculpture and architecture.

Steven: So here in the middle of the fifteenth century, in the center of Florence, we have this invention of what humanism looks, like applied to domestic architecture.

Watch the video <https://youtu.be/MHuUBkyF8KI>.

61.

Alberti, Sant'Andrea in Mantua

Dr. Heather A. Horton



Leon Battista Alberti, Basilica of Sant'Andrea, 1472-90, Mantua (Italy) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC: BY-NC-SA 3.0)

Mantua's relic

In the fifteenth century, pilgrims flocked to the Basilica of Sant'Andrea to venerate the most famous relic in the city of Mantua: drops of Christ's blood collected at the Crucifixion, or so the faithful believed. In fact, the church Sant'Andrea was erected to accommodate the huge crowds that arrived on holy days and who, in turn, helped fund its construction. Today, art historians admire Sant'Andrea's Early Renaissance design for elegantly bringing the grandeur of ancient architecture into a Christian context.

Who built that?



Andrea Mantegna, detail of Ludovico Gonzaga, Camera degli Sposi, 1465-74, fresco, Ducal Palace, Mantua

Sant'Andrea is built of bricks, though they are mostly concealed by painted stucco. The patron, Ludovico Gonzaga, estimated that at least two million bricks were needed. The bricks were baked in onsite kilns, making the church far less expensive and faster to erect than a building made with stone, which had to be quarried, transported, and finished.

Gonzaga was the Marquis of Mantua—and in addition to employing Alberti, he appointed Andrea Mantega as court artist. His portrait is featured in the frescos Mantegna painted in the Camera degli Sposi (also known as the Camera Picta), in the Marquis' palace.

The sections of the building constructed in the Fifteenth Century, including the Western façade and the nave up to the transept, are usually attributed to the humanist and architect Leon Battista Alberti, even though he died in Rome a few months before construction began in June 1472. Alberti was an expert on all things ancient and he wrote the first Renaissance architectural treatise.

Alberti probably made a model to explain his design and he definitely sent Gonzaga a drawing (now lost), and a short description of his plan in a letter dated 1470. Despite this, it is uncertain how much of the building follows Alberti's design, how much comes from the Florentine architect Luca Fancelli who directed construction, and how much should be credited to Gonzaga, who closely supervised the project.

Ancient models

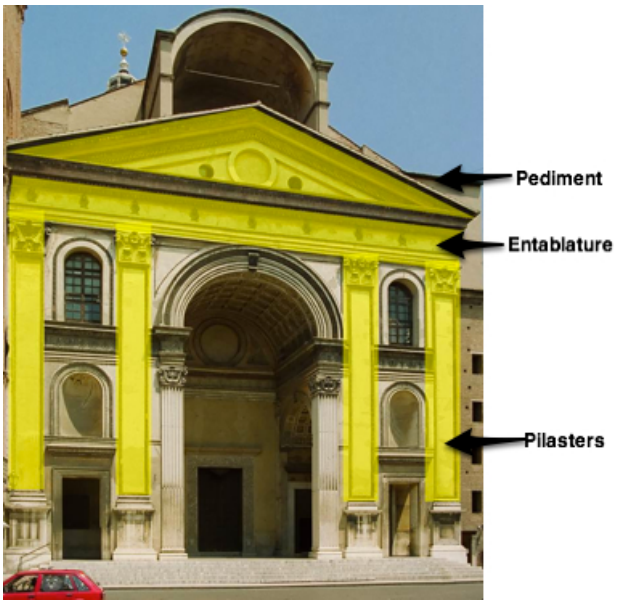


Photo adapted from David Nicholls <https://flic.kr/p/5DKQdX>

Questions of Sant'Andrea's attribution are important because it is such an ingenious, unified combination of three ancient Roman forms: temple front, triumphal arch, and basilica.

On the façade, four giant pilasters with Corinthian capitals support an entablature and pediment.

Together these elements recall the front of ancient temples, such as the Pantheon in Rome. There is also a grand arch in the center of the façade that is supported, at least visually, by two shorter fluted pilasters. Taken together, the lower façade, with its tall central arch and flanking side doors evoke ancient triumphal arches such as the Arch of Constantine.

Ancient rituals

The center arch extends deep into the facade itself, creating a recessed barrel vault that frames the main entrance to the church. The arch and its coffered barrel vault form a perfect setting for processions of the holy relic and the celebration of Christ's triumph over death. Such spectacles would recall ancient processions where victorious warriors paraded through Rome's triumphal arches.



Leon Battista Alberti, Basilica of Sant'Andrea, 1472-90, Mantua (Italy) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC: BY-NC-SA 3.0)

When pilgrims pass under the arch and into the nave (the long interior hall), after their eyes adjusted to the purposefully dim, mystical light, they would look up and see a second, much more massive barrel vault, the largest constructed since ancient Rome.



Alberti, barrel vault with painted coffers, Basilica of Sant'Andrea, 1472-90, Mantua (Italy) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC: BY-NC-SA 3.0)

Then, on both sides of the nave they would find three chapels with lower barrel vaults. Surprisingly, there are no side aisles or rows of columns, as at the old St. Peter's in Rome or other early churches like Santa Sabina.



Nave looking west, Alberti, Basilica of Sant'Andrea, 1472-90, Mantua

Sant'Andrea's huge central space and buttressing side chapels strongly resemble the layout of the ancient Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine in the Roman forum (below). The basilica plan is perfectly suited to large churches since it could accommodate massive crowds. But unlike earlier basilica-plan churches, Sant'Andrea's plan seems to return more strictly to the ancient forms.



Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine, 308-312 C.E., Roman Forum, Rome

It's even possible that Sant'Andrea's unusual plan and all'antica ("after the antique") façade impacted the new St. Peter's and the Church of the Gesù in Rome.

62.

Alberti, Façade of Santa Maria Novella, Florence

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Leon Battista Alberti, Santa Maria Novella façade, 1458-70, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/M9LEap>

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in Florence.Steven: We're in the piazza just in front of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. We're looking at a façade that was redesigned by Alberti, the great Renaissance architect.

Beth: Santa Maria Novella is an important Gothic church here in Florence.

Steven: One of the two mendicant churches in the city.

Beth: By that we mean churches founded by the begging orders, the orders of monks who begged for a living: the Dominicans and the Franciscans. Santa Maria Novella is a Dominican church. Now Alberti is coming here is the mid 15th century, and

his patron is Giovanni Rucellai, for whom he also designed a palace just a few blocks away. Rucellai inherited the patronage rights to this church but he inherited it from a family that had already begun to design the façade (the front face of a building).

Steven: Alberti had some serious problems here because he was a Classicist. That is, he wanted his architecture to conform to what he believed to be the ideals of Classical beauty, which were based on perfect geometry and rational order and proportion.

Beth: Copying of the rules of architecture handed down from ancient Rome via the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius.

Steven: The problem is that this was a Gothic church and Gothic is anything but orderly.

Beth: So he took this Gothic church and on it put a Classical façade that also recalls the Romanesque tradition of Italy—specifically, the Baptistery of Florence and also the church of San Miniato al Monte, which is just outside the center of the city of Florence.



San Miniato al Monte façade, 11th-12th century, Florence (photo: Kotomi, CC BY-NC 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/nF1Tt3>

Steven: We can see that especially in the linear geometric patterns that we see—the alternating of the white marble and this green stone. So Alberti had an issue. Not only was he dealing with a Gothic church, but there was a preexisting façade that was only partially complete. We're not sure how much of it was there but we think that a number of tombs had already been put in place of which six remain.

Beth: As modern viewers, we hardly recognize that those niches are in fact tombs. But that's what they are.



Tomb embedded in Santa Maria Novella façade, 1458-70, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Just above them we see those Gothic arches, which we also think predate Alberti.

Beth: What Alberti does with this lower story is that he frames it. On each end, he gives us a column accompanied by a pier. The column has a Corinthian capital, and in the center, he gives us a doorway modeled on the Pantheon. So what had been there before was a small doorway, and Alberti gives us a magnificent entryway.

Steven: In fact, it's easy to picture what that original doorway would have looked like because two earlier doorways still exist.

Beth: He defines the edges of the building for us. He defines the center with pilasters with Corinthian capitals, a coffered vault over the entrance. We see these references to ancient Roman architecture. But we also see a references at the top to an ancient Greek temple front.

Steven: It is clearly a temple front. We have a pediment just like we would expect to see on the Parthenon in ancient Greece: we see squared attached columns, pilasters supporting it. And that Greek temple front caused a problem for Alberti. If you look at the four pilasters that support the pediment above it, those four pilasters are not aligned with pilasters below them as would be appropriate in a Classical building.



Leon Battista Alberti, Santa Maria Novella façade, 1458-70, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Of course, Alberti was all about following the rules of Classical architecture.

Steven: What he does is he wants to distract us.

Beth: He does that really well. He creates this attic zone and he fills it with this decorative pattern of squares.

Steven: With pattern circles within them. It creates a zone of isolation between the top and the bottom.

Beth: There is a sense of rigor and geometric order here, aside from that one deviation. In fact, the whole facade fits into a square.

Steven: That square can be sub-divided into additional squares. If you look at the bottom zone of the church, you see that you have two of those squares, and then above that, a single centered square.



Leon Battista Alberti, Santa Maria Novella façade, 1458-70, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: He's got yet another problem to solve which is that he's got this very tall nave inside the church and then the shorter aisles on either side. So how to unify those two? He comes up with an ingenious solution, and that is to use these S-shaped scrolls to unify the top and bottom stories.

Steven: Now, he hadn't invented the idea of the scroll. This time, he's borrowing it from the lantern of Brunelleschi's Dome of Florence Cathedral, which is just a couple of blocks away.

Beth: Then he also puts a rosette inside that scroll, and so it echoes the round window in the center of the building, and that roundel is also repeated above in the pediment where we see a child's face in the middle of a sunburst, communicating the idea of the resurrection of the afterlife.

Steven: Lest we forget who was paying for all of this, just below that sun, we see Giovanni Rucellai's name as patron.

Beth: We also see his family insignia in the wind-blown sails that decorate the frieze.



Detail of sail on Alberti, Santa Maria Novella façade, 1458-70, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Those sails are meant to reference the idea that he hoped that through his faith he might sail to salvation.

Beth: The Rucellai were a very wealthy family in Florence, but the Rucellai were not as wealthy and powerful as the Medici family. We see the Medici crest—the diamond with three feathers emerging from it—right over the central doorway of the church.

Steven: So we can see expression of the Rucellai's loyalty to the Medici here.

Beth: It's so easy to walk by this church and miss all of this, but the 15th century is alive here in Santa Maria Novella in Florence.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/1wDFFqcXZOo>

IV

Northern Italy: Venice, Ferrara, and the Marches

63.

Venetian art, an introduction

Dr. Heather A. Horton



View of Venice (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/mew6xj>

Venice – another world

Petrarch, the fourteenth-century Tuscan poet, called Venice a "mundus alter" or "another world," and the city of canals really is different from other Renaissance centers like Florence or Rome.

The Venetian Style

Venice is a cluster of islands, connected by bridges and canals, and until the mid ninteenth century the only way to reach the city was by boat. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Venice suffered numerous outbreaks of the plague and engaged in major wars, such as the War of the League of Cambrai. But it also boasted a stable republican government led by a Doge (meaning "Duke" in the local dialect), wealth from trade, and a unique location as a gateway between Europe and Byzantium.

Painting in Early and High Renaissance Venice is largely grouped around the Bellini family: Jacopo, the father, Giovanni and Gentile, his sons, and Andrea Mantegna, a brother-in-law. Giorgione may have trained in the Bellini workshop and Titian was apprenticed there as a boy. The Bellinis and their peers developed a particularly Venetian style of painting characterized by deep, rich colors, an emphasis on patterns and surfaces, and a strong interest in the effects of light.



Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16' 5-1/2" x 7' 9" (San Zaccaria, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

While Venetian painters knew about linear perspective and used the technique in their paintings, depth is just as often suggested by gradually shifting colors and the play of light and shadow. Maybe Venetian painters were inspired by the glittering gold mosaics and atmospheric light in the grand Cathedral of San Marco, founded in the 11th century? Or maybe they looked to the watery cityscape and the shifting reflections on the surfaces of the canals?



Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice, begun 1063, Middle Byzantine (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/meum8g>

Oil paint

The Venetian trade networks helped to shape local painting practices. Ships from the East brought luxurious, exotic pigments, while traders from Northern Europe imported the new technique of oil painting. Giovanni Bellini combined the two by the 1460's-70's. In the next few decades, oil paint largely supplanted tempera, a quick-drying paint bound by egg yolk that produced a flat, opaque surface. (Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* is one example of tempera paint).



Giorgione, The Adoration of the Shepherds, 1505/1510, oil on panel, 35 3/4 x 43 1/2" / 90.8 x 110.5 cm (National Gallery of Art)

To achieve deep tones, Venetian painters would prepare a panel with a smooth white ground and then slowly build up layer-upon-layer of oil paint. Since oil dries slowly, the colors could be blended together to achieve subtle gradations. (See this effect in the rosy flush of the *Venus of Urbino*'scheeks by Titian or in the blue-orange clouds in Giorgione's *Adoration of the Shepherds*—above). Plus, when oil paint dries it stays somewhat translucent. As a result, all of those thin layers reflect light and the surface shines. Painting conservators have even found that Bellini, Giorgione, and Titian added ground-up glass to their pigments to better reflect light.

Venetian painting in the 16th century

Over the next century Venetian painters pursued innovative compositional approaches, like asymmetry, and they introduced new subjects,

such as landscapes and female nudes. The increasing use of pliable canvas over solid wood panels encouraged looser brushstrokes. Painters also experimented more with the textural differences produced by thick versus thin application of paint.

In the Late Renaissance Titian's mastery was rivaled by Tintoretto and Veronese. Each attempted to out-paint the other with increasingly dynamic and sensual subjects for local churches and international patrons. (Phillip II of Spain was particularly enamored with Titian's mythological nudes.) The trio transformed saintly stories into relatable human drama (Veronese's *The Dream of St. Helena*), captured the wit and wealth of portrait subjects (Titian's *Portrait of a Man*), and interpreted nature through mythological tales (Tintoretto's *The Origin of the Milky Way*).



Paolo Veronese, The Dream of Saint Helena, c. 1570, oil on canvas, 197.5 x 115.6 cm (The National Gallery, London)

64.

Oil paint in Venice

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation on the use of oil paint by Venetian artists.



Giovanni Bellini, Madonna and Child with St. John the Baptist and Saint, 1500-04, oil on panel, 54 x 76 cm (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice)

Steven: Drawing or color, which is most important?

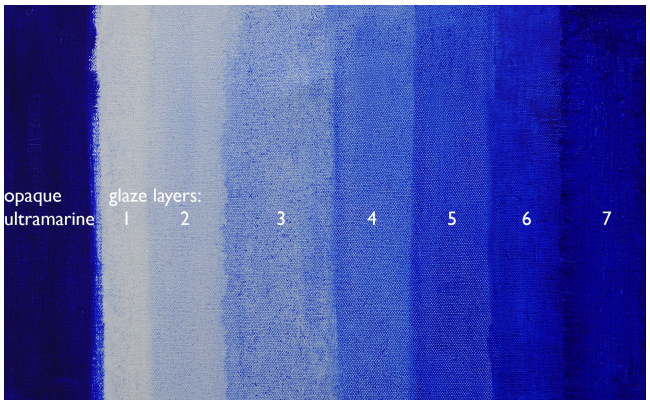
Beth: This was a burning question for artists and art critics in the 16th century.

Steven: And helped to define the styles of entire city states.

Beth: We're here in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice looking at Bellini's *Madonna and Child with St. John the Baptist and Saint*. Looking at this painting, I would say Bellini would have said that color was more important. The reds and the blues and the greens just glow.

Steven: They're spectacular, and that's of course because Bellini is using a new technique that had been perfected in northern Europe, known as glazing.

Beth: That's right, taking his cue from the artists of the northern Renaissance, artists like Jan van Eyck. The way that they painted was to apply oil paint on a white ground in layers, or in what artists called glazes. You would paint a thin layer of color, the oil would dry, and you would paint another thin layer and each of these layers was translucent and reflected the white ground underneath, creating intensity and depth to the color that was unprecedented in Italian painting before this, when tempera and fresco were the main media that artists used.



Oil paint applied on a white ground in glazes; each layer is translucent, meaning light passes through

Steven: Oil was so different. Not only did it allow for glazing, but it also stayed wet, and that meant

that you could rework the surface. Tempera dries very quickly and of course, fresco—staining a patch of wet plaster—also has to be done quite quickly and cannot be reworked.



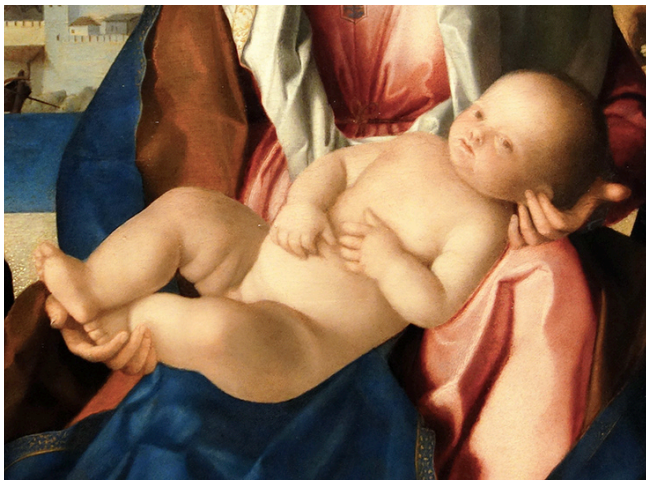
Example of a tempera painting. Davide Ghirlandaio, Selvaggia Sassetti, c. 1487-88, tempera on wood, 22 1/2 x 17 3/8" (57.2 x 44.1 cm) (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Beth: Tempera is opaque. In other words, you can't see through it. That, plus the fact that it dries quickly, meant that when an artist wanted to show the modeling of form, the movement from light to dark, they had to use lines, a kind of hatching technique.

Steven: And oil allows for the very soft modulation of light and shadow. Look, for instance, at the Christ Child's left leg. The light moves from a brilliance at the knee that helps it project forward, to the shadows of the top of the thigh, that help it move back in space.



Example of a tempera painting. Davide Ghirlandaio, Selvaggia Sassetti (detail), c. 1487-88, tempera on wood, 22 1/2 x 17 3/8" (57.2 x 44.1 cm) (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Giovanni Bellini, Madonna and Child with St. John the Baptist and Saint (detail), 1500-04, oil on panel, 54 x 76 cm (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice)

Beth: This is because oil paint stays wet and it can be blended. It's an oily substance.

Steven: The Venetians essentially gave up fresco in the late 15th century because Venice is a series of islands and it was really a bad atmosphere for fresco. So you have this division between the Florentine tradition and the Venetian tradition.



Map of Venice showing islands (© Google)

Beth: Right, the Florentine tradition is one where drawing is the most important—that is line, not color. That has to do, in part, with the Florentine interest in fresco. In a fresco, you need a final drawing, because fresco dries quickly and you need to know what you're going to do before you start painting.



Example of a fresco. Raphael, Galatea (detail), c. 1513, fresco (Sala di Galatea, Villa Farnesina, Rome)

Beth: What happens in the 1500s is that this early technique of glazing that we see in the art of Bellini changes when we look at Titian and Veronese and Tintoretto later in the 1500s, and they really exploit what oil can do and the way that oil can allow for a very different kind of process.

Steven: That process allows artists to change things on the fly, freeing them from being slaves to the original drawings. A good example of that might be Giorgione's *Tempest*, where we know that the figure on the left was once a seated female figure.



Giorgione, The Tempest, c. 1506-08, oil on canvas, 83 x 73 cm (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice)

Beth: And there's this idea of the artistic process on the canvas itself.

Steven: Directly on the canvas…

Beth: …working out your ideas, having them evolve right in that same place where the finished painting will eventually be is something that's unique to the possibilities of oil paint and something really exploited by the artist Titian.



Titian, Pietà, c. 1575, oil on canvas, 389 x 351 cm (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice)

Beth: Let's go have a look at a late painting by Titian where we can really see this different approach to oil paint.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/lG6NWLxDbNo>



Exterior of the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

65.

Ca’ d’Oro

Dr. Ellen Hurst



View of a Venetian canal

Venice, an outlier

When we think of the Italian Renaissance, we think of cities like Florence, Siena, and Milan where artists took an interest in reviving the traditions of classical antiquity. Venice, in contrast, remained something of an outlier. Whereas Florence, Siena, and Milan recalled their Greco-Roman past, Venice looked to its Byzantine history (as part of the eastern Roman Empire), which extended from the classical period up through the more recent medieval era.

Other Italian cities were also embroiled with political unrest even well into the High Renaissance (beginning in the late fifteenth century); rivaling families vied for power, warring for control, and killing or imprisoning their enemies. Venice’s more stable political climate and defensible island setting made it different from the other major cities in fifteenth-century Italy.

Venice’s unique position also made for a unique architecture. By the fifteenth century, it was a very wealthy city, with a strong merchant class that helped shape its culture. The city’s wealthiest families had the means and desire to build impressive palaces for themselves in the tradition of prominent civic architecture such as the fourteenth-century Palazzo Ducale on St. Mark’s Square. These powerful patrons constructed buildings as a way to express their wealth and importance and the Ca’ d’Oro (below) is a perfect example.

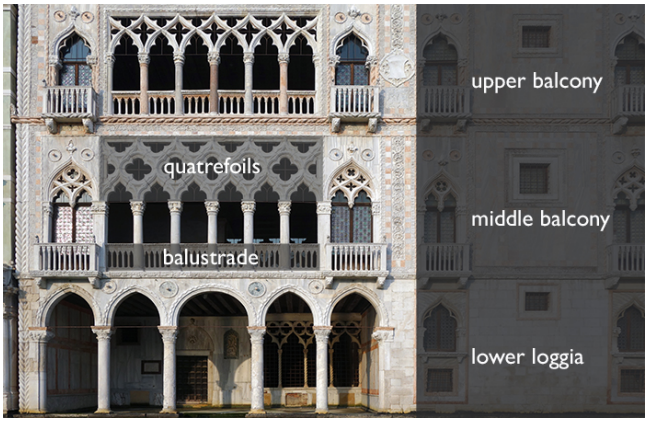


Ca’ d’Oro, 1422-1440, Venice

House of gold

Bartolomeo and Giovanni Bon are credited with the decoration for the Ca’ d’Oro, built for Marin Contarini, of the prominent Contarini family. The building borrows its style from the Palazzo Ducale (the palace of the elected ruler of Venice), albeit on a smaller scale, but what it loses in size it makes up for in ornamentation. The building was known as the Ca’ d’Oro—“House of Gold”—because its façade originally shimmered with gold leaf, which

has since faded away. You can't get much more opulent than a golden house! Even with the gold leaf no longer in place, it is still possible to get a good sense of the richness of this gem of a building.



Ca' d'Oro façade diagram

Like the Palazzo Ducale, the Ca' d'Oro is much more open than many of the palaces built in other parts of Italy at this time.



Palazzo Ducale (Doge's Palace), Venice, 1424

Unlike the Palazzo Medici in Florence, for example, the Ca' d'Oro is not fortress-like structure built with massive rusticated stones.



Michelozzo, Palazzo Medici, Florence, 1445-60

Also like the Palazzo Ducale, it is divided into three distinct stories: a lower loggia (covered corridor) of pointed arches open to the water, a middle balcony with a balustrade (railing) and quatrefoils (four-lobed cutout), and a top balcony with another balustrade and fine stone openwork.

The result is a delicate, ornate building that seems almost like a work of sculpture. Each level of the façade is increasingly ornate and intricate towards the top. The increased ornamentation on each story creates a vertical emphasis; however, that verticality is matched by the equally strong horizontal emphasis provided by the two balustrades on the upper balconies and the large cornice at the roofline.



Lower loggia, middle and upper balconies, Ca' d'Oro, 1422-1440, Venice

We also see a precise harmony to the division of space. The lower loggia has a wide arch at its center, which is symmetrically flanked by narrower arches. In the balcony above, two arches fit in the space directly above the wide central arch of the lower loggia.

The arrangement of columns and arches in the upper two balconies perfectly corresponds with one another: column over column, arch over arch. The façade's harmonious arrangement suggests the architects in Venice had similar interests to those of the classicizing architects working in Florence.

Uniquely Venetian



View from middle balcony, Ca' d'Oro, 1422-1440, Venice

Yet, we cannot describe the Ca' d'Oro simply in terms of Renaissance palace architecture. It is a distinctly Venetian building in its incorporation of Byzantine, Islamic, and Gothic elements. This blending together of architectural styles in a uniquely Venetian style had already occurred in the Palazzo Ducale, but this is perhaps an even better example of that phenomenon.

Patterned colored stones, in the tradition of Byzantine architecture, fill the flat wall space of the façade. As in the Palazzo Ducale, the ornamental details on the arcade and balconies combine Islamic and Gothic elements. In the Ca' d'Oro, though, the ornamentation pops because of its intense detail, set within the patterned stone walls. All of the different forms of ornament are combined within the same area of the façade.



Gothic quatrefoils atop columns on second story balcony, Ca' d'Oro, 1422-1440, Venice



Ca' d'Oro, 1422-1440, Venice

The five Gothic quatrefoils of the second story balcony stand atop slender columns. They stand out as distinct sculptural elements carved on all sides. In the upper balcony, pointed arches borrow from Islamic architecture in their distinct horseshoe shape and from Gothic architecture in their elongated, pointed form. Tracery connects every other column, creating an elegant interwoven effect. Within that interweaving, smaller pointed arches connect neighboring columns to one another, and these arches are multi-lobed, also in the tradition of Islamic architecture. Above each column there is a delicate cutout that mimics the quatrefoils in the level below. The open carving of the upper balconies in fact resembles the ornate screens common in Islamic architecture. This is repeated in the ornamentation of the windows to either side of the balcony on the second story.

In spite of its complexity and its many sources of inspiration, the building is unified and neither over-the-top nor visually chaotic. The Ca' d'Oro's varied elements come together in spectacularly unique fashion. The building embodies a distinct architecture all its own in early Renaissance Venice, one not merely imitative of Byzantium, the Gothic North, or Islam. Venetian architects brought these different elements together in new and surprising ways, making a building such as the Ca' d'Oro tremendously important.

66.

Palazzo Ducale

Dr. Ellen Hurst



View of St Mark's campanile (left) and Palazzo Ducale (right) from the lagoon, Venice (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/mew56m>

Venice in the 14th century

Today, we think of Italy as a unified country. But in the fourteenth century, the major urban centers of Italy were largely unstable. Wars were common. Rivaling families sought to oust their opponents—often by violent means—and seize power for themselves. This is why so much civic architecture of the Renaissance period is imposing and fortress-like. Buildings like Florence's Palazzo Vecchio (below)—with its thick, tall walls and defensive crenellations (gaps at the top of the wall for shooting)—were the standard for civic buildings in Italy well into the fifteenth century.



Arnolfo di Cambio, Palazzo Vecchio, 1299-early 1300s, Florence

Things were different in Venice. The city was politically more stable than other Italian centers, and it was also naturally protected from invasion by its favorable setting in a lagoon on the Adriatic Sea. As a result, Venice's architecture did not need to be as defensive as the architecture of neighboring regions. This allowed for greater experimentation in architectural form evident in the Palazzo Ducale, constructed beginning in 1340, for the elected ruler of Venice.

A new palace for the doge

Fourteenth-century Venice was an oligarchy, meaning that it was ruled by a select group of elite Venetian merchants. The main elected ruler was called the "doge," and his residence was—much like the White House in the United States—a private residence and also a place for official business. Although there was already a residence for Doge Gradenigo in the 1340s, the system of government changed afterwards so that more people were involved in governmental activities. This required more space than was available in the existing palace, the great council (a political body consisting of the nobility) voted to extend the palace. Workers began construction in 1340 and continued into the early part of the fifteenth century.



Palazzo Ducale, 1340 and after, Venice

The Palazzo Ducale sits in a prominent location. It is adjacent to the Basilica of St. Mark (Venice's cathedral church), on St. Mark's Square. The Ducale also overlooks the lagoon, which was a major point of entry into the city. Its prominent location made it (and continues to make it) an important symbol of Venetian architecture. It offered visitors one of their first impressions of the city.

Delightfully open

The building appears delightfully open and ornamental precisely because it is able to forego many elements of defensive architecture. The façade includes three levels: a ground-level loggia (covered corridor) defined by an arcade of pointed arches. The second level contains an open balcony which features a prominent balustrade (railing) that divides the first and second stories. Like the lower loggia, the balcony features pointed arches, though here with the addition of delicate quatrefoils (four-lobed cutouts) just above them.

A stone wall completely encloses the third and uppermost level of the façade and is punctuated by a row of large, pointed windows.



Lower loggia, second level balcony, and third level, Palazzo Ducale, 1340 and after, Venice

In many respects—especially in its horizontal emphasis and three-story façade—the exterior of Palazzo Ducale exhibits features that emerged in the Renaissance architecture of Florence during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. One could argue that this building anticipates those trends. Undoubtedly, in the Palazzo Ducale, we see a degree of the harmony and rhythm that we associate with later Italian Renaissance architecture.



Third level Byzantine patterned stone and second level balcony quatrefoils atop columns, Palazzo Ducale, 1340 and after, Venice

Crossroads of Byzantium, Islam, and Gothic Europe

However, the Palazzo Ducale is actually more representative of the unique position of Venice in the fourteenth century. Venice occupied a geographical location that was inherently defensible, and the city was uniquely situated in terms of its proximity to other cultures. Venice once belonged to the Byzantine Empire (the eastern part of the Roman Empire), but by the fourteenth century, it was an independent republic. Yet, it still had strong cultural and artistic links to Byzantium, partially because Venice was a robust center of trade with the East. The city absorbed many of the traditions of Islamic art and culture by virtue of contact with Islamic traders, artisans, and goods. Similarly, Venice's location at the northern edge of the Italian peninsula meant that it was closer to the Gothic centers of northern Europe than Italian cities farther to the south, such as Florence. It took longer to shake the Gothic habit, so to speak.

We see the architectural heritage of each of these distinct cultures in the Palazzo Ducale. The upper story of the façade features a diamond pattern of colored stone, a technique that was a hallmark of late Byzantine architecture. The openwork (lattice-like carving) and arcades of the bottom two levels combine Islamic and Gothic influences. Pointed arches and quatrefoils were typical features on Gothic buildings, but the pointed arches bow out beneath their peaks, in the manner of Islamic horseshoe arches. We also see tripartite lobes within the arches of the balcony that resemble a similar trend in Islamic architecture. As a result of its unique cultural and geographic position, fourteenth-century Venetian architecture—as exemplified by the Palazzo Ducale—is a beautiful hybrid of Byzantine, Islamic, and Gothic cultures, which are all bound together within a blossoming Venetian Renaissance architectural tradition.



Lower loggia pointed arches and second level balcony tripartite lobes and columns, Palazzo Ducale, 1340 and after, Venice

67.

Devotional confraternities (scuole) in Renaissance Venice

Dr. Lorenza Smith



Scuola grande di S. Marco e chiesa SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Venice, photo: Mark Edward Smith, by permission
© Mark Edward Smith

Venetian Society and the *scuole*

The Republic of Venice lasted for almost one thousand years (from the eighth to the eighteenth century). Its exceptional stability was due not only to its geographical position (in the middle of a protective lagoon) and its effective political system, but also to its social structure and the stabilizing presence of the *scuole*.

The *scuole* were confraternities, or brotherhoods, founded as devotional (religious) institutions, that were set up with the purpose of providing mutual assistance. They provided an important guarantee against poverty and played a crucial role in protecting individuals and families in need. The *scuole* were supported by a tax levied on each member and on the bequests of wealthy brothers. These donations and earnings were then used to

help all the members and their families. The *scuole* also depended on the state, which exercised a protective and supervisory role. Each *scuola* had a patron saint and a statute with its own symbols and emblems.



Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni (with paintings by Vittore Carpaccio), Venice, photo: Mark Edward Smith, by permission © Mark Edward Smith

In the fifteenth century, more than two hundred such *scuole* existed, among which six were *scuole grandi* (large *scuole*). By then the initial religious role had shifted to a more civic purpose. The *scuole grandi* included individuals who had diverse occupations and could afford spectacular meeting-houses, while the *scuole piccole* (small *scuole*), could be purely corporate. Even foreigners, in order to overcome the lack of protection by the State, and to strengthen their national or religious identity, founded several *scuole piccole*. These were all dissolved (but one) with the Napoleonic invasion in 1797—the year that marked the end of the Venetian Republic.

Social structure

In Venice there were three distinct social classes:

Patricians
The patricians were drawn from the nobility and were the ruling class. They represented about 5 percent of the population and were the only ones eligible to hold positions at a high political level.

Citizens
The next 5 percent were known as citizens. Citizens were divided into two categories: those who were Venetian by birth and those who became citizens after a lengthy process of naturalization (similar to green card status in the United States). Professionals, employees of the bureaucracy and merchants usually qualified as citizens. Though Citizens did not hold political power, they could exert some influence through the *scuole*, where the most distinguished members held significant positions.

Working class
The working class included artisans, small traders, other workers, and seamen. These people were not necessarily poor, just as the patricians were not necessarily rich. The working class also had their own *scuole*.

The *Teleri*

The *scuole* served an important role in the patronage of Venetian art. Along with altarpieces, they commissioned large narrative painting cycles (*teleri*). The subject matter of the *teleri* (*telero* — singular) was always religious but they also carried secular and civic connotations. The charm of these large paintings lies in the fact that they tell stories that unfold step by step. Because the imagination of the artists and their narrative skill was combined with their patron's instructions —and there are even instances when members of a *scuola* required they were included in the paintings, *teleri* provide a fascinating visual journey that allows us to appreciate and understand Renaissance Venice. What follows are a few outstanding examples with brief descriptions.

Gentile Bellini, *Procession in St Mark's Square*, 1496

The Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista (a large *scuola* dedicated to St. John the Evangelist) commissioned paintings that narrate the miracles made by the relic of the True Cross that was in its possession. This sacred fragment was carried

through the streets of the city each year on April 25 for the feast of St. Mark (patron saint of the city). In Venice, processions had great civic and religious meaning; creating continuity season after season, virtually unchanged over time.

This painting, by the great Venetian artist Gentile Bellini, depicts a miracle. In the midst of the procession, in the foreground, is a man in prayer. He is a merchant from Brescia who, having arrived in Venice for business, received the terrible news that his beloved son was in critical condition from a blow to his head. The next day, the man, aware of the powers of the True Cross, went to attend the ceremony, and when the famous relic passed in front of him, he knelt before it as a sign of devotion. When he returned home, he found his child miraculously healed.



Gentile Bellini, Procession in St Mark's Square, 1496, tempera on canvas, 347 x 770 cm (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice)

The protagonists of the procession are in the foreground: the *scuola's* brothers (members) are dressed in white; the procurators (the office of procurator of St Mark's was the second most prestigious appointment in the Venetian government after that of Doge) and senators of the Republic wear red gowns. The patricians and the citizens wear black. The members of the *scuola* carry a canopy to protect the reliquary that holds the sacred relic as it is carried through St. Mark's Square (the religious and political heart of the city).



Reliquary (detail), Gentile Bellini, Procession in St Mark's Square, 1496, tempera on canvas, 347 x 770 cm (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice)

St. Mark's Square is reproduced in Bellini's painting with a wide-angle view in striking detail, providing a remarkable visual document of the square at the end of the fifteenth century. To open up the scene, the artist moved the bell tower to the right. St. Mark's Basilica, sparkling with its Byzantine gold (gold also lights up the reliquary in the foreground), functions as a backdrop. The square is populated by a cosmopolitan mix of people elegantly dressed in the fashion of the time: some young people in multicolored stockings, a group of Jews, a number of Turks wearing turbans, as well as merchants and children. On the left, women look out from the windows and colorful carpets are displayed from balconies as a sign of celebration.

Vittore Carpaccio, *The Healing of the Madman*, 1496

Carpaccio portrayed another miracle of the True Cross for the *Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista*. The artist presents the passage of the miracle from the procession on the bridge (whose members are in white) to the main event that takes place in the Patriarch of Grado's palace on the upper left. The Patriarch is seen raising the relic before a possessed man who fixes a glassy-eyed stare on it, and who will be miraculously cured. The miracle is in progress, a dramatic moment made even more authentic by the fact that the scene takes place in a marginal position within the composition. The white tunics of the procession members surround the scene, while all around life

unfolds quietly, and it seems that few are aware of what is happening. Here Venice itself is not just the background but a dominant theme of the painting.

One can see the Rialto Bridge (the financial heart of the city) as it was then, constructed in wood, with a row of shops on each side, while below the Grand Canal (the main waterway of the city) is animated by gondolas and their gondoliers. In the distance, among the colorful palaces and the characteristic chimneys, daily life is in full swing. A woman beats a carpet, another hangs the laundry, a mason fixes a roof. In the lower section several men in turbans confirm the diversity of those who visited the Rialto market.



Vittore Carpaccio, The Healing of the Madman, 1496, tempera on canvas, 365 x 389 cm (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice)



Gentile Bellini and Giovanni Bellini, Saint Mark Preaching in a Square of Alexandria in Egypt, 1504-07, oil on canvas, 347 x 770 cm (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan)

Gentile Bellini, *St Mark Preaching in Alexandria, Egypt*, 1504-07



Saint Mark (detail), Gentile Bellini and Giovanni Bellini, Saint Mark Preaching in a Square of Alexandria in Egypt, 1504-07, oil on canvas, 347 x 770 cm, (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan)

The Scuola Grande di San Marco commissioned Gentile Bellini to paint *St. Mark Preaching in Alexandria, Egypt*, but the artist died before the painting was completed, so it was finished by his brother Giovanni Bellini (who, like Gentile, had never been to Alexandria). For the costumes and architectural details, Gentile drew inspiration from his stay in Constantinople and from travelers' accounts. The layout of the painting is reminiscent of *Procession in St. Mark's Square*, where the figures in the foreground are represented in profile.

The saint, who will become the patron saint of Venice, preaches from a small podium placed between the *scuola* brothers and the Arabs, while in the background stands a great temple whose façade, divided into three parts, brings to mind the meeting house of the Scuola Grande di San Marco, the Basilica of San Mark and the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Nearby is an obelisk engraved with hieroglyphics and several minarets. In the square, alongside the inhabitants, a number of exotic animals stroll by, including camels and giraffes.



Vittore Carpaccio, Arrival of the Ambassadors from the Saint Ursula cycle, 1490-96, tempera on canvas, 278 x 589 cm (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Vittore Carpaccio, *Arrival of the Ambassadors*, 1490-96

At the end of the fifteenth century, Vittore Carpaccio was commissioned by the Scuola Piccola di Sant'Orsola (a small *scuola* dedicated to Saint Ursula) to paint a cycle of nine paintings on the Life of Saint Ursula, taken from the popular medieval book, the *Golden Legend* by Jacopo da Varagine. With his vivid imagination he had no difficulty creating a northern scene (Brittany and Germany) set in the fourth century, often with elements drawn from an imaginary city reminiscent of fifteenth-century Venice. In the story, the ambassadors approached the father of Ursula in Brittany asking for the hand of his daughter on behalf of the English prince Ereo. After consulting her father, the girl accepted, on the condition that Ereo be baptized at the end of a long pilgrimage to Rome. After the baptism, on the way back to Cologne, the married couple ran into the king of the Huns who fell in love with Ursula. She rejected the proposals of the bloodthirsty ruler, preferring death instead.

The story begins with the *Arrival of the English Ambassador*s, where we see a large room represented with no front walls, while in the background we see buildings in the Venetian style and details of city life. Carpaccio skillfully employs perspective while maintaining the frieze-like structure typical of Venetian narrative paintings. The *telero* includes two consecutive moments. The first episode displays the ambassadors approaching the king; this scene unfolds behind a railing left accessible by an open gate. The following episode takes place in Ursula's bedroom where she receives the message from her father. The room is simple but includes a devotional painting testifying to the pious character of the young girl.

Vittore Carpaccio, *Saint George and the Dragon*, 1502

Carpaccio was also summoned by the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni (Dalmatians) to depict the cycles of Saint George and Saint Jerome, still in-situ today (in-situ refers to works of art still in their original location). The cycle of Saint George is also taken from the *Golden Legend*. In the narrative, Selene, a city in Libya, was oppressed by a terrible dragon that fed off the meat of boys and girls and terrorized the town

with threats of death and destruction. When it was the king's daughter's turn to be devoured, Saint George, on his steed, intervened swiftly, injured the dragon and then led it into the town before killing it in front of everyone. Thanks to the surprising liberation from the dragon, the knight persuaded the king and his people to be baptized.

In the combat scene with the dragon, the background is delineated to the left by a city, represented by several minarets, an obelisk, an equestrian statue, exotic palm trees and a castle typical of the Veneto (the region in northern Italy that was ruled by the city of Venice). On the other side we see the African princess, with a fair complexion and elegantly dressed in European-style clothing, looking on calmly, with her hands folded. In the foreground, the scene runs along the diagonal of the lance of Saint George who struggles valiantly with the dragon on a ground strewn with the remains of tortured bodies.



Vittore Carpaccio, Saint George and the Dragon from the cycle: Episodes from the Life of Saints Jerome, George and Triphun, 1502, tempera on canvas, 141 x 360 cm (Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice)

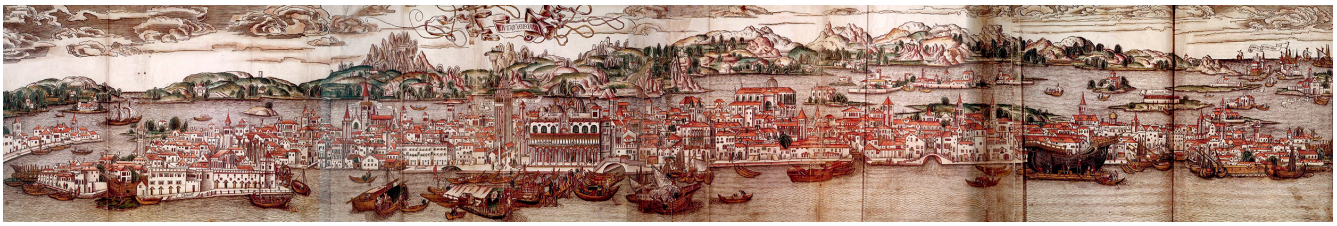
Conclusion

The complex narratives depicted in these paintings represent important religious events and miracles—yet directly or indirectly, they are simultaneously preoccupied with the complexity, diversity, and beauty of Renaissance Venice. They also point us to the critical role played by the *scuole* in both the life and art in the Most Sererene Republic of Venice.

68.

Aldo Manuzio (Aldus Manutius): inventor of the modern book

Dr. Lorenza Smith



Map of Venice, 1486, from Bernhard of Breidenbach, Sanctae peregrinationes, printed in Mainz by Erhard Reuwich (Bibliothèque nationale de France) <https://tinyurl.com/y34qlhna>

Venice as a center of print culture

For centuries, Venice served as one of Europe's main cultural and commercial centers and as the most important intermediary between Europe and the East. The city's political stability and wealth, combined with its extensive international relationships and rich cultural and artistic life, proved to be fertile ground for the establishment of the printing press.

In the second half of the fifteenth century, when printed books gradually began to substitute for handwritten manuscripts, Venice was the European capital of the printing press. The invention of movable type in Germany in the mid-1400s ushered in a sea change, placing Venice on a par with modern-day Silicon Valley. (Movable type is a system of printing where individual letters or other symbols are cast in metal and can be arranged and rearranged in order to create printed text.) Both of these creative environments resulted from a powerful combination of invention, technology and economic power. According to the scholar Vittore Branca, at the end of fifteenth century, an estimated 150 typographers operated in Venice, far more than the 50 or so that were active in Paris at that time. In the last five years of the century, Branca estimates that one-third of the volumes printed in the world originated from Venice.

Unsurprisingly, this flourishing industry generated wealth, cultural interest, and the diffusion of a new trend known as "bibliomania"—defined as a passionate enthusiasm for collecting and owning books. Readers and collectors from all over the world sought out the books of Venetian printers, who skillfully adapted production to demand. These printers created an inventory that was extraordinary in its variety, thanks also to the freedom of press granted by the government. It was in Venice that the first printed edition of the Koran was published, along with the first printed Talmud.

Books, booksellers, and bookstores

Anyone strolling through the bustling streets of Venice in the late 15th century would encounter bookstores whose windows displayed beautiful book frontispieces while catalogues of the books

available either hung from the jamb of the door, or were available inside, on the counter. It was common practice for the bookseller to offer the loose pages of a book in a package which the buyer would subsequently arrange to have bound in accordance with his or her taste and financial means.

Bookstores soon became places where scholars, intellectuals, collectors, and book lovers gathered to discuss new editions, exchange information, and converse with the bookseller who often was also the publisher and the printer. The invention of movable type spawned an industry that led to the creation of a new professional figure, the printer-publisher, and a new business, the publishing house. The publishing house developed its own structure, investors, and also required legal advisors, due to the emergence of copyright issues.



Plate showing the operation of a printing press, from Chants royaux sur la Conception, couronnés au puy de Rouen de 1519 à 1528, 16th century (Bibliotheque nationale de France)



Portrait of Aldo Manuzio, n.d., print, 105 x 81 mm (Deutsches Buch- und Schriftmuseum, Deutsche Nationalbibliothek Leipzig) <https://www.bildindex.de/document/obj67098817>

Aldo Manuzio

"Venice is a place that is more similar to the rest of the world than to a city," Aldo Manuzio wrote in a preface to one of his books. He arrived in Venice in 1490, driven by his profession as a Greek and Latin tutor. Manuzio was a humanist from a small town in central Italy, and it was probably his interest in books that brought him closer to the world of the printing press.

Manuzio was one of the first publishers in a modern sense. In a short time, he transformed the concept of the book in Europe thanks to his typographical innovations and to his unique editorial vision. He did this by founding and overseeing the Aldine Press, with the help of technicians, scholars, investors, as well as with political support. Aldine Press books were marked by a famous emblem depicting an anchor and

dolphin and were known throughout the world for their accuracy, beauty, the superior quality of the materials employed, and their cutting-edge design.

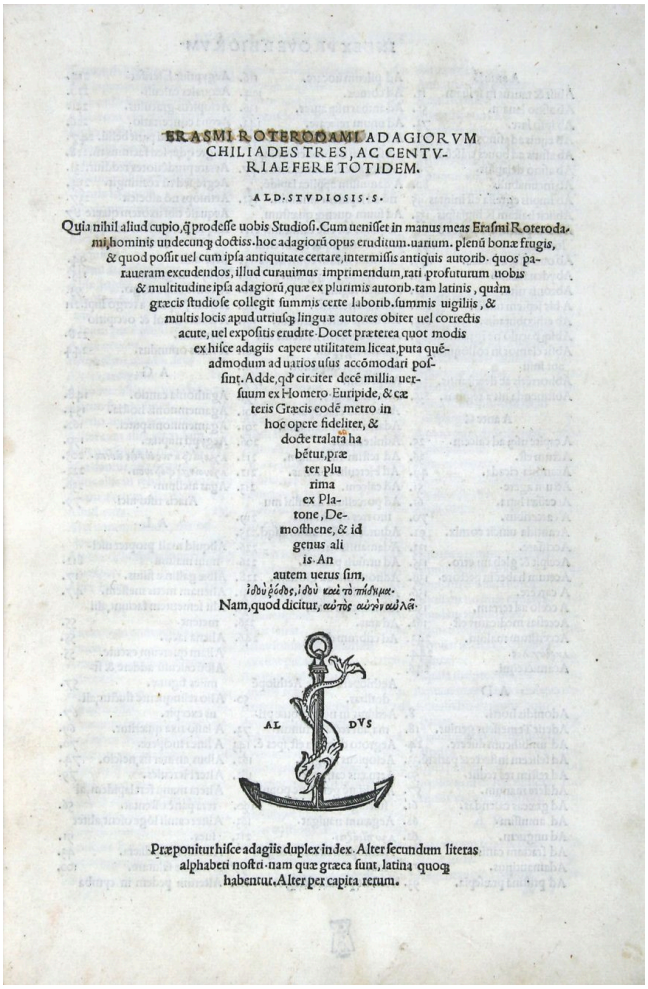
Manuzio's original intention was to spread Greek language and philosophy to a wider public. He subsequently produced books in Latin and Italian, publishing famous editions of Dante and Petrarch, as well as work by of some of his contemporaries, such as Erasmus. Over two decades Manuzio published 130 editions, 30 of which were first editions of Greek writers and philosophers.

Aldine editions stood out: from the first pages, Manuzio impressed the reader through the use of prefaces discussing his editorial work, his intentions and projects. In the preface, he would occasionally invite the reader to find and to report any errors in the text, thus actively engaging the reading public.

The inventor of the modern book

Many of the elements that Manuzio introduced, or eliminated, in the conception of his editions are innovations that have become embedded in today's books. Notably, he gave a new look to the printed page: the pages of Manuzio's books featured harmonic proportions between the size of the fonts, the printed section, and the white border, according to precise mathematical principles—reflecting a major theme in Renaissance culture.

One of Manuzio's most striking inventions was the printing of small-format books, the ancestors of our modern pocket-sized publications. Small religious volumes were already in circulation, but Manuzio's revolutionary idea was to publish both classics and modern works in the small format.


ERASMI ROTERODAMI ADAGIORVM
CHILIADES TRES, AC CENTV-
RIAE FERE TOTIDEM.

ALD. STVDIOSIS. S.

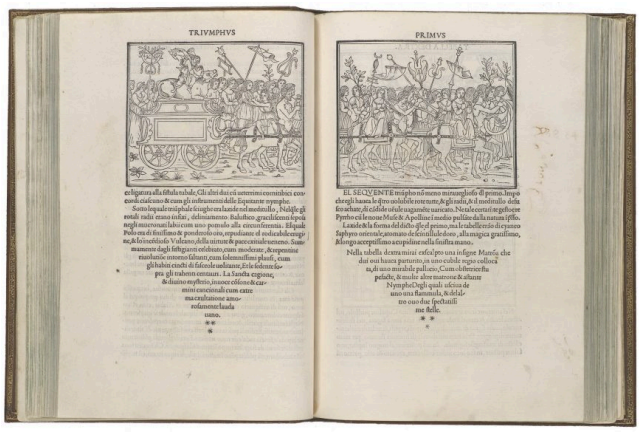
Quia nihil aliud cupio, q̃ prodesse uobis Studiosi. Cum uenisset in manus meas Erasmi Roterodami hominis undecunq; doctiss. hoc adagiorũ opus eruditum. uarium. plenũ bonæ frugis, & quod posset uel cum ipsa antiquitate certare, intermissis antiquis autorib. quos parabam excudendos, illud curauimus imprimendum, rati profuturum uobis & multitudine ipsa adagiorũ, quæ ex plurimis autorib. tam latinis, quàm græcis studiose collegit summis certe laborib. summis uigiliis, & multis locis apud utriusq; linguæ autores obiter uel correctis acute, uel expositis erudite. Docet præterea quot modis ex hisce adagiis capere utilitatem liceat, puta quẽadmodum ad uarios usus accõmodari possint. Adde, qđ circiter decẽ millia uersuum ex Homero. Euripide, & cæteris Græcis eodẽ metro in hoc opere fideliter, & docte tralatã habẽtur, præter plurima ex Platone, Demosthene, & id genus alia. An autem uerus sim, ἰδοὺ βάδος, ἰδοὺ καὶ τὸ πήδημα. Nam, quod dicitur, αὐτὸς αὐτὸν αὐλᾶ.

AL DVS

Præponitur hisce adagiis duplex index. Alter secundum literas alphabeti nostri. nam quæ græca sunt, latina quoq; habentur. Alter per capita rerum.

Erasmus of Rotterdam, Adagiorum chiliades, Aldine Press, 1508 (Bibliothèque Municipale, Tours, France). The Aldine Press emblem is visible at the bottom of the page.

Manuzio also introduced page numbers and made reading more fluid by clarifying the disorganized punctuation that prevailed at the time. He added a period at the end of the sentence and was among the first to adopt the use of the comma, apostrophe, accent, and semicolon in the ways they continue to be used today. In order to recreate the familiar effect of handwriting, he also invented what is now known in English as the "italic font," named after its Italian provenance.



Francesco Colonna, Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, published by Aldo Manuzio, 1499, book with woodcut illustrations, 29.5 × 22 × 4 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

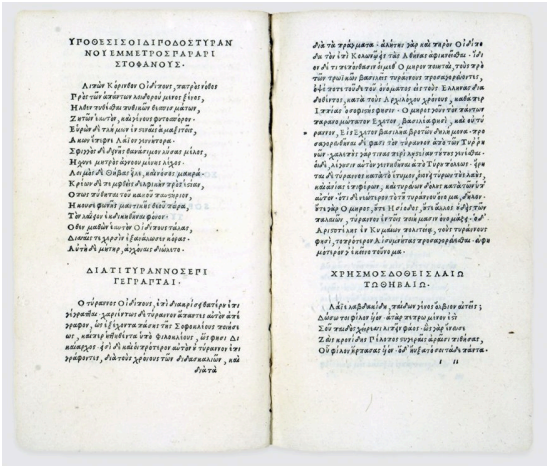
It can be argued that through this innovation Manuzio also invented a new audience. With pocket-sized books, reading became an intimate moment, an activity that could be enjoyed while traveling, lying in bed, or sitting on a garden bench. For the first time, the book became a manageable, easy to carry, and relatively inexpensive object, therefore it became accessible to a larger audience comprised not only of scholars, but also of aristocrats and members of the upper middle class. The small books immediately became very fashionable and conferred a certain status, as we can see in many portraits of the time.

Sweeping away barbarism with books

The Aldine editions had a significant impact in Europe, imparting new momentum to the book market and creating a larger audience, that in turn stimulated culture and led to the spread of ideas. Erasmus praised Manuzio's objective to "build a library that would have no boundary but the world itself." Indeed, the power of a book is that it enables its readers to live many lives and to deepen their understanding of the entire world without ever needing to leave their homes. By reviving the classics and publishing modern works with rigor and beauty, Aldo Manuzio wished—in what has proven to be a timeless quote—that "it could be possible to defeat weapons with ideas and to sweep away barbarism with books."



Epistole di santa Caterina da Siena, published by Aldo Manuzio, 1500 (Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna). This is the first example of italic type (printed within the book on the left), which was developed for Manuzio by the typographer Francesco Griffo.



Sophocles, Tragaediae septem cum commentariis, 1502, published by Aldo Manuzio (Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna).




Left: Lorenzo Lotto, Portrait of Laura da Pola, 1543-44, oil on canvas, 90 x 75 cm (Pinacoteca di Brera); Right: Titian, Portrait of Jacopo Sannazaro, c. 1514-18, oil on canvas, 85.7 x 72.7 cm (Picture Gallery, Buckingham Palace, The Royal Collection Trust)

69.

Saving Venice

A conversation

Dr. Steven Zucker and Lisa Ackerman

This is the transcript of a conversation about the issues facing Venice and efforts to save the historic city.



Venetian Palaces (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/mew56m>

Steven: I'm sitting in Lisa Ackerman's office in the World Monuments Fund in New York City, but we're here to talk about the city of Venice.

Lisa: World Monuments Fund was founded by a man named Colonel James Gray. One year after the organization was founded, the floods of 1966 happened and because he was living in the Veneto region, he just fell in with a group of people who became concerned about the fate of Venice in the wake of these terrible floods. And Venice has been of concern to WMF for its entire 52-year history.

Steven: And it has done so much.

Lisa: It was the first time in the media age we saw a worldwide calamity…

Steven: …one that had affected a cultural treasure that is universally understood to express the brilliance of the late Gothic, of the Renaissance.

Lisa: Venice was already a great tourism city in the 19th century, and I think in those post-war years of growing international tourism, Venice was one of those beacons. So it really tugged at people's heartstrings, to see the kind of devastation in Venice, and also the very dramatic photos of St. Mark's Square looking practically like a lake. And so, it really set new standards for dealing with conservation efforts in the wake of disaster.



Venice flood of 1966 (photo: Wikipedia, public domain)

Steven: These were environmental concerns that have not ebbed—the threat remains. And so we have a number of different phenomena that are exacerbating the situation. We have a subsidence of land; Venice itself has sunk about 10 inches. And at the same time, we have rising sea levels. We also have the natural phenomena of Venice being sort of an end point for the Adriatic, so when the prevailing winds are coming in from the southeast, for example, and if those winds are sustained, a large amounts of water is pushed into the lagoon.

Lisa: When the city was built in the Middle Ages, and then built upon even more in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, while they understood building technology, they knew they were building on islands and marshlands. Nonetheless, now that hundreds of years have gone by with these buildings, it has an effect—that's the sinking. The rising sea level that we're experiencing around the world affects Venice as well. But we've also contributed in ways that are not necessarily avoidable, because places modernize, so you go from oar-driven boats to mechanized boats and that has an impact. In the beginning, it's a kind of gentle impact, because the mechanization is not very forceful. There's the vaporetti, which are the water buses that have also been around for decades and relatively gentle on the system, but they create a wake as well, and that's also been written about over time. How many vaporetti can you have on the water without causing damage to the buildings? And then, the reality of the good and the bad of tourism. Everybody should enjoy Venice if they have that chance. The difference today is typical cruise tourism ships carry anywhere from 7,000 to 10,000 people each. So, just the scale of tourism is very different.



Vaporetti on the Grand Canal, Venice (photo: Theophile Escargot, CC BY-NC 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/93iFEh>

Steven: There's no question that people should go to culturally rich places. Venice is a spectacular destination for very good reason. But there is an undeniable shock when you see the enormous wall of a cruise ship against a Medieval building.

Lisa: One of the things we should do in Venice, and elsewhere, is encourage people to get off the beaten path.

Steven: To get past San Marco.

Lisa: Exactly. Just because a guidebook says these are the three best places to visit in the city doesn't mean there aren't equally spectacular places.



Flooding with San Marco (Saint Mark's Square), Venice, 2016 (photo: CameliaTWU, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/HhDis1>

Steven: But there's also other benefits. If people travel farther afield, they will contribute to the local economy in ways that are off the much more trodden routes.

Lisa: We have the feeling that cruise tourism is bringing a lot of economic benefits to the host city, and often, that benefit is actually very limited.

Steven: But Venice is grappling with the issues that it confronts. One of the best examples is a project that's called MOSE—which is Italian for Moses—and I think the conceit is that it parts the waters like Moses parted the waters. It's a seawall that can rise up 10 feet, and protect the lagoon from storm waters. And it's just being finished now. It's a massive project, and it looks to be very successful.

Lisa: Through the '80s and 1990s, as these high-water days grew in frequency, there was a recognition that something needed to be done. And there are probably as many people who criticize the MOSE Project as praise it. To make this work effectively, you also have to make sure you're not continuing to increase the water volume in the city. You have to make sure that if canals are dredged, there's a good reason to do it. So, the best planning means you're coordinating efforts with a lot of other agencies in the city and regional governments.

Steven: This includes shoring up the natural ecosystems, the mudflats, the salt marshes, the natural environment that helps to insulate the city from storms. I find it interesting that other cities around the world that are fearing flooding, for instance, right here in Manhattan, where Lower Manhattan is at risk, have looked at the MOSE Project as one alternative.



Boat view of the MOSE Project in Venice, Porto di Lido (Channel north of Lido) in mid 2009 (photo: Chris 73/ Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Lisa: Historic cities on the water face similar issues, and when you look at Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and Hurricane Sandy here in New York, the constant issues in Venice, in Ayutthaya in Thailand… this is a worldwide problem, and the best defense is actually learning how other people are addressing the problems. I was very entertained by an article a few days ago that said, the things scientists are looking at now are Roman sea walls in the Mediterranean that are 2,000 years old and are still intact. So, maybe, because Venice is a very old city, its best chance of survival is digging back into what the medieval community of Venice did to combat the water.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/d0MrCXdW_YE>

70.

Carlo Crivelli, 'The Annunciation with Saint Emidius'

Dr. Sally Hickson



Carlo Crivelli, The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)

Aside from Cosimo Tura, Carlo Crivelli was the most delightfully odd late Gothic painter in Italy. Born in Venice, he absorbed the influences of the Vivarini, the Bellini, and Andrea Mantegna to create an elegant, profuse, effusive, and extreme style, dominated by strong outlines and clear, crisp colors—perhaps incorporating just a whiff of early Netherlandish manuscript style. By 1458 he had left Venice to work in the Marches (the fertile plains south of the Appenines) in and around the port city of Ancona on the Adriatic. As a seaside painter, he could be credited with inventing a second Adriatic style that stands in stark contrast to the soft, suffused colors and gentle contours of Giovanni Bellini.



Carlo Crivelli, detail of The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)

The subject matter

This Annunciation is signed and dated 1486, so it was an early commission in his adopted territory. The narrative is deceptively simple; the angel Gabriel interrupts the Virgin, engaged in reading and prayer, to announce that she will become the mother of the son of God. The actual event, the incarnation, occurs through words rather than actions, and to be recognizable as a dramatic encounter there are a variety of poses that the Virgin assumes to signify her reaction, from humble acceptance to visible consternation. Crivelli's version rather peculiarly places Gabriel outside the Virgin's home, accompanied, in another unusual variation on the theme, by St. Emidius.



Gabriel and St. Emidius (detail), Carlo Crivelli, The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)

Emidius is the patron saint of the town of Ascoli Piceno, and Crivelli painted this altarpiece for the city's church of the Santissima Annunciazione (the Holy Annunciation). A proud citizen, Emidius seems to have hurried to catch up to Gabriel to proudly show off his detailed model of the town, which he holds rather gingerly, as though the paint hasn't quite dried.

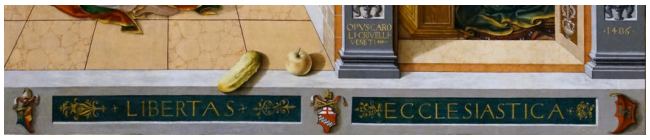
The fact that Gabriel and the Virgin do not share the same space is unusual, but doesn't seem to disrupt the delivery of the message. We see the descent of the Holy Spirit has penetrated the frieze of the building, through a conveniently placed arched aperture, into the room where Mary kneels receptively. The inclusion of Emidius brings the miracle of the incarnation home, and this corner of the city is depicted in the kind of deep perspective of contiguous spaces that one sees later in Dutch Baroque domestic scenes, such as Pieter de Hooch's *At the Linen Closet* <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/SK-C-1191>.

The variety of figures in the background on the left of the painting lend an atmosphere of spontaneity and the hubbub of everyday life; at the top of the staircase a little girl peeks around a column, a group of clerics are engaged in conversation and, in the upper mid-ground, two figures stand on the footbridge above the arch, one reading a just-delivered message (echoing the Annunciation).



Carlo Crivelli, detail of The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)

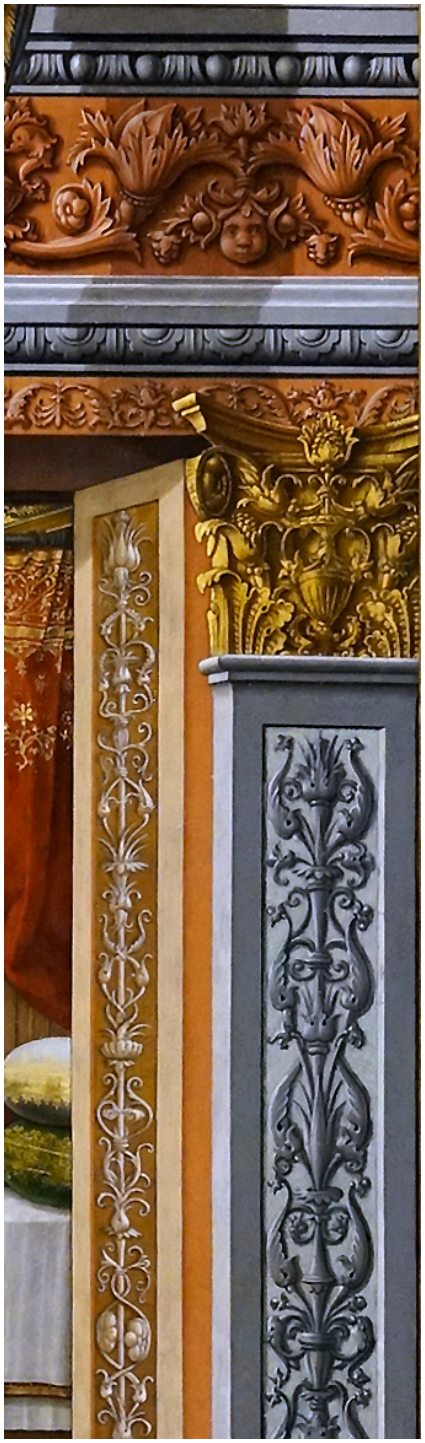
The inscription along the base of the painting reads "Libertas Ecclesiastica" (church liberty), and refers to Ascoli's right to self-government, free from the interference of the Pope, a right granted to the town by Sixtus IV in 1482. The news reached Ascoli on 25 March, the Feast of the Annunciation, which is probably the message the official in black is reading.



Carlo Crivelli, detail of The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)



Carlo Crivelli, detail of The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)



Carlo Crivelli, detail of The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)

To the right of the two figures on the bridge, the bases of a crate and a potted plant extend out over the wall just far enough to suggest they could, with a little nudge, topple onto the head of a figure below who, oblivious, shades his eyes to better see the penetrating irradiation of the Holy Spirit entering the wall. He is the witness inside the painting, we are the witnesses outside the painting.

The spatial composition of the overall painting is actually quite traditional, hearkening back to the *Annunciation* fresco of Piero della Francesca at the church of San Francesco in Arezzo; in both the surface of the painting is essentially vertically bisected by the architecture, while the right half is squared by the horizontal division between the lower room and upper balconies of the Virgin's dwelling. What is spectacularly different here is Crivelli's architectural articulation, which consists of an entire dictionary of *all'antica* elements, made more dramatic by the profusion of materials from which the buildings are made.



Piero della Francesca, Annunciation, 1452–66, fresco, 329 x 193 cm (San Francesco, Arezzo)

The white columns carry gilded capitals, the entablature (the horizontal area carried by the columns) is elaborated by a red marble frieze, both are illusionistically "carved" with running reliefs of floral, vegetal, and acanthus decoration, springing from beautiful vases, and the frieze is further punctuated with *putto* (a naked child, such as a cherub) heads, lending a sense of animation to the scene. Adding to the ornamentation are egg-and-dart and curious floral dentils (tall, rectangular blocks that resemble teeth and used as a decoration), varied marbles, a carved imperial profile relief encircled by a wreath, and crenellations (the merlons or battlements often associated with defensive buildings) along the farthest wall.



Carlo Crivelli, detail of The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)

Luxurious costumes

All the major characters wear luxurious costumes, painted to resemble gold and silver embroidered brocades. Gabriel wears a large gold medallion, on a heavy chain, studded with cabochon, or unfaceted, jewels. Emidius wears a bishop's mitre similarly jeweled, with a large jeweled clasp on his golden cope (a long ecclesiastical item of clothing). The Virgin wears a jeweled head-band and a dress modestly trimmed with pearls along the top of the bodice. Gabriel's feathered epaulettes (decorative shoulder item, such as we see on military jackets) echo his glorious wings, which deserve an essay of their own. The elegant delicacy of Crivelli's linear style can be seen best in the elongated, pale hands of the Virgin, floating at the ends of her arms, lightly folded across her breast in supplication.

A splendid interior

Rather than occupying a sparsely furnished monastic cell, the Virgin is depicted in a splendidly arrayed interior that echoes the magnificence of the palace exterior. Red and green pillows and blankets embroidered with gold thread cover her bed, with its sweep of red silk curtain, similarly embroidered in gold.



Carlo Crivelli, detail of The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)

The objects on the shelf above the bed are made of a variety of materials, from the gold candle holder to the barely fluted glass carafe which holds clear water, a sign of Mary's purity. The grain of the wood in the *prie-dieu* (a piece of furniture used for kneeling in prayer) runs vertically, in contrast to the horizontal grain of the base of the bed, which helps to create the shallow recession in which the Virgin kneels on a splendid carpet.



Carlo Crivelli, detail of The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)

A sense of cosmopolitanism

At the level of the balcony, Crivelli draws our eye to another carpet, this one displayed draped over the balustrade, and yet another is draped above the arch in the background. Carpets such as these were a major Italian import from the eastern Mediterranean, and used here they lend a cosmopolitan air to the city. The presence of a splendidly feathered peacock, another exotic import, reminds us that carpets from the eastern Mediterranean were coveted luxury items brought in through trade, and they lend an air of cosmopolitanism to the overall scene.

A pickle and an apple?

Of course, the objects that attract the most attention in this painting are the cucumber and apple, placed right in the center foreground of the painting, above the inscription. The cucumber, in fact, seems to project out of the painting and teeter into our space, breaking the fictive wall and blurring the line between a space of miracles and our everyday world. The apple can be taken to symbolize original sin, the source of our fall, the forbidden bite setting into motion the whole reason for the Annunciation. In all fairness, the National Gallery calls the cucumber a gourd (which does sound more Biblical), since cucumbers are part of the gourd family, and leaves it at that, there being neither a Holy Cucumber nor a Holy Gourd. Alas, here we enter the realm of speculation. One school of thought, absent any evidence, is that apples symbolize female sin and cucumbers symbolize male sin. I'll leave it to you to work out why. Could it be a marrow (a type of thin-skinned gourd, such as a zucchini)? Marrows do appear in the Bible, as in Psalm 63:5: "My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips." That seems rather appropriate. The controversy rages on.



Carlo Crivelli, detail of The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London)

71.

Persian carpets, a peacock, and a cucumber: understanding Crivelli's 'Annunciation'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Carlo Crivelli, The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg tempera and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/RyAvSk>

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the National Gallery, London.

Steven: We're in the National Gallery in London, looking at a large painting by Carlo Crivelli, who comes originally from Venice.

Beth: He's associated with a region on the eastern coast of Italy, known as the Marches.

Steven: He's one of my favorite artists. There's something incredibly compelling about his attention to architecture, to material culture.

Beth: The kind of hard-edged realism that makes everything almost pop out and move into our space, but he's clearly a master of perspective, so we're pulled in at the same time.

Steven: The surface of this canvas is almost bejeweled. It's so decorative.

Beth: The ornament, the jewels, the gold… even the bricks and the marble. He's clearly showing off his skill as a painter and in that way, making us aware of the incredible craftsmanship of the art of painting.

Steven: And it's so focused on the particular that it takes a moment to locate the subject, which in this case is an Annunciation.

Beth: When the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear Christ, that God will be made flesh, and she will be the mother of God.

Steven: In a traditional Annunciation, we see the Archangel Gabriel almost always on the left, kneeling, having just landed. And we see here, Gabriel's wings are still outstretched. To the right,

we see the Virgin Mary, and she's inevitably shown reading the Bible.

Beth: So we have a very typical Annunciation iconography here. The Angel Gabriel raises his hand, greeting the Virgin Mary, in his left hand he holds a lily, a symbol of Mary's virginity, her purity. On the right, the Virgin Mary accepting the message of the angel Gabriel, her hands folded in front of her, this expression of her humility. So all of that makes sense, but we have a third figure.

Steven: And I can't remember another Annunciation scene where a third figure was taking such an active role.



Crivelli, The Annunciation, detail of Angel Gabriel with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg tempera and oil on canvas (The National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: This is St. Emidio (Emidius), the patron saint of Ascoli, and the convent that this painting was made for is located in that city. He's attempting to engage Gabriel, and St. Emidio holds a model of the city in his hands.

Steven: This painting was a commission that was meant to commemorate a very important event in the city's history. (On March 25, 1482, a papal bull granted autonomy to Ascoli under the protection of the papacy.) The city had been able to reach an agreement with the pope, to cede to it a kind of local political autonomy, which was enormously important to the city.

Beth: It was a kind of freedom under the protection of the pope, and we can see that clearly in the bottom inscription, which says "Libertas Ecclesiastica" ("freedom under the church").

Steven: This painting was commissioned to commemorate that freedom.

Beth: And along the top of the triumphal arch, we see a papal messenger giving this document, that announces the freedom of the city, to an official. A critical thing here, though, is that the people of the city received this news from the pope on the holiday that honored the Annunciation.

Steven: And so there was this clear connection in the minds of the townspeople between the Annunciation and the freedom that they had gained, and this painting is bringing those two things together. And in fact, every year a procession was held to commemorate the gaining of this freedom, and the procession would end at this painting.



Crivelli, The Annunciation, detail of papal messenger, 1486, egg tempera and oil on canvas (The National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: We see also the life of the city: some Franciscan monks, and people, some rich, some poor.

Steven: This painting is filled with objects, and many of them have symbolic meaning.

Beth: For example, we see a bird in a cage. That's a goldfinch, a symbol of Christ's death on the cross, his sacrifice for mankind.



Crivelli, The Annunciation, detail of goldfinch and peacock, 1486, egg tempera and oil on canvas (The National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: But there are also other birds. There's this incredible peacock. Look at the decorative quality of the pattern of the tail. The peacock's a symbol of immortality, of the idea of the resurrection, made possible by Christ's sacrifice.

Beth: That cucumber and apple in the foreground.

Steven: Well the apple is easy enough to read. The apple is generally the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge—the forbidden fruit that Adam and Eve ate.



Crivelli, The Annunciation, detail of cucumber and apple, 1486, egg tempera and oil on canvas (The National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: So the apple is about their fall from grace with God, or the original sin in the Garden of Eden, and that refers back to the scene that we see before us, because it's Mary and Christ who, in a way, fix that original sin caused by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, by Christ's sacrifice. And the cucumber is filled with seeds—because it's filled with seeds, it's a symbol of the resurrection, of the idea of life after death, the central miracle of Christianity.

Steven: And we see the golden light of heaven. It pierces the wall of the house, so that it can enter and make its way to the Virgin Mary, and we see the white dove, the Holy Spirit. But there is a kind of conflict here. The conflict between the idea of the sacred and the wealth that's being expressed in this painting. Mary, who we know was very poor, and yet, she's living in a house that couldn't be more lavish. It's filled with expensive objects, with gold.

Beth: She kneels on a Persian carpet, there's another Persian carpet in the loge above. We're reminded of the trading that was happening in this region.

Steven: And so there are two parts to this. One is that there were medieval traditions that understood Mary as being of a royal lineage. But the other part of it is that the worldly possessions are seen as a symbolic way of representing her divinity. So in order to read this painting, we need to understand not only the story of the Annunciation, but the traditions of how that story is painted *and* we need to have some specific understanding of the circumstances under which this particular painting was made. When we look at the extraordinary work of an artist like Crivelli, I think it prompts us to think about why we focus almost exclusively on painting made in Florence or Venice. And I think part of the problem is the way that art history itself was written at the end of the 19th and through the 20th century. And it does a disservice to the more complex reality that existed in what we now call Italy.



Map of Italy, the Adriatic Sea, and the Ottoman Empire (underlying map, © Google)

Beth: It's important for us to see Italy as connected to the Adriatic Sea and therefore to the Ottoman Empire—and to see Europe as an interconnected place, with many artists who moved and served patrons in different places, the way that Crivelli did, and therefore to really appreciate more work from the Renaissance than the usual superstars that we see.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/hgMqBYJ1WPI>



Gallery view of Crivelli, The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486, egg tempera and oil on canvas, 207 x 146.7 cm (The National Gallery, London) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

72.

Gentile Bellini, 'Portrait of Sultan Mehmed II'

Dr. Elizabeth Rodini



Gentile Bellini, Portrait of Sultan Mehmed II, 1480, oil on canvas, 69.9 x 52.1 cm, The National Gallery London. Layard Bequest, 1916. Currently on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The afterlife of a painting

In a portrait attributed to the Italian artist Gentile Bellini, we see Sultan Mehmed II surrounded by a classicizing arcade, with a luxurious embroidered tapestry draped over the ledge in front of him. Gentile, already an accomplished portraitist from Venice, painted the sultan's likeness when he spent 15 months in Constantinople at the court of the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II around 1480 on behalf of the Venetian Republic.

Today this famous portrait belongs to the National Gallery of Art, London. It has had many "afterlives," that is, many ways it has been re-interpreted and understood since it was produced nearly 550 years ago.



Circle of Gentile Bellini (?), Portrait of Sultan Mehmet II with a Young Man, c. 1500?, oil on panel, 33.4 x 45.4 cm (purchased at Christie's London by the Municipality of Istanbul in June 2020)

For example, in June of 2020, the Municipality of Istanbul spent over a million dollars at auction for a double portrait featuring the face of Sultan Mehmed II and a young man. The painting is mysterious: it is uncertain who painted it, when, or where, and the identity of the second figure is unknown. The image of the sultan, however, is based on Bellini's well-known London picture, and the reputation of the mystery painting—as well as Istanbul's risky purchase—depends on its fame. This is just the most recent, and ongoing,

of the London portrait's "afterlives," which are the subject of this essay. Before exploring them, however, we must begin with the original painting and its production.



A Venetian travels to paint Sultan Mehmed II

When the London portrait was created, Mehmed was sultan of the Ottoman empire, and ruled from Constantinople (now Istanbul), the city that had been the capital of the Byzantine empire until Mehmed conquered it in 1453. (The Ottomans were Muslim, the Byzantines were Orthodox Christians, and European rulers were faithful to the Church in Rome, or to what we now call Catholicism—and these divergent creeds were no small matter.) Even today, Mehmed is known in Turkish as "Fatih," or "conqueror." In addition to being a warrior and politician, he was a great patron, bringing artists and architects together to write, paint, and build. When he petitioned the Venetians to send him artists skilled in portraiture, they sent Gentile Bellini, who seems to have had rare access to the private spaces of Mehmed's palace. The London portrait is believed to have been produced there, and was probably transported to Italy soon after Mehmed's death in 1481—by whom is unclear.

The painting resembles many other European portraits of the day, and is dramatically different from contemporary Ottoman portraiture. A single figure, bust-length and life-sized, poses in elaborate dress that reveals his rank and wealth. He is not quite in profile but turned ever so slightly forward, a visual strategy that, along with the carved stone arcade, gives a sense of depth and creates the illusion that the sultan actually sits before us. That illusion is disrupted by the flat, black background and six crowns that seem to float behind him, symbols either of his territorial rule or his place in the chronology of Ottoman sultans. Gentile signed the architectural plinth with his name and date, as a kind of painterly proof of his status as an eyewitness to the sultan (who was often hidden from view) and of the truthfulness of this image.

Why would Mehmed commission such a picture? The answer likely lies in his general curiosity as a patron. We know he studied classical languages, was fascinated by maps, and followed the latest advancements in military architecture. He collected coins and medals, and was aware of their power to glorify a ruler through the circulation of his image. In addition, Mehmed's interest in portraiture suggests he was up-to-date on some of the most revolutionary things that were happening in Italian painting—in particular, new attempts to depict the world as if it were seen through a window, to paraphrase the contemporary art theorist Leon Battista Alberti. Commissioning a skilled Venetian artist to paint a life-sized, illusionistic portrait might have been a test of just what, exactly, this new form of image making could do.



Gentile Bellini, Mehmet II, c.1480 (later casting), bronze, 9.38 cm (Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.)



Master of the Vienna Passion (attributed), El Gran Turco (The Great Turk), c.1470, engraving (Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Two points need to be clarified before we move on. First, the London portrait is sometimes considered the first "realistic" representation of a Turk to arrive in Europe (most images of the time were demonizing stereotypes, like "The Great Turk" engraving in Berlin). Yet it is misguided to assume Mehmed was focused on advancing European knowledge of foreigners. If, as is possible, he intended to circulate his image through copies of Gentile's portrait, his goals were fame and power, not ethnographic instruction. Second, the equally misguided notion that Islam forbids naturalistic imagery also needs correcting: such imagery had a long tradition, especially in illuminated manuscripts, and was often acceptable outside religious contexts. Moreover, for sultans, rules and norms did not apply.

Mehmed's portrait in Italy

How and when Gentile's portrait of Mehmed arrived in Italy is another of its mysteries. In all probability, it landed in Venice shortly after the sultan's death in 1481, and this is what the Ottomans thought—they even sent a delegate there to recover lost portraits of the sultans one hundred years after Gentile's trip east (they failed, returning with modern works instead, including the one by an artist in the circle of Veronese). But the painting now in London did not come to light until hundreds of years later, in 1865, when it was purchased from an impoverished nobleman by the British explorer, collector, and eventual ambassador to Constantinople, Austen Henry Layard. Layard's own circumstances offer an excellent introduction to the reception of Gentile's painting in the modern era.

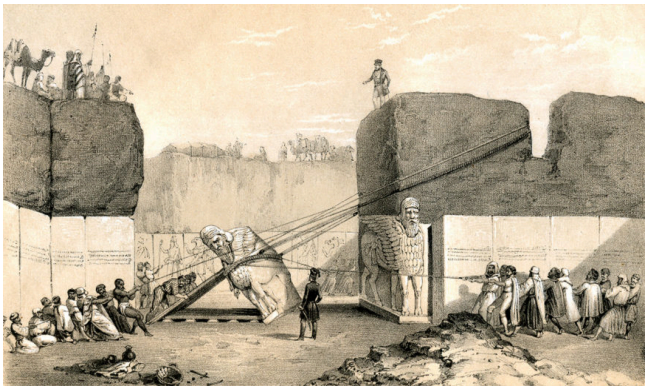


Circle of Paolo Veronese, Portrait of Sultan Mehmed II, 1578 or later, oil on canvas, 69 x 54 cm (Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich)

Like Gentile, Layard traveled to the Ottoman court in a diplomatic position, meeting privately at the palace with the reigning sultan, Abdülhamid II. As a young man, Layard had excavated, published, and sent back to London a trove of Assyrian artifacts from Nineveh (in modern Iraq), and had

authored several illustrated volumes about his experiences.

In these roles, Layard was an archetypal "Orientalist," someone whose status, power, and actions depended on a colonial imbalance between Europe and the Near East. On occasion, Layard even played at "Oriental," donning headscarves and swords. As a collector, he was particularly proud of his portrait of Mehmed, which he immediately recognized as the famous lost work by Gentile Bellini. But what did he see when he looked at it, hanging in his Venetian palace among assorted fragments of Assyrian architecture? Might he have seen his own experiences as ambassador reflected back at him? One journalist of the period suggested as much, but we can only speculate—recognizing at the very least how different Layard's interactions with the picture were from that of Mehmed.



Lowering the Great Winged Bull, lithograph, frontispiece to Austen Henry Layard, Nineveh and its Remains(London, 1849)

By 1915, Gentile's portrait had been at the center of two other conversations that again reframe its meaning. The first has to do with definitions of national patrimony, a topic that is very much in the news today. Layard had willed his collection, which hung in Venice, to the National Gallery in London. But on the death of his widow, Enid, in 1912, the Gallery found itself up against several recent Italian laws that aimed to keep the greatest "Italian paintings" in Italy. Gentile's portrait of Mehmed was among them: it "was regarded [by the Italians] somewhat as the Athenians regarded the Elgin Marbles," wrote the British ambassador to Italy, making reference to the Greek sculptures that are still at the center of patrimony controversies. That the portrait was painted in Constantinople for an Ottoman patron by a traveling Venetian, that it was an inherently global object, was not mentioned. But these claims offer another way of thinking about Gentile's picture—and presented a significant obstacle to its transport to London as well. (How the painting got out of Italy and into England in 1916 lay in the legal fine print.)

The second, equally philosophical controversy involved its status as a portrait. Layard left his collection to the National Gallery, but, in a clumsy turn of phrase, his will opened the door for his nephew to claim rights to all of his portraits. Both sides took legal action, bringing in experts to decide just what, exactly, constitutes a portrait. The surviving dossier reads like art theory crossed with intellectual property law and the observations of a private eye. Debate centered on questions of intent, interpretation, and continuity ("once a portrait, always a portrait"?); on whether there is a distinction between historical portraits and family portraits; and on how Layard organized, wrote about, and displayed his collection. Gentile's image of Mehmed was the star witness, the one painting the antagonists consistently tussled over.

Again the National Gallery won, and hung the portrait prominently in its entrance hall. Over the next century, however, its fortunes swung dramatically, along with shifting understandings of conservation and authenticity (problematic, since only an estimated 10% of the paint is original to Gentile—over time, the canvas was damaged and was on several occasions repainted), as well as evolving attitudes within museums about how and why certain paintings are valued over others. After being one of the museum's prize acquisitions, Gentile's picture spent decades in the lower level galleries for "problem works." In 2009, it was moved across London to the Victoria and Albert Museum where, along with carpets, ceramics, and metalwork, it is now part of a gallery dedicated to

art and trade in the early modern Mediterranean. These shifting appraisals say more about the frames of interpretation than they do about the painting itself that, aside from the abrasions of time, has not changed.



Entry to the Panorama Museum, Istanbul, September 2018 (photo © the author)

The portrait today

In 1999, Gentile's portrait of Mehmed traveled to Istanbul to star in a one-painting show that drew huge audiences and attention. "We have seen this picture so many times, in so many schoolbooks and on so many walls over so many years that it's really imprinted on our brains," one Turkish viewer told an American reporter. For many, aware of Mehmed's broad patronage and support of a Venetian painter, the image signified a tight bond to Europe. Notably, it was also in 1999 that Turkey made its first petition for membership in the European Union.

In the two decades since, however, relations between Turkey and the West have soured, and Ottoman imagery, including that of Mehmed II, has been coopted in Turkey by more conservative political forces to stand for a separatist, nationalistic identity. In this "neo-Ottoman" framework, Gentile's picture takes on new meaning, with emphasis on the sultan as "Fatih," conqueror—thus it is this face that welcomes visitors to Istanbul's new Panorama 1453 Conquest Museum, which celebrates the Ottoman taking of the city from the Byzantines centuries ago. The same face also appears on magnets, notebooks, tote bags, and countless internet memes, in a thoroughly contemporary stew of humor, nationalism, and entrepreneurship.

Is this painting exceptional in the many permutations of meaning we give to it? Probably not. Gentile Bellini's portrait of Sultan Mehmed II is more likely an object lesson in how many lives a single artwork can take on, and of the value to be found in deep looking and extended research.

73.

Giovanni Bellini and Titian, 'The Feast of the Gods'

Dr. Susan Nalezyty

A Divine Party

Finished just two years before Giovanni Bellini's death, *The Feast of the Gods* was an unlikely subject for this Venetian master (he typically painted Christian themes and portraits). But Bellini continued to challenge himself by creating a raucous scene of 17 classical gods and goddesses eating and drinking in a lush forest clearing, painted in brilliantly rich, blended colors typical of the Venetian school of painting. Nymphs and satyrs serve wine to these classical deities. Some figures tipsily raise glasses to their lips, while others suffer the effects of having imbibed too much, staring with unfixed gazes or even passing out altogether. And the one responsible for this uninhibited celebration kneels in the left-hand foreground—the ancient Roman god of wine—Bacchus, who draws yet more of his gift from a barrel.



Giovanni Bellini and Titian, The Feast of the Gods, 1514/29, oil on canvas, 170.2 x 188 cm (National Gallery of Art)

Changes to *The Feast* by Dosso Dossi and Titian

Bellini sent this large work from Venice to Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, who intended it to hang in his *camerino*, his little room, as he called it, a private study modeled after an ancient painting gallery. After the canvas's arrival in Ferrara in 1514 though, something must have gone wrong. Canvases are typically rolled for shipping and later varnished, but the painting's surface might have been damaged in the varnishing process. Alfonso asked a local painter, Dosso Dossi (who also contributed paintings to his camerino), to repaint the left-hand background with a hill and amend the tree foliage at upper right.

Bellini had originally composed a shallow stage for his figures, behind which was a continuous line of tree trunks illuminated by warm sunlight (the only passage of which survives at the far right). But the painting today is the result of yet another change. Since Bellini died in 1516, Alfonso commissioned one of his students, the ambitious young Titian, to provide three works for his camerino, and it is Titian who painted out Dosso's landscape with a striking mountainous backdrop, leaving only Dosso's foliage and the pheasant in the right-hand tree.



Copy after Titian, Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, oil on canvas, 127 x 98.4 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The Feast's subject

A consensus on the painting's subject has yet to be reached because a number of the figures' identities have been hotly debated. Some scholars argue a theme of marriage for the *Feast's* subject. The bird, a kingfisher, in the foreground could point to the winter solstice for Alfonso's December wedding, though it took place a decade prior to the commission. Bellini painted Bacchus unusually as a child, a guise that comes from the ancient writer Macrobius, whose book, *The Saturnalia*, discusses feast days, wherein Bacchus appears at four stages of life at the solstices and equinoxes of the calendar year. Bellini's child Bacchus appears with his gluttonous teacher, Silenus, who leans on his attribute (identifying symbol), his loyal donkey.

Behind them could be the god of beginnings, Janus (sometimes identified as Sylvanus), because his hand touches his attribute, the heads of 2 snakes on the winged staff of Mercury's attribute, the caduceus. Also in the background playing his flute is a nude Pan (or Faunus?). Jupiter with his eagle (the eagle is also an Este family symbol), appear in the center, and to the right, may be the queen of the underworld, Proserpina (or Amphitrite?). She holds a quince, a symbol of marriage to the god of the underworld, Pluto (or Neptune?), who amorously squeezes her upper thigh, while his pitchfork rests on the ground nearby. Next to him is the goddess of the harvest, Ceres (or Cybele?), wearing her wheat crown, and next to her, the god of poetry, Apollo, who with his laurel crown holds his lyre, painted as a sixteenth-century instrument, a *lira da braccio <http://collections.nmmusd.org/braccio.html>*

Bellini consulted a text by the ancient writer Ovid titled the *Fasti* (Book of Days) that discusses Roman holidays in 6 books, one for each month —January through June. Bellini's deities could, therefore, represent calendar months.January could be represented by Janus. February is Pan. March is the child Bacchus for the spring equinox. April is Ovid's story of the birth of spring, and the characters in the story are lined up in the foreground. Pluto had abducted Ceres' daughter, Proserpina and Jupiter decreed that she would return to the world of the living for only half the year. As the goddess of agriculture, Ceres annually mourned her daughter's absence, ushering in winter, halting plant growth when Proserpina resided in the underworld. Following Bellini's sequence and Ovid's text, then, the month of May could be for Maia, Mercury's mother, who appears in gold. June is the fertility god Priapus at right, with his bulging phallus and scythe hanging in the tree above. Bellini here represents a story Ovid tells twice—with different victims: a nymph, Lotis (in January) or the goddess of the hearth, Vesta (in June). In both versions, Silenus' donkey brays, awakening the sleeping lady, and foils Priapus' erotic plot to take advantage of her.



Annotated detail, Giovanni Bellini and Titian, The Feast of the Gods, 1514/29, oil on canvas, 170.2 x 188 cm (National Gallery of Art)



Titian, The Worship of Venus, 1518-19, oil on canvas, 172 x 175 cm (Museo del Prado)



Titian, Bacchus and Ariadne, 1520-23, oil on canvas, 176.5 x 191 cm (The National Gallery)

Other works in the duke's camerino

Characters from ancient stories seem to leap from the pages of classical books onto Alfonso's camerino walls. He enlisted a well-read advisor to help devise later paintings' subjects, and he tried to commission the best artists. Alfonso once climbed the Sistine Chapel scaffolding to ask Michelangelo for a painting, and he negotiated with Raphael, but both declined.



Titian, Bacchanal of the Andrians, 1523, oil on canvas, 175 x 193 cm (Museo del Prado)

He found Titian to be more accommodating. In 1519, Titian contributed his *The Worship of Venus* (above), and in 1523, his *Bacchus and Ariadne* (above). In 1525, Titian painted his *Bacchanal of the Andrians* (below), a scene described in an ancient text about the island of Andros, where a stream sacred to Bacchus flowed with wine. Titian inserted details deliberately invoking comparison to his teacher's *Feast*. Both feature a reclining female figure at right and an overturned wine glass in the foreground. Both have barebacked male figures carrying vessels exiting at left, and nearby, plump, inebriated fellows imbibing yet more wine. And later in 1529, Titian would repaint Bellini's background to stylistically unite it with others of his hanging in Alfonso's camerino, a Renaissance space dedicated to the rebirth of classical art.

74.

Giovanni Bellini, 'San Zaccaria Altarpiece'

Dr. Sally Hickson



Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/ehuExJ>

San Zaccaria, in Venice

We are fortunate that Bellini's famous altarpiece can be seen in the church it was made for, San Zaccaria, in Venice. San Zaccaria (Saint Zachary) is not a common name for a church — it is among a handful of Venetian churches named after Old Testament saints (more typically saints come from the New Testament and early Christian history). So how did Old Testament figures become saints?

According to Byzantine tradition, Christ spent three days in the underworld, breaking open the gates of hell to release the souls of the pre-Christian righteous who would otherwise not be able to share in the eternal life made possible by

his crucifixion. Adam and Eve were the first to emerge, followed by other Old Testament people like Moses, Job and Zachary, all three of whom have churches named after them in Venice. This "harrowing of hell," as it is known, was largely rejected in evolving Christian doctrine because of a lack of Biblical evidence, which explains why we don't often encounter St. Moses or St. Zachary in paintings. Perhaps that disagreement about the doctrinal soundness of the harrowing of hell (also called Anastasis in the Byzantine tradition) explains why there is no depiction of St. Zachary in the altarpiece by Bellini named for his church.

The fact that such an altarpiece was commissioned from Bellini, who was the official civic painter of Venice, is a testament to the importance of the group of nuns who occupied the church monastery, many of them the daughters of prominent patrician families.

A sacred conversation — a new kind of altarpiece

The subject of the altarpiece is a sacred conversation (*sacra conversazione*), a type of painting that developed first in Florence and then in Venice. The sacred conversation describes a subject of the enthroned Virgin, holding the infant Christ, surrounded by standing saints of differing eras, accompanied by angels. All of the figures are united in a single space.

Earlier altarpieces tended to be polyptychs or triptychs (altarpieces made up of several different panels), each of them containing one or more saints, arranged around a separate central panel often depicting the enthroned Virgin and Child. The s*acra conversazione* removes those barriers to create a single assembly of figures who share a literal (as well as a psychological) space.



Antonio Gambello and Mauro Codussi, San Zaccaria, 1458-1515, Venice (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Perhaps the earliest true sacra conversazione — Domenico Veneziano, Saint Lucy Altarpiece (Madonna and Child enthroned with St. Francis, John the Baptist, St. Zenobius and St. Lucy), c. 1445, tempera on wood, 209 x 213 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) Other early paintings that reduce the framing elements include Piero della Francesca's Brera Altarpiece (1472-74) and Fra Filippo Lippi's Barbadori Altarpiece (1438).



An example of an earlier triptych (three-panels): Agnolo Gaddi, Madonna and Child with Saints Andrew, Benedict, Bernard, and Catherine of Alexandria with Angels, shortly before 1387, tempera on poplar panel (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.)

In the *San Zaccaria Altarpiece* by Bellini, the individuals depicted are all aware of one another, and the viewer outside the painting shares this common space as well as this idea of inclusion and belonging. The Virgin, the saints, and the viewer are all from different times, but the artist has created a common space in which they can all assemble. The physical unity helps to promote a kind of silent communication, which is the essence of the sacred (and silent) conversation. The angels signify that, although this space looks real, it is of a different, transcendent order. They sometimes play instruments and appear to be singing; the music is a symbol of harmony.

The Virgin and Child (and an angel)

We recognize the Virgin and Child at the center of the composition. The Virgin does not wear a crown and is depicted as a simple young mother. Christ stands on her lap, in that strangely teetering but confident way that babies can stand when they're completely protected by their mother's body and steadied by her hand. In this case, the Virgin's right hand lightly supports Christ from the front. He appears to have just lifted his left foot from her left hand, which is cupped below his toes.



Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece (detail), 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Mary and the Christ Child (detail), Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece (detail), 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice)

Babies really do this when they briefly find themselves in a standing position – they randomly lift their feet. The infant holds his right hand up in a blessing gesture directed to the worshipper at the altar; and while both he and the Virgin look down and gaze to the left— toward anyone who might be kneeling in prayer before the altarpiece.

An angel sits on the steps of the throne, below the Virgin and Child, playing what looks like a very large violin-like instrument (of course, she's a very little angel).

Identifying the Saints

There are paired figures to the left and right of the Virgin, each pair consisting of a female and a male saint. To Mary's left, we see St. Catherine of Alexandria and, in front of her, St Peter. On the right we see St. Lucy and, in his red cardinal's robe, St. Jerome. The women are depicted in profile, each turned toward the Virgin, like parentheses enclosing the Virgin and Child. The male saints, who stand at the front of the picture plane and are closest to the viewer, are both facing forward. How do we identify these saints? And what are they doing here?

The two female saints are virgin martyrs, that is, they were put to death for choosing faith over forced sex; that's why they each hold a palm frond, a symbol of martyrdom. Each is shown with their instrument of torture; St. Catherine rests her hand on a broken wheel (it's broken because God's protection proved stronger than the wheel) and St. Lucy holds what looks like a kind of weedy flower, but is actually her two eyes, hanging on visceral stems, which she gouged out so she would no longer tempt unwanted sexual advances. St. Lucy was martyred in Syracuse in the 4th century but her remains were sent to Constantinople in the 8th century and looted by the Venetians in the Fourth Crusade of 1204, after which they were installed, and still remain, in the church of San Geremia. She is probably included here because she was adopted as a Venetian saint. St. Catherine has no direct relationship with Venice, but she inspired a hugely popular cult following throughout the Middle Ages as an exemplar for female Christian virtue. She was undoubtedly intended to serve as an example to the nuns of San Zaccaria, who were, by all accounts, notoriously debauched.

We also see St. Jerome dressed anachronistically as a cardinal of the church. St Jerome was considered one of the four Doctors of the Church, so he exemplified ecclesiastical authority. He was important for translating the Bible from Hebrew into Latin, making it more accessible to educated lay readers, and Bellini, who painted Jerome often, depicts him reading a book. Across from Jerome stands Peter, who was the rock of Christ's church (Peter derives from "petrus" which means rock) and the first Pope, and holds the keys to the kingdom of Heaven. He stands for spiritual authority, and the controlling oversight of the church over religious communities.



Saint Lucy and Jerome (detail), Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Architecture and the light

The *sacra conversazione* takes place in a perfectly depicted little chapel that, because of the accuracy of the linear perspective (reinforced by the receding squares of the painted floor), the scale of the painting (which allows the figures to be the right size in terms of where they're standing in relation to a viewer) and the integration of the real architecture of the frame with painted *trompe l'oeil* architecture in the painting, looks like it opens out from the architectural space of the church.

The painting is framed by a marble triumphal arch supported on pilasters decorated with running, floral scroll work. Inside the painting, we see two identical lateral arches, and another identical rear

arch… There is virtually no break between the real architecture of the frame and the completely illusionistic, vaulted chapel in the painting — one exists on a continuum with the other. As Alberti prescribed in his book *Della Pittura* (*On Painting*), it feels as though we're looking through a window. Any separation between the church and the world inside the painting disappears.



Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

There's another reason for this. As you enter the church, the painting is on the left wall of the church. Today, the interior of San Zaccaria is crowded with large-scale (mostly Baroque) paintings, hung in double registers along the walls. Bellini's altarpiece stands out immediately because of its architectural frame, but also because it responds precisely to the natural light that enters the church from a window in the façade. Knowing the precise location of the altar, Bellini calculated the composition of the painting in accordance with this light. When the sun shines, and the light hits the painting, all the shadows cast by the painted figures and the architecture in Bellini's fictional world fall in accordance to the real light in the church.This seamlessness of light and shadow increases the "reality" of the painting; we see the figures as solid, three-dimensional beings who are sharing our space.



Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Disegno and *colore*

Of course, a modern viewer can increase the light by dropping a couple of euros into the coin box to turn on lamps that flood the painting with artificial illumination. And that's fun, because it makes the colors pulsate with light and Bellini, as a painter, was fundamentally a colorist. There was a great debate in the Renaissance, and beyond, between the fundamental importance of *disegno* (drawing) and *colore* (color) in painting. The idea is that the Florentines thought *disegno* (composition, but also contour and clarity in drawing) was the most important thing, while the Venetians said that painting is nothing without *colore*; by which they meant not just the choice of colors, but the tonalities, contrasts, harmonies, and application of paint.

Look at how Bellini uses color in the figures. Peter wears blue and yellow, which are the characteristic colors of his robes; Jerome wears a glorious red. The two figures together are an essay in primary colors, but softened by Bellini's application, which

incorporates a lot of Leonardo's gentle transitions in the areas of shadow. This is the glory of oil paint, which can be coaxed into the subtlest transitions in a single shade.

The female figures — the Virgin, St. Catherine and St. Lucy — wear primaries as well, but there's also green which blends green and yellow and therefore adds a new harmony. The music-making angel alerts us to these harmonies, wearing green and the gentlest of pinks. If you look carefully, the same tones are found in the architecture, the mosaic, the landscape — Bellini writes music in paint.



Angel (detail), Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The mosaic

Once you hear the music, you study the details. The rear arch frames the throne of the Virgin, sitting at the center of the space (not against the rear wall). The wall itself curves to form an apse-like space, crowned with a glittering half vault, painted to look like mosaic.

By the sixteenth century (even well before), mosaic work would have seemed anachronistic anywhere except Venice, which retained the Byzantine taste and expertise for mosaic. Frescoes are a near impossibility in Venice because the whole city sits in water that creeps up the masonry and seeps into the plaster, turning frescoes into sodden, salt-bloomed, indecipherable messes. Mosaics, set into proper mortar, are more durable. Plus, Venice was the European center for glassmaking, and produced quantities of gold glass that characterize Byzantine-style mosaic work.

The simulated glasswork in Bellini's paintings is always astonishing, he was a master of the pictorial representation of gold-glass. The surface shimmers and shines, capturing and reflecting dancing shards of light. Below the mosaic, there is an elegant, curved entablature, echoed by a black marble band , which sets off the relief of the carving.



Apse dome (detail), Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The egg

A lantern, suspended from a large, perfect, oval ostrich egg, is located above the Virgin's throne. We've seen this egg before, in the *Montefeltro Altarpiece* (c. 1474) of Piero della Francesca, made for the Duke of Urbino. The egg seems strange to modern eyes but is both symbolic and historically accurate. Ostrich eggs were often suspended in Coptic churches in Egypt (as well as in mosques) — apparently, something about the odor repelled spiders, which would be the practical aspect (in case you're wondering, humans can't detect the smell). More importantly, however, ostrich eggs also have Christological significance because they are hatched by the heat of the sun.

The analogy is to the miraculous conception and birth of Christ. Pearls carry the same symbolism because they are spontaneously born from oyster shells. Miracles in nature are used an analogies for the miracle of Christ.



Diagram for Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice)

The throne

Finally, the Virgin's throne is a simple, stepped, rectangular structure of white and yellow marbles, punctuated by globed, gold finials on the arms, and topped by the carved head of a king. This is Solomon, renowned for his wisdom and mercy, reinforcing the importance of learning both in theory and in practice. Behind him there is an elegant, woven Persian-motif carpet, suspended from an iron crosstie, a reference to the Virgin's cloth of honor. Miraculously, the little illusionistic chapel is not completely enclosed. The lateral arches are open to provide an outdoor view. The two slivers of landscape include a glimpse of blue sky and slim, elegant trees springing up from a green lawn. The landscape admits painted "natural" light into the chapel, which helps to illuminate the figures. It also transports us out of Venice and into the world of the painting, making the illusion complete.

About Bellini

Bellini was 74 years old when he completed the *San Zaccaria Altarpiece*. Having grown up in his father's workshop, he was a painter from the moment he was born. Almost all his work was made for Venice, and most of his paintings are devotional works depicting the Madonna and Child in various iconographical permutations rooted in Byzantine tradition. In its monumentality, classically inspired architecture, and treatment of color and light, this altarpiece is his most perfect synthesis of that tradition with the new values of Renaissance art.

Note: Centuries later, the *San Zaccaria Altarpiece* was considered such a masterpiece that in 1787, when Napoleon ransacked the city, he had his troops steal it, cutting it from its frame. This explains the missing area at the top of the painting, just below the frame of the crowning arch. During its time in France, the painting was subjected to a radical new form of conservation intervention; the supporting panel was stripped down so that the paint surface could be removed and then it was glued to a canvas support (it has since been transferred back to panel — long story). At the time, it was thought that paintings should be on canvas, and presumably the change of support also made the works lighter and easier to hang and frame in Napoleon's new museum. The return of the painting to its rightful place in Venice brought it back to life, allowing it to be experienced as Bellini intended.



Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

75.

Guido Mazzoni, 'Lamentation' in Ferrara

Dr. Heather Graham



Guido Mazzoni, Lamentation, 1480s, created for the no longer extant church of Santa Maria della Rosa, today in the Church of the Gesù (Ferrara, Italy) (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0)

Modeling Magnificent Woe



Guido Mazzoni, the dead Christ, detail of the Lamentation, 1480s, created for the no longer extant church of Santa Maria della Rosa, today in the Church of the Gesù (Ferrara, Italy) (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0)

In the early 1480s, Duke Ercole d'Este, ruler of the North Italian city-state of Ferrara, hired the artist Guido Mazzoni to create a life-size, terracotta (earthenware) sculpture group of seven biblical figures gathered around the dead body of Jesus Christ. The characters are those associated in religious texts with the final phase of Christ's human life: the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalen, Mary Cleofas, Mary Salome, John the Evangelist, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea. Painted in naturalistic polychrome (many colors) and modeled with great physical realism, these figures demonstrate deep emotional reactions to the death of Christ whose corpse, modeled with equal naturalism, lies at their feet.

Among the biblical mourners are two figures local audiences would have immediately recognized: Duke Ercole and his wife, the Duchess Eleonora of Aragon. Both rulers are presented as active participants in the drama of Christ's death.The duke is put in the role of Joseph of Arimathea, the wealthy donor of Christ's tomb, while the duchess is cast as Mary Salome.



Guido Mazzoni, the Duchess Eleanora of Aragon as Mary Salome and Duke Ercole d'Este as Joseph of Arimathea, detail of the Lamentation, 1480s, created for the no longer extant church of Santa Maria della Rosa, today in the Church of the Gesù (Ferrara, Italy) (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0)

The sculpture group was placed in a public church, Santa Maria della Rosa (now destroyed), in a new quarter of the city of Ferrara that the duke was actively developing. Through humble clay, Mazzoni created a work that reflected his patrons' deep Christian faith, their privileged place within the political and spiritual hierarchy, as well as their noble generosity.

Art and Magnificence

In the princely courts of renaissance Italy, the display of magnificence through art and architecture made from rare and costly materials—marble, gold, silver, precious gems, silk thread and the like—was one of the ways a ruler might demonstrate his power. The more marvelous the objects that a ruler collected or spectacular the buildings that he sponsored, the more noble and learned he (and occasionally she) was understood to be.



Commissioned by or the wealthy Florentine banker, Palla Strozzi, Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

This display of magnificent nobility was important to a ruler; it justified his position of authority over his subjects. Sculptures in bronze or marble, silk tapestries with silver and gold thread, paintings encrusted with precious gold-leaf and inlaid with gemstones—such works of art made from materials themselves thought to be "noble" helped a ruler to craft a persona of rightful authority. This performance of nobility through patronage was replicated by the wealthy elite of republican states, like that of Florence, where members of the rising merchant class sought to elevate their own social positions by emulating the patronage practices of traditional aristocrats. An example of this is the opulent—and expensive—altarpiece of the *Adoration of the Magi* created by Gentile da

Fabriano for the wealthy Florentine banker, Palla Strozzi. With its extensive gold-leaf, elaborate gilded frame, and heavy use of expensive pigments such as ultramarine blue, the image spoke to the material wealth and fine taste of its illustrious patron.



Guido Mazzoni, Mary Magdalen, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Cleofas, detail of the Lamentation, 1480s, Ferrara, Italy (photo: Nicola Quirico, CC BY-SA 4.0) <https://tinyurl.com/yyaxs75l>

Over the course of the early renaissance (usually designated in Italy as the fifteenth century), this emphasis on materiality began to shift. While the importance of the monetary value of artistic and architectural media was never fully eclipsed (people still wanted objects made from costly materials) new value was placed on the skill of the artist. New artistic theories were developing in the early 1400s, most famously recorded in Leon Battista Alberti's treatise, *On Painting* (1435/6). In this text, one of the first theoretical discussions of art in the European tradition, the Florentine scholar explicitly advises against the use of gold or other costly media, calling upon the artist to ennoble his work with skill and ingenuity over raw materiality. Artists were tasked with rivaling or even surpassing Nature in their treatments of the visible world. Alberti further advised artists to appeal to the emotions of their audiences by creating figures that displayed believable feelings. The artist at the cutting-edge of early renaissance art was one who could suggest both physical and psychological reality.

The Artist

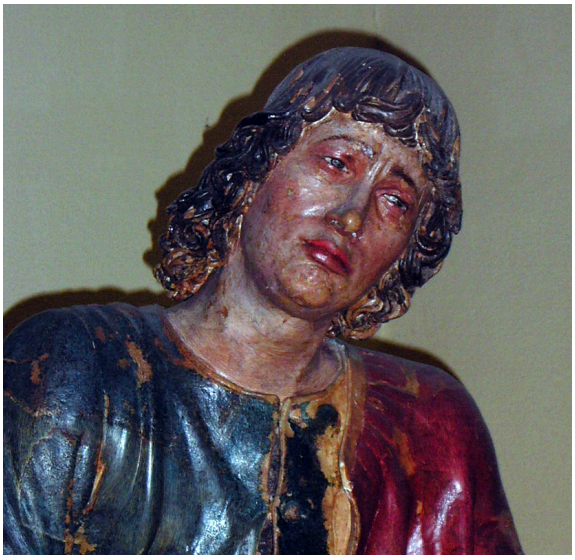


Guido Mazzoni, Mary Cleofas, detail of the Lamentation, 1480s, Ferrara, Italy (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0)

Guido Mazzoni came of age as an artist during this period of shifting visual interests and new appreciation for visual artists' creations as intellectual output. While little is known of his personal life, Mazzoni was fortunate in coming from a well-connected family (his grandfather was a member of the rural gentry and his father was a notary) and had close ties to the glamorous Este court. His privileged social position undoubtedly helped him to navigate courtly circles as an artist. Mazzoni worked for and was awarded marks of favor from Duke Ercole I d'Este of Ferrara, Duke Alfonso of Calabria (King Alfonso II of Naples), and the French monarchs Charles VIII and Louis

XII. By all accounts, the sculptor enjoyed a highly successful career and was able to capitalize on the rising social status of visual art-making. He was well-paid for his work and well-recognized for the nobility of his profession, even being awarded a knighthood by Charles VIII of France in 1496.

Clay becomes Flesh



Guido Mazzoni, St. John the Evangelist from the Lamentation, 1480s, Ferrara, Italy (photo: Heather Graham)

Terracotta was a popular sculptural material throughout the early renaissance. It offered unique mimetic and technical possibilities to artists and was known to have been used as an architectural and sculptural medium by the ancient Etruscans, lending it ancient authority. (Mimesis refers to imitation. In this case, an artist trying to capture something mimetically is attempting to copy nature or make something naturalistically.)

Mazzoni's sculpture group created for Duke Ercole was one of several terracotta groups the artist made in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. He created numerous lamentation groups, such as the one in the Church of St. John the Baptist in the crypt in Modena, as well as other subjects including the Adoration of the Madonna and Child in the crypt of the the Modena Cathedral. Although the figures are made from humble clay (a material far more readily available in the region of Ferrara than stone), through the artist's skillful manipulation this lowly material was transformed into a virtuoso display of artistic ingenuity and refined, courtly taste.



Rogier van der Weyden, Francesco d'Este, c. 1460, oil on wood panel, 29.8 x 20.3 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Each figure is modeled with careful attention to physical and anatomical realism. The bodies are accurately proportioned, the gestures are graceful and naturalistic, and facial features and expressions are exquisitely precise. As the sixteenth-century author, Giorgio Vasari, made note, Mazzoni's figures were "truly more than alive" (*veramente più che vivo*). [1]

The extreme realism of his figures and the superfluity of details in sculpted flesh, cloth, and gestures reflected not only the ultimate early renaissance artistic goal of surpassing nature but also the sophisticated taste of the Italian courts. At the Ferrarese court in particular, northern European art was highly valued.

The Este family had long collected the work of Flemish painters known throughout Europe for their extreme naturalism and emotionally charged imagery. Mazzoni's richly colored terracotta

sculpture group superbly captures the precise detail and provocative emotional displays of Flemish painting in three dimensions while also reflecting the latest Italian trends in bodily and emotional realism.

Art historians have often dismissed Mazzoni's work as "popular art," preferring the stoic idealism of the high renaissance to his emotionally charged and highly naturalistic imagery. This designation implies a lack of sophistication that does an injustice to the artist's skill in manifesting renaissance artistic goals. Thankfully, recent interest on the topics of patronage, the history of the body, and the history of the emotions has prompted a new appreciation for Mazzoni's accomplishments.

Notes:

[1] Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite*, eds. Bettarini and Barocchi (Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 1966), 4.1, p. 423



Detail of Christ, Guido Mazzoni, Lamentation, 1480s, created for the no longer extant church of Santa Maria della Rosa, today in the Church of the Gesù (Ferrara, Italy) (photo: Nicola Quirico, CC BY-SA 4.0)

76.

Guido Mazzoni and Renaissance Emotions

Dr. Heather Graham



Guido Mazzoni, Lamentation, 1480s, created for the no longer extant church of Santa Maria della Rosa, today in the Church of the Gesù (Ferrara, Italy) (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0)

Why Mourning Matters

A life-size, terracotta sculpture group shows seven biblical figures gathered around the dead body of Jesus Christ. Created in the 1480s for Duke Ercole d'Este of Ferrara, Guido Mazzoni's sculpture group also includes the duke and his wife, the Duchess Eleanora of Aragon, cast in the roles of Joseph of Arimathea and Mary Salome. All of the figures express a range of emotional responses to the death of Jesus. These emotional displays in Mazzoni's Ferrarese sculpture group are key to understanding the work's function as a display of the patron's nobility and piety. Emotions are inherent to humanity, but they are not universal and unchanging. Emotions vary across time and culture. They are nurtured or suppressed, constructed and understood according to people's ideas about the human body, the human psyche, and humanity's place within the universe.



Guido Mazzoni, the Duchess Eleanora of Aragon as Mary Salome and Duke Ercole d'Este as Joseph of Arimathea, detail of the Lamentation, 1480s, created for the no longer extant church of Santa Maria della Rosa, today in the Church of the Gesù (Ferrara, Italy) (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0)

In renaissance Italy, displays of grief were expected to be moderated by Christian viewers' faith in their salvation through Jesus Christ. Although sorrow at the death of a loved one was expected and valued as a display of personal affection, there were definite limits to how extreme the public display of grief was supposed to be. Saint Paul, one of the leaders of the early Christian church, had explicitly prohibited excessive mourning: "I would not have you grieve

as others do without hope" (I Thessalonians 4:13–14). Emotional moderation was so important that in various parts of Italy throughout the renaissance period laws were passed prohibiting excessive mourning behaviors at funerals. Works of art that showed people in mourning situations (as in the scene of grieving over the dead body of Christ created by Mazzoni) were one way to help guide Christian audiences in appropriate behavior. While each of Mazzoni's figures displays a believable sorrow, none of them tear their hair, shred their clothes, gesture wildly, or perform other expressions of what would have been considered socially inappropriate levels of grief.



Guido Mazzoni, Mary Magdalen, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Cleofas, detail of the Lamentation, 1480s, created for the no longer extant church of Santa Maria della Rosa, today in the Church of the Gesù (Ferrara, Italy) (photo: Nicola Quirico, CC BY 3.0)

Gender and Emotions

While we may never truly know the inner emotional experiences of people living in the distant past, we may use works of art, like Mazzoni's grieving figures, to understand how people were expected to behave in emotionally charged situations. Works like this may provide clues into how men and women were expected to behave differently, as were people of different social classes. In Mazzoni's work, it is the women who display their sorrow most forcefully. This is in keeping with renaissance understanding of women as more naturally emotional creatures, who were thought to be generally unable to moderate their behavior as well as men. We also see how emotional control was nuanced across social class. Of the women displayed, the aristocratic Duchess Eleonora as Mary Salome is the most restrained in her sorrow.



Left: Guido Mazzoni, the Duchess Eleanora of Aragon as Mary Salome, detail of the Lamentation, 1480s, Ferrara, Italy (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0); right: Guido Mazzoni, Mary Magdalen, detail of the Lamentation, 1480s, created for the no longer extant church of Santa Maria della Rosa, today in the Church of the Gesù (Ferrara, Italy) (photo: Heather Graham)

A comparison between her figure and that of Mary Magdalen—the supreme example of an emotional woman in the Christian tradition—shows the duchess to be sorrowful, yet nobly restrained.

Similarly, John the Evangelist is the most emotionally demonstrative of the men displayed. However, while the women beside him open their arms and mouths in expressions of sorrow, his hands are tightly woven together and his face in contorted into a tightly closed grimace. As a man, renaissance viewers would have understood John to be more capable of controlling his emotions than his female counterparts. Most restrained in his expression of feeling is Duke Ercole as Joseph of Arimathea. His head is softly tilted and his features are lightly strained in dignified grief.



Left: Guido Mazzoni, St. John the Evangelist, detail of the Lamentation, 1480s, Ferrara, Italy (photo: Heather Graham); right: Guido Mazzoni, Duke Ercole d'Este as Joseph of Arimathea, detail of the Lamentation, 1480s, created for the no longer extant church of Santa Maria della Rosa, today in the Church of the Gesù (Ferrara, Italy) (photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0)

Model Mourners

As rulers, Ercole and Eleonora were expected to embody the nobility of their princely status and also be models of Christian piety. A Renaissance prince lived at the political and spiritual center of his community. He was both secular governor and spiritual shepherd for his people. In Ferrara, this closeness was reinforced by the direct physical relationship between the Este castle and the city's cathedral located in close proximity to one another.

Duke Ercole and the Duchess Eleonora are restrained and gender-appropriate models of grief in Mazzoni's sculpture group. They embody fifteenth-century emotional behavioral ideals for their Christian community. Not only do they demonstrate rational emotional responses appropriate to the death of Christ, but their noble behavior served as a broader example of appropriate grieving for their subjects. They are models of moderation, soberly dressed in fine clothing, but not overtly magnificent; emotionally expressive, but not excessive in their demonstrations of sorrow. In Mazzoni's skillful hands, Ercole as Joseph and Eleonora as Mary Salome are presented as ideal models of tasteful nobility and moderate emotion.



The Este Palace and Ferrara Cathedral were at one point in the same city square with one another. Over time, buildings have obscured the sight-line between the two.

The history of emotions is a new and expanding field. Works of art populated by emoting human figures offer us one way to explore the emotional worlds of the past and, by doing so, may help us better understand our own emotional world. For many in the present-day, death is often sanitized and grief compartmentalized. Guido Mazzoni's *Lamentation* reminds us that our mortality is a burden shared by all, that great sorrow—like great joy or great beauty—is a precious part of our humanity.

77.

Giovanni Bellini, 'St. Francis in the Desert' (or St. Francis in Ecstasy)

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Frick Collection, New York City.



Giovanni Bellini, Saint Francis in the Desert (or Saint Francis in Ecstasy), oil on panel, c. 1480 (Frick Collection, New York City) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/CxSnqG>

Steven: I'm looking at this gorgeous, subtle painting by Giovanni Bellini of the *Ecstasy of Saint Francis*, but I'm not seeing the seraphim (angelic beings), I'm not seeing the gold rays, I'm not seeing all of the stage props of divinity that I expect to see.

Beth: It makes sense that we don't see those things because here we are around 1480, the Italian Renaissance is well underway, and the artists of the Renaissance are interested in interpreting moments from the lives of saints or stories from the Bible in fully naturalistic ways. So that kind of obvious narrative—where we see the gold rays and we see Saint Francis receiving the stigmata—has been reinterpreted. This looks so natural. In some ways, we know what's happening, but in some ways, it's a landscape with a figure in it.

Steven: So a 15th-century viewer would have been maybe as perplexed as we are. They would have expected these things and they would have been able to, in a sense, imagine them because they have been so trained to see them.

Beth: Instead of the seraphim and gold rays coming down, we have a sense of supernatural light coming from the upper left of the painting flooding down onto Saint Francis. His body is represented in browns and golds, but this little rocky ledge where he is is in shadow, so he seems illuminated but within this shaded environment.

Steven: That space is so cool and so beautiful, but he seems so warm. This is this sense of God's love. Francis has stepped away from his office. He's stepped away from his desk. There is this sense of momentary, even though we might expect to see this rendered as a kind of an eternal moment. You know, he hasn't even put his sandals on.



Detail of Giovanni Bellini, Saint Francis in the Desert (or Saint Francis in Ecstasy), oil on panel, c. 1480 (Frick Collection, New York City) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: We do have a kind of unfolding of time, and we have a sense of a real person engaged in real activities in a real landscape. Francis is on a retreat. He's in Mount Alverno. He's there for prayer and meditation. We see his Bible and we see a skull—a memento mori, a reminder of death, and the importance of repentance. We wonder what's made him rise suddenly and leave his sandals behind, turning toward the light. Animals seem to be wondering what's going on. A shepherd in the back might also be paying attention, but then there's also the sense of life continuing even while this miracle is happening.

Steven: In some ways, that seems so much more credible. That seems so much more possible that this man who had only lived a couple of hundred years earlier could have actually left his desk, turned around and God's presence could have flooded him. There is that sense that that's the way it would have happened.

Beth: So there wouldn't have been little gold rays and seraphim flying through the sky…

Steven: That's right, that idea that nature is enough to represent divinity here on earth. But Bellini is really clever. He's able to take that ambiguity and fill this painting with symbolism. So for instance, you have that sense of the momentary with the sandals left behind, but that also becomes a reference to Moses walking barefoot on the ground before God. There's a very subtle way that Bellini is able to take this naturalism and actually imbue it with even more symbolism.

Beth: This is something that he's getting from the artists of the Northern Renaissance, this idea of imbuing the natural world with religious meaning. You might think of Robert Campin's *Merode Altarpiece* (c. 1427-32), where the objects on the table or the decorative forms on the furniture have symbolic meaning. In Bellini's painting, you can also look up at the grapevine that Francis is

cultivating that refers to the Eucharist, to the wine, to the blood of Christ.

Steven: I see real parallels to Campin and the *Merode Altarpiece,* not only in the concentrated symbolism that both artists use, but also in the attention to manufacture. It's not just Campin of course, it's the entire Northern tradition. Look, for instance, at the desk. We can understand the construction, the carpentry, the physicality, that notion of the spiritual overlaying the physical is central.

Beth: Right, and if you're going to do that, then the physical has to be entirely believable. Many of the plants are identifiable by species. The cultivated plants that are near his work and living space were grown in a monastic environment. And the wild plants—everything is painted with enormous amounts of care and clarity so everything's so believable.

Steven: It's really the beauty of the interrelation between the spiritual and the physical world. Beauty is infused with divinity. It is the central idea of the Renaissance, it is the central humanist idea.

Beth: We see Francis who is only a small part of this whole landscape and townscape in the background; that's really unprecedented.

Steven: This may be the most extensive treatment of landscape in the history of painting to this day.

Beth: Can you think of an earlier example?

Steven: I can think of examples that are more schematic, like Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegory and Effects of Good and Bad Government* (c. 1337-40).

Beth: So that precedes this by about 150 years. Think about Jan van Eyck and the *Ghent Altarpiece* (1432), where we have a whole Flemish city in the background, or in the background of the Joseph panel of the *Merode Altarpiece,* but it's as though Bellini has enlarged that so it's become a focus.

Steven: There's something really different here which is that the main figure, the protaganist Saint Francis, has been diminished, or I should say, he's enhanced not by his scale, but by his inclusion in this full world. It's absolutely appropriate to Francis, who is associated with nature, for whom periodic ventures into the wilderness were a part of his life. And of course, he'll receive the stigmata after taking the donkey that we see in the middle ground, up to Mount Averno.



Workshop of Robert Campin, Annunciation Triptych (Merode Altarpiece), Joseph panel detail c. 1427–32, oil on oak panel (The Cloisters, The Metropolitan Museum of Art) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Francis is ennobled, or made divine, by the landscape; the landscape enhances our understanding of his divinity, of his saintliness.

Steven: But what an incredible expression of the humanism of the Renaissance itself, that is, *our* natural world, the one that *we* inhabit, can potentially ennoble us.

Beth: I get a real sense of dawn, a strong but subtle early-morning light flooding from the left onto that townscape in the background, especially in the hill town that we see kind of up high amidst those clouds, which are also capturing the morning sunlight.

Steven: You know, if you look at those clouds closely, it's really this bravura brushwork.

Beth: And if you look to the very upper left of the brushwork, you can actually see paint that works across the clouds and forms a diagonal line that's very subtle, going from that light in the upper left towards Saint Francis.



Detail of Giovanni Bellini, Saint Francis in the Desert (or Saint Francis in Ecstasy), oil on panel, c. 1480 (Frick Collection, New York City)

Steven: Well that movement from upper left to lower right is continued through linear perspective; not anything precise because we're in a natural environment—we don't have the right angles of architecture—but if you look, for instance, at the orthogonals, those three bars that help to steady the trellis, you can follow those right back to that source of divinity. The warm light of Francis seems to stand out so strongly to make him such a potent figure in the foreground in comparison to the cool recessive colors that surround him. It's interesting because those cool colors are what we would expect to see in the background. They would help lead our eye into the distance.

Beth: With atmospheric perspective, that's normally how we would see it.

Steven: That's right, but here, those cool colors function as a kind of frame for Francis.

Beth: So the image is remarkably subtle. We know that this is Francis, we know that this is a miracle, we know that Francis is receiving the runes of the crucifixion on his body. Saint Francis lifts his eyes up. He opens his mouth, but there's something about the subject and the miraculousness of what's happening that makes one expect drama and pain, but instead it's all very gentle, subtle and lovely.

Steven: This is a painting that is about light. Oil allowed Bellini to be able to create this sense of luminosity. This is Venice's inheritance from the north. More than any Venetian artist of the 15th century, Bellini is able to take the great achievements of central Italy, the Italian Renaissance, and wed them to the innovations of the north. The miraculous is central to this painting, but the miracle is expressed through nature as a credible force.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/STs6h1qUSGs>

78.

Giovanni Bellini, 'San Giobbe Altarpiece'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Accademia, Venice.

Steven: We're in the Accademia in Venice, and we're looking at a relatively early Giovanni Bellini. This is the *San Giobbe Altarpiece*.

Beth: This was made for a church here in Venice dedicated to prayers for plague victims—one of five plague churches in Venice. Venice was a place that especially suffered from the plague.

Steven: So this is, we think, the very first sacra conversazione that is set within the architecture of a church painted in Venice. And one of the first examples anywhere in Italy.

Beth: Sacra conversazione is a group of saints from different time periods together in the same space with the Madonna and Child. This was certainly a new trend in painting in the late fifteenth century. We see it in the work of Piero della Francesca in his *Brera Altarpiece* and we also see it in the *San Zeno Altarpiece*. We're invited to join the court of heaven: Mary and Christ surrounded by saints and angels.

Steven: One of those saints is quite literally inviting us into the space. If you look on the extreme left, you see Saint Francis. He is not only displaying his stigmata—that is, the holes in his hands, feet, and side that he received as a kind of honor for living his life so closely to Christ—but he is actually beckoning to us: if we can be as faithful as he, we could join this spiritual company.

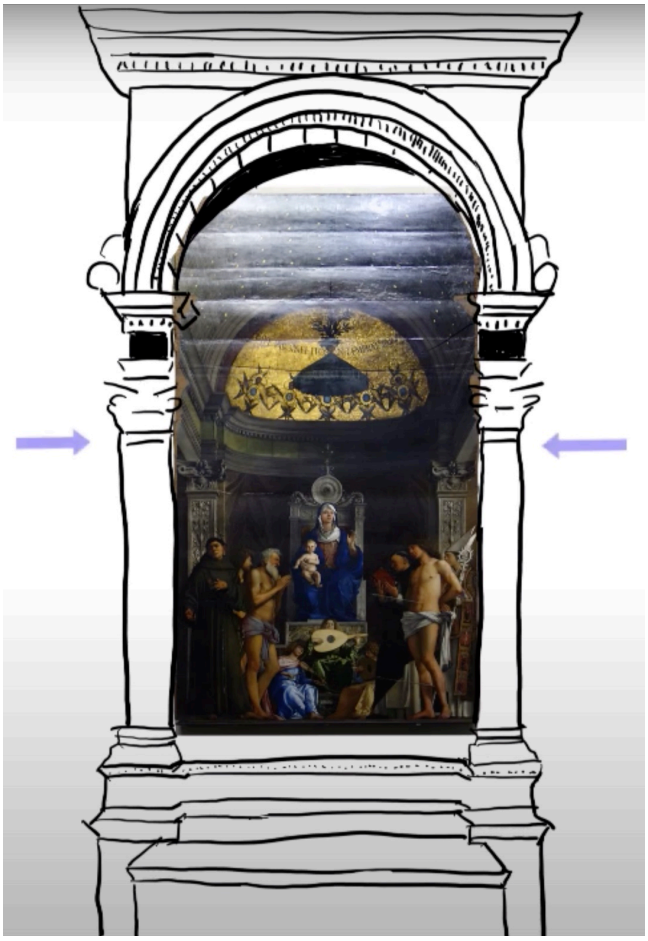


Giovanni Bellini, San Giobbe Altarpiece, c. 1485, oil on panel, 471 cm × 258 cm / 185 in × 102 in (Accademia, Venice)

Beth: That invitation is there in the very construction of the painting. The painting had a rounded, architectural frame that had on either side

pilasters with capitals very much like the ones that we see in the painted space.

Steven: That's right, this painting in its original frame had married the architecture of the actual church with the architecture of the invented space.



Reconstruction of frame for Giovanni Bellini, San Giobbe Altarpiece, c. 1485 (photo and graphic: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Bellini is also joining our space with the space of the Madonna and saints by creating this coffered barrel vault that extends into our space from which a canopy or baldacchino hangs so we really feel this joining of our own space in the space of the painting.

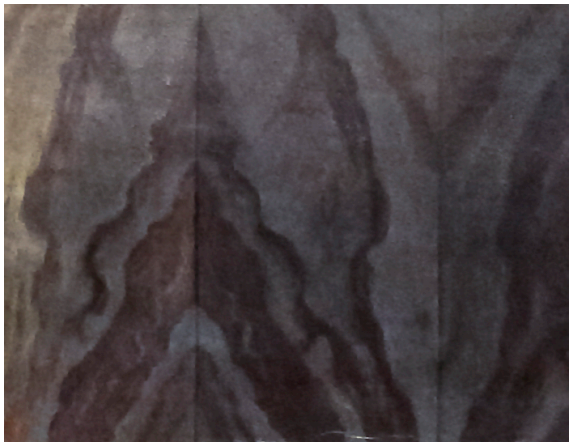
Steven: But the architectural references in this painting are not so much to the church of San Giobbe as to the most important church in Venice, that is, the Basilica of Saint Mark (San Marco).



Crossing dome, Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice, begun 1063, Middle Byzantine (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/mew83d>

Beth: We can see that if we look up at the apse above and behind Mary and Christ. This is exactly what the inside of Saint Mark looks like with mystical golden light created by the mosaics.

Steven: You can also see references to San Marco in the beautiful highly decorated marble that exists in back of the throne. After Venice had plundered Constantinople in 1204 during the fourth crusade, they had brought back all of these treasures including this very decorative marble, which is all over the exterior of San Marco. We see it replicated here in Bellini's painting.



Detail of decorative marble, Giovanni Bellini, San Giobbe Altarpiece, c. 1485, oil on panel (Accademia, Venice)

Steven: Let's go back to those saints for a moment though. In addition to Saint Francis, you can see that there are two other saints on the left side. In the background, Saint John the Baptist and then Job himself, who is offering prayers in the direction of Christ and the virgin Mary. Then on the other side we see Saint Dominic; in the foreground the nearly naked Saint Sebastian; and then in the back Saint Louis of Toulouse. Now remember, this is just the beginning of what we will call the High Renaissance. Bellini is really interested in geometry here. You can see that the three saints on the left side create a kind of triangle with their heads pointing back into space with Saint John the Baptist's head as the furthest most point. On the right side we have another triangle of heads, so we have these inverted triangles.

Beth: We also have a pyramid in the three angels at the bottom of the throne, and then Mary herself, holding the Christ child, her body forms a pyramid—something we see very often in high Renaissance art. We might recall, for example, Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*, where Mary, Christ, and Saint John and an angel form a pyramid.

Steven: Geometry is bound to help with our understanding of the High Renaissance because it can help provide a sense of stability, of balance, and a sense of the eternal.

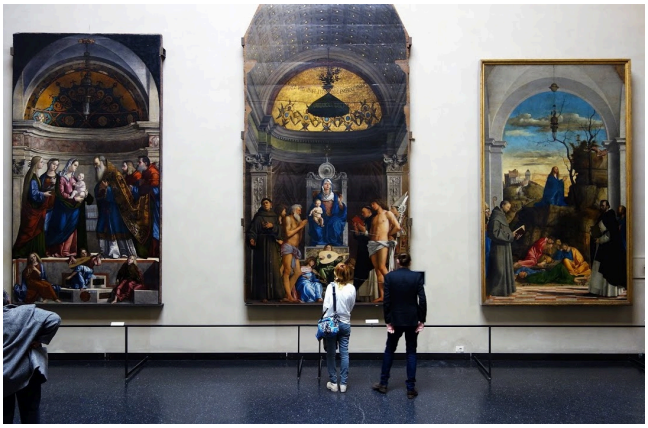
Beth: So what Bellini is doing so differently from earlier sacra conversaziones—if we could think for example of Domenico Veneziano's *Saint Lucy Altarpiece*—there, there is a clear white light that permeates that space. But here, Bellini has created a golden warm tonality and atmosphere that unifies the figures.

Steven: I think that also comes right out of Bellini's experience in San Marco. That architectural space has such a kind of rich internal atmosphere that is full of mystery, that is full of shadow. Bellini has brilliantly found a way of bringing that to the painted surface.

Beth: In so many ways this painting is a continuation of something started by Masaccio, of creating an illusion on the wall of real space, but the naturalism of the Renaissance, its emphasis on real bodies and real space, is tempered, I think, by Bellini. That golden light, the meditative mood of the figures—this all gives us a sense of transcendence, of looking at something spiritual.



Masaccio, Holy Trinity with the Virgin and Saint John, c. 1427, Fresco, 667 x 317 cm, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Viewer in front of Giovanni Bellini, San Giobbe Altarpiece, c. 1485, oil on panel (Accademia, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: One of the things that I find most powerful about this painting is the rendering of the human bodies. You have two figures that are almost completely nude and whose bodies are defined so beautifully by the subtle light. Sebastian really stands out in this regard.

Beth: Look at his beautiful contrapposto.

Steven: There is this attention to the beauty of the body, which is such an expression of the thinking of the Renaissance.

Watch the video.

<https://youtu.be/PxCTyVQMVbs>



Detail of Sebastian, Giovanni Bellini, San Giobbe Altarpiece, c. 1485, oil on panel (Accademia, Venice)

79.

Giovanni Bellini, 'San Zaccaria Altarpiece'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/ehuExJ>

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the San Zaccaria, Venice.

Steven: We're in the Church of San Zaccaria in Venice, looking at one of Giovanni Bellini's last altar paintings.

Beth: This is the *San Zaccaria Altarpiece*. It's a sacra conversazione, which is something that we see a lot of in Venice: a group of saints from different time periods around an enthroned Madonna and Child.

Steven: Starting on the left, we see Saint Peter. He holds a book in his right hand, and the keys to heaven in his left.

Beth: Following him, we see Saint Catherine. She supports a wheel that she was martyred on.

Steven: In the middle, enthroned, is the Virgin Mary, holding the Christ Child. Below them is an angel playing a small, archaic instrument that is related to the violin.

Beth: On the other side, we see Saint Lucy, who holds a crystal.

Steven: She's associated with sight. She's actually the patron saint of the blind. Her eyes were plucked out, according to legend, for her faithfulness to Christ. Then, all the way on the right, we see Saint Jerome, the translator of the Bible into Latin, the Vulgate; he's associated with learning. He's a father, a doctor, of the church, and therefore is wearing Cardinal red.

Beth: And is often shown bearded and with a book.

Steven: But what I see across all of these figures is a tremendous degree of solemnity, of quiet.



Detail of Saints Lucy and Jerome, Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Detail of Virgin, Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5-1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Of contemplativeness; of meditation; of prayer; of devotion. Absolutely, like in Masaccio's painting of the Holy Trinity, Bellini opens up the wall, so we don't believe that it's a wall any more, but rather a chapel.

Steven: It's interesting that the interior architecture, the depicted architecture, seems to relate to the frame of the painting. The physical stone, because we can see, for instance, arches moving towards us on the upper left and upper right that frame the landscape, that we seem to be able to walk out, but we don't know how much of the original frame remains. This painting was taken to Paris by Napoleon. It was stolen, obviously eventually returned, but we're not even sure if this painting is in its original location.

Beth: So it seems to me Bellini is working hard to make this into a space that we can participate in or at least understand, but on the other hand, we see the figures from very far below, and we look up at them, and so there is a real distance that's also there.

Steven: We are looking at this sacred conversation that is not entirely available to us. In other words, we can approach it; we can certainly pray to it; but we're not quite invited to participate in it.



Looking up at Giovanni Bellini, San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas (San Zaccaria, Venice) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/ehoSWP>

Beth: So this is painted in oils, and we know that Bellini was one of the leaders in exploring the possibilities of oil paint. Unlike tempera, which is opaque, you can't see through it, oil, if you thin it down, you can see through it, and applied to a white ground in thin layers, you could create color with a depth and saturation that artists were never able to do before.

Steven: Bellini is also able to introduce a kind of subtlety of light. Look at the way in which the eyes of the figures are downcast and in shadow. Look at the way in which the light articulates that semicircle behind the Virgin. There is this real sense of volume. The painting as it currently sits in the church is aligned so that the actual light from the sun outside corresponds perfectly with the light and shadow in the painting.

Beth: That's right. As we stand and look at it, the doorway makes sense in relationship to the painting, when we see shadows moving from the left toward the right.

Steven: And we see that beautifully also in the apse mosaic; there is this golden mosaic that is a reminder of Bellini's lifetime interest in the Byzantine tradition.

Beth: The place that Bellini would have been most familiar with, that exemplified that tradition, is the Church of Saint Mark's here in Venice, which is covered with golden mosaics, very much like the one we see in the apse here.

Steven: And yet there's also a classical and also biblical set of references. If you look, for instance, at the pilasters, you have Corinthian Capitals. If you look at the throne that Mary sits on, you see a classicizing head above it, and we think that might be King David; a reminder of Christ's regal ancestry, according to tradition.

Beth: There is that sense of calm and contemplativeness, and it comes I think also in part from the symmetry. It's not a rigid symmetry. There is a real sense of balance and harmony. Two figures on either side; the figures close to us facing front, looking down; the two female figures looking inward; Mary, who tilts toward her right; the angel who tilts in the opposite direction.

Steven: That sense of harmony and elegance is drawn out also in gentle arcs that we can see throughout the composition. Look for instance at the arc of the sleeve of Saint Peter, that's echoed by the palm frond held by Catherine and her drape. Look at the way that that's echoed again by the lighter color worn by the angel.

Beth: You're right. There are these subtle curving forms that help to unite the composition. [*church bells ring*] I think it must be five o'clock and time to go.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/NCu83PcEQ1U>

80.

Mantegna, 'St. James Led to his Execution'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Andrea Mantegna, Ovetari Chapel cycle frescoes (reconstructed), 1448-57, Church of the Eremitani, Padua, Italy (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2jbzJVY>

This is the transcript of a conversation in the Ovetari Chapel, Padua.

Steven: We're in the city of Padua in the Church of the Eremitani, or Augustinian hermits, looking at a major fresco cycle by the great Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna—or perhaps I should say, what's left of it.

Beth: This space, the Ovetari Chapel, was destroyed during World War II.

Steven: An enormous number of bombs were unleashed from Flying Fortresses in March 1944. There had been real concern among church officials that the church might be hit.

Beth: There was no intention to destroy much of this church…

Steven: …but nevertheless, reportedly, four bombs hit this part of the church, the Ovetari Chapel.

Beth: And that's because right nearby were the headquarters of the reconstituted fascist government. So the Allies were pushing up from the south, the fascists were located in Padua in the north, and the allies were bombing various cities in Italy. Now, more care was taken in cities like Rome and Florence, but Padua wasn't well known as a city filled with cultural treasures.

Steven: And the loss really was tragic. Even with the tiny fragments that have survived, it's clear what a masterpiece this had originally been. Primarily, what we're seeing are black and white photographs that were taken before the war that have been blown up; overlaying that are actual fragments of the fresco.

Beth: But we're also looking at attempts by the conservators to provide inpainting—paint in between the surviving fragments —in order to give us a better sense of what this fresco originally looked like.



Mantegna, Judgment of St. James, Ovetari Chapel cycle fresco (reconstructed), 1448-57, Church of the Eremitani, Padua (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Aftermath of bombing March 11, 1944, photograph of the nave, Church of the Eremitani, Padua (photo: Il Complesso degli Erimitani a Padova, University of Padua)

Steven: And we can differentiate the inpainting because of the vertical lines that have been added. Most of the color that we're seeing is inpainting—that is, it is modern restoration. The cycle tells the stories of two martyred saints, St. James and St. Christopher. But let's focus on *St. James Being Led to His Execution*.



Mantegna, St. James Led to His Execution, Ovetari Chapel cycle fresco (reconstructed), 1448-57, Church of the Eremitani, Padua (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: The composition is divided into two. On the left, we see St. James; we can recognize him because he wears a halo and he has his right hand up in a gesture of blessing toward a man who's kneeling. St. James has walked through this triumphal arch on his way to his execution and is healed a crippled man. But instead of showing us that scene, Mantegna shows us the moment when a scribe named Josiah witnesses that miracle and drops to his knees and is blessed by St. James. So it's this moment of recognizing the divine, this moment of conversion…

Steven: Our vantage point seems to be at the level of the feet of the figures as we look up.

Beth: Mantegna made the horizon line of linear perspective essentially at the top of our heads. So we're looking up at these figures, and that architecture seems even more massive and heavy as a result. Now, a Roman triumphal arch celebrated Roman military victories, and so this Christian martyr has performed a miracle right before this symbol of Roman military power.

Steven: He's also making a point that even with all of Rome's military power, its architectural and engineering prowess, Christianity quietly is triumphant.

Beth: We see a distinctly different scene on the right: a Roman soldier is pushing up against another figure who carries a banner and who is in turn assaulting the Roman soldier. And so we have this scene of violence. It's so clearly intended to contrast with the saint blessing Josiah on the left.



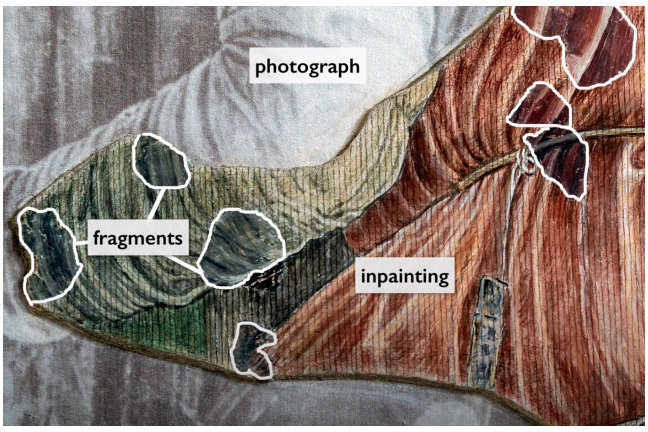
Detail of Mantegna, St James Led to His Execution, Ovetari Chapel cycle fresco, 1448-57, Church of the Eremitani, Padua (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Even before this bombing, the United States had taken steps to preserve the cultural heritage of Italy, and committees were set up filled with art historians, archivists, librarians—experts—to identify major sites that should be safeguarded whenever possible.

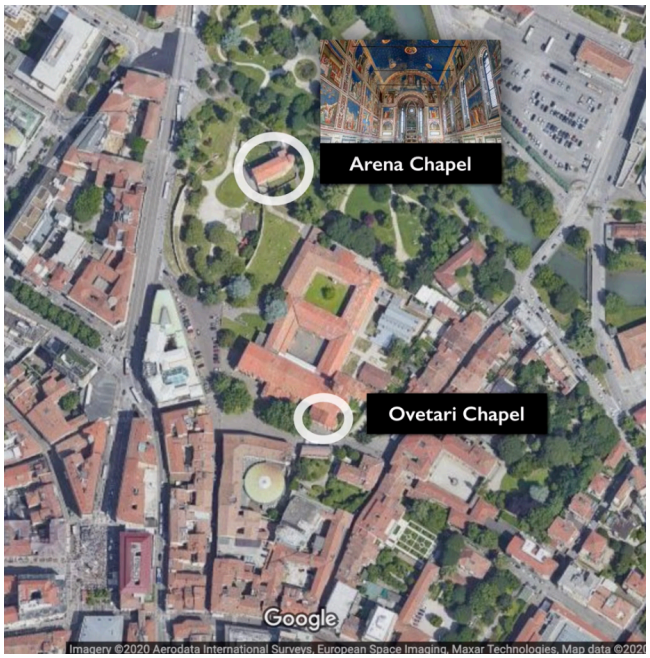
Beth: We know one of these organizations as the "Monuments Men."

Steven: After the bombing, there was a renewed effort to avoid destroying historic treasures. This event galvanized the allied forces and essentially gave more credence, more power, to the committees that were working to safeguard cultural treasures.

Beth: Famously, the art historian Frederick Hartt had studied Mantegna and learned of the bombing and cried. Perhaps it's best to read Frederick Hartt words: "The Eremetani Church has been very badly hit and the Ovetari Chapel with all the Mantegnas utterly wiped out. As a matter of fact, you can hardly tell there was a building there. The last of the stick of bombs missed the Arena Chapel by a mere hundred yards." That reminds us that we are very close to a late Gothic masterpiece by Giotto, the Arena Chapel (c. 1305-06). Apparently the ground shook underneath that chapel when the Ovetari was hit.



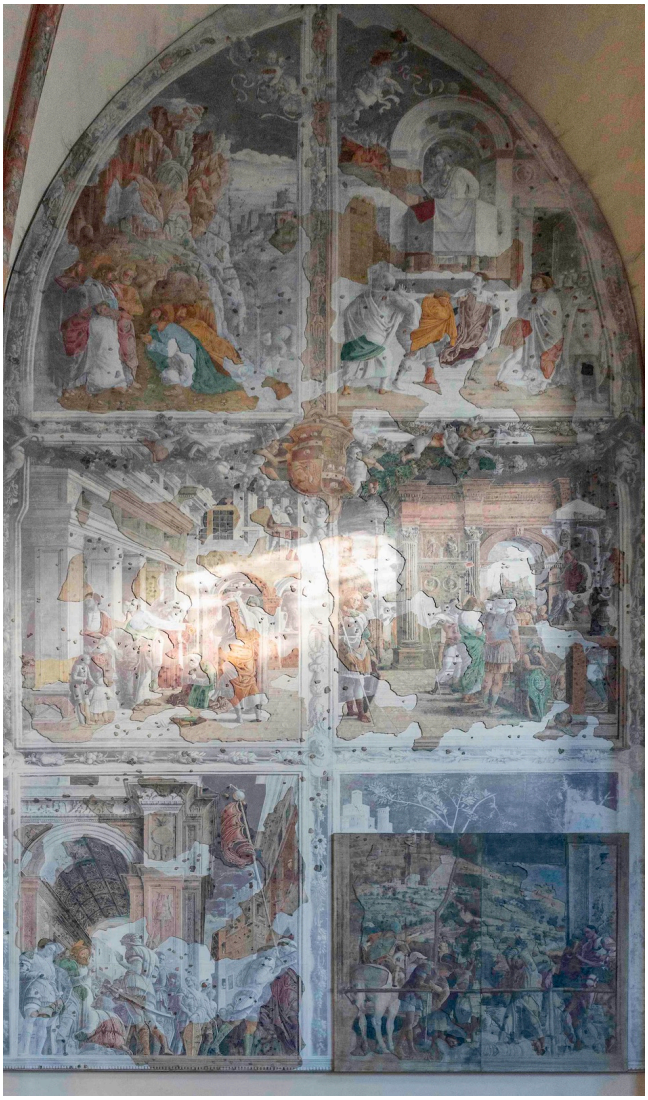
Detail of Mantegna, Ovetari Chapel cycle fresco, 1448-57, Church of the Eremitani, Padua (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Map showing Arena Chapel and Ovetari Chapel, Padua (underlying map, © Google)

Steven: But thankfully the frescoes inside were undamaged.

Beth: But that day, we could have lost both Mantegna's 15th-century fresco cycle and Giotto's early 14th-century fresco cycle. Faced with a pile of rubble—of 80,000 fragments—of an incredibly important masterpiece by a great Renaissance master, what was the superintendent of monuments here in Padua to do? He collected those fragments, he stored them, they were photographed, they were cataloged, they were measured. There were several attempts to take these tiny two or three centimeter fragments and reconstruct the fresco. The Mantegna project at the University of Padua worked for many years on the fragments of the frescoes. The reconstruction was based on an unprecedented use of computer technology. I have nothing but enormous respect for all the people who worked for over a decade to take those tiny pieces and restore whatever could be restored; simultaneously though, the fragmented state of what we're looking at makes it hard to experience the fresco, we're distracted by the restoration.



Mantegna, Ovetari Chapel cycle frescoes (reconstructed), 1448-57, Church of the Eremitani, Padua (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Example of Mantegna Laboratory's use of computer technology to restore the Mantegna frescoes (© Mantegna Project, University of Padua) <http://www.progettomantegna.it/index.html>

Steven: My view is that it was the right choice to attempt a reconstruction. It's a testament to the violence of the 20th century, and it becomes a kind of memorial.

Beth: The fragmentary state of the fresco reminds us that this was destroyed and in a way that text can't do. Looking at a black-and-white reproduction in a book and reading a caption that says, "destroyed during World War II," is not as powerful as being here in this beautiful church with earlier frescoes all around it and seeing the damage that we've done.

Steven: This painting has survived for 500 years; *we've* destroyed it in the modern world.

Beth: Since the war there have been various measures put in place, for example, the Hague conventions, to protect cultural heritage during times of war, but clearly we know when we read the headlines that works of art remain endangered around the world due to war.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/h3FrEXMB_Wg>

81.

Andrea Mantegna, 'Saint Sebastian'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Andrea Mantegna, Saint Sebastian, oil on wood panel, ca. 1456-59 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Steven: The nude had been off limits for a thousand years.

Beth: In the Middle Ages, the only opportunity that artists had to paint or sculpt the nude was to do Adam and Eve. But with the Renaissance, we have this renewed interest in the human body, and artists looking for opportunities to paint it.

Steven: What we are looking at is Andrea Mantegna's very small painting of Saint Sebastian. It's in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, and it's this tall, thin, painting that is completely improbable; in some ways, it is just an elaborate ruse to be able to paint the human body. But of course, Mantegna was also deeply in love with all things Classical.

Beth: And both of those things are really in evidence here.

Steven: Look at all of the fragments of sculpture and architecture that comes from his study of ancient Rome.

Beth: And of course the figure of Saint Sebastian himself looks like an ancient Greek or Roman sculpture. According to legend, Saint Sebastian was in the employ of the ancient Roman Emperor Diocletian who didn't know that Sebastian was a Christian.



Filippino Lippi, Standing Youth with Hands Behind His Back, 1457/58–1504, Metalpoint, highlighted with white gouache, on pink prepared paper (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Steven: Apparently Sebastian came to the aid of two other Christians who had been found out and therefore his own Christianity was revealed. He was ordered to be executed when he refused to renounce his Christianity, and so, he was shot with arrows, but he survived that attack.

Beth: Right, and was later clubbed to death.

Steven: It's easy for us in the 21st Century to forget how little was known about the human body—that knowledge that had once existed from ancient Greece and Rome had largely been lost. Here was a generation that was rediscovering the body for the first time in a thousand years.

Beth: You couldn't go and buy a book on anatomy, you couldn't look something up on the web. This was a time when rediscovering the body meant an investigation of the body from scratch, with very little knowledge left from antiquity.

Steven: And the understanding of the body in the ancient world like contrapposto (weight shift onto one leg), is just being rediscovered in this century. And look at the way in which the S-curve of the body is accentuated here. You can really see an artist who is studying ancient sculpture. In fact, one could probably argue that the arrows themselves almost function as diagramming lines, helping us see the shifting axis of the body. But there are also funny anachronisms here. Things are disjointed in terms of time. Since Sebastian is being martyred by an ancient Roman emperor at a time when ancient Rome is at the height of its power—-and yet, what the artist is showing us here is ancient Roman architecture in ruins: the way it looked in Mantegna's own time.

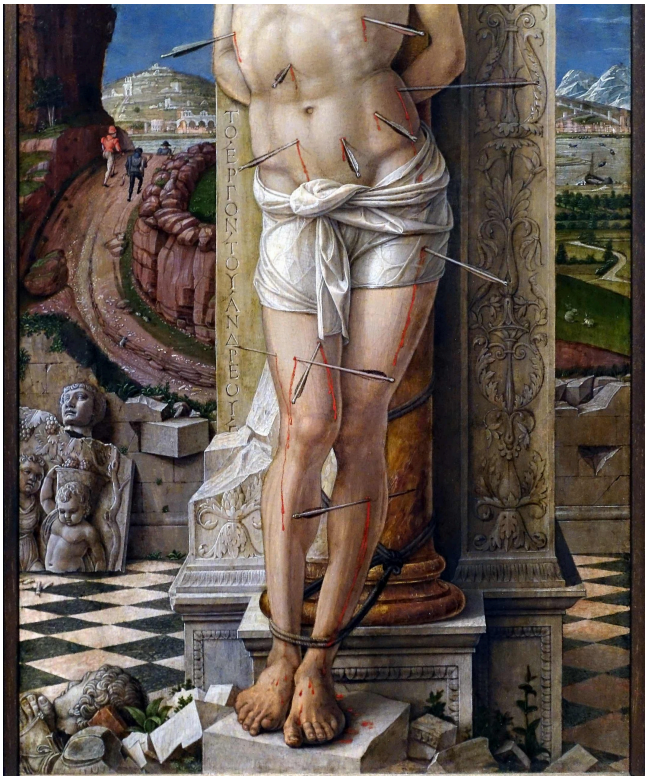
Beth: And he's clearly relishing the beauty of those ruins as ruins.

Steven: It's as if the faith of Christianity has outlived the mighty Roman Empire.

Beth: Right, which lays in ruins around the feet of the saint.

Steven: Here's an artist who is in part responsible for creating the art that we know of as the Early Renaissance. And characteristic of that moment, we see someone who is giving us as much visual information as possible. Look at the precision even in the buildings of extreme distance, that beautiful atmospheric perspective, that careful delineation of form, of mass…

Beth: Right, modelling, so we've got a sense of the three-dimensionality of the body, of the light coming from the left. We can see Mantegna's use of linear perspective in the tiles on the floor. In a way, this has everything we expect of the Renaissance.



Detail of Andrea Mantegna, Saint Sebastian, oil on wood panel, ca. 1456-59 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Detail of Andrea Mantegna, Saint Sebastian, oil on wood panel, ca. 1456-59 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: This is bringing together those fragments from antiquity that were just being rediscovered. This is trying to place these figures in a world that we can occupy.

Beth: …and a *vast* landscape. Perhaps we see the archers retreating on a road in the background, and a whole city that looks very much like an aAncient Roman city…

Steven: Here's an artist who is central to the northern Italian tradition, somebody who is working in Venice, working in Padua, and who understands what's taking place in Flourence. This is just such an exemplar of this reinvention, of ancient humanism.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/wIbpSJdSz90>

82.

Andrea Mantegna, 'Dormition (or Death) of the Virgin'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Museo del Prado, Madrid.



Andrea Mantegna, Dormition (or Death) of the Virgin, c. 1462, tempera on panel, 21.26 × 16.54" / 54 × 42 cm (Museo del Prado, Madrid)

Steven: We're in the Prado in Madrid, and we're looking at a small Andrea Mantegna. It's the *Dormition of the Virgin*. The painting that we're seeing is only the bottom two-thirds of the original.*Beth*: Right, so it would have had a top that showed the vaulting of the architecture, the bottom half of which we see in this panel. It would have also shown Christ receiving the Virgin's body.*Steven*: That actually sort of raises the question, what does "dormition" mean? This was the moment when the Virgin was readying herself to die and invites the Apostles to be with her…

Beth: …this is an Apocryphal story…

Steven: Right, not in the Bible itself. I think, actually, that Mantegna has played fast and loose even with the Apocryphal version because we've got this set in a kind of classical environment, yet out the window, or past the porch …

Beth: It's Mantua!

Steven: Yeah, we see this incredibly accurate rendering of an actual place in Italy.

Beth: Apparently this is very, very early, maybe the first truly topographical landscape of a part of Italy.

Steven: I have to tell you that one of the aspects of this painting that I love is the precision with which Mantegna renders the folds and the textures of the drapery, especially in the two front figures in that green and that blue, but then also the figure in the red that's leaning away from us… If you look at it, it's almost as if there is static electricity that makes the cloth cling to the body that exposes it.

Beth: He's clearly looking at Classical sculpture…



Detail of Andrea Mantegna, Dormition (or Death) of the Virgin, c. 1462, tempera on panel (Museo del Prado, Madrid)

Steven: …this is Classical sculpture, right, being brought to life again.

Beth: I'm looking also down at the floor where we see the tiles forming the orthogonals of linear perspective—I'm not sure exactly where the vanishing point would be—but look at the lovely feet and their sense of weight, and the shadows. We have a sense of light coming from the right, illuminating the columns and casting shadows that move out from the figures toward the left. There's a real sense of light and weight and space here that's incredibly convincing.

Steven: It's true, look at the way the floor brightens in that little negative space between the feet of the figure standing behind Mary. While mentioning Mary, she seems so minor in comparison to the rest of the image. She's so pale and so frail, but so small in comparison to the much more vigorous figures around her and also, of course, the scale of the architecture.

Beth: We do have a sense of them surrounding her and this moment that's about to happen of her death and the figures grieving for her.

Steven: We see the figures on the left, standing, holding a palm frond, the symbol of death, but I'm actually…

Beth: Not only a symbol of death, but of the triumph over death.

Steven: Yes, right, and of course Christ would have received her in heaven had the painting not been cut in two. I love on the right the way in which the figures were singing and the way in which the candles are not held perfectly vertically, but are responding to the movements of the body just ever so slightly. To me, there's this sense of movement and rhythm and change, even in this very stable environment.

Beth: And that figure who leans over her bed who almost is our counterpart in the painting…

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/Du-0kAn4u6w>



Detail of Mantegna, Dormition (or Death) of the Virgin, c. 1462, tempera on panel (Museo del Prado, Madrid)

83.

Andrea Mantegna, 'Dead Christ'

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.



Andrea Mantegna, Dead Christ, tempera on canvas, c. 1480-1500, 68 × 81 cm (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan)

Steven: We're in the Brera in Milan and we're looking at one of Andrea Mantegna's most extraordinary and most famous paintings, *The Dead Christ*.

Beth: Mantegna's son called it "The Foreshortened Christ," and this way of representing Christ so foreshortened is really unusual in art history.

Steven: Well certainly I've never seen anything like this. Now Mantegna was fascinated throughout much of his career with extreme perspectives. You might think about *St. James Being Led to His Execution*, where you have a view upward.

Beth: Foreshortening is often used by Renaissance artists to create an illusion of space, an illusion of depth. But here, Mantegna is using it to draw us in, to make us feel as though we're at Christ's side at this moment after he's been taking down off the cross. He's been placed on this stone, his body is ready to be anointed and shrouded and placed in the tomb.

Steven: One of the comments that people often make when they look at this and they think about that kind of very careful perspectival structures that are being developed in the 15th century, is that this is in fact distorted. That is, the feet are much too small and in fact there is kind of an odd distortion as you move up the body where the body seems to grow in size. But what's fascinating is when you stand in front of the painting, at least for me, the feet are seen almost through our peripheral vision and our eyes are drawn right up to the face.

Beth: No question, we're drawn to that look of suffering. We don't have an image of Christ that transcends human suffering. There's real pain etched on his forehead, the way that his eyebrows have been pressed together. There's a sense of his humanity here.

Steven: There is this incredible sense of physicality—we are so far away from the medieval conception of the dead Christ, that is transcendent and completely divorced from any kind of pain.

Here, just look at the wounds in the hand or in the feet; there's an almost clinical accuracy. Look at the way in which the skin has dried and it feels like it might even be sharp.

Beth: Look at how Mantegna has lifted up the hands as though he wants to show us Christ's wounds. The hands are propped up in the same way the head is propped up by the pillow.

Steven: Well those are almost the only verticals. Now we've been focusing on Christ and the body of Christ for good reason but Christ is not the only figure here. We seem to be in the tomb itself, it's dark, but we can make out that there are three other figures. Closest to us, we can just barely make out the profile of St. John the Evangelist. Next to him is an unusual rendering of the Virgin Mary, who's quite old here and clearly suffering, seeing her son die. But just beyond Mary, you can just make out Mary Magdalene, and the reason that we know it's her is because on the stone you can see a jar of the ointment that Mary Magdalene used to anoint Christ's feet.

Beth: We often see that jar as an attribute of Mary Magdalene. So we know that this painting still belonged to Mantegna at the time of his death. In other words, it was never delivered to a patron. And so this has led art historians to speculate that perhaps it was rejected by the patron because of its extreme focus on the dead body of Christ in this literal way and its intense foreshortening. It's also possible that Mantegna painted this for his personal use. We're just not sure.

Steven: We're also not sure if perhaps the intended patron, if there was one, was somebody who was focusing on the wounds of Christ.

Beth: Right, someone whose devotional practice was focused on the wounds of Christ, someone who perhaps especially venerated what's known as the Stone of Unction, the stone that his body was laid on for anointing.



Detail of mourners, Andrea Mantegna, Dead Christ, tempera on canvas, c. 1480-1500 (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan)

Steven: So these are all questions. What we *do* know is that this is a painting that in so many ways exemplifies the changes that are taking place in Italian art in the 15th century where you have this increasing focus on the physicality of Christ.

Beth: We begin to see in the later part of the 1400s images of Christ, of the saints, depicted very close to us. It's likely that this is related to ideas of the image as a kind of prompt, to mediate on Christ's suffering, to imagine what it was like to be at the Crucifixion, to put ourselves there at the tomb at this moment.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/XGZvvQ8BmjY>



Detail of Christ's feet and wounds, Andrea Mantegna, Dead Christ, tempera on canvas, c. 1480-1500 (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan)

84.

Andrea Mantegna, Camera degli Sposi

A conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. David Drogin

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in the Ducal Palace, Mantua.



Andrea Mantegna, Camera degli Sposi (frescoes in the Ducal Palace, Mantua), 1465-74

Beth: Let's talk about this frescoed room by Andrea Mantegna.

David: First a little background information. Mantegna was active in Northern Italy, first in Padua, also Ferrara, and around the Veneto in the middle of the 1400s. Then, in 1460, he's appointed by the Marquis of Mantua, Ludovico Gonzaga, to be the court artist of the Court of Mantua, so he moves there in the 1460s.

Beth: It's really important to recognize that what's happening in Mantua is going to be really different than what's happening in Florence.

David: Yeah, than in other kinds of cities. Mantua, at this time, is a court; it's ruled by a marquis, which is a step below a duke. The Gonzaga family who'd been in control for quite a while are the single dominant rulers of the city. It's very different from a situation, as you pointed out, in Florence or Venice, which are republics.



The Marquisate of Mantua (in pink) in the context of late 15th century Italy (map: Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 3.0)

David: So, Mantegna comes and he begins working on this project, which is called the "Camera Picta," or the Camera degli Sposi, which…

Beth: And camera just means…

David: Room. "Camera Picta" means the "painted room." One thing to point out is that besides the door frame and the mantlepiece and some architectural features like these brackets at the bottom of the vault, everything that we're looking at is paint.

Beth: It's just amazing to me that it's all paint.

David: It's completely frescoed. All of the things that look like architectural decoration, and ornaments, and moldings…all of this is fresco.

Beth: He made it look as though the walls are actually open.

David: We have the ceiling that's decorated with these architectural and sculptural forms, and then it has an oculus, or this open hole, at the center of the ceiling, that we'll take a look at—all painted, and painted very, very naturalistically, and with careful attention to perspective, as if you are seeing three-dimensional objects from below or on the walls and that makes it illusionistic, as if it's really there.

Beth: And we're, what, about 40 or 50 years after the death of Masaccio, so we are really in that full swing of the Early Renaissance, and humanism, the re-discovery of classical antiquity.

David: That's right, and Mantegna was a big part of that.



Andrea Mantegna, Camera degli Sposi (frescoes in the Ducal Palace, Mantua), 1465-74 (photo: Herbert Frank, CC BY 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2hmiZDu>



Detail of oculus and portraits, Andrea Mantegna, Camera degli Sposi (frescoes in the Ducal Palace, Mantua), 1465-74 (photo: Herbert Frank, CC BY 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/2hmkMce>

David: Speaking of classical antiquity, we can start on the ceiling. What we see is this oculus, and then surrounding it is this architectural and sculptural ornamentation that's extremely classicizing in terms of the molding and the details in the ribbons and the garlands, and the putti…

Beth: And the putti!

David: What they're holding are fictive reliefs of the first eight ancient Roman emperors; and so, also with the subject matter, the ceiling is extremely classical. What's important to point out is that, we talk a lot about "Classical Antiquity" in the Renaissance, and the revival of antiquity, but it's important to remember that different types of cities drew from different types of classical antiquity. What we're looking at here with these portraits of the emperors, is an imperial classical antiquity (looking back to the ancient Roman Empire), which is entirely appropriate for a court city like Mantua that's ruled by a marquis or any other city ruled by a duke. But this kind of imagery would have been completely inappropriate in a place like Florence.



Detail of imperial portrait, Andrea Mantegna, Camera degli Sposi (frescoes in the Ducal Palace, Mantua), 1465-74 (photo: Maurizio Abbiateci, CC BY 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/GrMiyt>

David: Private citizens in a republic would not have been allowed to decorate a room in their house with Roman emperors.

Beth: No, Florence looked back to the period of ancient Rome when it was a republic.

David: So it's important to remember that for the people in the Renaissance, they were able to distinguish between different types of classical antiquity, and pick what was most relevant to them. Below the ceiling, we see this open space. On the walls are frescoes of the Marquis Ludovico and his everyday life, scenes in what supposedly Mantuan territory scenes from his activities. Here we see Ludovico meeting with his son, the cardinal, in the landscape; there's some putti that are standing up on top of the door holding an inscription. Then on another wall we see Ludovico and his wife and his family and his favorite dog and the court little person, all sitting around while he receives a message from an advisor on the far left. Then, coming up the stairs on the right are some visitors who are coming to greet him, and that might be related to the function of this room, which might have been a kind of ceremonial greeting space. You see this extremely naturalistic, illusionistic painting that creates the fiction of architectural spaces. Look at how the curtain seems to be pulled forward and in front of the column; sometimes it's really hard to distinguish between what's real and what's not.



Gonzaga family portrait of Ludovico II (right) and his secretary, Andrea Mantegna, Camera degli Sposi (frescoes in the Ducal Palace, Mantua), 1465-74 (photo: Jim Forest, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)



Andrea Mantegna, Camera degli Sposi (frescoes in the Ducal Palace, Mantua), 1465-74 (photo: Maurizio Abbiateci, CC BY 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/GxB1bR>

Beth: There's a lot of fun clearly in playing with those boundaries and using perspective to fool the eye.

David: Right, because you are looking slightly up at these figures, they're standing on top of the fireplace, and notice that you actually do look up at them. You can see slightly up into the bottom of their tunics, so you don't see the top surfaces of the stairs or the floor that they're standing on; so, Mantegna's painting it as if you're really seeing them elevated in that position. This is a part that's intentionally fun and humorous. This is the oculus, this opening. "Oculus" means eye in Latin.

Beth: But it's not a real opening.

David: Not a real opening; it's just painted from this *di sotto in sù* (from below) radical perspective. So, we see everything very foreshortened: the balustrade (the railing that circles the oculus), the putti that are standing here—you see them very foreshortened from below. There's a peacock that we see from below.



Detail of putti and peacock, Andrea Mantegna, Camera degli Sposi (frescoes in the Ducal Palace, Mantua), 1465-74 (photo: Maurizio Abbiateci, CC BY 2.0)

David: You see several servants, including an African one, standing around and they're looking down and they're laughing. If you look very carefully, you'll notice that one of these women has her hand on this pole that's supporting this pot with a plant in it; and the suggestion, I think, is that she's about to pull that pole away and that potted plant is going to fall right on your head. So, that's the joke—you're standing there looking up with your mouth hanging open, and suddenly you realize that there's the joke, the illusion, of these objects that are going to fall on you.

Beth: In fact, there are other figures who look like they could drop things on us out of their hands, or—other parts of their body.



Detail of putto, Andrea Mantegna, Camera Picta (Camera degli Sposi), frescoes in the Ducal Palace in Mantua, 1465-74 (photo: Maurizio Abbiateci, CC BY 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/GrMfsD>

David: Right, because look at these putti, not wearing diapers with their little rear-ends sticking out, or the front of them facing us, and so there may be other things falling on you, too. On the one hand, this room gives us a serious subject matter of the marquis as a ruler of his domain, with this serious, imperial, classicizing imagery of the ancient Roman emperors on the ceiling, but at the same time, in a kind of marginal location, above your head, what you might not see right away, there's this puerile, humorous joking quality that lightens the atmosphere a little bit.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/GN0P5RkQAow>

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