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**Visual theology in 14th and 15th century Florentine frescoes
a theological approach to historical images, sacred spaces, and the modern viewer**

Reddaway, Chloe

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Author: Chloe Reddaway

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**VISUAL THEOLOGY IN 14TH AND 15TH
CENTURY FLORENTINE FRESCOES:
A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO
HISTORICAL IMAGES, SACRED SPACES,
AND THE MODERN VIEWER**

Chloë Rebecca Reddaway

PhD Visual Theology

In memory of my grandmother, Madeleine J.M. Constantinides

14 December 1923 – 15 April 2011

Aujourd'hui plus qu'hier, et bien moins que demain.

Abstract

Although Christianity is a ‘religion of the book’, visual art has played a crucial role in the history of theological communication, and the premise of this thesis is that historical images are a potentially rich, but underused, theological resource for modern Christians.

Art historical analyses are rarely intended or equipped to demonstrate the rich theological potential of attentive interaction between the modern viewer and historical images, and do not take account of the fundamentally incarnational nature of Christian images. There have been, however, relatively few attempts at theological interpretation of historical Christian images and minimal discussion of an appropriate methodology for doing so, despite increased interest in the relationship between theology and visual art.

This thesis proposes a methodology for the theological interpretation of images, drawing on critical hermeneutics in theology and literary studies, the approaches of reader criticism, reception theory, and cultural history, the insights of art historical analysis, and a Christian understanding of religious art and sacred place. It demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach through case studies drawn from Florentine fresco cycles of the 14th and 15th centuries, enriching the experience of the modern viewer.

In particular it addresses the materiality of images and the relationship between the space within images, the spaces of their locations, and their interaction with the spatially located viewer. The images are shown to be sophisticated pieces of visual theology with the capacity to express complex theological ideas of creation, incarnation, transformation and revelation, in powerfully engaging ways. They present a redeemed, post-resurrection view of creation in which materiality does not, or need not, equate to separation from God; an anti-dualist confession of faith in which content and composition, content and medium, concept and form, image and viewer, interpenetrate to enable material revelation of the divine, with potentially transformative effects.

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1 Introduction

Although Christianity is a ‘religion of the book’, visual art has long been used by Christians, alongside and in addition to words, to express experience of and thoughts about the divine.¹ Art is a fundamental form of human expression, not a specifically Christian construct, but its particular power in a Christian context is due to the vital significance of the image for those who believe that the Word became flesh; God became man; the divine was, for one brief lifetime, signified perfectly in a visible and physical body.

The premise of this thesis is that images (like texts) can be theologically expressive, capable of illuminating and influencing, and that historical Christian images are a rich but underused theological resource for modern Christians.² While art historical study has provided valuable insights into Christian art, it has generally been inadequate in its treatment of theological content. The legitimate didactic, inspirational, commemorative, and decorative functions of Christian art³ have often been treated in somewhat simplistic terms, while more complex aspects, such as the way in which the coherence of form and content in images can become sacramental, revelatory, and transformative in the encounter between viewer and image, have often been overlooked.⁴ Art historical analyses are rarely intended or equipped to

¹ Bible quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible New Revised Standard Version*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

² The term ‘contemporary’ will be used to mean contemporary with the frescoes (i.e. 14th and 15th century) and ‘modern’ of the time of writing (not ‘Modern’). The ‘ideal viewer’ imagined is a ‘modern Christian viewer’ of any denomination not opposed to Christian images. This definition can reasonably be extended to include a non-Christian modern viewer sympathetic to Christianity and to the purposes of this project. For the sake of brevity, God and the viewer are given masculine pronouns throughout. This is purely practical and is not intended to be sexist (although access, and degrees of access, to some of these images was gender dependent for contemporary viewers).

³ It is not necessary to rehearse the extensive literature discussing the legitimate purposes of Christian art here. See, for example: H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* trans., E. Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994). Celia M. Chazelle, "Pictures, Books and the Illiterate. Pope Gregory's Letters to Serenus of Marseilles," *Word and Image* 6, (1990); Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000). N.B. this thesis deals with images in the Western Christian tradition.

⁴ The terms ‘sacramental’, ‘revelatory’ and ‘transformative’ are used here in the simple and transparent sense of ‘communicating or acting as a material channel for divine grace’, ‘manifesting something of the divine’, and ‘inspiring and enabling a reorientation of the viewer towards God or reinforcing this’. For further discussion see, for example, Viladesau. Ch.3.

demonstrate the rich theological potential of attentive interaction between the modern viewer and historical image, and do not take account of the fundamentally incarnational nature of the Christian image.

Despite the increased interest among theologians in the relationship between theology and visual art (and, indeed, the arts in general) and the growing lists of publications and conferences dealing with this subject, there are relatively few examples of theological interpretation of historical Christian images, and minimal discussion of an appropriate methodology for this. The purpose of this thesis is, therefore, to propose a methodology for the theological interpretation of images, and to demonstrate its validity by analysing specific cases, with the intention of enriching the theological experience of the viewer. In doing so I explore how images communicate beliefs, inspire model behaviour and emotions, and express religious identity, paying attention to the material and spiritual nature of both the image and the viewer, and the capacity of images to manifest the mutual inherence of these. In attending to materiality, I consider in particular the relationship between the space within images, the spaces of their locations, and their interaction with the spatially located viewer. I hope that this study will contribute to the expanding field of Christianity and the arts, making connections between existing scholarship in theology and history of art, and increasing understanding of the valuable theological resources which historical images offer modern Christians.

The initial question which I address is, ‘What methodology could facilitate a theological interpretation of historical Christian images which is neither naïve (accepting unquestioningly the religious content in images) nor cynical (dismissing the possibility of integrity in religious images and focussing solely on socio-economic and political factors in their creation), but which takes seriously the potential of religious art to be sacramental, revelatory, and inspirational, within a critical assessment of specific cases?’.

In response I propose a methodology for the theological interpretation of images and apply this to 14th and 15th century Florentine fresco cycles. These offer an ideal set of historical case studies against which to test the methodology because of the number and variety of cycles available by artists whose reputations have stood the test of time and which survive in an excellent state of preservation. The advantage of using cycles rather than isolated images is that it is possible to explore the connections between the images and not only within a single scene. The case studies provide a group of examples which are both related and independent. Their artistic and contextual relationships suggest that conclusions drawn from one example have a reasonable possibility of being applicable to others, without compromising the individuality of each example, while the range of artists, dates, and locations suggests that any conclusions drawn from this study as a whole are not based merely on fleeting artistic incidents, nor are they specific to only one religious order.

The question throughout the main body of this thesis is therefore, ‘What does applying a theological methodology to the interpretation of these images reveal about the theological function and significance of religious frescoes in Florence, c.1316-1490, for the modern as well as the contemporary viewer?’ In each case I assess relevant art historical analyses of the frescoes and present an alternative or additional interpretation to the standard treatments. This process is theologically constructive and enables new insights into the images in question. In the Conclusion to this study I support the validity of the methodology, based on the outcomes of the case studies, explore the main theological themes which emerge from them, and suggest that the methodology could be usefully applied to other art works and art forms.

2 Methodology: Identifying a Theological Hermeneutic for Images

2.1 The need for a methodology

This thesis proposes a theological hermeneutic for images and applies this to case studies of Florentine frescoes in order to offer a theological interpretation of these historical Christian images which is relevant to the modern as well as the contemporary viewer. The proposed methodology for doing this necessarily draws upon art history, but is not restricted to either its content or its methodology which, though vital to understanding the images in context, do not consistently take account of their theological significance. In addition to the valuable insights of art history, a specifically theological methodology is required. Of course, theological methodologies vary, reflecting the context and concerns of the user and the purposes of the project in question, and a single interpretative methodology might not be adequate for all images. There are, however, few methodological precedents in this area, and none that specifically deals with the exegesis of images. I hope that this thesis will begin to fill that gap.

Scholarly discussion in the field of theology and the arts has focussed on: the significance of the arts for theology and how the two interact;⁵ specific pieces of art,⁶ or particular religious themes in artworks;⁷ and the artist as interpreter of source texts engaging in a visual exegesis which is contained within art works.⁸ There is little discussion, however, of an appropriate methodology for the theological interpretation of art. Although Richard Viladesau's discussion of the similarities between art works and texts, in which he argues that the exegete should treat the

⁵ E.g. the work of Jeremy Begbie, David Brown, Frank Burch Brown, John Dillenberger, Richard Viladesau and others.

⁶ E.g. John Drury, *Painting the Word* (London Yale University Press, 1999).

⁷ E.g. Jules Lubbock, *Storytelling in Christian Art from Giotto to Donatello* (London: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁸ E.g. Paolo Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano, Painting as Visual Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Natasha F. O'Hear, *Contrasting Images of the Book of Revelation in Late Medieval and Early Modern Art, a Case Study in Visual Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). M. O'Kane, *Painting the Text, the Artist as Biblical Interpreter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007).

image as they would a text,⁹ is helpful in according images a status which they have often lacked, it does not take account of the ways in which images differ from texts, nor does it say much about other factors which should be considered when interpreting them.

I have yet to come across a genuinely detailed examination of the question of how a theological interpretation of a piece of art should be conducted and it is this ‘theological hermeneutic for images’ which I hope to provide here.¹⁰ The methodology I propose draws on critical hermeneutics in theology and literature, as well as art historical analysis, incorporating a Christian understanding of religious images and sacred space.

This chapter explores the similarities between texts and images which make it possible to draw on textual hermeneutics when interpreting images, as well as the differences between texts and images which mean that a purely textual approach would be insufficient. It then proposes ways in which other disciplines can inform a methodology for the theological interpretation of images and argues for a method based on the approaches of reader criticism, reception studies, and cultural history, and one that considers the significance of space, particularly sacred space, in giving a full account of images. Finally it sets out the proposed methodology for the thesis.

⁹ Viladesau. Ch.3.

¹⁰ This is in contrast to analysis specifically of the *artist's* interpretation of a *text*. E.g. Berdini. O'Hear.

2.2 Text and image

2.2.1 The applicability of textual hermeneutics to images

Western Christianity has generally treated images as similar to texts in function if not in media or status, and many aspects of textual interpretation can legitimately be applied to images. Of course, images do not function precisely as texts do, and cannot be translated into texts without reduction and alteration, but much of the basic methodology of textual interpretation applies. Like texts, images have creators, commissioners, and audiences; they have an original, historical context and subsequent contexts; there are elements whose significance may be unclear due to damage, loss of knowledge, or misunderstanding; and they communicate through a variety of forms, conventions, associations, and references.

Viladesau¹¹ makes a strong case for approaching religious art (or at least what he terms its ‘classics’) in a similar way to religious texts and, therefore, for paying as much attention to hermeneutics with regard to art as with regard to texts. He identifies three main ways in which religious art functions similarly to religious texts, both as a text ‘of’ and a text ‘for’ theology. Art can be a text ‘of’ theology as a locus of religious practice and faith, as part of Christian tradition mediating Christian faith. It can reflect and embody Christian beliefs¹² and present these “in a way that is persuasive and attractive, giving a vision that can lead to moral conversion and action”.¹³ As a text ‘for’ theology art “reveals significant aspects of the particular human situations to which God’s word is addressed and on which theology must therefore reflect”,¹⁴ having what Paul Tillich might call a ‘correlational function’.¹⁵

¹¹ Viladesau. Ch.3.

¹² Ibid. p.125.

¹³ Ibid. p.125.

¹⁴ Ibid.p.125.

¹⁵ I.e. the idea that Christianity provides the answers to the questions of human existence. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). See also, for example, Bernard M. Loomer, "Tillich's Theology of Correlation," *The Journal of Religion* 36, no. 3 (1956).

Of course, an artwork as a theological text has inherent limitations, being a physical object attempting to mediate that which goes significantly beyond the concrete.¹⁶ Additionally, the viewer has limitations in his understanding of and response to the art work, affected by his knowledge of the historical, aesthetic, and symbolic context of the artwork, and his own hermeneutical framework.

In constructing a methodology for interpreting images I hope to avoid defining the object of study by the methodology applied to it (rather than vice versa), although the charge of circularity (choosing the methodology based on the nature of the object, but identifying that nature by some precursive sympathy for the methodology) is hard to escape. Nevertheless, starting from a functional rather than an ontological point may help and one should perhaps begin by asking not what a text (or image) is, but what it does. Daniel Hardy provides a helpful list of functions which theological texts can embody, and these could be applied equally well to images. A text, Hardy writes, may do some or all of the following:

1. “ It configures or maps reality in its spatial and temporal aspects...”
2. “It gives human beings both their place in the cosmology of the world and ...in the continuity of world-history.”
3. “It ‘plots’ actions and events...establishing the coherence of such actions in events...[T]he meaning of texts is found in performance, through which what has been is then done, and what still needs to be done is actually done.”
4. “It provides a calculus for the value to be assigned to reality in its different aspects, to human beings, and to actions, events and situations. In this way it ‘measures’ them, and assigns them ethical importance that is then embodied in ethical behaviour.”
5. “It ‘stirs’ appropriate forms of thought and conduct.”

¹⁶Viladesau. p.157.

6. "Through all of these, it brings to light the purposes and activity of the God whose own intensity is found in the density of the meaning of these texts and by the behaviour propelled or attracted by it."¹⁷

Hardy writes,

Human beings – as by nature spatially and temporally extended – can only apprehend density of meaning (at its most intensive where the divine and human meet) *extensively*. That does not imply that they are *confined* to this extensity of meaning, however: even very specific and limited appreciations may contain truthful intimations of the more profound meaning.¹⁸

If this is true of texts, it applies even more to images which are, by their nature, even more extensive than texts, and encountered in a more extensive way.

This approach is useful when considering images because it recognises the physical nature of the artwork and the viewer's encounter with it. The artist responds to the extensity of created life but also to the intensity and dynamism of certain aspects of it, and in powerful works of art there is often a sense of density, a concentration of existence. Since corporeal extension is a fundamental characteristic of human existence, humans are particularly suited to understanding experience, observation, emotion, and instruction (in their density) through extended forms of communication, and therefore through art.

2.2.2 The insufficiency of textual hermeneutics for interpreting images

Having surveyed briefly the similarities between texts and images, which suggest the legitimacy of applying textual hermeneutics to the study of images, it is worth noting some key differences between images and texts, which mean that textual methodologies alone are insufficient when examining images.

¹⁷Daniel W. Hardy, "Reason, Wisdom and the Interpretation of Scripture " in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom* ed. David Ford and Graham Stanton (London: SCM, 2003). p.76.

¹⁸Ibid. p77.

One clear difference is in their status as Christian sources. Clearly textual sources have varied theological status, but canonical Scripture takes first place and no image in the Western Church can claim the proximity to Christ that the New Testament does.¹⁹ The earliest known Christian images date to the early third century and the frescoes considered in this thesis are over 1300 years after Christ. These images are based on textual sources (usually the New Testament and the *Golden Legend*²⁰), much as their textual contemporaries have their sources in Scripture and in earlier theological writings. However, this thesis does not focus primarily on how the images *interpret* their textual sources, but on how they *express* their theological content. Clearly an understanding of textual sources may illuminate this, both because of their influence on the patron and artist, and because of the probable resonance for the viewer. However, textual sources for images are themselves sources for the history of God's relationship with humanity. They are not, therefore, the primary material, but the record of it. Images can likewise be records of this primary material; a means of more direct encounter with it (as, indeed, can some texts, especially those designed to be read in a visually imaginative way such as devotional handbooks which instructed readers to visualise events and imagine themselves present at the scene²¹). In this thesis, the images are the primary object of study and the aim is to understand how they function, rather than solely how they relate to their textual antecedents (while acknowledging the influential importance of these).

¹⁹According to tradition, St Luke painted the Virgin, and various icons are said to have been painted by the saint. There are also traditions of *acheiropoieta* (images not made by human hands) which were thought to have been painted, or finished, by angels or other miraculous means. These traditions demonstrate a desire to show a close connection between holy images and saints or angels and to give them the status of miracles or primary sources for the relationship between God and mankind. The same applies to textiles bearing the imprint of Jesus' face (the Mandyllion and the veil of Veronica). While still revered by many Christians today, scholars do not accord them the status of primary sources on a par with the New Testament.

²⁰ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend, Readings on the Saints*, trans., William G. Ryan, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²¹ E.g. the *Mediationes Vitae Christi*, which encouraged the reader to imagine himself present in scenes of Christ's life and immerse himself in Christ's Passion. See Eugene Honee, "Image and Imagination in the Medieval Culture of Paryer: A Historical Perspective," in *The Art of Devotion 1300-1500*, ed. Henk van Os (London: Merrell Hoberton Publishers with Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, 1994).

The second difference is essentially methodological. While the texts of canonical Scripture are presented in their ‘final form’²² which scholars have often sought to unpick to reveal the sources and original components of the text, images frequently present something much more fragmentary.²³ The damage of time and ill-advised ‘restoration’ has often left only pieces or shadows of what was, originally, the ‘final form’ of the image. Thus while biblical scholars work from a final form to its components, pulling apart their texts, so to speak, many art historians try to rebuild images, imaginatively adding to them, to ‘see’ what contemporary viewers would have seen. In so doing they often increase their understanding of the sources behind an image and the methods used in making it, but art history often works to reconstruct an unseen ‘top layer’ as well as the unknowns of the foundations. In this sense, art historians may be working both forwards and backwards from the image and must be aware of the dangers of over-interpretation on both sides, as must theologians working with art historical material.

Third, there is a difference of *sensory experience* between reading a text and looking at an image. It would be easy to overstate this difference and ignore the complex interplay between words and pictures which were, artificially and to the detriment of both, progressively separated from the Reformation onwards. Words and images are part of a continuum of experience and expression, often enriching each other, and interaction with either can involve imagination. This said, images are particularly open to multisensory interaction. Stephen Pattison has argued convincingly for a rehabilitation of the concept of ‘haptic vision’ to understand and enrich our relationship with images.

²² Rowan Williams cautions against the assumption that the earlier form of a text is the authentic form, but also against seeing the later form as definitive/finished. He describes the tools of the historical-critical method as essential provided they are delineated from assumptions of superiority attached to earlier or later forms of the text. See Rowan Williams, "Historical Criticism and Sacred Text " in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom*, ed. David Ford and Graham Stanton (London: SCM, 2003). p.222.

²³ Of course documents are sometimes incomplete or damaged and scholars may attempt to reconstruct the original. Scripture, however, is treated as canonical even when scholars can identify earlier elements within it, while the theological documents contemporary with the frescoes studied here tend to be in their final form.

Haptic vision, (from the Greek verb *haptēin*, meaning to grasp, seize, touch),

reconnects vision with the body and other senses, as well as allowing sight to draw nearer to perceptible objects. It allows people to get close to and become involved in more intimate relations with the world... a haptic concept of sight emphasizes the holistic, embodied and relational aspects of vision.²⁴

The notion of haptic vision recognises that images are more than symbols or representations but have material bodies of their own and “inhabit the same spatial world” as we do. It is therefore possible to have “bodily, non-symbolic”, “personlike” relations with images and for these to have profound and formative effects.²⁵ Pattison explains that,

Until the Renaissance, and even beyond, sight was firmly located alongside the other senses...It was even thought of as a kind of touch. More importantly, the whole action of seeing was thought to be a direct and active substantial engagement and encounter with material reality.²⁶

From this perspective sight is the most important of the senses, but more integrated with them. This multisensory engagement with images as corporeal things is not wholly divorced from the experience of reading a text but is nevertheless of a different order and directs the methodology of this thesis firmly towards the need to recognise the corporeal and spatial as categories integral to a theological interpretation of images.

The fourth difference is qualitative and also bound up with the question of space. Many religious images have a physical location in a way which a book does not. The relationship between image and location may be best understood as a quality of the image and, sometimes, its location. Texts are generally not location-specific. They are usually portable and even a text intended for use in a particular place can be read elsewhere and equally well understood, while copies of texts are (setting aside

²⁴ Stephen Pattison, *Seeing Things* (London: SCM Press, 2007).p.19.

²⁵ Ibid. p.20.

²⁶ Ibid. p.41.

copy errors and bindings, illustrations, illumination, etc.) just as much ‘the text’ as the original.

The same is true of some religious images, but not all. A woodcut or print designed to be reproduced is not location specific (except, perhaps, in the sense of the specific position of an illustration in a text, although both text and image remain essentially portable). Many religious images, however, were not designed for reproduction (although they often are today) and are location specific as texts are not. Some religious images may even be considered as location-makers, i.e. the image alters the nature of its location. This occurs in three main ways, through three kinds of image which for ease of reference I will call ‘portable’, ‘designed’, and ‘incorporated’.

The first category is exemplified by the portable altarpiece in which a small image works in conjunction with a portable altar to create a sacred environment for prayer and sacrament. Other devotional images operate in a similar if less immediately sacramentally orientated way (i.e. without the immediate connection with an altar). A devotional panel could be placed in a bedroom or closet and become the focus, and locus, of prayer. The panel could be moved and would have the same function and effect in its new location. The presence of the image transforms its location from secular to sacred, redefining the purpose of that space (without negating its original function). The second category is exemplified by images which are designed (or chosen) for a specific place and which, while they may be portable, given sufficient manpower, belong there and are only moved for special occasions such as processions, because they have become redundant,²⁷ or for their own preservation. These issues, however, make no difference to the nature of the image as originally selected for its particular location. The third category, the incorporated image, overlaps with the second in that images in this category are also designed for a particular location and may be moved (or obliterated) for the same reasons. The difference is that these images are incorporated into the fabric of their location, as is the case with frescoes, mosaics, carvings and some sculptures.

²⁷ E.g. due to remodelling or redeployment of the building, because of damage, or because a new image is thought preferable with changes in patronage, popularity of saints, artistic styles, etc.

Images in these categories are physical in a way that texts are not. Granted, texts are physical objects in that they are recorded on physical materials, and when read aloud are embodied in the physicality (if not tangibility) of sound waves. These images, however, are in various ways and to various degrees, part of their location, chosen for it, perhaps physically incorporated into it, possibly defining or even transforming it. The image determines the viewer's location and the degree of determination increases according to the nature of the image as portable, designed, or incorporated. Whereas the viewer has control over the placing of a portable image, only the patrons and owners of the building have control over the placing of incorporated images, and once placed they are fixed. Because they are physically part of their location, the activity of viewing them physically locates the viewer, establishing a spatial and corporeal relationship between image, location, and viewer. The significance of space, especially sacred space, and the possibilities which religious images open up for their viewers through the medium of sacred space, will be central to this thesis.

2.2.3 Some conclusions regarding the application of textual hermeneutics to images

Textual hermeneutics can legitimately be applied to images but the differences between texts and images mean that a solely textual approach would be insufficient for the theological interpretation of images. The most significant difference is the physicality of images and the viewer's encounter with them. A theological hermeneutic for images must, therefore, be aware of and refer to this. The precise nature of the physicality will vary according to the image, and the interpretation must be sensitive to this. As 'incorporated images', frescoes have a particular physicality associated with being embedded in their locations. Addressing the issue of sacred space in and around images will therefore form an important part of the methodology of this thesis and will be considered in more detail below.

2.3 Drawing on methodologies from other disciplines

2.3.1 Reader criticism and multiple layers of meaning as an appropriate model

In the past three centuries three main hermeneutical approaches have dominated theology and literary criticism: historical criticism, the 'New Criticism', and reader criticism/response. All three methods can be applied to the study of images but the first two are unsatisfactory, primarily because they do not reflect the reality of the encounter between reader and text (or viewer and image). The historical critical search for authorial intention as the 'real meaning' of the text is inadequate because even if, under favourable circumstances, an authorial intention can be approximated, it can never be directly or fully known. The search for it is likely to increase understanding of the context of a text and as such is an illuminating and worthwhile project, but the meaning of that text is not necessarily restricted to this. Such restriction would be comparable to claiming that because the 'Quest for the Historical Jesus' did not arrive at a single, unanimously recognised, historical figure, Christ was therefore devoid of meaning.

In the history of literary criticism, the search for authorial intention and its rebuttal as the authorial or intentional fallacy²⁸ was succeeded by a focus on the text per se (the New Criticism), as a quasi-autonomous subject of study, regardless of author, context, or reader. Although this approach rightly allows for the on-going life of a text beyond its original context, and values its inherent structures, it is equally unrealistic, since texts evidently do have authors, contexts, and readers, and these evidently do influence what is written and how it is read. Dismissing these aspects of a text is therefore inaccurate and reductionist.

In the sphere of literary criticism, the New Criticism was followed by a reader criticism model which claimed that textual meaning emerges during the reading

²⁸ William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *Sewanee Review* 54, (1946).

process and that meaning is legitimately identified by the reader in terms of his response to the text. Its critics have argued that reader criticism destroys stability and determinacy of meaning through pluralism, lacks authority, and can facilitate un-self-critical reader ideologies. There have therefore been numerous attempts to propose an acceptable theory of reader criticism by neutralising these problems.²⁹ These include considering pluralism in a positive light (as a dynamic force, encouraging on-going engagement between Christian communities and ‘living’ texts,³⁰ and ensuring that interpretations are always open to improvement³¹) and/or emphasising that pluralism need not be radically relativist. Interpretation can be restrained by ‘controlling factors’ which would render certain readings incompatible with the reader’s interpretative criteria or community, or which are held to be incompatible with the genre of the text. Some interpretations would thus be unacceptable to certain people or groups, while others would be coherent and persuasive.

The question of authority, not only to interpret (i.e. to determine meaning), but to determine what constitutes a legitimate hermeneutical method, can be endlessly debated since one party’s proof is another’s falsehood. Reader criticism, however, has the advantage of empirical backing in that it reflects actual practice: people read a text and respond to it. The text ‘means’ for them what they think it means. An interpretation could be criticised for failing to take account of certain factors, for being self-contradictory, or for over/under emphasis, but the text still ‘means’ to the reader what that reader reads in it. The best that is achievable in terms of legitimising a reading is a peer review process, though it is neither flawless nor objective.

²⁹ See, among others, Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader, Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). Also Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1980).

³⁰ See Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture, a Model for Theological Interpretation* (London: Blackwell, 1998). pp.10-11.

³¹ See Werner G. Jeanrond, "After Hermeneutics: The Relationship between Theology and Biblical Studies " in *The Open Text, New Directions for Biblical Studies* ed. Francis Watson (London: SCM, 1993).pp.92-95.

A self-critical attitude is always desirable but no methodology can guarantee it and other forms of criticism are not immune to failures in this respect. Indeed, a reader critical approach might claim that historical criticism and the New Criticism were simply forms of reader criticism, reflecting their particular readers' concerns. Reader criticism, therefore, need not imply that author and context are superfluous or invalid. What it does is to acknowledge that different readers have different reading experiences, influenced by different 'concerns' (including taste³²), and that these experiences, being fact, are valid and meaningful, at least for them. Whether one person's 'meaning' has significance for another depends on the reading (and the ideologies or concerns influencing it) and the reader's ability to communicate it. Provided the 'listener' is attentive and critical when assessing an interpretation he need not fear the interpreter's own concerns, and provided the interpreter is self-aware and self-critical, he need not fear these either.

Earlier hermeneutic models may also be valuable to the interpretation of art. In the medieval period a standard approach treated texts as having four layers or kinds of meaning: literal (direct, historical, factual), allegorical (explained in terms of doctrine, often on the basis of typology or symbolism), anagogical (related to metaphysical or eschatological knowledge) and moral (the practical implication).³³ While this method may not have been uniformly applied, with scholars focussing on the meaning with most mileage for their purposes, it nevertheless allowed for a flexibility within exegesis that could accommodate multiple meanings.

Arguably, the contrast drawn between the literal and metaphorical since the Reformation was less restrictive in medieval times. According to Denys Turner, Aquinas included the metaphorical as part of the literal, the literal sense being what the author intended and referring to historical events, but the ultimate author being

³² Taste is often used to mean simply that which best fits the mores of its time but can imply much more. Frank Burch Brown argues for an 'ecumenical taste' which rejects prejudices based on artistic taste and welcomes all spiritually nourishing art, seeking the highest quality, regardless of the art form in question. Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste, Aesthetics in Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³³ See Henri de Lubac S.J., *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans., Mark Sebanc, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids & Edinburgh: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company and T&T Clark, 1998). pp.1-14.

God who comprehends all things and may therefore intend many things simultaneously. A single ‘event’ in salvation history might therefore be interpreted in many ways, all of them divinely intended. Metaphor is an additional rather than an opposed or alternative way of describing something; the literal sense can signify spiritual and metaphorical things. Furthermore, analogy and typology are spiritual senses of the literal historical events.³⁴ Such plurality of meaning in Scripture is theologically important because it corresponds to the plurality of human minds and enables all men to understand Scripture in some way.³⁵

A slightly different formulation was proposed by the 14th century Franciscan, Nicholas of Lyra, who posited a dual concept of the ‘literal’ as an authorial intention that included literal-historical, and literal-prophetic. The prophetic, whose meaning is understood after the author’s own time, could sometimes take precedence over the literal-historical. The interpreter’s role was to explain the historical meaning and elucidate its later spiritual significance. The meaning of a text was not necessarily restricted to its ‘original’ meaning but could bear an “implicit meaning only understood by a later audience” and sometimes more important than the meaning originally intended by the author.³⁶ Whether dual, or fourfold, the medieval exegetical awareness of multiple layers of meaning within a text is admirably suited to interpreting images, art being inherently capable of carrying multiple meanings and functions, and of communicating in a complex manner.

This thesis is intended to develop the theological understanding of specific images - within the context of Christian images more generally - and enrich the experience of the modern viewer encountering these. The interpretations offered are neither fully comprehensive, nor the final word on the subjects. They take account of both the original contexts of the images and their continuing existence (often in functioning

³⁴David Turner, "Metaphor, Poetry and Allegory, Erotic Love in the Sermons on the Song of Songs of Bernard of Clairvaux," in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom*, ed. David Ford and Graham Stanton (London: SCM, 2003). pp. 202-207.

³⁵Eugene Rogers cited in Fowl. pp.38-39.

³⁶David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture, Classic and Contemporary Readings* ed. Stephen E. Fowl (London: Blackwell, 1997). pp.30-31.

churches), and explore their on-going theological significance for modern Christians.³⁷ The ‘modern Christian’ functions in this thesis rather as the ‘implied reader’ does in literary criticism. The ideal (implied) viewer probably exists no more than the ideal (implied) reader, but the concept remains useful since it approximates to many, differing, real viewers and readers. This thesis seeks to answer the question: “Why should these images matter to the modern Christian viewer?” It is therefore, inherently, a ‘reception’ driven project, and the interpretations offered here are a synthesis of existing knowledge about the images and their contexts and a critically examined intuitive response to them, as seen through a theological lens. I readily acknowledge my personal ‘viewer’s concerns’ in this thesis, which I approach as a member of the Church of England who sometimes worships in the Roman Catholic Church and with the Society of Friends. The project began when I questioned why I had a strong religious response to the frescoes by Fra Angelico in San Marco and wondered what these and other frescoes of the period might mean to the modern Christian and how they might communicate this. My ‘viewer’s concerns’ will no doubt be visible throughout what I believe is, nevertheless, a critical examination.

Where theology is informed (as it should be) by reality, i.e. by the experience and concerns of those whose faith it addresses, it often has to navigate between the normative and the experiential. Theologians must then communicate the decisions reached, the interpretations formulated, and seek assent to them. This ‘communication’ may be persuasive or coercive. Persuasion in this context consists of providing a sufficiently coherent and compelling account of, for example, a sacred text, or doctrine, to attract affirmation from others.³⁸ Persuasion in this context is not about changing someone’s mind, perhaps against their better judgement, but rather about presenting an interpretation which, after critical examination, convinces the reader or listener. Coercion, on the other hand is applied such that the alternative to agreeing with the interpreter is damaging (physically, mentally, socially, economically, etc.) to the other person. This elicits a false kind of agreement in which a person ‘agrees’ on the grounds that this is the least damaging option,

³⁷ See note 2 on page 12.

³⁸ This does not refer to persuasion by demonstrable logic, which does not work in a religious context.

without really meaning it. True agreement must be on the grounds of genuine persuasion. That this does not provide a very clear cut policy regarding who has interpretative authority should not be considered any more problematic than the task of interpretation itself which is, by definition, more of an art than a science.³⁹

This is not to espouse complete relativism. Texts and images, like most forms of human communication, especially those which are complex, produce complex and subtle effects (responses). In such cases there can be no ‘perfect’, ‘literal’ synonym but rather the responses of as many readers as encounter it. Responses to expressive works involve a plethora of associations and emotions, and interpretation is not, by and large, a question of right or wrong, but of persuasiveness: that is, of coherence and attractiveness.⁴⁰

For the purposes of this thesis I shall be working on the assumption that authorial intention, contemporary reception, and subsequent reception history, including modern responses, are all relevant to interpreting images. Greater knowledge may illuminate and increase appreciation of an image, and an awareness of context, authorial intention, and contemporary reception, insofar as they can be known, is likely to be relevant: the more one knows about inspiration, authorship, sources, and effects, the richer one’s experience and the more there is for one to respond to.

Where it is not possible to know much, or perhaps anything, about the original function or authorial intention of an image, or its contemporary effects, that may reduce but will not invalidate discussion of its significance now. Similarly if the modern response and the contemporary response differ, this does not invalidate the modern. As God created humans with free will, so the artist, in *imitatio dei*, creates

³⁹An early hermeneutical distinction was made between *ars intelligendi* (the art of understanding) and *ars explicandi* (the art of explaining) which includes *applicatio*, the explanation of significance in terms of application to a situation (the Sunday sermon being a good example). See Eric D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1976). p.19.

⁴⁰There may be instances where an interpretation is wrong within the parameters of its own venture: for example, an interpretation might hinge on the fact that a word was used seven times in the text and that seven held some special numerical symbolism. If the word was actually used six times then the theory would be wrong by its own standards.

an image, thereby creating (consciously and/or unconsciously) a potential range of responses that it may evoke, without determining which ones will obtain.⁴¹ The viewer's response is to an image but the response is in him and strongly conditioned by him. That response is, therefore, not right or wrong, it is a statement of the reality of the viewer's thoughts and feelings. One may argue about the appropriateness of the response, its subtlety, its awareness of certain aspects of the image etc., but the response itself cannot be correct or incorrect, it can only be more or less coherent with the visual and historical data and more or less persuasive for other viewers. In this sense positive theology⁴² has similarities with art interpretation in the sense that both operate by persuasion and the aesthetic element of a coherent interpretation can in itself be a persuasive factor.⁴³

2.3.2 Reception studies

The rise of reader criticism as a literary movement was mirrored in biblical studies by the development of reception history, which treats the history of how a theological source has been received and interpreted as revealing aspects of its meaning and as worthy of study in its own right. As Francis Watson argues, historical criticism will provide historical answers to historical questions but this does not mean that these questions are the only legitimate ones.⁴⁴ As discussed above, by excluding other hermeneutics, historical criticism is in danger of ignoring other, valuable aspects of the text. Rigorous historical scholarship is still valid, but the objective reconstruction of original context is not always achievable and restricting scholarship to this is impoverishing.

⁴¹ The artist, no matter how definite his communicative purpose, is forced eventually to leave matters in the viewer's hands (or eyes). Could one go so far as to say that, just as a creation which was not free could have no moral value, so an image to which only one response is possible could have no value? Perhaps. It would certainly be likely to undermine its artistic value (propaganda usually gets short shrift as art, although it can be hard to identify without being well informed about the context). Such an image is obviously hypothetical and can only be so: no image could have only one possible response since the conditioning factor of the viewer is far stronger than the conditions of the viewed. The viewer's 'perspective' is the most important in determining the response.

⁴² "POSITIVE THEOLOGY: The branch of theology which treats of matters of historic and particular fact, custom, or enactment, as opposed to 'natural theology', which deals with religious principles and laws of universal validity." Elizabeth A. Livingstone, ed. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). p.410

⁴³ I am grateful to Ben Quash for noting this.

⁴⁴ Francis Watson, ed. *The Open Text, New Directions for Biblical Studies* (London: SCM, 1993). Introduction.

Recently, Marcus Bockmuehl has argued very sensibly that, in order to revive

insights of exegesis and application, but without being forced to give hostages to either a one-dimensional “history of the victors” or a revisionist veneration of all that was supposedly suppressed⁴⁵

the modern New Testament scholar should include the history of the reception of a text as “an integral and indeed inescapable part of the exercise in which they are engaged.”⁴⁶ This would provide a better historical understanding of both the background and the ‘foreground’ of the text.⁴⁷ Looking at the ‘footprint’ of a text helps in understanding its meaning and allows the scholar to connect diachronic⁴⁸ and synchronic⁴⁹ hermeneutical methods,⁵⁰ obtaining a fuller understanding of the text. While acknowledging that authorial intention and the implied reader may not be precisely identifiable, bearing in mind the original context insofar as it can be known will be informative, without denying the “active contribution of that reader to the act of interpretation and the generation of meaning.”⁵¹ The same is true of images.

Hermeneutics should, therefore, be *historically* conscious: the interpreter should be as clear as possible about what period in a text/image’s history he is addressing, e.g. its creation, its contemporary reception, the later history of its reception, modern responses to it, etc. Hermeneutics should also be *subjectively* conscious: the interpreter should be as clear as possible about the subject whose response he is addressing. This might include any or all of, the author/artist’s creative act (response to an idea), and responses to this, whether intended or additional, contemporary or

⁴⁵ Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word, Refocussing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006). p.66.

⁴⁶ Ibid.p.65.

⁴⁷Ibid. p.64.

⁴⁸“...the traditional cluster of historical-critical studies along with a few newer methods adopted from fields like social history and cultural anthropology, rhetoric, and modern archaeology”. Ibid. p.32.

⁴⁹ “...with their sociolinguistic, poststructuralist, or broadly literary pursuits, their miscellaneous queer or cultural studies, liberationist or post colonialist ideological criticism, and the sometimes unabashedly partisan relativism of their hermeneutics”. Ibid.p.32.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p.66.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.68.

later. Furthermore, the interpreter should try to be *personally* conscious, and open about his own ideologies and concerns etc., allowing these to be examined, questioned and criticised within the process of interpreting.

Although this thesis offers an interpretation of certain frescoes with the aim of increasing appreciation of their theological significance by the modern viewer, this is illuminated by understanding as much as possible about the context of their creation, the world and attitudes of their original viewers, and the concerns of their patrons. Without attempting to define the experience of the contemporary viewer, it takes account of what can be known of this, seeking to adopt the ‘period eye’ wherever possible.

2.3.3 Drawing on historical and art historical methodology: the period eye

2.3.3.1 The cultural history method and purpose

The development in theology of reception studies had its counterpart in historical studies in the rise of cultural history. Cultural historians such as Peter Burke and Quentin Skinner supported the gradual move in the 20th century away from reading history as a sequence of great events orchestrated by powerful people, to an examination of the cross section of society, considering the everyday experiences of a variety of people, as well as the unusual experiences of extraordinary people, and studying behaviour and ideas as well as major events. Cultural history took ‘culture’ (variously defined) as the primary material for understanding the past, leading to the re-examination of literary and visual sources and an increased interest in oral and visual history. Cultural history has engaged with literary criticism, biblical hermeneutics and, especially, with art, as historians looked to art to help them to understand their periods.⁵²

⁵² Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (Malden, MA: Polity Press 2004).p.8.

Burke identifies two major approaches to cultural history: *Zeitgeist* and schemata. The former appears in classic cultural histories such as the works of Jacob Burckhardt and Johan Huizinga who implicitly sought to paint a ‘portrait of an age’, reflecting what Hegel had termed the ‘*Zeitgeist*’.⁵³ Erwin Panofsky presented a variation on this approach in art history, claiming that the iconography of art could reveal the ‘world-view’ of its culture, as in his provocative argument that gothic architecture was the physical expression of scholastic thinking.⁵⁴ Frederick Antal likewise saw culture as reflective of society, as demonstrated in his Marxist study of the art of Renaissance Florence as essentially an expression of the bourgeois mentality.⁵⁵ The schemata approach is visible in the work of Aby Warburg, who was interested in the (re)presentation of particular themes across different historical periods and geographical areas. The study of cultural history through schemata was endorsed by philosophers such as Karl Popper who argued that we make observations by a process of testing hypotheses, enabling us to identify patterns rather than being swamped in the confusion of meaningless detail. Hans-Georg Gadamer similarly argued that textual interpretation is based on prejudgements (a form of pattern recognition) and challenges to these, and Ernst Gombrich famously developed the idea in art history, drawing on contemporary theories of learning by ‘schema and correction’.⁵⁶

The Cambridge School of history, exemplified by Quentin Skinner, argued the need to understand the intellectual and political context of texts in order to understand their meaning and purpose. Skinner advocated taking authors and readers seriously on their own terms, by learning their language, adopting their point of view, and seeking the rationale behind beliefs which might seem strange to modern eyes.⁵⁷ Skinner has been criticised⁵⁸ for an overly secular approach, for underestimating the way in which individuals share assumptions with groups of which they are members

⁵³ Ibid.p.7.

⁵⁴ Ibid.pp.12-13.

⁵⁵ Ibid.pp.16-17.

⁵⁶ Ibid.pp.11-12.

⁵⁷ Alistair Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory, eds., *Seeing Things Their Way, Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009). p.2.

⁵⁸ D.W. Bebbington, "Response," in *Seeing Things Their Way, Intellectual History and the Return of Religion*, ed. Alistair Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009). p.248.

and for being too keen to attribute an anachronistic, post-Enlightenment version of rationality and consistency to past thinkers, which may not always be helpful in a religious context where beliefs may be fragmentary and experiential.⁵⁹ Skinner's requirement that one compare a work with its intellectual milieu also assumes the presence of comparative evidence, which may not always be available and, even if it is, there may be difficulties in setting parameters for what constitutes comparative evidence.

Despite such criticisms, Alister Chapman, John Coffey and Brad Gregory have recently argued⁶⁰ that Skinner's methodology could be applied to reinserting religion into accounts of intellectual history, making it "richer and more complete."⁶¹ They propose a *via media* to avoid the reductionism of either a materialist (Marxist, Freudian etc.) or an idealist approach. Materialist reductionism assumes that religious belief is to be explained in terms of something considered to be "more permanent and fundamental" than the belief itself, such as "economic interests, repressed sexuality, [or] the need for communal integration", resulting in a portrayal of people of the past in ways that they themselves would not acknowledge.⁶² Idealist reductionism occurs when church historians and confessional theologians "take *their own* theology so seriously that they judge all other theologies in the light of it."⁶³ To avoid such reductionism, Chapman et al assume that religious ideas are as important and intelligible as political and philosophical ideas and say as much about the past, and adopt Skinner's approach of doing "everything possible...to understand past agents on their own terms in their own contexts".⁶⁴ Scepticism about the possibility of recovering authorial intention, while it should instil modesty and caution in the historian, should not put him off the historical enterprise. We cannot have the experiences of people in the past, but we *can* understand their beliefs better if we

⁵⁹ Ibid.p.249.

⁶⁰Chapman, Coffey, and Gregory, eds.

⁶¹ Ibid.pp.4-5.

⁶² Ibid.p.12. Making claims about what an historical person would or would not acknowledge is, of course, contentious.

⁶³ Ibid.p.14.

⁶⁴ Ibid.p.16.

take the trouble to do so, and the more we do so, the better are our chances of recovering authorial intentions.⁶⁵

2.3.3.2 Justifying the cultural history approach

In self-justification cultural history must answer the question, ‘Is it possible to say anything valid about the experience of people in the past?’ Burke identifies a number of potential methodological problems in cultural history, including: the need for sound source critics to understand the purpose of text and images and assess data; the danger of making assumptions; critical bias; overemphasis on homogeneity, overlooking subcultures or grouping various subcultures together; lack of hard data (especially in the *Zeitgeist* model); oversimplifications regarding high/learned and low/popular culture; the tendency of tradition and innovation to mask each other; the contemporaneity of the non-contemporary;⁶⁶ distinguishing between authorial intention and reception; and, perhaps most significantly, the danger of psychological anachronism. This last can be paralysing, making it seem impossible to say anything about the experience of people in the past.⁶⁷ With regard to images in particular, there is scepticism about the iconographical/iconological decoding methods of art historians like Panofsky, and recognition of the difficulties involved in interpreting images and making deductions from them. There is also the danger of creating circular arguments: identifying an event or attitude in an image and then using the image as historical evidence for that event or attitude.

In a helpful overview, Brad Gregory has produced a concise summary of the objections to ‘seeing things their way’ and a convincing rebuttal of these, concluding that the project of ‘seeing things their way’ is valid.⁶⁸ Gregory classifies the objections as epistemological and ideological, practical and theoretical, i.e.: firstly, it cannot be done in principle; secondly, it cannot be done in practice; thirdly, it

⁶⁵ Ibid.p.17.

⁶⁶ The beliefs and practices which seem to belong to one period often continue into later periods as inherited culture.

⁶⁷ Peter Burke, ed. *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). p.17.

⁶⁸ Brad S. Gregory, "Can We “See Things Their Way”? Should We Try?," in *Seeing Things Their Way, Intellectual History and the Return of Religion*, ed. A. Chapman, J. Coffey, and B.S. Gregory (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

should not be done in principle; fourthly, it should not be done in practice. His response as follows. Firstly, it is trivially true that we cannot have the experiences of other people (of any time including the present) but it is nonsensical to say that we cannot understand the experiences of others. Every act of successful communication proves otherwise and if it were not so, almost all history would be an impossible project. Secondly, those who explain religion in terms of other, apparently more fundamental, categories, far from objectively and disinterestedly pursuing historical understanding, are espousing an “ideological historicism grounded in a post-Enlightenment metaphysical naturalism that in effect denies the possibility that *any* religious beliefs *could* be true.”⁶⁹ The premises of this view are self-justifying, not self-evident, and “the use of secular categories to explain religious views is analytically equivalent to the use of religious categories to explain secular views.”⁷⁰ Thirdly, the alterity of situations, the paucity of evidence, and the obstruction of scholarly biases are not insurmountable problems and none of them “constitutes an absolute barrier to understanding, provided that by “understanding” we do not mean a complete, perfect reconstruction of the ideas of the people whom we study.”⁷¹ Fourthly, the view that reconstructing the experiences of people in the past is not useful or interesting wrongly assumes that taste (that which one finds interesting or uninteresting) is an acceptable reason for dismissing such studies. All scholars must justify their work, but not everyone will be interested in all things, and this does not necessarily reflect the value of that work.⁷² In conclusion, Gregory argues:

It is time to recognise, in a manner analytically identical to the critique of traditional confessional history, that secular ideas and ideologies are just as capable of distorting the study of religion as are particular religious commitments.⁷³

In art history, Erwin Panofsky considered the controls that could be applied as corrections to the interpreter’s subjectivity. Although his work is somewhat dated now and his ‘decoding’ methodology no longer fashionable, his idea that the art

⁶⁹ Ibid.p.33.

⁷⁰ Ibid.p.34.

⁷¹ Ibid.p.36.

⁷² Ibid.p.41.

⁷³ Ibid.p.43.

historian's judgement can be corrected by his knowledge and skill,⁷⁴ is still a valid one, suggesting that scholars are capable of exercising self-criticism and restraint. In the 1970s Michael Baxandall coined the phrase 'the period eye' and famously applied this to a discussion of 15th century Florentine paintings and their contemporary viewers' experience of them, demonstrating that valuable if incomplete information could be gained in this way.⁷⁵

That there are dangers inherent in the cultural history method is clear. There are dangers in all methodologies. The cultural historian must be particularly wary of psychological anachronism, personal biases, eisegesis, and reductionism. This said, scholars such as Gregory and Baxandall have shown both the validity of the aim of 'seeing things their way' by acquiring the 'period eye' and the benefits of its practical application. Under the right conditions and with suitable self-awareness and humility, cultural history can offer a constructive interpretation of (rather than the final word on) societies and events in the past.

For the purposes of this thesis, the period eye may be derived from contemporary source material, both visual (the images and their comparators) and literary, including sources about individual art works (e.g. commission documents, letters from patrons and artists, descriptions of the images, records of payment), sources about artists (e.g. biographies, documents relating to other commissions, wills, tax returns, letters), painters' manuals, humanist writings about art theory and criticism, and theological and philosophical works (including sermons, tracts, papal bulls, etc.) that may illuminate contemporary theology, ideas, and concerns. In addition, there may be contextual information from a variety of sources (including theological ones) which could contribute to a general understanding of the period and help to situate particular artworks contextually in terms of location, function, audience, the socio-economic-political climate of the time, domestic concerns, gender issues, public life etc.

⁷⁴ Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology, Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1972 (first published 1939)), p.15.

⁷⁵ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

This thesis does not attempt to interpret the images in question ‘as a contemporary viewer would have seen them’ but to offer an interpretation for the modern viewer in the hope of facilitating a richer theological experience of the images. In doing so, it hopes to take into account the contemporary perspective as revealing of purpose, function and content, but it does not restrict the ‘meaning’ of the images either to their authorial (or patronal) intention or to their reception by their original audience.

2.4 Sacred space

2.4.1 Sacred space and the theological interpretation of art

As noted in 2.2.2 the physical, spatial nature of images is a crucial difference between images and texts, and indicates the need to go beyond textual interpretation strategies when interpreting images. Having borrowed from the disciplines of literary criticism, biblical hermeneutics, art history, and cultural history in constructing a theological hermeneutic for images, it is also necessary to account for the spatial nature of the image as theologically significant. Sacred space⁷⁶ is an essential category in this thesis and vital to its methodology. It is a necessary consideration in the theological interpretation of art because of the spatial and corporeal nature of both image and viewer, which conditions their relation and is thus crucial to the communication of meaning.

To state the obvious, space is a necessity of extended, corporeal human existence.⁷⁷ It is fundamental to all human experience, including religious experience, and to human relations. As John Dixon argues in *Art and the Theological Imagination*, awareness of the self means awareness of the other as ‘not self’. The self is here, the ‘not self’ is not here, it is there.⁷⁸ Human relations are spatial, and actions create tensions (and hence drama) in these relations. Dixon writes,

the categories of otherness – space and drama – are not simply the categories of the arts. They are the forming categories of theology.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Space and place are sometimes used interchangeably, but with a tendency to use ‘space’ of the abstract, infinite, or empty, and ‘place’ as more firmly located. This loose distinction applies here. For a useful overview of the concept and significance of space and place see: Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place, a Philosophical History* (California: University of California Press, 1997); John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003). Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* trans., Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1991). and John North and Philip North, eds., *Sacred Space: House of God, Gate of Heaven* (London: New York, 2007).

⁷⁷ See, for example, Casey, p.ix.

⁷⁸ John W. Dixon, *Art and the Theological Imagination* Crossroad Books (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978). p.9.

⁷⁹ Ibid.p.10.

Humanity's relation to God is similarly spatially conditioned: the Incarnation of Christ in created space is the founding event of Christian experience and the reason for the creation of the images discussed here. Space is a primary category of our experience and knowledge, and the medium in⁸⁰ which we interact with each other and creation. Jeremy Begbie, writing about music and theology, notes that music "is capable of highlighting and instantiating" the order of creation, of "intertwining with the world's temporality" and disclosing it.⁸¹ Similarly, images share and represent the world's spatiality, and can disclose the intense, dense significance of man's encounter with God in this world. Hardy's formulation of 'density of meaning' experienced 'extensively' by humans and found to be most intensive where there is encounter between the divine and human⁸² is helpful for understanding how images communicate meaning and how they are apprehended, indicating the methodological importance of space as a fundamental condition of experience and epistemology.

Another discussion of place which is particularly relevant in this context comes from Georges Didi-Huberman's commentary on Fra Angelico's work at San Marco. Didi-Huberman explores the concept of 'ground' or 'place' as more than simply "a container for the story", an essentially neutral backdrop in contrast to which "the figure personifies meaning". Place can help to define a figure or subject, but Didi-Huberman rejects the idea that it is simply a 'prop'. While there are instances in which place/ground is largely neutral – in others (e.g. in Angelico's work) it is part of "the subtle relations of text and image".⁸³ Didi-Huberman draws on a theory of the genesis of forms developed by Albertus Magnus in which

the place is very far from playing the simple role of a more or less neutral and indeterminate "container" for the figures but is part of the active principle that creates them, not just topographical, but generative.

⁸⁰ It is impossible to avoid circular references when speaking of space: all categories and terms which might describe it are, themselves (and unsurprisingly), spatial.

⁸¹ Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). p.276

⁸² See 2.2.1.

⁸³ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans., Jane Marie Todd (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1995). p.16.

Place/ground is that “within and through which forms will be formed and figures will detach themselves” and “potentially an operation of the divine.”⁸⁴ Although for Albertus Magnus, and for Didi-Huberman, “place is not strictly reducible either to form or to matter” it has a, “capacity for morphogenesis...a principle of *generatio*, of *mutatio*, even of *transmutatio*.”⁸⁵ Because of this generative quality, place, and indeed ‘matter’ as the essence of place/ground are ascribed a “causal virtue” and are seen as acting in a process of on-going, generative, displacement and transition in which the purely physical (ground, matter) becomes biological, cosmological, and finally (exegetically) metaphysical. The causal virtue of place operates “[b]etween physics and exegesis” such that “it participates...it ‘works’ at producing being”.⁸⁶

Much of this thesis concentrates on the spaces between figures, objects, and buildings, on space rather than place. However, these are slippery terms⁸⁷ and space in the sense of something ‘empty’ or immaterial is only comprehensible within material boundaries. Thus what is true of the material ‘place’ surrounding and locating immaterial ‘space’, while it may not be identical with what is true of ‘space’, is nevertheless connected and relevant to it. This is not Didi-Huberman’s argument – he is concerned with the nature of place as ‘figure’ – but his discussion of the generative nature of place enriches the concept of sacred space proposed here and supports the view that space and place be taken seriously in interpreting Christian art.

⁸⁴ Ibid. p.18.

⁸⁵ Ibid. pp.172-173. See also the discussion of place and memory, pp.174-178.

⁸⁶ Ibid. p.172.

⁸⁷ See note 76 on page 40.

2.4.2 Christian sacred space

It is not possible to give a detailed discussion of theological, philosophical or sociological accounts of sacred space and place here,⁸⁸ but simply put, sacred space is space marked out for the purpose of worship and considered to be particularly connected with God because of that worship and, often, because of the presence of holy objects. Sacred space is a defining category in how many societies think about and express identity and beliefs, embodying religious concerns, and reflecting the socio-political order.

The significance of sacred space and place in Christianity is scripturally based. In the Old Testament, the God of Israel and his people encountered each other through place,⁸⁹ while the New Testament arguably substitutes holiness of person for holiness of place, though not always consistently.⁹⁰ Although the Incarnation has been used both to reject the idea of sacred space and to support it,⁹¹ Jeremy Sheehy argues convincingly that God's incarnate participation in human nature simultaneously validates the particular and universal, overcomes polarity between the material and spiritual, and relates the visible to the invisible "such that one is the effective sign of the other"⁹² (in other words, they are related sacramentally).⁹³

⁸⁸ Much of the literature on sacred space has been generated by anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of religion. Mircea Eliade's work on the sacred and profane is still regularly cited. Eliade's horizontal division of space into these two categories and discussion of substantive places of hierophany as intersections between the spaces of this world and worlds conceived of as 'above' and 'below', remains relevant. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959). Others dispute the substantive model, proposing a model of the sacralization of place. See, for example Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). and Jeane H. Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space : An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship* (New York: Oxford, 2008). p.6.

⁸⁹ On sacred space in Scripture see: Inge. p.xff. M. Barker, "The House within a House " in *Sacred Space, House of God, Gate of Heaven*, ed. John North and Philip North (London Continuum, 2007); Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). Seth D. Kunin, *God's Place in the World, Sacred Space and Sacred Place in Judaism* (London and New York: Cassell, 1998). p.8. William D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land , Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994).

⁹⁰ Davies.p.260 cited in Inge. p.50.

⁹¹ On the validity of the concept of Christian sacred space see North and North, eds. p.5; Harold W. Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House* (The Hague, Paris, & New York: Mouton Publishers, 1979). and Kilde. pp.7-8. In general, Protestantism has denied particular divine presence in churches etc. while the Roman Catholicism has favoured it, in a divide mirroring that of belief in the real or symbolic presence in the Eucharist.

⁹² N.B. special and general presence need not be mutually exclusive. It is not because God is specially present in one place that he is not generally present in all. The symbolic need not reduce materiality: a symbolic space can be more, rather than less real.

Sheehy cites T.F. Torrance in asserting that the Incarnation affirms space and time as the context of humanity's creature-creator relationship with God,⁹⁴ and suggests a parallel between the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy and discussions of sacred space (both derived from Christological concerns), arguing that to deny God 'place' would be to deny Christ's humanity.⁹⁵ As John Inge writes,

In defining the locus of God's relations with humanity to be focused in one particular individual the Incarnation asserts the importance of place in a way different from, but not less important than, the Old Testament. It entails a movement away from a concentration upon the Holy Land and Jerusalem but at the same time initiates an unprecedented celebration of materiality and therefore of place in God's relations with humanity.⁹⁶

Christians have understood spaces in both literal and metaphorical senses, as physical locations and as spiritually significant.⁹⁷ Church building has reflected the need to shelter a congregation and house holy objects, and embodied theological (and social) ideas.⁹⁸ The development of Christian architecture reveals not only changing aesthetic tastes, architectural styles, and engineering techniques, but aspects of the relations between Church⁹⁹ and state, laity and clergy, worshippers and God. Some scholars¹⁰⁰ have seen parallels between the Church's theology and liturgy, (as well as its status and stability within society) and its physical constructions. Identifying parallels in architectural form and intellectual/theological

⁹³ Jeremy Sheehy, "Sacred Space and the Incarnation," in *Sacred Space, House of God, Gate of Heaven*, ed. John North and Philip North (London: Continuum, 2007). pp.16-17.

⁹⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh T & T Clark Ltd., 1969, 1997).p.67.

⁹⁵ Sheehy.pp.19-20.

⁹⁶ Inge.p.52.

⁹⁷ E.g. St Augustine's discussion of the literal and symbolic nature of Paradise. See also the discussion of medieval hermeneutics in 2.3.1.

⁹⁸ See, for example, Robert W. Gaston, "Sacred Place and Liturgical Space: Florence's Renaissance Churches," in *Renaissance Florence a Social History*, ed. Roger J. Crum and John T. Paoletti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). p.342.

⁹⁹ I.e. the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy.

¹⁰⁰ E.g. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Michal Kobialka, eds., *Medieval Practices of Space Medieval Cultures*, vol. 23 (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Kilde. Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House*.

ideas risks eisegesis and provokes heated debate¹⁰¹ but it would be strange if art and architecture did not reveal at least something of their time.¹⁰²

In discussing sacred space as an element of religious experience, many authors cite Rudolph Otto's work on religious experience as 'numinous' and Spicer and Coster correctly note that one, "cannot fully understand the sanctity of space without appreciating these emotional and psychological aspects."¹⁰³ Going somewhat further, Inge claims that the "most constructive manner in which to view place from a Christian perspective is sacramentally". On the basis that sacrament is a concept "grounded in event" and that human encounter with the divine is of vital importance throughout Scripture and the Christian tradition, he argues that such encounters may be properly termed "sacramental events". Rather than being "isolated incidents given only to a few, such 'sacramental events' are a very common part of Christian experience". The place "in which such events occur is not merely a backdrop to the experience, but an integral part of it" and Inge's "relational view of place, people and God" as the "biblical paradigm, is retained in such encounters." These 'sacramental encounters' are "built into the story of such places" with the result that they gradually become holy places.¹⁰⁴ He concludes that "place is crucial both in the here and now and in eternity: Jesus implies as much when he tells his disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ For discussion of the relation between architecture and theological thinking see Michael Tavinor, "Sacred Space and the Built Environment," in *Sacred Space, House of God, Gate of Heaven*, ed. John North and Philip North (London: Continuum, 2007). pp.23-33. Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (New York: Penguin, 1951; 1985). Oleg Bychkov, "Theology, Aesthetics and the Gothic Space" in *Theology in Built Environments : Exploring Religion, Architecture, and Design*, ed. Sigurd Bergmann (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2009). p.54. John Milbank, "On Complex Space," in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

¹⁰² For a helpful survey of architectural and artistic expressions of God's transcendence and immanence see David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place, Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). On the relation of light and the divine in architecture see Tavinor. pp.25-27.

¹⁰³ William Coster and Andrew Spicer, eds., *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).p.14.

¹⁰⁴ Inge.p.x-xi.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.p.xi. Jn. 14:3

2.4.3 Sacred space in Florence in the 13th-15th centuries: belief and identity

The spaces inside Florentine churches (as elsewhere) were highly organised, creating a sense of journey from the main door, through the nave, past the transept, through the rood screen, into the chancel, and up to the high altar. Access to certain areas (e.g. private chapels and the chancel) was restricted,¹⁰⁶ implying the presence of a more ‘concentrated’ form of holiness in key places. The rood screen protecting the holy of holies from the profanity of the laity would have been particularly powerful in this respect, and meant that the laity saw (and heard) only part of the Mass (at which they rarely took communion). Such gradations of holiness, which could begin outside the church, meant that worshippers either moved between different zones of holiness or that the priest did so on their behalf. The progression through sacred space to the holiest of spaces was thus an important element in religious practice.¹⁰⁷

Roger Crum and John Paoletti claim that space in Renaissance Florence was neither a simple matter of enclosure, nor a question of emptiness or void.¹⁰⁸ Florentine spaces existed in the “lived memory and shared experiences of the Florentines” even in times of change,¹⁰⁹ and Florentine space was, on both a physical and a mental level, varied, flexible, and changing. Writing in the same volume, Robert Gaston reiterates the theological importance of place: “The persistence of a potent notion of “place” in the medieval and Renaissance liturgical sphere is a manifestation of the theological primacy of place”,¹¹⁰ and although Alberti was later to subordinate liturgical requirements to spatial design, the older concept of a church as ‘place’ rather than more abstract ‘space’ remained generally true for Renaissance Florence.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ By clerical/lay status, social status, and gender. Andrew Spicer, ed. *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). pp.9.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. pp.9-15. In practice the dividing lines between sacred and secular spaces were often flexible.

¹⁰⁸ Roger. J. Crum and John. T. Paoletti, eds., *Renaissance Florence: A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). p.2.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.pp.4-.5.

¹¹⁰ Gaston. p.340.

¹¹¹ Ibid. p.349.

Gaston stresses the sanctity of place derived from holy objects and people, citing San Bernardino's exhortations to reverence in church on the grounds that God, the angels, the Host, and the relics are there.¹¹² Sacred space was not, however, restricted to the enclosed spaces of buildings. Andrew Spicer and Will Coster describe pre-Reformation Europe, with its plethora of sacred places, as a "landscape of the sacred" linked by pilgrimage routes which became "veins of sacred force" with their own roadside shrines,¹¹³ and Edward Muir has further argued that in Italian cities at least, "the distinction between the sacred church and the profane world around it was blurred by holy images, 'extending the sacrality of the church outward'."¹¹⁴ In Florence, as in many cities, there were roadside shrines and images on walls, and the many churches, chapels, convents, and shrines were connected by procession routes. The friars in particular used outside spaces for sacred purposes, preaching in piazzas as a way of reaching the townspeople. It has been argued that Florence, like many other European cities, saw herself as a model of the New Jerusalem, the holy city, and thus, on one level, the whole town could be considered sacred.¹¹⁵ The Florentines' sense of civic (and presumably, therefore, individual) identity was at least in part formed by a belief that theirs was a city of God.

2.4.4 Empty space

One type of sacred space rarely mentioned in academic literature will be significant in this thesis: empty space. Emptiness does appear in Christian experience and writings, on a meta-narrative level in the void before creation, and on a historical level with the Old Testament wanderings in the desert, Jesus' period in the wilderness, and later the desert fathers, the ascetics, the eremitic lifestyle, and the apophatic tradition. Furthermore there is the personal understanding of the

¹¹² This is related to the belief that "the devoutly attentive liturgy celebrated by angels before the enthroned Christ of the celestial court was an appropriate model for liturgy performed in the church and for private devotion" which Gaston sees as a significant "transference to the laity of a traditional, clerical understanding of the sacrality of liturgical space." Ibid.pp.335-336.

¹¹³ Spicer, ed. pp.4-9.

¹¹⁴ Edwin Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). cited in Spicer, ed. p.9.

¹¹⁵ Crum and Paoletti, eds. pp.10, 47, 99, 101, 147. Crum and Paoletti also cite Phillip Earenfight, "Florence as the New Jerusalem: The Metaphor and the Real in the Piazza San Giovanni," in *College Art Association Annual Conference* (Chicago: Unpublished, 2001). At times Florence also saw herself as the New Rome, as, for example, in the Sassetti Chapel in Santa Trinita where Roman settings are replaced with Florentine ones. See 8.2.6.

experience of emptiness, both as a form of spiritual hollowness, and as a deliberate means to spiritual fulfilment. There is little discussion, however, of empty space within Christian buildings or images and how this might relate to emptiness as described above.

In analysing the use of space in images this thesis will consider, among other things, the role of empty space, approaching it on the assumption that it can be theologically significant. There are strong precedents for this: the void precedes creation; kenosis precedes the Incarnation; the Virgin's womb¹¹⁶ receives the Son of God,¹¹⁷ the empty tomb is the first revelation of the resurrection. These are empty spaces which enable new things, they are loci of transformation, pregnant with possibility.

Empty space is the painter's starting point. How to fill the space, and how to draw the viewer 'into' that space, is the challenge of composition. In some of the images explored in this thesis the empty spaces are highly significant. The empty space between the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary in the *Annunciation* in Cell 3 at San Marco and the empty space that St Francis crosses in the *Renunciation of Worldly Goods* in the Bardi Chapel, but which he gradually comes to inhabit and empower in the rest of the cycle, are both examples.¹¹⁸ The theme of empty space will recur throughout this thesis and is fundamental to interpreting some of the images considered.

¹¹⁶ The idea that a womb is an empty space has, of course, been repudiated but was still current in medieval and Renaissance times.

¹¹⁷ See Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto* where the Virgin parts her overdress at the belly to reveal the shift covering her pregnancy, while angels part the curtain to reveal her. Kate Dunton has suggested in an unpublished paper that the curtain references the Temple curtain, torn at the Crucifixion, an event interpreted as signifying the removal of the division between God and humanity. *Art and Morality in the Italian Renaissance*, National Gallery London, November 2007.

¹¹⁸ In contrast, the lack of any significant empty spaces in, for example, the Spanish Chapel at Santa Maria Novella, where everything is filled, every space accounted for, means that although these frescoes are dense with imagery and meaning, they lack dramatic tension: there are no more possibilities, all eventualities have been covered.

2.4.5 Tripartite space

Images modify their spaces, extending and creating layers within them.¹¹⁹ An example is the introduction in the 15th century of large altarpieces with fictive architecture using single point perspective, with which painters “illusionistically extended the real architectural space” and transported viewers

into personalised architectural spaces that bridged between the privately owned space of the patron’s chapel and the heavenly locus occupied by the divine protagonists in the picture.¹²⁰

The same could be said of many frescoes. Images interact with their surroundings, especially if they are physically part of them as frescoes are. They can expand, heighten, and invigorate the experience of being in a particular place and when that place is sacred, the relationship between the content and composition of the ‘visual’ space in the image and the ‘material’ space around it can be theologically significant. Understanding the nature of this relationship and the viewer’s interaction with it is central to this thesis and to the project of exploring how the fresco cycles function theologically in sacred space.¹²¹

In interpreting these images theologically, taking account of their materiality, their located nature, and their spatial relationships, it is helpful to posit a tripartite spatial framework, using the terms *material* space, *visual* space, and *receptive* space. This framework may be briefly summarised as follows.

The first spatial category, material space, refers to the site of the work (e.g. church, chapel, convent) and within this the particular location of the artwork (e.g. above an altar, on a cell wall). This combination of site and location determines more specifically the nature of the image (e.g. a narrative cycle in a chapel, a Crucifixion for private devotions in a convent cell, an image of a saint above an altar).

¹¹⁹ Spicer, ed. pp.14-15.

¹²⁰ Gaston.p.337.

¹²¹ In many instances, they have multiple functions, including being didactic, sacramental, directional (of meditation, prayer, and behaviour) and transformative.

The second category, visual space, concerns the space within the image itself. This necessarily occupies the same physical location, but the application of paint creates a 'new' space on a different plane from that of straightforward physical location.¹²² The artist defines and fills this visual space, appointing the relationships between figures and objects and determining their form. It is in this category that one may discuss matters such as style, decoration, iconography, materials, composition, perspective, and modelling.

What the artist does with this second space combines with the first to determine the parameters of the third. This third 'space' is altogether different, being a locus of activity, emotion, and thought, rather than a material or visual space. This is the viewer's receptive space, an internal space (though necessarily linked to and shaped by externalities) of the mind, heart, or soul, where the viewer's response to the material and visual spaces is formed.

Space, and especially sacred space is a fundamental element of creation, and human life within it. It is orientating, defining, and identity forming. Images are physical, located, created objects and viewers have a physical relationship with them. A theological interpretation of images, especially images which are specifically located within or incorporated into their space must consider sacred space as an aspect of the image. Attention to the relationship between the image, its pictorial space, the space of its location, and the spatially located viewer can be revealing of theological content and its means of expression through the image. The consideration of sacred space should therefore be an essential part of the methodology for a theological interpretation of images and this thesis will examine the theological function of space in art through these three spatial categories, exploring the relationships between them, and seeking to understand how space in and around images is used to express theological content.

¹²² It would be possible to describe a particular point on a wall as a measurement in feet and inches, or as a pictorial point on an image in terms of content. The point is the same but the describer clearly has a different agenda.

2.5 Conclusion: a methodology for the theological interpretation of images

Like any theological enterprise, the norms directing judgement will be Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, and these will inform my thinking throughout this thesis.¹²³ More specifically, the methodology adopted in this thesis, and proposed as having wider application for the theological interpretation of art, has been developed by drawing on the following methodologies: the literary critical method of reader criticism; the theological approach known as reception studies; its comparator, cultural history, with its project of ‘seeing things their way’; and its counterpart in art history of acquiring the ‘period eye’. These methods have been selected on the basis that they are realistic reflections of the engagement of readers or viewers (including interpreters) with texts or images, that they facilitate an on-going and dynamic relationship with their objects of study which enables them to continue to resonate for the modern Christian, and that their breadth of scope enriches our understanding and appreciation of these objects. At all times there is a need for the interpreter to be historically, subjectively, and personally conscious. The interpretations made possible by this method are not the final word on the subject but a constructive reading, intended to enrich the modern Christian’s experience and appreciation of the theological content of these images.

In addition to these necessary but insufficient approaches, and of more fundamental significance, a Christian hermeneutic for images must be incarnational. That is to say, it must acknowledge the Incarnation not only as the central theme of all Christian art – of which it constitutes the content, context, purpose, and justification – but also in the method by which it interprets this art. A methodology which addresses Christian art on its own terms must acknowledge the mystery of God become man, of the mutual inherence of the physical and spiritual, and it must treat materiality – embodiment and locatedness – in positive terms, as having a capacity

¹²³ For discussion of these theological sources and of their enduring relevance see, for example: John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Also Nigel Atkinson, *Richard Hooker and the Authority of Scripture, Tradition and Reason, Reformed Theologian of the Church of England* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997).

for the divine and an ability to express that in material terms. It is therefore important to recognise the essentially corporeal and located nature of art works. The discussion of sacred space above is thus crucial to producing a theologically sensitive interpretation of art. An incarnational approach, i.e. one which considers the corporeality and locatedness of its object, is perhaps particularly relevant to frescoes as embedded images. Considerations of sacred space and the relationship between the image, its pictorial space, the space of its location, and the spatially located viewer may reveal and illuminate theological content and will be a key element of a theological hermeneutic for images.

In thinking about the Incarnation and its implications for art (a subject to which this thesis inclines but lacks the space to explore in depth) it is worth mentioning again Didi-Huberman's work on Fra Angelico's frescoes. The mystery of the Incarnation is at the heart of his interpretation of these images and, in seeking a methodology which could address them in terms beyond the usual categories of art history (these being too restrictive for images which work in the context of "devotional practice and theological meditation"¹²⁴) he appropriates a form of scholastic exegesis.

The free association (within certain contextual confines) derived from an exegetical process as described by Didi-Huberman, allows for a relationship with images which is both deeply respectful and highly imaginative. It acknowledges the multiplicity of references and meanings which a single image may embody and allows for an exploratory, enquiring, and open-ended interpretation. He writes,

Paintings are often disconcerting because their relative lack of determination, their limited conceptual means – and in particular, their fundamental incapacity...to represent logical relations in a univocal way – nevertheless

¹²⁴ Didi-Huberman.p.3. The explicit and implicit tools of art history presuppose the questions we ask of an image through their phenomenological, aesthetic, anthropological and semiotic interests. It may be better to start with the object and see to what presuppositions it leads us. p.7.

make them the fabulous instrument of an overdetermination of meanings and a true exuberance of thought.¹²⁵

The term ‘overdetermination’ is used here in the sense in which Freud employs it in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where it applies to a single object (e.g. a dream) which has multiple causes or inputs.¹²⁶ It does not imply constraint, or meaning which is rigidly prescribed or described.

Didi-Huberman’s interpretative approach reflects in its lack of finality the mystery of the Incarnation which underpins all Christian art.¹²⁷ His underlying methodology is thus very similar to that of this thesis.¹²⁸ As he explains, exegesis comes from the idea of ‘leading out of’, unfolding pathways and associations that lead from the story to the moral, doctrinal, and mystical “depths of its *figural* meaning”. Exegesis involves:

[T]he inexhaustible possibility of creating an infinite world of relations, of networks where every particle of sacred text entered into an always unique and totally new correspondence with another particle, freeing meaning to an ever greater extent and, with meaning, freeing faith and the imaginary, by making them swirl endlessly around this central kernel...of the mystery, this impossible divine *scientia*, the kernel of the Incarnation.¹²⁹

Although Didi-Huberman does not set out this scholastic exegesis in ‘reader criticism’ or ‘reception theory’ terms, they are remarkably close in the process of free association which they allow.¹³⁰ The way in which he relates the nature of the interpretative method (exegetical, open, on-going, imaginative) and the mystery of

¹²⁵ Ibid.p.7.

¹²⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987).

¹²⁷ Of course, the Incarnation may be seen as ‘final’ in the sense of the ultimate revelation, but the *mystery* of the Incarnation remains precisely that: mysterious, unfinished, unresolved by human understanding.

¹²⁸ I came across Didi-Huberman’s work some time after establishing my methodology for this thesis and have found it supportive of my own approach, constructive, and liberating.

¹²⁹ Didi-Huberman. p.6.

¹³⁰ The constraints within which scholastic exegesis might operate are of course specifically Christian, whereas reader criticism and reception theory can operate in a secular context, but their influence on the methodology for this thesis presupposes a Christian framework.

the Incarnation which is the cause (at least indirectly) of the image being interpreted, is thus widely applicable to this thesis.¹³¹

On a practical level, the analysis of a particular image will involve examining context, content and form. Contextual questions may highlight the concerns and ideas of the times, suggesting the purpose of the image, and its likely reception.¹³² These might include questions about how and why it was made, who had access to it and in what circumstances, and how it relates to previous, contemporary and later images. Formal and subject analysis might ask questions about content, style, media, models, composition, and how the artist uses colour, line, shape, volume, shading, and light.

Having examined the context of the image, its subject matter and formal elements, the exegete can present an interpretation of its content and style and offer suggestions about how the viewer might interact with these. Knowledge of the history of the reception of an image may be relevant to this, but even without such information, the analysis may be possible. In this thesis, the viewer primarily in mind is the modern Christian, but the probable or possible experience of the contemporary viewer will also be considered as this will inform and enrich the modern viewer's understanding and appreciation of the image.

¹³¹ While it does not appear to be specifically applicable to the other case studies considered, the core of Didi-Huberman's method is generally relevant to interpreting Christian art and likely to be highly theologically generative, as he persuasively demonstrates with regard to San Marco.

¹³² There is an exceptionally large body of contemporary documentation related to these case studies which provides insights into the circumstances of the time including the social, economic, and political conditions, religious beliefs, moral and behavioural codes, as well as documents specifically relating to art and visual experience. There is not space to rehearse this material which is readily available elsewhere.

3 Introduction to the Case Studies

3.1 The choice of case studies

These six cycles were chosen to provide a variety of artistic styles and periods, and represent a range of religious orders:

Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce (Franciscan): Scenes from the life of St Francis, Giotto, c.1310-1328.

Baroncelli Chapel, Santa Croce (Franciscan): Scenes from the life of the Virgin, Taddeo Gaddi, c.1328-1334.

Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine (Carmelite): Scenes from the life of St Peter, Masolino, Masaccio, and Filippino Lippi, c.1420 - 1480s.

Convent of San Marco (Observant Dominican): Scenes of Gospel subjects and Dominican prayer, Fra Angelico, c.1436-1443.

Sassetti Chapel, Santa Trinita (Vallombrosan): Scenes from the life of St Francis, Ghirlandaio, 1479-1485.

Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella (Dominican): Scenes from the lives of the Virgin and St John the Baptist, Ghirlandaio, 1480s.

Although artistic precedents are often visible and it is clear that the artists drew on the work of their predecessors, each cycle is individual in terms of the interaction of style, subject matter, and location. Five of the cycles were commissioned by lay patrons for private funerary chapels in publicly accessible churches, and share this purpose and context, while the series at San Marco was painted by Fra Angelico for his own convent. These case studies are not, of course, the only Florentine Renaissance fresco cycles available for consideration and many potential candidates have been excluded partly for reasons of space. Ultimately, the selection was made on the basis of the clearest theological potential for the purposes of this thesis. Arguably this constitutes a selection bias and could jeopardise its conclusions. If

other cycles appeared to have less theological significance this might suggest that those chosen are anomalous. That there is a bias is true but this is not a cause for concern. It is not necessary to argue that all Florentine Renaissance fresco cycles operate in the ways suggested in this study (let alone that all art does so), but only that some examples may legitimately be interpreted in this way and that the results are theologically rewarding. Inevitably the limited ‘data set’ restricts the scope of any conclusions drawn from them. This should be borne in mind, but it does not affect the validity of the conclusions reached about those case studies which are included.

3.2 Structure of the case studies and appendices

Each case study briefly introduces the frescoes before a critically examining the main interpretations¹³³ that have been proposed by art historians as keys to understanding them, and suggesting additional or alternative ways of looking at them which provide a deeper understanding of their theological significance, in line with the methodology and aims set out above.

Corresponding appendices provide historical details of the frescoes, their contexts, patrons, and artists, and descriptions of individual scenes or elements, with reproductions of the images. Descriptions of the arrangements of the chapel frescoes assume a viewing position facing the altar wall of the chapel, with the transept or nave of the church behind. The locations of the San Marco frescoes are indicated by compass directions. The information and images provided (which are readily available from art historical literature) have been collated and included alongside the main body of the thesis for ease of reference, and familiarity with this information is assumed in the main body of the text.

¹³³ The body of art historical literature surrounding many of the frescoes, and Renaissance Florence in general, is extremely large and it would be impossible and fruitless to present all of it here. For this reason, only the most influential, representative, or unusual interpretations have been included and they have generally been summarised with considerable abbreviation.

4 Leap of Faith: the Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce

Scenes from the Life of St Francis, Giotto, c.1310-1328.

Previous interpretations of this damaged but compelling cycle have suggested that it presents St Francis as a second Christ, that it champions the concerns of the Conventual Franciscans, and that it expresses Bardi support for the Angevin royal line, the papacy, and the crusades. While Conventual ideals may well be expressed in the cycle, this is by no means an exhaustive (or particularly compelling) account of the cycle. This study suggests that if, instead of starting with external factors and seeking evidence of them in the images, one begins with the images themselves, and pays close attention to their composition and content, the result is rather different. Giotto's compositional choices and his placement of the figure of Francis are shown to be very revealing, as the viewer traces Francis' spiritual development.

4.1 The cycle

The left wall, from top to bottom, depicts the *Renunciation of Worldly Goods*, *Apparition at Arles*, and *Funeral of St Francis and Verification of the Stigmata*. The right wall has the *Approval of the Rule by Innocent III*,¹³⁴ *Trial Before the Sultan*, and *Visions of Brother Agostino and Bishop Guido*. Above the entrance arch is the *Stigmatization of St Francis*. The internal light sources in the frescoes match the natural light from the altar wall window, harmonising the painted and architectural spaces, Francis being generally associated with the light source.¹³⁵ Originally, the public would only have seen into this private Chapel through the wrought iron gate but its dedication and the subject of its frescoes were advertised by the *Stigmatization* scene, with a Crucifix visible on the altar below.¹³⁶

The four painted altar wall niches contain St Clare,¹³⁷ St Louis of Toulouse,¹³⁸ and a fragment of the Angevin Franciscan tertiary, St Elizabeth of Hungary. The empty fourth niche may have contained St Anthony of Padua¹³⁹ or the canonised Angevin King Louis IX of France.¹⁴⁰ In the vaults are allegories of Chastity and Obedience, two Franciscan virtues. Poverty probably occupied one of the now empty vaults.

¹³⁴ The scene is generally referred to in this way and is identified as such by Goffen, although not all scholars agree. See Rona Goffen, *Spirituality in Conflict: St Francis and Giotto's Bardi Chapel* (University Park Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988). p.120, n.44.

¹³⁵ As Goffen explains, in the "*Renunciation* scene, Francis and the churchmen are in the light, literally and metaphorically illuminated; in the *Apparition at Arles*, Francis comes from the direction of the light, turning toward Anthony, whose face is illumined by it; in the *Proof of the Stigmata*, Francis's face is now turned towards the light...in the *Approval of the Rule* and *Proof of Fire*, the saint looks or moves toward the light. If the ...scene of the saint's posthumous *Visions* originally included an image of Francis, then here too it seems probable that he would have turned his face to the source of illumination, actual and symbolic at the same time." Ibid. p.64.

¹³⁶ Source references: St Bonaventure, "The Life of St Francis (Legenda Maior)," in *Bonaventure, the Soul's Journey into God, the Tree of Life, the Life of St Francis* (London: SPCK, 1978). See especially chapters 2, 3, 4, 9, 13, 15. Although Goffen argues that the Bardi images are based on Bonaventure, these stories are also told, with some variation, in the two lives written by Francis' first biographer, Celano. Thomas of Celano, *St Francis of Assisi*, trans., Placid Hermann O.F.M (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988). First Life: 13-15, 32-33, 48, 57, 94-96, 112-113. Second Life: 218, 220. See also Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend, Readings on the Saints*, trans., William G. Ryan, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). pp.220-230.

¹³⁷ An early Franciscan follower and founder of the Poor Clares.

¹³⁸ Louis of Toulouse had strong Spiritual leanings but was nevertheless appropriated by the Conventuals, possibly as a means of controlling his influence. Goffen. pp.55-56.

¹³⁹ Joachim Poeschke, *Italian Frescoes, the Age of Giotto, 1280-1400*, 1st ed. ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 2005). p.227.

¹⁴⁰ William R. Cook, "Giotto and the Figure of St Francis," in *The Cambridge Companion to Giotto* ed. Anne Derbes and Mark Sandona (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). p.143. Goffen. p.74.

The fourth may have shown Francis, arms raised displaying the stigmata, as the 19th century restorers believed.¹⁴¹

The scenes of Francis' life had been painted before but the choice of these seven out of many more candidates, and their variance from the pre-existing visual models invites explanation and interpretations vary. Interpretative themes include the Bardi's political and social interests with their Angevin and papal connections, the presentation of Francis as a second Christ (*Franciscus alter Christus*), and Conventual Franciscan concerns (e.g. a moderate approach to poverty and contemplation as compared to the more austere and meditative Spirituals), and links between the Bardi and the Angevins, papacy, and crusades.

¹⁴¹ Goffen. p.65.

4.2 Interpretations

Two of the most influential interpretations are those by Rona Goffen and Jane Long. Goffen is the most vocal exponent of a *Franciscus alter Christus* reading, alongside which she emphasises the Bardi's political (and spiritual) links with the Angevins, which she sees expressed in the cycle. Long argues that the cycle primarily reflects Conventual concerns and deliberately minimises the presentation of Francis as *alter Christus*, portraying instead a moderate version of Franciscan life, balancing its active and contemplative elements.

4.2.1 *Franciscus alter Christus*

Goffen's interpretation is constructed around the distinction she draws between Conventual imagery, using Bonaventure as the textual source, and Spiritual imagery based on an earlier biography by Celano which had been suppressed. She argues that the cycle shows Conventual imagery (unsurprisingly given its Conventual location and the suppression of Celano's text) and presents Francis as *alter Christus*, i.e. Francis as not simply imitating Christ but having identity with Christ.¹⁴² This said, Goffen believes that Giotto's Francis transcends divisions between Conventuals and Spirituals, divisions derived from tensions within Francis himself as he sought to balance the sometimes conflicting demands of private prayer and public mission.¹⁴³

4.2.2 Bardi concerns

Of almost equal importance, Goffen argues, are reflections of the Bardi's political and business concerns, most prominent in the connections suggested with the Angevins and their Conventual sympathies. The Bardi-Angevin links included ties of kinship, business, politics, and spiritual allegiance which bound together "dynastic, Guelph, papal, and Conventual Franciscan interests".¹⁴⁴ Business interests within Florence may also have encouraged Bardi patronage at Santa

¹⁴² See *ibid.* pp.13-22 on *Franciscus alter Christus*. On the relationship between the frescoes, Bonaventure's biography, and *Franciscus alter Christus*, see pp.59-64.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* p.77. This could suggest that Giotto glossed over genuine division but should perhaps be taken as implying that a balance was achievable in theory, if not in practice.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p.54. For the Bardi-Angevin connections see pp.51-59.

Croce,¹⁴⁵ following the lead of their associates, the Acciaiuoli and Peruzzi.¹⁴⁶ An additional, 'personal' factor may also have been involved in the patronage decision: Ridolfo de' Bardi may have identified himself with Francis (perhaps because both had been soldiers), and the burial of a son in the Franciscan church in Nice may have created a loyalty to the Order.¹⁴⁷

4.2.3 Conventual Franciscan concerns

Long agrees that the frescoes exhibit Conventual concerns but argues that *Franciscus alter Christus* was a Spiritual, not a Conventual, interpretation of Francis and therefore improbable in this context.¹⁴⁸ While acknowledging the undoubted influence of Bonaventure's text (along with visual models, especially Assisi), Long argues that Francis is not presented as *alter Christus* here and that, if anything, his identification with Christ is played down.¹⁴⁹

Long also rejects Goffen's claim that the cycle reflects the Bardi's material interests, arguing that there is no evidence that the Bardi had a significant role in devising the programme and that the cycle expresses the spiritual interests of Conventual Franciscans, not the political interests of the family. She believes that scholars have repeatedly assumed that 15th and 16th century attitudes can be applied to 14th century art, attitudes to which are less well known, leading scholars to expect evidence of secular interests in sacred images, where there might be none.¹⁵⁰ There is no evidence that 14th century donors had control over the details of the images they paid for and,¹⁵¹ on paying for the Chapel, Ridolfo de' Bardi was acquiring a space whose size, location, and dedication were already fixed, and whose fresco programme may have been out of his hands. Furthermore, Long does not believe that the relationship

¹⁴⁵ Rather than simply continuing earlier patronage at Santa Maria Novella or moving to Santo Spirito, near their palazzo.

¹⁴⁶ Goffen. p.53.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. p.53.

¹⁴⁸ Jane C. Long, "The Program of Giotto's Saint Francis Cycle at Santa Croce in Florence," *Franciscan Studies* 52, (1992).pp. 120-125. See especially n.90, p.123 and n.92, p.124.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. Especially pp.120-25.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. p.86.

¹⁵¹ In fact there is very little evidence of any sort relating to commissioning frescoes of this period.

between the Bardi and the Franciscans was particularly close,¹⁵² and argues that patronage by business associates does not explain “the extraordinary Bardi patronage of the Franciscans”.¹⁵³ Thus, in Long’s view, we cannot identify the Bardi’s worldly concerns in their frescoes which, she argues, express Franciscan spiritual concerns, and motifs suitable for a burial chapel.¹⁵⁴

In Long’s opinion, the programme is concerned with “illustrating Francis’s role as an exemplar for the faithful” rather than his “biographical glorification”¹⁵⁵ and is divided into three main themes related to his ministry: “his calling, his way of life, and his approval by God.”¹⁵⁶ The scenes promote an anti-inflammatory and moderate vision of the Order, which had suffered from internal conflict about the proper Franciscan way of life, and external criticism of this division. Long believes that the Bardi frescoes represent a reformulation of the presentation of Francis’ life¹⁵⁷ in which the official sanction of the Church is stressed, poverty downplayed,¹⁵⁸ and the balance between active and contemplative elements refutes the Spirituals’ extreme focus on the contemplative life. Long suggests that, although Francis’ own life was divided between the active and the contemplative, and his Order charged with the dual duties of prayer and preaching, and although this caused tension and eventually division in the Order, in the Bardi Chapel the two elements are balanced.¹⁵⁹ In this respect she agrees with Goffen.

Rather than following the Assisi presentation of *Franciscus alter Christus*, “the harbinger of a new age in spiritual history”,¹⁶⁰ Long sees the Bardi cycle as

¹⁵² Ridolfo had no close relatives called Francis as one might expect and, although his father left money to a friar at Santa Croce and his son was buried in a Franciscan Church in Nice, “in the light of the popularity of the Franciscans...this hardly constituted close ties with the Order.” Long. p.88.

¹⁵³ Ibid. p.88. Although, as Goffen rightly asserts, Ridolfo must have had a reason for choosing to patronise this particular Chapel. Nevertheless, her explanations (see above, Goffen. p.53) are, in the absence of records, speculative.

¹⁵⁴ Long. p.87.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. p.90.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. p.90.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. p.91. Although the earlier Francis cycle at Assisi retained its validity as a visual model.

¹⁵⁸ The papacy supported the Conventuals. Extreme apostolic poverty was denied by Pope John XXII in 1323.

¹⁵⁹ Long. pp.111-112, 117.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. p.120.

illustrating the Franciscan life. The *Renunciation* shows no hand of God in the sky, the *Trial* does not make Francis' own quest for martyrdom and *imitatio Christi* the central point, and Francis' posture in the *Apparition* is not that of Christ Crucified. The *Stigmatization* necessarily relates Francis to Christ but this is "a naturalistic narrative rather than a transcendent icon" in Long's view, and signifies a revelation of divine favour rather than implying identity with Christ.¹⁶¹

The Bardi Francis is not typologically linked to Christ, and there are no apocalyptic references suggesting the arrival of a new era. References to apostolic poverty are minimised, and Francis is a "humble but not impoverished saint" whose life is, with the exception of the stigmata, compatible with conventional depictions of saints' lives.¹⁶² Overall, the focus is on a balance between the active and contemplative life.¹⁶³ Long believes that art historians have incorrectly treated '*imitatio Christi*' and '*alter Christus*' as synonyms when, in fact, "[a]ll Christians were expected to imitate Christ as closely as they could."¹⁶⁴ The Bardi cycle showed them how to do so, claiming validity for the Franciscan life without equating Francis and Christ.

Francis' activities are presented as a divinely ordained, ecclesiastically sanctioned, and efficacious apostolate, winning the saint celestial recognition and a place in heaven. Missionary work and contemplation, the two aspects of the Franciscan experience, are presented as the route to eternal salvation. In this light the significance of Francis's life is not that he recreated Christ's life on earth, but that he followed Christ's precepts to provide a model for the redemption of the faithful.¹⁶⁵

For Long, the cycle presents a Conventual Franciscan message of moderation amidst divisive conflict, rather than *Franciscus alter Christus*, or the mercantile and political messages of the donor.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. pp.120-121.

¹⁶² Ibid. p.121.

¹⁶³ Ibid. p.122.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 122, n 84.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. p.122.

4.3 The scenes

4.3.1 Renunciation of Worldly Goods

Goffen notes the dramatic void at the centre of the image and the way in which the palace wall,

literally comes between Francis and his father...set at an angle to the picture plane...its walls...bisect the composition and...separate the protagonists, while establishing the primacy of the young saint, standing beneath the highest point of the building...¹⁶⁶

Both men are “held by others”, the father “forcibly” and Francis “protectively”, while on either side children preparing to throw stones are restrained by adults.¹⁶⁷

The costly garments that Francis has returned to his father (a cloth merchant) symbolise the life he has left, emphasising the division between the two groups: the well-dressed laity of the town and the clerics. Nevertheless, Francis’ gesture of prayer reaches out to the secular world, perhaps anticipating the Franciscan way of life, including both private prayer and contact with the secular world, not least through preaching. The palace behind the figures unites the composition while emphasising the division between father and son.¹⁶⁸

Goffen argues that the inclusion of the *Renunciation* implies “if not an homage to the merchant class...at least an explicit reminder of Francis’s origins”¹⁶⁹ and agrees with Borsook’s assessment that the prior depicted is a portrait of Ridolfo or a Bardi

¹⁶⁶ Goffen. p.65.

¹⁶⁷ Cook suggests a typological link between the stone throwing children and Calvary, based on children mocking Elisha for being bald (*calve*) in a prefiguration of the mocking of Christ. The naked Francis who recognised his true father will one day bear the stigmata. The typology hinges on a tenuous link in the Latin translation and it is not clear that contemporary viewers recognised it, but a typological link between Francis and the mocked Christ is plausible. Cook. p.146. Goffen notes that “here Giotto represented what was prevented in the central episode, a physically violent relationship between parents (or adult) and child”. Goffen. p.65.

¹⁶⁸ Goffen. pp.65-66.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. p.66.

relative.¹⁷⁰ It was unusual for a saint to come from a mercantile background - they were usually aristocrats - and Goffen believes that, looking at this scene, the Bardi “might have felt simultaneously the seemingly contradictory emotions of self-congratulatory pride in their class and high-minded denial of its worldliness.”¹⁷¹ Not everyone could choose poverty like Francis, but all could admire it and support it. Thus both the Church and the merchants and bankers could support the Conventual ideal.¹⁷²

For Goffen, the *Renunciation* is the beginning of Francis’s *imitatio Christi* which culminates in the stigmata. She cites Bonaventure’s explanation of the *Renunciation* in terms of Francis being stripped of everything in order to follow Christ who died naked on the Cross: apostolic poverty is the start of the path of Christ. She also notes that the placing of the *Renunciation* under the personification of Obedience in the vaults (and opposite the *Approval of the Rule*) reflects the obedience shown by Francis to the Church which here accepts him.¹⁷³

Long stresses a different aspect of the relationship between Francis and the Church, seeing in the *Renunciation* a statement of the legitimacy of Francis’ conversion and the Bishop’s embrace of Francis as a formal event, “as though he is accepting Francis’s profession of vows in this moment.”¹⁷⁴ Rather than an instance of *Franciscus alter Christus*, Long sees Francis acting in a non-miraculous physical world, evoking emotion with a direct impact on the viewer, and without any visible celestial activity.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ Poeschke, who describes the figure as a canon, denies this on the grounds of his crossed hands which he believes indicate disapproval, though it is hard to imagine why the canon, or indeed a Bardi, should disapprove when the Bishop approves so publicly. Poeschke. p.228.

¹⁷¹ Goffen. p.67.

¹⁷² Ibid. p.67.

¹⁷³ Ibid. p.67.

¹⁷⁴ Long. p.94.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. p.94.

4.3.2 Approval of the Rule by Innocent III

The setting and composition emphasise Franciscan obedience to the papacy and Franciscan authority as conferred by the pope, continuing this theme of obedience and approval from the *Renunciation*. The figures are directed towards the meeting of Francis and Innocent, and Francis is distinguished from his brothers by his halo and the change in background decoration behind him. As Poeschke notes, the architectural arrangement, which frames rather than locates the scene, is adjusted equally to the picture's frame and plan, and "was ultimately intended to create a new pictorial unity of image and space, an interlocking of fictive and actual space".¹⁷⁶

The ceremony of the scene creates a formality which affirms Franciscan authority. By presenting the verbal approval of the Rule as though the Pope were giving the Rule to Francis, Giotto emphasises papal approbation and Franciscan obedience to the papacy.¹⁷⁷ Goffen argues that the pediment bust of St Peter is a reminder of apostolic succession, conferring authority and authenticity upon the scene, and creates a visual association between Peter and Francis, immediately below him, suggesting a "spiritual or historical resemblance".¹⁷⁸ As Peter was the foundation stone of the Church and the apostles' leader after Christ's death, Francis was the founder of his Order and, in a sense, a second founder of the Church itself, as in Pope Innocent III's dream in which the Church was saved from collapse by Francis and his brothers.¹⁷⁹ Peter was the patron of Santa Croce and the "resemblance" between the saints is here affirmed on its walls. Goffen also claims that by presenting twelve friars Giotto was reiterating "the theme of the saint's imitation of Christ."¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ Poeschke. p.228

¹⁷⁷ Goffen 67-68.

¹⁷⁸ Goffen. p.69. Although Peter presides over the scene as a whole, especially when viewed obliquely, he is not specifically positioned above Francis rather than the others.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 69. Bonaventure. Ch.3.

¹⁸⁰ Goffen. p.68.

Long, however, disagrees with suggestions that the *Approval* presents the Franciscans as the new Apostles and Francis as a new Peter.¹⁸¹ She argues that “this association does not appear strongly marked”¹⁸² and that, while some unofficial biographies spoke of twelve brothers (plus Francis),¹⁸³ creating a parallel with Christ, such biographies show no other influence in the Chapel. Furthermore, the twelfth figure was a late addition and probably a portrait of a family friend.¹⁸⁴

While it is hard to avoid associating twelve friars and their saintly leader receiving a preaching commission, with Christ and the Apostles, Long’s point is fair. Francis is not giving the commission but kneeling to receive it. There is an association between Francis and Peter but it speaks more strongly of the authority conferred on Francis and his Order, and of Petrine protection, than of direct resemblance. Overall, the impression is of Francis as the focal point, poised between the Pope’s authority and the world’s needs, backed by his brothers and operating within the infrastructure of the Church. The association with Christ and the Apostles is present simply in the general theme of obedience to God (as mediated through papal authority) and the preaching of the gospel.

4.3.3 Apparition at Arles

Long notes that both Anthony and Francis are “isolated and framed in the double openings of the cloister and inner wall, making their roles as pivots of the action explicit.”¹⁸⁵ Francis, however, does not really seem to occupy the physical space around him in the way that the other figures do.¹⁸⁶ Central, and almost floating,

¹⁸¹ Long, p.99, n.35.

¹⁸² Ibid. p.99.

¹⁸³ Ibid. p.97. n.30. Long notes that the “major texts and earlier representations describe him with only eleven” and disagrees with Goffen’s claim that Bonaventure records twelve brothers, arguing that the twelve cited include Francis.

¹⁸⁴ Possibly Federigo Bardi, canon of Florence Cathedral, or a friar to whom Ridolfo’s father left money, or a friar known to the family and perhaps charged with their spiritual care. Ibid. pp.97-98. See also Goffen. p.68.

¹⁸⁵ Long, p.102.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. p.102.

Francis is further singled out by being drenched in light¹⁸⁷ and appears both present and yet not physically located in an ordinarily intelligible way. Meanwhile, the viewer is invited to become part of the picture space, joining the friars. As Jules Lubbock notes, “from outside the chapel the painting springs to life, and we seem to be present in the cloister looking into the Chapter house.”¹⁸⁸

Goffen interprets the scene as pertinent to a number of Franciscan themes, but most importantly as a presentation of Francis as *alter Christus*.¹⁸⁹ She observes that his hands are prominent (all but one of the friars having their hands hidden in their habits) and suggests that, by association, one thinks of the stigmata,¹⁹⁰ citing Bonaventure who saw the apparition as a prefiguration of this, showing Francis’ identification with Christ. Long quite rightly points out, however, that in the Bardi fresco Francis’ hands are not stretched out as though on the Cross (as in the vision,¹⁹¹ and as one might expect if identification with Christ were being suggested), but raised in a position “closer to an orant praying than to that of Christ crucified.”¹⁹² In her opinion the fresco focuses on the practice of Franciscan meditation, showing the friars meditating after the sermon.¹⁹³ Such meditation could involve vivid visualisations of, and affective response to, the Passion and Long goes so far as to say that it is the meditation which causes the vision.¹⁹⁴ Bruce Cole supports Goffen’s interpretation, on the grounds that there was a once a Crucifix in the background.¹⁹⁵ Long, however, argues that it was a Crucifixion with mourners, rather than a Crucifix per se, and that the emphasis is therefore on the response to the Passion, presenting Francis as like Christ’s followers, rather than like Christ himself.¹⁹⁶ Either way, Francis’ posture with arms raised rather than stretched out as if crucified suggests strongly that the *alter Christus* concept is not of primary

¹⁸⁷ As elsewhere, the natural and pictorial light is aligned. The unity of pictorial and actual space which Poeschke noted in the Approval is even stronger here. Poeschke. p.228.

¹⁸⁸ This effect is achieved by “several carefully calculated but almost imperceptible optical corrections”. Lubbock. p.141.

¹⁸⁹ Goffen. p.69.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. p.71.

¹⁹¹ Bonaventure. Ch.4. p.215.

¹⁹² Long. p.103.

¹⁹³ Against Goffen, Long thinks that St Anthony is no longer speaking. Ibid. p.103.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. p.103.

¹⁹⁵ Bruce Cole, "Giotto's *Apparition of St Francis at Arles*: The Case of the Missing Crucifix?," *Simiolus* 7, (1974). Cited by Long. n.48, p.104.

¹⁹⁶ Long. n.48, p.104.

importance. If there is identification with Christ it is less in terms of the stigmata and more in the sense of Francis being present with his brothers when they are gathered in prayer, as Christ promised to be present with those who come together in his name.¹⁹⁷ Such an association would also explain the feeling of being consoled by the Holy Spirit experienced by those brothers who did not see the vision.

In addition to the presentation of *Franciscus alter Christus*, Goffen finds further Conventual elements in the scene. She believes that, rather than focussing on the friar who sees the vision (Brother Monaldo) Giotto directs attention to Anthony, to whom Francis gave permission to teach and preach, thus affirming these Conventual activities and reminding the viewer of the harmonious governance of the Order as guided by Francis, who is identified with Christ and approved by God. Goffen claims that this amounts to “an endorsement of the active Conventual life of preaching and teaching exemplified by Anthony – and approved by Francis – and a hopeful statement of concord between the Conventuals and the Spirituals”, although she notes that this concord was never achieved.¹⁹⁸ This suggestion may be overstated: the scene certainly shows both preaching and contemplation, but neither the Conventuals nor the Spirituals opposed either of these activities in principle, they simply accorded them differing levels of importance. If the Conventuals wished to give a message to the Spirituals here, it seems more likely to be that good and authoritative preaching prompted effective meditation.

4.3.4 Trial Before the Sultan

The *Trial* opposite uses the same compositional device of a horizontal arrangement of figures spread relatively evenly from side to side, with a discretely framed vertical figure on whom the action is focussed. Here the enthroned Sultan¹⁹⁹ bisects the

¹⁹⁷ Matt. 18:20.

¹⁹⁸ Goffen. p.71.

¹⁹⁹ Bonaventure describes this episode as taking place in Syria and the Sultan as the Sultan of Babylon. Bonaventure. Ch.9. The same is recorded in W. Heywood, ed. *The Little Flowers of St Francis of Assisi* (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, Random House, 1998). Ch.24, pp.52-54. Here the Sultan is converted and baptised on his death bed. Celano describes him as the Sultan of the Saracens in Syria. Celano. First Life: 57. However, the scene is generally referred to as taking place in Egypt

picture space, linking the two distinct halves in narrative as well as spatial terms. Despite the palatial setting, the space remains a frame for the event rather than a real location and the shallow perspective projects the Sultan's throne forward, emphasising his significance in the story.

In a scene reminiscent of Elijah challenging the priests of Baal, or Moses and Aaron with Pharaoh's magicians,²⁰⁰

Francis has raised his right arm in a gesture that suggests both a blessing and a command...as he prepares to walk forward. His gesture is juxtaposed with the similar gesture by the priest in yellow but signifies exactly the opposite: willingness, not reluctance; courage, not cowardice.²⁰¹

The hub of this imbalance and dramatic tension is the Sultan. His gesture – pointing with his right hand at Francis and the fire on his left, while looking back at the priests on his right - has been interpreted as either command (he is ordering his priests to meet Francis's challenge and his attendants are trying to enforce this²⁰²) or judgement (he is judging Christianity to be the true religion and the attendant in the foreground is echoing his gesture but chivvying out the now useless priests²⁰³). Giotto's narrative skill is displayed in the departure of the priests which shows, through each member of the group of men to the Sultan's right, a succession of movements equating to one man's departure, beginning with the frontal figure closest to the Sultan and ending with the man walking through the door and out of the picture. It is the Sultan and Francis, however, who are the protagonists.²⁰⁴

Again, there is disagreement over the presentation of Francis. Bonaventure describes Francis' mission to the East and his willingness to prove his faith as a longing to imitate the martyrs and an illustration of his identification with Christ, and

and the Sultan in question is identified as Al-Kamil who ruled much of north Africa during the 5th Crusade, 1213-1221.

²⁰⁰ 1 Kings 18. Exodus 7.

²⁰¹ Goffen. p.73.

²⁰² See *ibid.* p.73 and Cook. p.149.

²⁰³ Long. p.100.

²⁰⁴ Again, Goffen sees significance in the hands: only St Francis' and the Sultan's hands are visible, marking them out as the active agents in the scene. Goffen. p.73.

Goffen interprets the scene in terms of *Franciscus alter Christus*. She associates it christologically with the *Apparition* opposite, the *Apparition* prefiguring the stigmata and the *Trial* the martyrdom which Francis desired (a desire which, though he was not martyred, was effectively fulfilled by the stigmatisation).²⁰⁵ Like the *Apparition*, the *Trial* follows preaching, in this case Francis' preaching to the Sultan. Goffen notes that Francis had refused gifts from the Sultan who was privately convinced by him (although he could not convert publicly), and cites Bonaventure's association of poverty with fire, both as a cleansing, purifying agent and a metaphor for passionate love of Christ.²⁰⁶

In addition to this *alter Christus* reading, Goffen sees the scene as both missionary and crusading in character. She claims that the *Trial* alludes not only to the Franciscan mission to Egypt but to their role in the Crusades more widely, including the acknowledgment of their activity in the East by the granting in 1333 of pastoral charge of the holy sites in Palestine.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, she connects it to the *Approval* on the basis of Pope Innocent III's call for a crusade, and argues that Bardi allegiance to the Angevins associates them with the Angevin right (purchased) to the throne of Jerusalem, their involvement with the Franciscan tertiaries, and the canonised Angevin Franciscans, whose inclusion in the Chapel programme Goffen interprets as a statement of Bardi loyalty.²⁰⁸

Despite the considerable factual detail about Bardi-Angevin-Franciscan-crusading links which Goffen supplies, the causal relations she suggests are not confirmed by

²⁰⁵ Ibid. p.72. Bonaventure. Ch. 9.

²⁰⁶ Bonaventure, *Sermones* 4, *Opera Omnia* 9:579; 116 and 118 cited in Goffen. p.73 and n.73, p.122.

²⁰⁷ Ibid. p.73. Cook agrees that there is a crusading aspect to the scene, seeing this version of the *Trial* as more "aggressive" than earlier ones and suggests that this may be to do with the desecration of holy sites and the martyrdom of friars in Asia. In Cook's eyes, "Giotto's fresco almost demands of the viewers that they recognize a conflict in which they have to choose sides." Cook. p.149.

²⁰⁸ Robert of Anjou, King of Jerusalem, Naples and Sicily, and his consort Sancia, both Franciscan tertiaries, visited Florence in 1310. The Florentines renewed their Angevin allegiance in 1312. Goffen. p.58. An infant son of the Angevin Regent of Florence died in 1327 and was buried in Santa Croce. p.75. Saints Elizabeth of Hungary, Louis of Toulouse, and King Louis IX of France, whom Goffen believes was depicted in the fourth niche of the altar wall, were all Angevin. To further cement this network of Bardi, Florentine, Franciscan, Angevin, and Holy Land connections, Goffen adds a Bardi ancestor who collected a relic of St Philip from the Patriarch of Jerusalem on behalf of Florence, and joined a crusade to liberate the Holy Sepulchre, later becoming Bishop of Acre. pp.74-75.

the visual evidence. No doubt the Bardi were interested in the Crusades but there is no visual reference to this, or to the rejected gifts. That the Bardi were supporters of the Angevins who were prominent at the time is true but it would be normal for the saints on the altar wall of a Franciscan chapel to include notable Franciscans and Anthony of Padua is as likely, if not more likely, a candidate for the fourth niche as Louis IX.²⁰⁹ Goffen thinks that it would have been appropriate to place Louis IX next to the *Trial*, to associate the crusader king with the missionary saint,²¹⁰ but it is not evident that the position of the saints on the altar wall relates directly to the scenes. Furthermore, according to Goffen's own dating of the frescoes, they were painted before the Franciscans took pastoral charge of the holy sites of Palestine in 1333 and, in any case, the scene shows only the Sultan, and does not allude to Palestine, the Crusades, or the holy sites.

That the Bardi, the Angevins, and the Conventuals had shared interests is undeniable; that they are prominently visible in the frescoes is highly debateable, and Long, predictably, disagrees with Goffen's interpretation of the *Trial*. She argues correctly that Francis is not centre stage and that Giotto does not visually identify Francis and Christ. Rather this is a scene about the success of Francis' missionary activity, assigned to him by the Pope. The Sultan is the important figure: a heathen who judges Christianity to be the true religion. "The victory of Christianity over Islam is revealed not only by the sultan's gesture, but also by the demeanours of the representatives of the two faiths". Long therefore rejects an *alter Christus* reading, and the idea of a link with apostolic poverty (an unlikely choice of focus for a Conventual church), the Crusades, and the Angevin connection.²¹¹

²⁰⁹ Long argues against Goffen's claim that the fourth saint was Louis IX of France and points out that Goffen's reasoning here is circular: the Angevin connection suggests an Angevin saint who would support an Angevin connection. Long. p.102. n.43. This is a little unfair as the saint could have been Louis, who was, after all, a Franciscan saint as well as an Angevin, the Angevin connection did exist, and the Bardi might have been influenced by this. Nevertheless, Anthony was a very popular saint, frequently depicted, and the fourth niche could easily have been his. See also Andrew Ladis, "Spirituality in Conflict: Saint Francis and Giotto's Bardi Chapel, by Rona Goffen," *Renaissance Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1992).

²¹⁰ Goffen. p.74.

²¹¹ Long. p.101. including nn.42-43.

4.3.5 Funeral of St Francis and Verification of the Stigmata

Interpretations of the *Funeral* are, again, strikingly opposed. Long claims that there is a “visionary character” to the depiction, with figures dissolving into the clouds, and that Francis, “instead of formally revealing his wounds...assumes the same orant posture that he displays in the *Apparition* immediately above this fresco, and in the *Stigmatization*” and “looks less like a permanent icon than a momentary vision in the unfolding of the story”. She concludes that “the painting focuses on the bereavement of Francis’ followers and the saint’s acceptance into heaven, rather than on his similarity to Christ”,²¹² and that the “wounds are played down as much as possible”.²¹³ In contrast, Goffen believes the scene emphasises the stigmata, with five men around the bier each examining or kissing one of the wounds.²¹⁴ She describes the ascending Francis as adopting a “prophetic” and “receptive” posture similar to the *Apparition* and *Stigmatization* scenes and claims that,

Giotto’s narrative is obviously related to the ongoing debate about the veracity of the Stigmatization: here, in his most verisimilar manner, Giotto captures and communicates the wonder, doubt, and ultimate conviction of the eyewitnesses.²¹⁵

However, since Long focuses on Francis’ ascending soul and Goffen on the corpse, their interpretations are not wholly opposed and both make valid points.

4.3.6 Visions of Brother Agostino and Bishop Guido

The two scenes are set within one architectural frame (separated by a doorway) and are thematically linked as instances of witness to Francis’ sanctity and as auditory encounters (Brother Agostino speaks to Francis and Francis speaks to Bishop Guido). It is possible that the fresco originally included a figure of Francis in the

²¹² Ibid. p108.

²¹³ Ibid. p.108, n53.

²¹⁴ Goffen. p.75.

²¹⁵ Ibid. p.76.

area now destroyed. If so, this might have been a similar image to that of his soul ascending in the opposite scene.²¹⁶ Either way, the fresco emphasises the visionary.

This image, on the lowest tier, is, with the *Funeral*, closest to the tombs. The Bardi would have seen Francis as their intercessor after death and the funerary theme is appropriate. For Goffen, the scene is about Francis as intermediary, his intercession guaranteed by the divine approval signified in his stigmata.²¹⁷ According to Cook, the appearances show that “Francis is still active among the brothers and gives people confidence that he will be their advocate in heaven”.²¹⁸ The fresco brings the cycle a “full circle from the first story, where the Bishop wraps the naked Francis in his cloak” and “confirms Francis’s love for and devotion to the Church at a time when some who claimed to follow Francis were in open rebellion against it.”²¹⁹

4.3.7 Stigmatization

Separated from the rest of the cycle both physically and by the unique subject matter, the *Stigmatization* occupies the most public space available and ‘advertises’ the cycle. As Marilyn Aronberg Lavin notes, its position mirrors that of the *Assumption of the Virgin* above the Tosinchi and Spinelli Chapel nearby, creating a triangular arrangement with the great Crucifix by Cimabue over the chancel. “The prominence and isolation of the two fresco scenes...give them a strong devotional character” and the “iconic” *Stigmatization* is separated from the rest of the Francis narrative and minimal in its selection of elements of the story, with “strongly hieratic” figures. She suggests that Francis’ frontal position, which makes “all five wounds of the stigmata...equally visible”, is a “direct allusion” to the installation of the Feast of the Stigmatization in 1304.²²⁰

²¹⁶Barbara Buhler Walsh believes that Giotto did include St Francis and Ugo Procacci has claimed that a nineteenth century restorer who painted St Francis into the picture (the ‘restoration’ has now been removed) was following the line of a halo still visible at the time, which must have been the saint’s. See Long. n.55, p.109.

²¹⁷ Goffen. p.77.

²¹⁸ Cook. p.151.

²¹⁹ Ibid. p.152.

²²⁰ Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, *The Place of Narrative: Mural Decoration in Italian Churches 431-1600*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).pp.52-53.

While not disputing the prominence of the scene, in contrast to Lavin's focus on the 'hieratic' and 'iconic', Long notes the impressive naturalism with which this 'unnatural' event is depicted. "Francis's head tips back to look at the seraph, which causes the realistic phenomenon of his mouth dropping slightly open", while his hands "curl responsively around the spot where the stigmata hit him...not...in a mirror image, but in an exact parallel; that is, the wound on the seraph's left hand strikes Francis's left hand...and so on."²²¹ The Christ-Seraph's physicality (the human anatomy is visible and the motion realistic, with the loin cloth fluttering) contrasts with earlier images in which Francis is presented in an orant-derived pose "locked into a permanent relationship with the completely symbolic seraph."²²² Here, "Giotto is so concerned to describe the physical reality of the action that he even shows the ray from the seraph's right hand moving behind Francis's head to hit his right hand."²²³ The pictorial space around Francis is remarkably unified, a factor which Poeschke attributes to the light which emanates from the vision and lights up the right hand side of the mountain, the church façade and Francis himself.²²⁴

The Bardi *Stigmatization* differs from its predecessor at Assisi in that the Christ-Seraph is shown crucified and in motion. The Crucifix is appropriate for Santa Croce, but Goffen believes it also reinforces the theme of *Franciscus alter Christus*.

Of obvious relevance to the Franciscan order in general, and to the dedication of this Franciscan church of the Holy Cross in particular, the *Stigmatization* announces the theme of Francis's imitation of Christ, which resounds within the chapel as well.²²⁵

Goffen argues that *Franciscus alter Christus* is the leitmotif of the Bardi cycle,²²⁶ citing Bonaventure, quoting Galatians, "With Christ I am nailed to the cross."²²⁷ The Crucifix which was the original Chapel altarpiece,²²⁸ the great Crucifix above the

²²¹ Long. pp.115-116.

²²² Ibid. p. 116.

²²³ Ibid. pp.115-116.

²²⁴ Poeschke. p.229.

²²⁵ Goffen. p.60.

²²⁶ Ibid. p.60.

²²⁷ Galatians 2:19. See ibid. p.60 and n.10 p.118.

²²⁸ By Ugolino da Siena. Ibid. p.53. and n.25. p.113.

high altar, and the planned cycle of the True Cross²²⁹ in the chancel perpetuated the visual theme of the Crucifixion, “underscoring the typology of the saint’s *imitatio Christi*”²³⁰ which Goffen reads as identity with Christ, not simply imitation.

Long accepts that the imitation of Christ is “inevitably an important aspect of the narrative” but she distinguishes between imitation of Christ and the identity with Christ implied by *Franciscus alter Christus* and argues that it is the “sign of God’s blessing” of Francis which is most important here.²³¹ Furthermore, the *Stigmatization* links the contemplative and active elements of Francis’s life and the cycle.

It occurred while Francis was meditating on the Passion, and it gave him the martyrdom in imitation of Christ that was the ultimate reward of missionary activity. The event not only underlined the efficacy of Franciscan contemplation but also confirmed the exceptional validity of the Franciscan way of life as the route to eternal salvation.²³²

This much seems clear and can be accepted regardless of differing opinions about the presentation of Francis and questions of Bardi allegiances.

²²⁹ Agnolo Gaddi.

²³⁰ Goffen. p.60.

²³¹ Long, p.117. n.74. The ‘mirror image’ presentation of the rays running from the Seraph’s right hand to Francis’ right hand and so forth could support either an *alter Christus* or an *imitatio Christi* interpretation. A mirror image might imply identity, in the sense of seeing oneself in a mirror, or imitation, in the sense of following a pattern. The obvious difference lies in the contrasting postures of the figures, suggesting that an *alter Christus* reading is too strong and that it is Francis’ *imitatio Christi*, divinely approved with the ‘seal’ of the stigmata, which is indicated.

²³² Ibid. p.117.

4.4 Assessing the cycle: correlation between content and composition

While Goffen's discussions provide a wealth of interesting detail about the Bardi, Francis, and textual sources, Long's exegesis is more compatible with the visual evidence of the frescoes' content and composition, and thus more coherent and convincing.

The lunettes show Francis' calling. Here Francis is slightly "off-axis toward the window in otherwise strongly centralised compositions". These scenes have a "formal, ceremonial character" which "heightens the impression of official approbation and places Francis's future acts firmly under the authority of the Church."²³³ The middle tier shows his way of life. The images are frontal, their locations contained within the fresco field.

In each an isocephalic²³⁴ group of figures is broken at the centre by a framed, elevated, form that dominates both narrative and composition...the scenes reveal the primary tenets of [Francis'] spirituality: a balance between mission and mediation, a harmonisation of the active and contemplative ways of life.²³⁵

On the lowest tier, Francis is endorsed by God and appears posthumously to his followers. These scenes are physically close to the Bardi tombs and associate Francis' intercession with their occupants. Lavin's analysis of the narrative arrangement of fresco cycles suggests that the Bardi arrangement, moving from one side to the other, may be intended to,

give a sense of Francis's peripatetic life (each event in a different place) and to express the simultaneity of the last three episodes, the saint's death and the two visions of his death, seen on opposite sides of the same tier."²³⁶

²³³ Ibid. p.99.

²³⁴ I.e. the figures' heads are on roughly the same level.

²³⁵ Long. p.105.

²³⁶ Lavin. p.53.

Long accurately describes the scenes on the left as relating to Francis' spiritual commitment and his contemplative life, his "personal profession to God, the effects of his kind of meditation and his entrance into heaven".²³⁷ The right wall relates to his ministry and active life, "the official sanctioning of Francis's mission, his efforts to carry out that mission, and the emergence of his cult".²³⁸ By pairing the scenes horizontally in terms of iconography and composition, the two themes are linked, increasing the significance of each by connecting it visually and conceptually to the rest. Thus the composition and arrangement of the scenes reflects the balance which their content portrays.

²³⁷ Long, p.110.

²³⁸ Ibid. p.110.

4.5 Further considerations

Long successfully correlates the frescoes' content with the overarching compositional structure and programme layout. Her final analysis of the balance achieved in communicating the contemplative and the active aspects of Franciscan life is, ultimately, not dissimilar to Goffen's claim that the cycle harmonises Conventual and Spiritual attitudes, showing that in art - if not in life - the two could co-exist.²³⁹ Long's interpretation as summarised above is cohesive, credible, and theologically rewarding but her sensitive insights into the role of composition in the communication of content are not exhaustive and it is revealing to consider Giotto's use of space in the compositions in greater detail.

4.5.1 Spatial factors within the Bardi compositions

The compositional strategy within the scenes is a simple but effective one in which the centre of each scene is the physical location of spiritual activity and, more specifically, of Francis' spiritual development and his spiritual effect on others. It is this central space which is the most spiritually important and which encapsulates the primary theological message of each scene.

In the *Renunciation*, in a startling compositional choice, the centre of the picture is empty. The space symbolises the gulf between Francis' old life, characterised by worldly things, and his new life in Christ. The figure of the father, thrusting diagonally forward among the upright figures around him, has dramatic, emotional, but impotent energy. Not only do his friends restrain him, but his son is already beyond his influence. Francis has exchanged earthly for heavenly things and his earthly father can no longer control him. The father's angry diagonal movement is contrasted with Francis' upright posture and his arms raised in prayer, another diagonal line among the verticals but here indicating contained petition rather than lashing out. The visual effect of the verticals of Francis and the palace wall is to halt the forward motion of the father whose gesture, even were he to break loose, would

²³⁹ Goffen, p.77.

surely waver and crumble against the strength of this vertical axis. His diagonal motion is too uncontrolled and its excess seems likely to dissipate, deflected by the taut, strong vertical of Francis and the ecclesiastical structure backing him up.

The angle of the palace directs the eye forwards to Francis who stands at its corner (jutting out into the foreground and visually indicating that he is turning from one life to another), beneath its highest point. The group of Francis, the Bishop, and the clerics are closer to the Chapel altar, with the actual²⁴⁰ and pictorial light behind them, and seem protected both by this proximity and the palace wall itself. Francis has been welcomed into their fold and, with them behind him, no longer engages with his earthly father but looks over him to his Father in Heaven. The space between father and son, the physical location for a face to face argument, has become a spiritual gulf. Francis has crossed it by renouncing his worldly goods while his father, still clutching these and the worldliness that they represent, cannot. Although Francis's gesture of prayer may indicate a continued, prayerful, relationship with the secular world (as borne out by his life), the contrast between his gesture and his father's is as stark as the gulf between them. This space thus represents the moment of Francis' commitment, his leap of faith. By releasing himself from worldly ties, by becoming naked and vulnerable in an almost baptismal sense, Francis begins a process of spiritual transformation which continues in the rest of the cycle.

In the *Approval* opposite, Francis is very slightly to the left of centre, again on the altar side of the scene. He is coming closer to spiritual fullness, to occupying his rightful spiritual place. Facing the Pope, backed by his brothers, observed by the laity, and under the aegis of Peter, Francis receives authorisation for his spirituality as expressed in the Franciscan way of life. He is drawing people to him, receiving approbation, and the composition expresses this spiritual growth in the arrangement of the figures which positions Francis as the leader of his brothers. There is nothing abject in his humility as he kneels before the Pope and the mass of the group of friars

²⁴⁰ Though little natural light enters for most of the day.

behind him expresses a confident solidity. The papal approval, however important, affirms what already exists. Having made the initial leap of faith, Francis is now operating from a place of spiritual confidence, leadership, and authority.

In the *Trial* below, Francis' mission expands to converting the heathen. Before, he knelt for approval; here, he stands as a challenge to the infidel priests as they slink away and a challenge to the Sultan, sitting in judgement. His mature spirituality is manifest in his posture and in the effect which it has on the Sultan. The preaching preceding the moment depicted has already impressed the Sultan and now the conviction of his faith acts like an exorcism, driving away the priests and creating an internal conflict in the Sultan whose choice, evoked by Francis' compelling spirituality, is centre stage. As in the *Renunciation*, the effect of Francis' faith is disruptive and the diagonal movement cutting across the verticals and horizontals of the majority of the composition, has particular force.²⁴¹ The Sultan points downwards with his right hand at Francis and the fire on his left, while looking to the right, reproving or exhorting his priests. Pulling in two directions and disrupting the axes of the composition, his body expresses his spiritual conflict. Whether this is the moment of personal conversion or the dramatic build up to this, his state of tension and subsequent choice have been created by Francis, whose commanding presence is undiminished by his marginal position.

In the *Apparition*, Francis comes to occupy fully the central space. Appearing among his brothers, apparently unconfined by the physical architectural space around him, but visibly present to at least one friar and spiritually present to all, Francis' spirituality is the focus of his Order. His standing orant figure, contrasts with the enthroned and conflicted Sultan on the opposite wall. Francis is not physically present in the chapterhouse, but his spiritual presence fills it. Framed by the archway through which we see him, his raised arms mirror its curve to create a circular form within which the circles of his haloed head stand out even more

²⁴¹ The 'disruptive' aspect of this scene need not be interpreted as radical, in a Spiritual, as opposed to a Conventual, sense. Rather, it underlines the drama and Francis' compelling spirituality. This dramatic rendition does, however, contrast with version in the Sassetti Chapel. See 8.3.2.

strongly. The standing Anthony does not detract from Francis' pre-eminence, but rather seems to derive his own position as a leader among the friars from Francis, standing among them while they sit, but to the side and with his hands quietly folded in his habit.

Below this, in the *Funeral*, Francis' soul ascends to heaven in the centre of the painting, as his brothers mourn over his stigmatised body. One friar, close to Francis' head, looks up at the ascending soul, directing the viewer's gaze with his own. The fullness of Francis' spirituality in the scene above is confirmed by his acceptance into heaven. In the damaged final scene it is impossible to be sure what occupied the centre of the fresco but Brother Agostino and Bishop Guido to whom Francis appeared posthumously both face the central space. Whether Francis was originally depicted there or not, this is the direction of their gaze and it is here that the contemporary viewer may have seen him and here that the modern viewer imagines him (the viewer's own 'vision' as it were), as the intercessor of the faithful.

As in the *Renunciation*, the centre of the *Stigmatization* appears empty. The focal point of the picture is Francis' face, but in the physical centre of the image is the mysterious interaction between Francis and his vision, which occurs, if anywhere, on a meta-physical level in the relationship between Francis and Christ. In the *Renunciation* Francis made the leap of faith, symbolised by the empty space in the centre of the image, and was embraced by the Church. The change in his life was like a second baptism, a death to an old self and the birth of a new, naked and vulnerable. In the *Renunciation*, Francis achieves a kind of self-emptying in his embrace of poverty; in the *Stigmatization* he opens himself to Christ (both spiritually and physically: his posture as, surprised, he starts to stand, opens out his body towards the vision, his hands and feet exposed) and here, instead of the Church embracing him, he is imprinted by the Christ-Seraph and honoured with the marks of Christ's Passion which physically break into his body. The process of 'emptying out' which begins with the *Renunciation* continues in the emptiness of the mountain

wilderness.²⁴² The apparently ‘empty’ space at the centre is not empty, but a place of spiritual engagement, bridged by the golden rays, making visible the powerful connection between the two figures.

²⁴² Mountains and wildernesses are traditionally places of revelation. Whether or not Giotto intended a reference to Moses on Sinai or Christ’s Transfiguration is impossible to say. The connections are not visually obvious but the nature of the *Stigmatization* as a revelation on a mountain naturally reminds the viewer of similar incidents. Like Moses, Francis is a law giver, creating the Rule for his Order and, like Moses, he receives the divine radiance which infuses him with God’s glory, a ‘breaking in’ like the breaking in of the stigmata. See Exodus 34:29-35. Like the apostles at Capernaum, Francis sees the transfigured glory of Christ, here crucified and in the form of the Seraph, an event at which Moses also appears, seeing Christ in an extension of his encounter on Sinai when he did not see but heard God. See Exodus 34:5 and Matt. 17:1-3; Mk 9:2-4; Lk. 9:28-30. These typological connections place Francis in a tradition of holy recipients of privileged encounter with God and leaders of their people.

4.6 Conclusions

The theme of spiritual transformation, or the achievement of a harmonious balance between potentially competing, conflicting, aspects of spiritual maturity, is not undermined by the lack of consensus regarding the religious, social, political and economic interests which may have influenced the frescoes. Their transformative and unifying nature is played out in the relationships between the material and visual spaces of the Chapel and the receptive 'space' of the viewer.

The transformative (even transfigurative) element of the cycle is present in the transformation of a young man into a saint, and the spiritual and physical experiences of the flourishing relationship between Francis and God and, by extension, of God's affirmative relationship with humanity. While Francis is not presented as a second Christ, he has an extraordinary spiritual presence in life and after death, and is a constant exemplar to his followers.

The 'balancing' or 'unifying' element is achieved compositionally through the arrangement of the scenes as described by Long, in which the two walls and their three tiers physically, spatially harmonize the contemplative and missionary aspects of Franciscan life, and the development from calling to action to final affirmation. It is also achieved by the dual nature of the events depicted. In each scene Francis is shown in two aspects simultaneously. In the *Renunciation* he both rejects and reaches out; in the *Approval* he displays both humility and leadership; in the *Trial* he challenges others and he proves his own willingness to be challenged; in the *Apparition* he is physically absent and spiritually present; in the *Funeral* his corpse lies on the bier while his soul ascends to heaven; and in the *Visions* he is both physically absent (his corpse elsewhere) and visible and audible to his brothers. Francis' character and actions are, like Giotto's composition, constantly harmonising and unifying his relation to God and his relation to the world. This unification of the great goals of human life (right relation to God and to his creation) is thus identified with the transformative spirituality that Francis exhibits and inspires. Even the more radical elements of the cycle (the *Renunciation* and the *Trial*) are disruptive only in

the sense that they challenge perceptions and change lives. They are actions that reject old habits and ideas and, in so doing, make space for something new, for transformation. However bitter and divisive the disagreements between Conventuals and Spirituels, they are not visible.

Here is a transfiguration of corporeality within one man's life which has inspirational implications for others. Francis rejects his old life, making a leap of faith, naked into the protecting arms of the church. He is changed because he gives himself to God. Drawing others to him, he establishes a new way of life which is approved by God via the apostolic succession from Peter to the Pope. Thus sanctified, his conviction overrides physical fear and proves the strength of his faith with such power that it convinces the heathen. His spiritual presence among his brothers is unconfined, appearing among them in their preaching and contemplation. After his death, his brothers see the physical manifestation of his spiritual state imprinted on his body, while his soul ascends to heaven, and he immediately takes up the role of intercessor, leading his dying brother to heaven.

The *visual* space of the Chapel is thus one of transformation and unity and this is also true of the *material* space. The Bardi Chapel is primarily a funerary chapel, and the masses said here were intended to bring about the transformation of the deceased in the hope of the resurrection, and their ultimate unification with God. Standing in a church built on the foundations of Francis' life and example, the viewer's situation is physically determined by Francis, a relatively recent saint when the Chapel was painted and one whose Order had already changed the spiritual environment of the time dramatically and continued to be influential for centuries. Francis' own reality was radically changed during his lifetime as a result of his decision to follow Christ. To the Bardi, their fate after death was presented visually as in his hands; to the viewer of any period, the cycle offers the possibility of a changed, transfigured reality in the example of Francis who was changed and who changed others, and in the imitation of Christ. Through the composition of their *visual* space and its relation to their *material* space, the frescoes communicate this to the viewer (the *receptive* space). Francis has remained a popular and 'accessible' saint, and his

figure has a particularly affective quality in these frescoes which is entirely appropriate to expressing Francis' imitation of Christ and to inspiring transformative imitation in others. Such imitation is driven by the desire for Christ which Bonaventure described in Francis as a flaming love²⁴³ and which is deeply personal and relational, qualities which are clearly evident in the frescoes themselves.

²⁴³ E.g. Bonaventure. p.305.

5 Thresholds of Revelation: the Baroncelli Chapel, Santa Croce

Scenes from the Life of the Virgin, Taddeo Gaddi, c.1328-1334.

Gaddi's treatment of light in this cycle is famous. The scenes have also been thematically interpreted in terms of the ancestry of Christ and the virtuous Christian life. While these analyses are valid, they are insufficient in describing a cycle which rewards attentive viewing and in which the relationship between content and composition is theologically infused. This case study explores Gaddi's use of light as a medium for annunciation and revelation in greater depth, considers the relationship of word and image in the frescoes, uncovers a prominent theme of transformation and journeying as related to revelation, and argues the significance of location and liminality throughout the cycle. These themes are represented by means of spatial and physical metaphors and accord with the funerary nature of the Chapel, and the liminal status of its patrons awaiting the transformation of judgement and the life to come. They are also relevant to the modern viewer whose response is implicated by comparison with the recipients of revelation in the frescoes and who is invited to make a visual pilgrimage, to experience revelation mimetically, and to become closer to the exemplars in the Chapel by placing himself in the vulnerable, liminal places which obedience to God and a life of Christian virtue may require.

5.1 The cycle

The narrative scenes are taken from the life of the Virgin.²⁴⁴ On the left wall, the lunette depicts the *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple* and *Joachim's Dream*. The tier below shows Saints Joachim and Anne in the *Meeting at the Golden Gate*, and the *Birth of the Virgin*. The second tier shows the *Presentation* and the *Marriage of the Virgin*. The altar wall has scenes on either side of the window, meeting in a partially divided lunette with the *Annunciation* on the left and the *Visitation* on the right. Below this, the first tier shows the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* on the left and the *Nativity* on the right. On the second tier, *The Christ Child Appearing to the Magi as a Star* is on the left, with the *Adoration of the Magi* on the right.

On the outer side of the entrance wall are the *Resurrection of Christ* and *Christ Among the Doctors*, and prophets holding scrolls foretelling the Virgin Birth. The tomb monument has a frescoed lunette with the *Madonna and Child*. The intrados of the entrance arch contains Old Testament figures while that of the archway between the two Chapel bays shows the Evangelists, Christ, the Virgin, Saint Jerome, and three Church Fathers. The vaults depict the cardinal and theological virtues, with further virtues on the window jambs. A pilaster to the right of the altar has figures of David and Jesse. The lowest tier on the left presents two fictive niches containing liturgical items.

In addition to the frescoes, sculptures of Gabriel and the Virgin Annunciate flank the entrance arch and the (original) altar retable depicts the *Coronation of the Virgin*. The stained glass – also original - shows *St Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, and Saints Peter, John the Baptist, Louis of Toulouse, Sylvester, John the Evangelist, and Bartholomew.

²⁴⁴ Source references: Matt 1; Lk 1; de Voragine, *The Golden Legend, Readings on the Saints*. Vol.1. pp.37-43;78-84, 196-202. Vol 2. pp. 77-97, 149-158.

5.2 Interpretations

5.2.1 Standard interpretations

The life of the Virgin is self-evidently the primary unifying factor in the narrative programme, reflecting the Chapel's dedication to the Virgin Annunciate, alongside which are presented exemplars of the Christian life and its virtues. The patrons hoped to gain salvation by living a virtuous Christian life, and the Chapel furnished them with examples of Christians who did so, and personifications of the virtues they possessed.²⁴⁵

Francis is, of course, a prominent Christian role model and, unsurprisingly, Franciscan interests are represented here in the figures of Francis and Louis of Toulouse in the window, and Francis on the altarpiece predella. The Stigmatization, which placed Francis in exceptional proximity to Christ,²⁴⁶ supposedly occurred on the eve of the Feast of the Holy Cross, for which the Church is named. This angelic visitation has an iconographic and typological link with the annunciatory scenes in the life of the Virgin, while Francis' response to the vision echoes the Virgin's response to Gabriel: both assent to the will of God and are physically marked by Christ.²⁴⁷ The window Stigmatization places Francis very close to the *Annunciation* fresco, reinforcing these connections.

In addition to these themes of the life of the Virgin, Christian virtues, and exemplary Christian lives, art historians have identified themes of: annunciation, revelation, and light; the ancestry of Christ; the influence of Fra Simone Fidati; and Taddeo Gaddi's architectural interests.

²⁴⁵ Diana Norman, ed. *Siena, Florence and Padua, Art, Society and Religion 1280-1400*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (London: Yale University Press, 1995). p.175.

²⁴⁶ For discussion of Francis see 4 and 8 on the Bardi and Sassetti cycles.

²⁴⁷ On the stigmata as a highly visual miracle, see 8.4 and 8.5.

5.2.2 Annunciation, revelation, and light

The frescoes directly depict five revelations – Joachim’s Dream, the flowering rod, and the Annunciations to the Virgin (reinforced by the statuary), Shepherds, and Magi. The *Visitation* reminds the viewer of the revelation of the Baptist leaping in the womb and refers indirectly to the annunciation to Zachariah of John’s forthcoming birth. The window also contains a revelation in the Stigmatization. Annunciation and revelation are thus in themselves a unifying theme in the narrative programme, and Gaddi’s portrayal of the heavenly light associated with the angels and the Christ Child as a star is famous.

The Chapel is lit by the window on the altar wall and the left wall frescoes are modelled on the assumption of this light source.²⁴⁸ On the altar wall, however, the light is associated with the revelations of the three annunciation scenes on the left hand side, and their complements on the right. Ladis writes that light is the principle medium for conveying these revelations, the natural light being overpowered by “bursts of miraculous light”²⁴⁹ which “verifies the miraculous presence of the Divine”, and would have been confirmed by God’s radiance in the pinnacle roundel of the altarpiece. Ladis claims that light itself is the unifying element in the Chapel decoration, uniting Christ, Francis and the “irradiating” seraph, scenes of revelation, and the altarpiece roundel, as well as the Virgin to whom the Chapel is dedicated and who is crowned in glory on its altarpiece amidst a blaze of gold and saints.²⁵⁰

Julian Gardner observes that,

Since the source of light is taken as the window in the altar wall it must logically be understood as being behind the scenes on that wall... Taddeo exploits this fact... particularly in ... the Annunciation to the Shepherds and

²⁴⁸ Excepting *Joachim’s Dream* where the light comes primarily from the angel.

²⁴⁹ Andrew Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1982). p.30.

²⁵⁰ See 11.4. Ladis sees the mirrors which the angels hold up before God as a reference not only to God’s radiance but also to the Virgin as the mirror that reflects God’s light, quoting Wisdom 7:26 and identifying Wisdom with the Virgin: she is “the brightness of eternal light, and the unspotted mirror of God’s majesty, and the image of His goodness.”

the Annunciation to the Magi. Here the blinding splendour of the celestial apparition bathes the landscape with light, a cool pale gold for the herdsmen among their flocks by night, and a warmer radiance for the Magi.

The silhouetted figures and the “cold glitter” of the nocturnal light represent “a new stage in the appreciation of light as a determinant of the expressive content of a scene.”²⁵¹ In Ladis’ view, however, these are not “truly nocturnal” scenes, because they “exist far from the world of facts in a supernatural realm of visions.” This light is spiritual, not natural, and “darkness, not night, is its foil.”²⁵² As Alistair Smart writes, the hillside in the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* shines, reflecting a “heavenly radiance, as one of the shepherds shields his eyes from the blinding light” and the angel is incandescent.²⁵³ This is not ‘natural’ light. Nevertheless, Gaddi’s portrayal of light implies acute observation,²⁵⁴ and Poeschke notes that the “depth and liveliness” of the pictorial space is bound up with the “suggestive effects of light, for which Taddeo had a particular penchant”. Gaddi may also have been aware of the significance of light in contemporary Franciscan theology in which it was seen “both as verification of the presence of God and as a metaphor for spiritual enlightenment.” Bonaventure’s first sermon on the Annunciation opened with the quotation from Revelation 22:16 “I am...the bright morning star”.²⁵⁵

²⁵¹ Julian. Gardner, "The Decoration of the Baroncelli Chapel in Santa Croce " *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 34, (1971). p.96. Study of the painting has shown deliberate adaptations of technique in painting the earthly and divine light.

²⁵² Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. p.31.

²⁵³ Alistair Smart, *The Dawn of Italian Painting 1250-1400* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978). p.32.

²⁵⁴ E.g. Norman, ed. p.176.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p.178. An interesting discussion of the impact of the Franciscan theology of light on church decoration was offered at a recent conference: Gerevini Stefania, "Light Matters: Rock Crystal Cross-Reliquaries, Light and Transparency in the Late Middle Ages," in *Matter of Faith* (British Museum: Unpublished, 2011). Publication of the conference papers is anticipated.

5.2.3 Influence of Fra Simone Fidati

Scholars have argued over the tone of the images, particularly those on the left, with some seeing them as restrained, sober, and reverent, and others observing a light hearted, even comic, spirit, especially in the *Marriage*.²⁵⁶ The former interpretation is linked to the idea that Gaddi was influenced by the Augustinian preacher, Fra Simone Fidati,²⁵⁷ noted for his “fiery sermons”.²⁵⁸ This connection is based on an exchange of letters between Fra Simone and someone who signed himself Taddeus of Florence, in which he describes damaging his eyesight by looking at a solar eclipse.²⁵⁹ Fra Simone criticises his overweening curiosity about matters beyond his comprehension and tells him to accept his punishment humbly.

Gardner and others have argued that this Taddeus is not to be identified with Taddeo Gaddi and this is now the consensus view,²⁶⁰ although interpretations of the frescoes’ tone remains varied. Smart sees in the frescoes, “a reaction against the intimate religious devotions encouraged most notably by the *Meditationes* in favour of a more restrained and...reverent approach to the divine mysteries”²⁶¹ with the images expressing “an intense religious feeling that is consonant with all we know about the spiritual climate of the middle decades of the century.”²⁶² Smart claims that the left wall “sets the tone of the whole cycle” with its lunette, where the

tense postures and dramatic gestures of the figures express a grave awareness that the events in which they are partaking have a solemn import beyond their complete comprehension. The surprise of the shepherds at the Angel’s appearance – underlined by the startled reaction of the sheepdog, which

²⁵⁶ See Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. p.27.

²⁵⁷ This suggestion, first made by Italo Maione, was seriously undermined by Gardner in the appendix to his 1971 article, “The Decoration of the Baroncelli Chapel in Santa Croce”.

²⁵⁸ Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. p.28.

²⁵⁹ That Gaddi might have taken the observation of light to inadvisable extremes has been argued by those who believe that he witnessed the total eclipse of 13 May 1332 and damaged his eyesight. This is debated. See Gardner. p.114. and Appendix, Norman, ed. p.178, and Poeschke. p.253.

²⁶⁰ Cf. John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 1997). p.91. who accept the connection with Fidati.

²⁶¹ Smart. pp.78-79. Smart does not explain this or why the Baroncelli Chapel would reflect it.

²⁶² *Ibid.* p.81.

strains upward, frozen by fear – focuses attention upon Joachim’s awed response to the divine message.²⁶³

In the *Meeting* there is such “reverential restraint” that Smart thinks that the image could have been used as an illustration to Fra Simone’s own injunction that ‘married couples must not indulge, whether seductively or playfully, in caresses, which put the fire of sensuality into their flesh.’

In contrast to the warm embrace in Giotto’s Arena Chapel treatment of the subject, the focus here is on “purity and self-control”, a concern which Smart sees as appropriate to the “spiritual mood of the 1330s”, giving the impression “that a veil has been drawn aside from mysteries which are beyond normal experience”.²⁶⁴

Ladis, however, claims that Gaddi’s art has none of the moralizing of Fra Fidati or the “subtle psychologizing of Giotto” and that his narration “relishes the texture of everyday life.”²⁶⁵ He sees the development from Giotto in terms of rhythm and the number and arrangement of figures,²⁶⁶ rather than reflecting a religious mood, and specifically makes the case for a humorous interpretation of the *Marriage* in strong contrast to Smart’s ‘restrained reverence’, although he does not suggest that the humour extends to other scenes.

5.2.4 Christ’s ancestry

Ladis in particular identifies Christ’s ancestry as a theme in the frescoes. The *Marriage* shows the daughter of the royal house of David and Jesse, marrying Joseph whose rod has blossomed in reference to Isaiah’s prophecy that a rod would come forth out of the root of Jesse. The Virgin is identified with the root, Jesse, and the rod which blossoms at God’s will, with Christ,²⁶⁷ while the prominent, verdant, rod may also be understood as a visual play on the words *virga* (rod) and *virgo*

²⁶³ Ibid. p.81.

²⁶⁴ Ibid. p.82.

²⁶⁵ Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. p.28. The contrast between subtle psychologising and everyday life is questionable, the one being a facet of the other.

²⁶⁶ Ibid. pp. 25-27.

²⁶⁷ Isaiah 11:1.

(virgin). Bonaventure's sermon on the Annunciation is again relevant, opening with the idea of light and lineage: "I am the root and offspring of David, the bright morning star".²⁶⁸

Beside the entrance arch and on the tomb monument Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Elijah hold scrolls foretelling the Virgin Birth while, according to Gardner, the figures in quatrefoils in the intrados may be read as types of Christ and the Virgin, and prefigurations of the *Annunciation* and *Adoration of the Magi*.²⁶⁹ The on-going fulfilment of the prophecy is the subject of the altar wall where David and Jesse are depicted on the right, near the annunciations to the Virgin, Shepherds and Magi, followed by the *Visitation* and the two adorations. In the rediscovered altarpiece roundel, God holds a leafy rod like Joseph's and "an open book inscribed with Alpha and Omega". Ladis writes that, in the Father and Son,

are united the Old Law that governed earth in the beginning and the New Law that will govern until its end. The Virgin is the legitimate offspring of the house of Jesse and David through which the prophecies of the Old Testament found fulfilment at the moment of the Annunciation.²⁷⁰

Christ himself appears on the intrados of the second archway, with the Doctors of the Church and the Evangelists. Thus,

as one moves up the steps and into the body of the chapel so one passes from the sphere of the Old Law into that of the New, where the Gospel story is itself represented. On the rear side of the tomb appear four reliefs of the Evangelists...who testified to these events, and on the base of the tomb busts of Peter and Paul who took the new faith outward to the world. Finally on the altar itself appeared the culminating event of the chapel's iconographical programme, the Coronation of the Virgin in Heaven among His saints.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Revelation 22:16. Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. pp.31-33.

²⁶⁹ Gardner. pp.101-103.

²⁷⁰ Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. pp.33.

²⁷¹ Gardner. p.103.

The references in the decorative programme thus encircle the Annunciation in prefigurations and prophecies, and although Christ's life is not portrayed, he appears among the Doctors, on the second intrados, and most importantly in the eucharistic and sacrificial function of the altar itself.

5.2.5 Architecture, depth, figures, and characters

Although not exactly a theme, scholars have consistently remarked upon Gaddi's architectural compositions and, to a lesser extent, his figure placement and use of spatial depth. According to Poeschke, Gaddi's contemporaries were "impressed more by the architecture in his paintings than by the chiaroscuro of his scenery",²⁷² and many commentators have noted Gaddi's skill and interest in illusionism as demonstrated in the *trompe l'oeil* aumbries on the left wall.

Ladis notes how Gaddi uses both architecture and figures to carry the viewer's eye across each picture plane and from one scene to the next. For example:

From a deep point in the space at the left edge of the *Meeting at the Golden Gate*, the architectural forms enlarge until a single structure encloses the foreground of the *Birth of the Virgin*. In this register, as in the lunette above, the figures, all arranged within the shallow foreground, help to unify the two scenes. There are the same number of figures in each scene, they are concentrated along the spiralling central axis of the wall, and certain gestures and groupings are mirrored from one scene to the other, at once linking and balancing the compositions, countering the recession of the architecture, and easing the transition from one scene to the next.²⁷³

He argues that Gaddi's interest was in action rather than Giottesque psychological drama but that he "lavished as much attention on the stage as on the players" and "followed Giotto's lead in exploring space but combined his exploration with a fascination for complex, dynamic, and carefully organized compositional

²⁷² Poeschke. p.252.

²⁷³ Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. pp.25-27.

rhythms.”²⁷⁴ That said, Ladis also believes that in this “humanistic art...characters govern the narrative.”²⁷⁵ Either way, it is true that the scenes are plentifully filled with figures, architecture, and detail, leading Poeschke to claim that Gaddi’s main interest is in subsidiary characters and motifs which often take over from the more important aspects of the narrative. This is overstatement: the subsidiary characters enliven the narratives but do not threaten the protagonists, and the subsidiary motifs, backgrounds, and details, far from being distracting, have an amplificatory function of contextualising the protagonists.

²⁷⁴ Ibid. p.24.

²⁷⁵ Ibid. p.30.

5.3 The scenes

5.3.1 Left wall

The frescoes on the left describe the miraculous and revelatory events of the Virgin's life from conception to marriage, paving the way for the Nativity events of the altar wall.

5.3.2 Scenes of Joachim and Anne: Expulsion of Joachim, Joachim's Dream, Meeting at the Golden Gate

Poeschke makes much of the weight which he believes Gaddi gives to “the subsidiary motifs, the subordinate characters, and the backdrops”, “elaborating and enriching the motifs of the scene” rather than concentrating on the core of the narrative and the main characters.²⁷⁶ He believes that this concern with the detail explains why Joachim and the Angel are set back in *Joachim's Dream* while the sheep and shepherds occupy the foreground. In the *Meeting at the Golden Gate* he argues that the figure of the shepherd or servant “is accorded such space and so realistic a character that he becomes a focus of attention for the entire picture”.²⁷⁷ This is misjudged: the ‘additional’ figures are a supporting cast only, adding realism, and engaging and directing the viewer's response. They do not detract from the powerful imagery of either Joachim and the Angel or the *Meeting at the Golden Gate*. Joachim and Anne remain absolutely centre stage both visually and iconographically.

Poeschke's remarks on Gaddi's use of chiaroscuro are more helpful. He notes how, in *Joachim's Dream*, the “illusion of depth is reinforced by the extended, rugged massif, by the shepherds who are coming forward out of the background” and by the contrasting light, darkness, and shadows.²⁷⁸ White suggests that the scene has a

²⁷⁶ Poeschke. p.250. See also 5.2.5, 5.3.2, and 5.5.

²⁷⁷ Ibid. p.252.

²⁷⁸ Ibid. p.250.

theatrical, even melodramatic, character but associates light and revelation, seeing the lighting and the soaring architecture of the Temple²⁷⁹ as contributing to what he describes as “the transition from the merely theatrical towards the visionary”.²⁸⁰ The chiaroscuro appears again in the *Meeting* where Poeschke notes that it creates spaces, situates buildings, and contributes to the atmosphere.²⁸¹ One might add that atmosphere and lighting are connected by Joachim’s coming out of the shadow of the trees to the left and into the light from the right (consistent with the natural light source). In performing God’s will and approaching the scene of the impending miracle he is walking towards God.

Joachim and Anne come together in what was popularly believed to be the moment of the Immaculate Conception and Smart points out that in Gaddi’s depiction their “meeting haloes preserve the distance between them and stress the theological significance of the event”.²⁸² Unlike the scene by Gaddi’s teacher, Giotto, in the Arena Chapel, there is no kiss. The look between them, however, is intense, urgent, trusting, and suggests a deep knowledge and familiarity. Smart’s description of them as motionless²⁸³ belies a physicality which, without being erotic, conveys both love and seriousness, their forward movement towards each other being direct and purposeful. The shape of their figures (Anne almost falling towards Joachim but supported by him) is triangular, composed of many smaller triangles, in a form of great strength which occupies and dominates the whole centre of the scene. Ladis describes Joachim and Anne as “exaggerated” and “even clumsy”,²⁸⁴ but this is to ignore both the purposeful forward propulsion of their meeting and the strength of the form which their meeting figures make.

²⁷⁹ Possibly inspired by the appearance of the unfinished Duomo at the time. John White, *Art and Architecture in Italy 1250-1400* (London: Penguin, 1966). p.415.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p.415.

²⁸¹ Poeschke. p.252.

²⁸² Smart. p.82. It was believed that the Virgin was conceived without sin as a perfect second Eve, and that Anne miraculously conceived when embraced by Joachim at the Golden Gate.

²⁸³ *Ibid.* p.82.

²⁸⁴ Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. p.23.

5.3.3 The early life of the Virgin: Birth, Presentation, and Marriage

These scenes move from the intimacy and humanity of the *Birth*, with the affectionate, homely nursemaids and the infant Virgin, watched by Anne from her bed,²⁸⁵ to the dramatic *Presentation* scene and on to the jubilant crowd of the *Marriage*. At home and in public the Virgin is the centre of attention.

Jules Lubbock describes the Temple as a “virtuoso example of anamorphic²⁸⁶ perspective”²⁸⁷ and Ladis as a “dizzying geodesic²⁸⁸ fabrication of shifting levels, angles, and facets” which “defies logic” and “is in itself an object of marvel that electrifies an otherwise ordinary action”.²⁸⁹ Smart believes that Gaddi’s “oblique perspectival construction” of the Temple “had its origins less in naturalistic considerations in themselves than in the desire to do justice to the religious meaning of the subject” and that it helps to evoke the

sense of mystery attendant upon a miraculous occurrence in the life of the future Mother of God and Queen of Heaven, in the presence of which the solemn witnesses of the drama, forming a wide circle around the tiny but dignified figure, keep their distance.²⁹⁰

Ladis describes the astonished priests, the “curiosity and delight” of the Temple virgins, and the admiration and excitement of the crowd.²⁹¹ All eyes are on the Virgin who is both surrounded and very alone, a small, dignified figure, isolated on the big flight of steps.

In the *Marriage*, Gaddi maintains the visual focus on the Virgin, in spite of the crowd, “by means of an architectural backdrop and a brightly coloured hanging”.²⁹² Poeschke again argues, unfairly, that the main action is sidelined by the crowd. This

²⁸⁵ White. p.415.

²⁸⁶ I.e. distorted so that it is recognisable only when viewed from a specific point.

²⁸⁷ Lubbock. p.144.

²⁸⁸ I.e. based on the geometry of curved surfaces, often in the form of polygons arranged to create a curved surface.

²⁸⁹ Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. p.27.

²⁹⁰ Smart. p.83

²⁹¹ Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. p.27.

²⁹² Norman, ed. p.176.

is not so: the main action is not sidelined but surrounded, suggesting not that the crowd is more significant, but that the Virgin's marriage is significant for all these people, and indeed all viewers of the scene, a cause for general jubilation, (despite the disappointment of her suitors) which in itself implies that the crowd understands at least something of her status though they cannot yet realise its full extent.

Interpretations of the tone of the *Marriage* scene vary greatly. Ladis sees it in terms of the ritual of the shivaree²⁹³ and describes it as “perhaps the most lighthearted, humor-filled painting of the Trecento”, with Gaddi exploiting the “comic aspects of the aged, unwilling Joseph's unlikely betrothal to the young Mary.”²⁹⁴ The scene “brings the story of the Virgin's early life to a joyous climax and establishes a visual link with the more dignified celebration of her *Coronation* on the altar.”²⁹⁵ Unlike scholars such as Smart, who describe the scene in solemn terms,²⁹⁶ reflecting the influence of Fra Fidati, Ladis reads it in the light of Boccaccio's bawdy *Decameron* stories. He also believes that it represents an “amplification of the character of Joseph”.

In the Baroncelli Chapel, as in the Arena Chapel, Joseph fulfils an important narrative and theological role by acting as a foil for the supernatural. But because Joseph is understood and treated in comic terms, his responses to the miraculous are limited by his humanity. If his reluctance to marry shows no recognition of the divine plan, it is a shortcoming the worshipper can forgive. Taddeo vividly underscores Joseph's humanity by means of the shivaree...and through Joseph affirms that the supernatural moves in the same natural world inhabited by the worshipper.²⁹⁷

Lubbock also observes the packed nature of the scene, “awash with figures to the extent that it is almost impossible to see the ceremony” but notes that by standing outside the Chapel (the viewpoint of most contemporary viewers) one looks “along a

²⁹³ For a description of the custom of shivaree, *charivari*, or *mattinata*, see 12.3.4.

²⁹⁴ Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. p.27.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p.28.

²⁹⁶ Smart. p.82.

²⁹⁷ Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. p.30.

diagonal axis into the far corner of the courtyard, over the backs of two of the disappointed suitors, to the...ceremony.” The viewer is thus in line with the suitors and the confusing nature of the composition is

a deliberate attempt by the artist to convey the confusing experience of actually being present in a crowd, trying to catch sight of the source of the excitement. Our efforts to unravel the apparent visual confusion of the painting mimic and remind us of the real effort to see through the heads of a crowd, making the artistic experience more real.²⁹⁸

Lubbock does not comment on the effect this might have on the viewer’s devotional experience but Franciscan spirituality of the time (in spite of Smart’s remarks above) is known for its affective and imaginative qualities and the viewing experience here might serve to increase the sense of being devotionally ‘present’ at the scene. Such an imaginative engagement with the scene need not be restricted to contemporary viewers and, at the least, the impression, as one approaches, of looking into the scene and the Chapel space may draw in the modern viewer, whose access is unrestricted, to look more closely.

5.3.4 Altar wall

Turning to the altar wall, the viewer moves from large, crowded scenes, to smaller, less populous ones. On the left are the annunciations to the Virgin, the Shepherds, and the Magi; on the right, encounters that are the destination of three journeys, the Virgin’s to Elizabeth, and the Shepherds’ and Magi’s to the stable.

The arrangement of the architecture and the sloping hillsides create a sense of curvature and depth, as if the wall were bowed (a spatial device mirrored in the altarpiece)²⁹⁹ but it is the supernatural illumination which characterises these scenes that has been the subject of most of the art historical comment on them.

²⁹⁸ Lubbock. pp.144-145.

²⁹⁹ Gardner. pp. 98, 105.

5.3.5 Annunciations: Annunciation to the Virgin and Visitation, Annunciation to the Shepherds, Nativity, The Christ Child Appears to the Magi as a Star, and Adoration of the Magi

The *Annunciation*³⁰⁰ and *Visitation* echo the meeting of Joachim and Anne, the Immaculate Conception now seeming to prefigure the Virgin Birth, and the triangular shape of the figures in the *Visitation* echoing the form of the earlier meeting, though less dramatically.³⁰¹ Gabriel, illuminated against the night sky and the Jerusalem on the hill behind the Visitation seem bright until one looks down to the *Annunciation to the Shepherds*.

Poeschke claims that, “Although the light source is a supernatural one, it produces a natural effect, so there is no sharp distinction between one quality of light and another.”³⁰² The brilliance of the light, however, is supernatural and the Shepherds and their dog respond to it as extraordinary. In the *Nativity*, the angels’ brightness is less incandescent, perhaps so as not to detract from the more important scene below, where the subject of their annunciations is now in his mother’s arms. It is rekindled in *The Christ Child Appearing to the Magi as a Star* which, though not a verbal annunciation, sits below the annunciations to the Virgin and the Shepherds and belongs with them in terms of content and composition. Like these it is complemented by the scene opposite where the Magi’s journey reaches its destination in the *Adoration*.

The link between the Christ Child on the Virgin’s lap and the Christ Child as star above the ‘stable’ is made by the central magus³⁰³ who points it out to his companion. Behind him, one of the horses also observes the light. Poeschke believes that the miraculous light of the Christ Child as a star is somewhat reduced so as not to outshine the Christ Child being adored below. If so, this would be similar to the treatment of light in the *Nativity* above, but the light sources in both

³⁰⁰ Gabriel’s unusual position on the right is presumably due to space constraints.

³⁰¹ There is not the same sense of forward motion.

³⁰² Poeschke. p.253.

³⁰³ Either Caspar or Balthasar: they are of similar ages and dress, and both carry caskets, preventing a conclusive identification.

scenes are ambiguous: the heavenly light does not seem strong enough to account for the light around the figures, but no other light sources are evident. This inconsistency may be intended to heighten the supernatural atmosphere of the scenes.

5.4 Further considerations

5.4.1 Paucity of theological interpretation

The art historical discussion of the Baroncelli frescoes is helpful in understanding technical and contextual aspects of the programme but, understandably, pays little attention to the narrative content per se, or to the relationship between content and composition. Beyond observations regarding the use of light as a medium for revelation, and opposing claims about the frescoes' tone and rationale, the relationship between theological content and composition has largely been overlooked. For example, Gardner's detailed and otherwise excellent article analysing the decorative programme barely mentions the narratives themselves, discusses the left wall only in terms of its architectural elements, and pays no attention to the impact of the content on the viewer, despite thinking carefully about the viewing position and even noting an instance where a change in the viewer's physical position is mirrored in the change of decoration, with a shift from the Old Law, represented in the intrados of the first archway, to the New Law in the second.³⁰⁴ Gardner identifies spatial networks within which he situates the viewer, without really addressing the impact of this. Such art historical literature is thus interesting but theologically frustrating.³⁰⁵ The following paragraphs will therefore consider in more detail aspects of the theological significance of the frescoes and the interaction which they facilitate between the viewer, the frescoes, and the Chapel space.

5.4.2 Light as a medium for annunciation and revelation

The most theologically sensitive of the existing discussions focus on the use of light as a medium for annunciation and revelation,³⁰⁶ but there is more to be said about this theme.

³⁰⁴ See 11.4.

³⁰⁵ N.B. Lubbock's interesting comments form a small part of a much larger book on a broader theme.

³⁰⁶ Especially Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. pp.30-31.

Gardner's observation about the light source being logically 'behind' the altar wall frescoes is accurate. There is, however, a disjunction between the fact that the light in the frescoes behaves directionally as if it came from the window while, qualitatively, it is described as heavenly. Perhaps 'logic', in the empirical rationalist sense, is not the best filter for understanding divine light, but consideration of the nature of the 'natural' light source may enhance our understanding of the relation between natural and divine light in the altar wall frescoes. The light enters through a stained glass window, whose colours transform our experience of it. Filtered through images of the saints, we experience the light as both natural and qualitatively altered by its jewel-coloured, saintly filter. Perhaps something similar is true of the painted light which illuminates the altar wall frescoes: the angelic light sources are directionally aligned with the natural light, but the angels' light is not quotidian but revelatory and comes from God rather than the window. This light accompanies and verifies the annunciations, reveals the angels who, simultaneously, reveal the light of God, allows the viewer to see the responses of the recipients of the revelations, and illuminates the places of revelation.

Ladis' comment about the altar wall scenes being not "truly nocturnal" because they belong in a "supernatural realm" rather than in the "world of facts"³⁰⁷ misses the mark because, if the frescoes show anything, it is that the supernatural enters the natural world in these events. The two are coextensive in these scenes. The light is indeed spiritual and its foil darkness, not night, but the scenes are about hierophany, the divine *in* the world, not separated from it. Ladis makes two additional and more helpful observations about the responses of the recipients and the places of revelation, although he does not pursue their implications. In the *Annunciation to the Shepherds*, for example, he notes how the light shows varying degrees of comprehension of the revelation among the Shepherds, the dog, and the sheep. The Shepherds, "startled from their repose, struggle to understand the angel's message, the dog growls in apprehension [and] the sheep barely stir", while in *The Christ Child Appearing to the Magi as a Star*, the light "enhances the expression of wondrous awe in the faces of the three kneeling magi." Emotion and facial

³⁰⁷ Ibid. p.31.

expression are not, however, the only responses which the Shepherds and the Magi (or other protagonists in revelatory scenes) make. The response to revelation is a kind of transformation, often physically expressed by a journey, as will be explored below. Ladis also notes how the illumination of the hillside in the *Annunciation to the Shepherds*, “not only bathes but also tints the figures and the landscape”.³⁰⁸ If so, then the point is surely that the divine light not only illuminates but *affects* the Shepherds. They witness a revelation and they are changed by it, and the colouring acts metaphorically to indicate this alteration.

The revelation of place is important and occurs in the hillside annunciations (*Joachim’s Dream*, the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* and the *Christ Child Appearing to the Magi as a Star*). In these scenes light reveals place and, in a sense, creates it because it fundamentally changes the nature of the space, creating a place of hierophany out of an ordinary hillside.³⁰⁹ The contrast between darkness and light, and between natural and heavenly light, literally highlights the irruption of the divine into the human sphere, the extraordinary events that the angelic messages foretell, and the change which is initiated in those who receive their revelation. These juxtapositions have a strong precedent in the opening of John’s gospel in which the Word is associated with life, that life is the light of all people, shining in the darkness and not overcome by it, and the Baptist testifies to the true light of Jesus Christ, which comes to enlighten all people, although not all accept him.³¹⁰ Christ is, of course, the light of the world.³¹¹ Whether or not Gaddi intended the viewer to think of John’s gospel, and of the light being separated from the darkness at the beginning of the creation story in Genesis, to which it also refers,³¹² it seems probable that contemporary viewers would have made the connection, which remains apparent, situating the scenes from the life of the Virgin within the history of salvation, beginning with Creation and culminating here in the birth of Christ as described by the Evangelists, depicted on the second intrados. The heavenly light

³⁰⁸ Ibid. pp.30-31.

³⁰⁹ It is perhaps relevant that the annunciations to Joachim, the Shepherds and the Magi are depicted on hillsides (the Magi are already *en route*) given the long association between mountains and divine communications, epitomised by the revelations to Moses on Mt Sinai.

³¹⁰ Jn 1.

³¹¹ Jn 8:12.

³¹² Gen. 1: 1-5.

makes sense of the darkness and, especially in *The Christ Child Appearing to the Magi as a Star*, Christ is the reference point by which the viewer understands and situates everything else, just as he is the guiding star for the Magi's journey. The light is, as in the gospel, the rational principle, the logos. It makes brightly lit, specific places, places of hierophany, out of what is otherwise dark, un-knowable space.

5.4.3 Image and word

By seeing differently one may understand differently. The angels in three of the revelatory scenes deliver oral messages – annunciations – while illuminating the skies, but the truth of their messages is verified by the divine light with which the angels glow. The annunciations are ‘revelation’, and ‘to reveal’ has a strongly visual connotation in the idea of uncovering or unveiling something. It is not simply imparting, but showing; not simply communicating information but demonstrating visibly. Other revelations (Joseph's rod, the star) are non-verbal, although they prompt verbal exchanges (marriage vows and the Magi's question to Herod³¹³). Words and images go hand in hand in revelations but the power of the visual in God's communication with humanity is predominant in these frescoes. This is partly because they too are visual communication, but the privileging of the visual here also makes sense in terms of the Nativity as the culmination of the cycle: all these visual revelations (and visually mediated and verified annunciations) lead to the birth of Christ, the Son of God, the *imago Dei* who says, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”³¹⁴ Indeed, the non-verbal revelation of *The Christ Child Appearing to the Magi as a Star* is the prime example: without verbal directions, the Magi understand simply by seeing the Star, and duly set off to honour the King whose birth it proclaims. The annunciations to the Shepherds and Magi are on the lower two left hand tiers of the altar wall, with their counterpart adoration scenes on the right, so that as the viewer looks from annunciation to revelation in Christ, his gaze crosses the altar, reminding him of the Mother of God crowned on its altarpiece, and of the eucharistic sacrifice that takes place there, commemorating the sacrifice of Christ in

³¹³, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.” Matt. 2:2.

³¹⁴ Jn 14:9.

a highly visual equation of the bread and wine with his body and blood. Here too there is revelation and transformation, as the Host is elevated (revealed), and bread is transformed into Christ's flesh, while for those who participate in the eucharist³¹⁵ there is also the transformation of receiving a sacrament.

5.4.4 Transformation and journeying

This transformative aspect of revelation has been overlooked in the literature, although Norman stands out in describing the frescoes as,

a set of images which, by their graphic portrayal of divine light, powerfully evoked precisely the transforming visionary experiences that were so central not only to the lives of Saint Francis and the Virgin, but also to the broader narrative of the nativity of Christ.³¹⁶

This reference to transformation is both rare and meagre. In fact, the fresco cycle could be read as a series of transformations, mediated by revelation, expressed visually through spatial, locational, and liminal metaphors, and connected by journeys.

The news of each annunciation is world changing - the births of the Virgin and Christ fundamentally alter the relationship between God and humanity - and this news initiates change in the recipients, a change expressed physically and spatially by their response, which is to make a journey. The journeys may be read as both a physical matter of travelling, and a metaphor for the spiritual life and the developing relationship between human being and Creator. Thus Joachim journeys from the Temple to his flocks on the hillside where he receives his revelation, and thence to Jerusalem to announce this news to his wife (who comes to meet him at the gate). The Virgin journeys to the Temple and up its steep steps, formally beginning her life of dedication to God, and, after her own annunciation, journeys to her cousin Elizabeth with the news of her pregnancy. The Shepherds and the Magi both

³¹⁵ Whether visually or by actually taking communion.

³¹⁶ Norman, ed. p.178.

respond to the annunciations of Christ's birth (the latter purely visual) by journeying to Bethlehem. The protagonists journey towards revelation and because of revelation; they change places, reflecting the change brought about by God. The viewer's gaze, following the sequence of the frescoes, travels with them.

5.4.5 Places and liminality

Gaddi's architectural structures are admired, but little attention has been paid to the importance of non-architectural spaces, and places themselves. However, place is important throughout the cycle, and the places depicted are linked by the journeys described, which are equally significant. The architecture is most important insofar as it serves to increase awareness of place and situate sacred events. Often, the places of revelation, or precursive to a revelation, are presented as liminal places, the protagonist being, as it were, on the threshold of something new.

As Joachim leaves the Temple, confused, and perhaps angry at his rejection, his body is bowed, and his cloak trails reluctantly on the ground. His bare toe peeping out reminds us that he is on holy ground as he stands on the threshold of the Temple, about to move forward, returning to the profane world, but looking back at the altar where another man's sacrifice is accepted. Two men to the right are half inside, half outside the Temple - unlike Joachim they are able to occupy both worlds legitimately - while the man to Joachim's right touches the Temple, establishing his own physical link with it in contrast to Joachim. Joachim's location is a physical and public metaphor for his spiritual status as unacceptable to God. The hillside where his shepherds graze their sheep is, therefore, not only a place of normal, pastoral activity, but also of exile, and its barren slopes seem more suited to Biblical wanderings in the wilderness than to the efficient feeding of hungry flocks. This is an 'in-between place' rather than a destination and Joachim remains isolated. Distinctive in position and dress, he sits alone on a central plateau, his green and pink clothes marking him out in contrast to the shepherds' greys and browns. It is clear that the Angel's message (received in a dream but here presented as an annunciation, with Joachim and the shepherds awake) is for Joachim alone. The

shepherd in the foreground is facing the viewer and oblivious to the Angel and, although the two on the left are conscious of the Angel, one points at Joachim and they seem aware that this visitation is for him. The angelic light falls fully on Joachim, only illuminating the shepherds 'in passing'. On the left of the lunette, the negative, expulsive communication of the High Priest reorders Joachim's physical existence as well as denoting his spiritual status: he is cast out. On the right, he is illuminated by the Angel's annunciation which reverses his physical and spiritual isolation and sends him back to his wife and home with the news of God's blessing.

The *Meeting* echoes the liminality of Joachim poised on the threshold of the Temple, with the gate and the holy city of Jerusalem in the background, and Joachim's servant coming out of the wood indicated on the left. Now, however, Joachim is being received rather than rejected and instead of an unacceptable offering, he relays the message of the Angel, announcing the news of Anne's pregnancy and therefore of God's blessing. The Temple is not visible in the cityscape, but its dominance in the scene above maintains its presence. Popular belief held that Anne conceived at that moment of greeting, and the scene is set not only at the entrance to the city but at the threshold of a new life. The strong triangular shape of their meeting figures, their forward propulsion still visible, fills the centre of the scene, making a place of their two bodies. Joachim's bare feet (in contrast to his servant's hefty, calf-length footwear) suggest pilgrimage and holy ground, and add to the weighty sense of significance in the scene, indicating that this is the site of something miraculous, a place of annunciation between Joachim and his wife, and of conception. The *Birth of the Virgin* to the right is badly damaged, but here too place is significant. A miraculous birth has taken place in an ordinary looking home.³¹⁷

The *Presentation* returns to the Temple setting, now elaborated to include the three flights of steps with loggias on both sides, while the city of Jerusalem is suggested by the building on the left where a woman looks out of her window. The Virgin's

³¹⁷ The identity of the women in the porch is unclear. They may be visitors, but comparison with the same subject in Giotto's Arena Chapel frescoes suggests that they are receiving a bundle of soiled linen for laundering.

status, first indicated by her miraculous conception, is further confirmed by her ability to ascend the steps alone at a young age. That this occurs at the holiest of sites (to which she has made her first pilgrimage, honouring its spiritual importance) gives the event prestige. Ladis fears that the complex architecture may detract from the narrative.³¹⁸ Far from it: the importance of the place itself is manifest in this complexity, while the solitary Virgin stands on the threshold between life with her earthly family and life dedicated to God, cared for yet confidently stepping out on her own, ascending to a divine vocation. She climbs the steps alone, inviting the viewer to witness her obedience to God, as do the onlookers and the welcoming priests. This scene is therefore a foretaste of the Annunciation (indeed, she is later to be identified with the Temple because her own body becomes the temple that houses God), emphasising her spiritual status and illustrating her obedience to God and her vocation from an early age. It is also clear that what she does is significant for everyone, and that her action is an example to them (and one which a child in the foreground is starting to imitate). In a sense she ascends the steps on behalf of others; her vocation of service to God benefitting all. Here she is on the threshold of that vocation, her spiritual development metaphorically represented by her liminal position on the Temple steps.

The *Marriage* is less specifically, architecturally, situated. Nevertheless, the ceremonial place is marked by the colourful hanging on the side of the house and, despite the crowd, the focal point is a small clear space where the hands joined in marriage are visible against the priest's pure white robe. The garden wall and trees behind refer to the Virgin as the *hortus conclusus*, looking forward to the Annunciation in which she protests her virginity.³¹⁹ Thus amidst the throng a sacred space is created and the Virgin's own nature is referred to in a spatial metaphor. As in the *Presentation*, the crowd indicates her significance for others and, as Lubbock has noted, the viewers are invited to participate in the scene (particularly when viewing it obliquely from the entrance), peering over the suitors and musicians to catch a glimpse of the Virgin.³²⁰

³¹⁸ Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. p.34.

³¹⁹ Lk. 1:26-38.

³²⁰ Lubbock. p.144.

In the *Annunciation*, the Virgin sits in her loggia looking up at Gabriel. The architectural structure is perhaps less important here than the Virgin herself who, as the future Mother of God, is both sacred person and sacred place in her own right, her womb housing Christ. The concept of the threshold is particularly significant in relation to the Annunciation because it symbolises penetrating while leaving intact.³²¹ On the opposite side of the lunette, the Virgin and Elizabeth greet each other at the entrance to Elizabeth's house when both are on the threshold of exceptional motherhood, physical location again acting as a metaphor for the spiritual.

The *Annunciation to the Shepherds* is discussed above but here too revelation leads to change: the Shepherds' response is to go to Bethlehem to see this thing that has come to pass.³²² The angels' message that the Messiah is born for them makes evangelists of them as they spread the news. The moment depicted sees them still confused by this extraordinary, life changing, event which confers upon them both an evangelistic and a representative role (the annunciation to the Shepherds is often interpreted as meaning that Christ came for the poor as well as the rich, while the Magi show that he came for Gentiles as well as Jews).³²³ In the *Nativity* the first shepherd is arriving, looking over the rocky parapet around the stable, whose structure, though simple, shelters and frames the Virgin and Child, marking them out spatially. Joseph sits outside, a saintly bystander, while the Shepherd approaches to pay homage. Again, there is a sense of being on the threshold: the Shepherd is about to meet his God in a newborn child.

The location at which the Magi see the Christ Child as a star is unspecific. Like the Shepherds and Joachim the Magi are shown on a hillside, but they could be anywhere on their journey. This pilgrimage is spatially situated between their home 'in the East' and Bethlehem and, like the Shepherds and Joachim, they appear

³²¹ See note 497 on page 171.

³²² Lk. 2:8-19.

³²³ For a discussion of the Shepherds and Magi in art see Heidi Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003). pp.98-100.

exposed and vulnerable on the bare hillside, but receptive to the star's revelation and obedient to its command. In the *Adoration* they reach their destination but are depicted at its outer edge: they do not enter the loggia but stand reverently outside, while Melchior, traditionally the most senior, leans forward on his knees to kiss the Child's feet, an earthly king on the point of honouring, physically, the heavenly king.

In these frescoes there is a strong connection between liminal places and scenes of annunciation and revelation. The protagonists are repeatedly situated on the threshold of great change and the movement from one place to another, from the profane to the sacred, and vice versa, heralds the miraculous: change is the precursor to divine irruption and divine irruption is transformative. Thus Joachim hesitates on the threshold of the Temple, before receiving the news of his wife's miraculous conception; Joachim and Anne meet at the entry to Jerusalem where he tells her the news; women stand in the porch of Joachim and Anne's house, waiting on the new mother; and the Virgin pauses briefly as she ascends the Temple steps where she is welcomed by the high priest. The *Marriage* scene is less directly liminal although it takes place just outside the house and just beyond the garden wall, but its precursive nature is as a preface to the *Annunciation* and the Virgin's question about how she will conceive. On the altar wall, the Virgin sits in an open loggia, about to conceive by the Holy Spirit, her physical person a sacred place housing the Son of God; the Virgin greets Elizabeth at the entrance to her house when both are on the threshold of sacred motherhood; the Shepherds' ordinary hillside is transformed into a place of hierophany, transforming their lives; at the stable, the first Shepherd leans forward to see the Virgin and Child, on the point of witnessing what the angels foretold; while in the *Adoration*, the Magi look on from outside, with Melchior just bridging the threshold as he kisses the Child, on the threshold of tangible revelation, touching God incarnate.

Liminality is a spatial precursor to revelation throughout the cycle. Indeed, none of the divine revelations takes place inside a sacred building.³²⁴ The emphasis is on

³²⁴ Arguably there is an oblique reference to the birth of John the Baptist, whose father, Zachariah received revelation in the Temple, but this scene is not part of the cycle.

places between others, on events about to happen, and on the responses of those who receive the revelations and obediently make the spiritual and physical journey required of them. Joachim, the Virgin, Joseph, the Shepherds, and the Magi all obediently follow their divine directions. Obedience is among the many Christian virtues manifested in the frescoes and personified in the non-narrative decorations. Obedience to God, as seen in the Christian lives of those depicted in the Chapel, allied to such virtues as chastity, poverty, and purity (all particularly associated with the Virgin and also with Francis and the Franciscan life), is the guiding star on the Christian journey.

The liminality which precedes revelation in the narrative scenes is also intrinsic to the funerary nature of the Chapel. The Baroncelli patrons hoped for the Virgin's intercession as they passed from this life to the next. They too were on a threshold: their physical and spiritual status, and their spatial location having (quite literally) changed with death, and being about to change again with the coming judgement and hoped for resurrection. This hope is expressed on the altarpiece where the Virgin is crowned among angels and saints, portraying the Baroncelli hope that her proximity to Christ would ensure his mercy, enabling them to join this heavenly company. The threshold of the Chapel is a threshold between life and the ultimate and concluding journey of death, with the tomb monument outside, and the promise of the next life inside.

5.4.6 Proximity and distance

Revelations in various forms, and angelic annunciations in particular, are spatially associated in the frescoes with liminal places and journeys. The recipients' response relates to the enactment of Christian virtues as portrayed in the Chapel and is often physically and spatially represented through liminality and journeying. These poles of physical distance and proximity reflect the paradox of divine transcendence and immanence, epitomised by the Incarnation: the unimaginably distant becomes irrefutably close. In the annunciation scenes, the angels (and their light, which can, of course, traverse distance, illuminating and therefore transforming all in its path)

bridge the 'gap' between God and humanity, while in the adoration scenes Christ himself is the bridge. The Virgin, along with Anne and Elizabeth, bear living, physical, witness to the immanence of the transcendent God: their bodies are physical paradoxes (the Virgin Birth, the Immaculate Conception, and the conception by an old and barren woman) and they too bridge the gulf between God and humanity. In the Virgin's case she not only bridges it but makes it possible for that division to be overcome. With the Incarnation which she enables, God and humanity are no longer separated because Christ is Immanuel: God with us. The obedient acceptance of God's will by these women, and primarily by the Virgin, is transformative and leads to new life in the form of three very important babies, and to the unique and life-changing kind of life that is Christ. The annunciations are not only a revelation of the transcendent divine whose glory the angels reflect, but of the immanent divine that bursts into the human sphere and radically alters it.

5.5 Conclusions

It is clear that the cooperation between content and composition in these frescoes is not restricted to the use of light as the annunciatory medium. The theme of annunciation is supported by a broader theme of revelation and Gaddi represents the irruption of the divine into the human sphere, the transformation this effects, and the responses of the recipients of revelation (manifesting Christian virtues as personified and exemplified in the non-narrative elements) by means of spatial and physical metaphors of place, liminality, and journey. This accords with the Chapel's funerary function and the liminal status of the patrons who await the transformation of judgement and the life to come, express their faith in the rewards of a virtuous Christian life and desire to identify with those who have lived thus, and hope for divine mercy by the Virgin's intercession.

Gaddi has further responded to the *material* space of the Chapel by adapting the light in the frescoes to the natural light and relating them to the stained glass, connecting wall surface and light source. Gardner's discussion of the viewing point suggests that the arrangement of the architecture and the sloping hillsides in the altar wall frescoes create a sense of curvature and depth, with the same spatial device used in the altarpiece. Gardner observes that this calculated effect emphasises the viewer's distance from the scenes,³²⁵ although he does not suggest why Gaddi might have wanted to do this. One possibility could be that Gaddi wished to emphasise the supernatural nature of the events by setting them at a distance, but the effect also brings the outside edges of the scenes (furthest from the window) *closer* to the viewer in comparison, so the distancing is only partial. The result is that the images simultaneously suggest proximity and distance, an effect which is entirely coherent with the idea of revelation and annunciation, in which the divine comes closer to the human sphere while remaining transcendent.³²⁶ An additional aspect of this device

³²⁵Gardner, p.98 and 105.

³²⁶The illusionistic aumbries with liturgical items depicted on the left wall "dissolve[e]the barrier between the imaginary space of the wall and the actual space of the room." Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. p.36. These images have been discussed as early instances of still life painting and as demonstrating Gaddi's exceptional skill, but they also suggest that while the paintings are fictive, what they depict is real. The liturgical vessels shown here are images of the real ones used on the altar; the painted scenes from the Life of the Virgin are similarly

is that it makes it seem as if the altar wall were slightly curving around the altar, embracing it, creating a stronger spatial link between the frescoes, the altar and the altarpiece, connecting the eucharistic sacrifice with the extraordinary events of Christ's birth. The embracing walls also invite the viewer into the Chapel, into their space and the visual space of the pictures.

In the tomb monument lunette, the Virgin's arm projects over a ledge into the viewer's space and the image is a reminder on the outside of the Chapel of the consequence of the Annunciation, the importance of the life of the Virgin depicted within, and her role as the foremost intercessor for the dead. The *Resurrection* is depicted directly above the monument, with the pinnacle of the tomb overlapping the scene, making a definite connection between the deceased, Christ's empty tomb, the Virgin's intercession, and the hope of resurrection and a place in heaven, as depicted on the altarpiece.

The *visual* space of the Chapel depicts revelations to specific people, and the annunciations are essentially isolated scenes. Nevertheless, the inclusion of subsidiary figures invites the viewer into the scenes and suggests that the sacred events are relevant for more than just their protagonists.³²⁷ Thus, as Lubbock observes, the viewer can situate himself in the crowd at the *Marriage*, but he can also perhaps identify with the temple-goers, attendants, shepherds, and servants, according to his social position and occupation. The visual space of the Chapel, unsurprisingly, privileges visual communication, in an appropriate progression from divine revelation to its depiction on the Chapel walls, i.e. from divine showing to mimetic human showing. Word and image are co-present in revelation but the frescoes present the visual, allying their own visual nature with the astonishing sights witnessed by the protagonists.

only paint, but the events they depict are real and have relevance to their viewers and those commemorated in the Chapel.

³²⁷ Cf. Poeschke, p.250.

The viewer's response, the *receptive* space, is implicated by comparison with the recipients of revelation. As they are transformed by the revelations, by what they see (as well as what they hear), so the viewer can be transformed by what he sees, being invited to experience revelation mimetically. Moving from one scene to the next he may identify with subsidiary characters, or even the protagonists, pause with them in the liminal places and moments preceding and accompanying revelation, witness those revelations, and journey with their recipients accordingly. The viewer's gaze makes the visual pilgrimage from revelation to destination, following the figures and moving towards and across the altar. This may be experience by proxy, but the frescoes suggest that, like the protagonists, like the onlookers, the viewer can experience divine revelation on earth, in this life, and that God both speaks to his people and shows them things. Revelation - whether by the angels, or by signs like the blossoming rod, or by seeing the Son of God, the true *imago Dei* - can be an intensely visual matter, and the viewer's visual faculty can be the means of experiencing God's relationship with his creatures. The Image as well as the Word mediates the divine, whether experienced directly, or in representation. If the viewer is willing to put himself in the vulnerable, liminal places which obedience to God and a life of Christian virtue may require, open his eyes to the signs of God's will, and respond to them, his life may be closer to those of the exemplars in the Chapel, and his reward the one sought by the Baroncelli, through the Virgin's intercession.

The deceased awaiting judgment, the communicant awaiting communion, and the viewer at the entrance to the Chapel are poised at a moment of transition and transformation, placed in a liminal position in relation to the effective element in that transition. Thus the deceased rely upon the intercession of the Virgin and their patron saints in judgement, the communicant relies upon the cleric's celebration of the Mass, and the viewer relies on the revelation given to others and here imparted in paint, in order to understand what is required of him. All are invited to follow the example of those who intercede to confer mercy, enable communion, and facilitate mimetic revelation and visual pilgrimage. The frescoes are, therefore, perfectly visually attuned to the funerary and eucharistic functions of the material space, and to the internal, spiritual needs of the viewer.

6 Spiritual Transformation in Person and Paint: the Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine

Scenes from the life of St Peter, Masolino, Masaccio, and Filippino Lippi, c.1420 - 1480s.

The Petrine frescoes of the Brancacci Chapel are known as one of the great artistic masterpieces of Europe and are often cited as a definitive moment in the Renaissance, setting a standard and pattern for centuries to come. They are also a theological masterpiece, connecting the contemporary, the historical, and the meta-historical under the overarching narrative of the history of salvation which takes place in all three. Standard assessments have generally overlooked their theological content and this case study explores the way in which the artists portray spiritual transformation by integrating the subject matter and the composition of the pictures. Through references to contemporary life which invite the viewer to see the New Testament world of the pictures as their own world, and especially through the use of the central space (the natural focal point) of each scene as the locus of divine activity, the artists create strong, often spatial, connections between the viewer in the Chapel and events in the frescoes, enabling the viewer to experience simultaneously his own space and time, and the historical and meta-historical reality of the picture plane. Ultimately the viewer is able to apply the pictorial reality to his own reality and, in depicting spiritual transformations in the physical world and the corporeality of the human body, the physical medium of paint on plaster becomes revelatory in these frescoes.

6.1 The cycle

Originally the vaults held the four Evangelists and two lunettes showed the *Calling of St Peter*³²⁸ and the *Naufragio*. These, along with two scenes on the altar wall of *St Peter Weeping* and *Feed my Sheep* have been lost. What remains is as follows: on the right pilaster, on the upper tier, is the *Temptation*, and opposite it on the left pilaster the *Expulsion*. Continuing at this level on the left wall, the *Tribute Money* shows the tax collector from Matthew's gospel and Christ telling Peter that he will find a coin to pay the tax in the mouth of a fish. The scene concludes on the right with Peter paying the tax. On the altar wall, to the left of the altar, is *St Peter Preaching* and on the right the *Baptism of the Neophytes*. On right wall are the *Raising of Tabitha* and *Healing of a Cripple*. The lower tier of the left wall shows the *Raising of the Son of Theophilus* and *Chairing at Antioch*. The altar wall shows *St Peter Healing with his Shadow* on the left of the altar and the *Distribution of Alms* on the right. The right wall shows the *Disputation with Simon Magus* and the *Crucifixion of St Peter*. On the left pilaster is *St Paul Visiting St Peter in Prison* and on the right *An Angel Leading St Peter out of Prison*.³²⁹

³²⁸ Or the *Calling of St Peter and St Andrew*.

³²⁹ Source references: Gen. 1; Matt. 4:18-20, 8:23-37, 14:28-33, 17:24-27, 26:75; Jn 21:15-18; Acts 2:16-41, 3:1-8, 5:1-6, 5:15-16 9:36-41, 12:6-11; de Voragine, *The Golden Legend, Readings on the Saints*. Vol.1. pp.162-166, Vol.2. pp.340-350.

6.2 Interpretations

Previous assessments of the Brancacci frescoes have rightly identified a meta-narrative of the history of salvation and themes of spiritual transformation, and the contrast between earthly and divine vision, within a context of a funerary chapel where the Mass is celebrated. They have also located the cycle within a local context, and argued, more debatably, that the scenes demonstrate a pro-papal policy and relate to the *catasto* tax³³⁰ and events in the life of Felice di Michele Brancacci who paid for the frescoes.

6.2.1 Brancacci, Carmelite, and local concerns

In the most comprehensive recent assessment of the Chapel³³¹ historians and art historians examine the relationship between the Chapel, its patron, the Carmelites, local confraternities, the surrounding neighbourhood, and Florentine concerns more generally, including pro-papal policy and taxation issues. The general assumption is that the iconography is to be understood by reference to factors external to the composition of the images and not necessarily related to the business of a burial chapel in which the Mass is celebrated.

Peter was the onomastic saint of Pietro di Piuvichese Brancacci, the Chapel's founder and uncle of Felice Brancacci. Peter was also, of course, the primary papal authority, and the Brancacci, like most Florentine merchants (and the Carmelites), supported Pope Martin V during the schism. The choice of saint may therefore be a statement of support for the papacy and a visual expression of the origin of its authority in Peter. Whether or not these factors were decisive in the choice of fresco programme they would certainly have resonated with the contemporary viewer. Another contemporary, papal reference has been linked to the *Tribute Money*, namely the arrangement (agreed by Pope Martin V) in 1423 that the Florentine Church would pay tax to the state. An alternative reading suggests that the tax refers

³³⁰ A form of land tax.

³³¹ Nicholas A. Eckstein, *The Brancacci Chapel, Florence: Form, Function and Setting*, Villa I Tatti / the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2007).

to the Florentine *catasto*, a land tax to which the Brancacci were subject. It seems unlikely that the Brancacci would wish to support this, but there may be a general link with the idea of rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's.³³² Felice Brancacci's maritime interests may perhaps be referenced by the water imagery of some scenes, in particular the sea as a source of wealth,³³³ which it was for the Florentine merchants.³³⁴

The cycle's subject matter may also have had direct relevance for the local community. Nicholas Eckstein has argued that the almsgiving scene would have had particular resonance in a 'deprived' area of town where lay groups were engaged in ritualised charitable giving. Furthermore, he believes that the fresco creates a visual link between the charity of a saintly Carmelite friar, Beato Andrea Corsini, known for his good works, and the cult of Peter, whose ministry the Carmelites claimed to have witnessed and with which they liked to ally themselves. He writes,

While Peter's bestowal of alms, his healing of the sick and resurrection of the dead spiritually charge the physical space around him, the piazza and surrounding buildings, their strolling worthies, humble inhabitants and children, the open windows, airing linen and domestic animals transpose the momentous deeds of the early church to the fifteenth century....other scenes in the Chapel advance the Carmelites' claims to have witnessed Peter's ministry, so this naturalism also helped to reinforce perceptions of the centrality of the Carmelites' sacred presence in the temporal sphere.³³⁵

6.2.2 History of salvation

Although not included among the contributors to Eckstein's volume, Ornella Casazza's description of the iconography of the Chapel is a concise summary which probably expresses the iconographic interpretation that, by and large, most scholars

³³² Matt. 22:21.

³³³ Possibly referred to by the coin in the fish's mouth in the scene of the *Tribute Money*.

³³⁴ Umberto Baldini and Ornella Casazza, *The Brancacci Chapel Frescoes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992). p.39.

³³⁵ Nicholas A. Eckstein, *The Brancacci, the Chapel, and the Mythic History of San Frediano* (Firenze: Olschki, 2003). p.29.

now espouse. Casazza, closely involved in the 1980s restoration campaign, is concerned primarily with technical and formal elements. She describes the iconography simply as a history of salvation without interrogating or expanding on this. She writes, “The overall programme is a *historia salutis*...a history of the salvation of mankind through Christ, mediated by the Church, represented by Peter.” Adam and Eve sin and are expelled from Paradise. Since the

end of man’s harmony with God...is occasioned by man, the move towards reconciliation can only come from God, through His Word, as witnessed and communicated by the Evangelists, who were portrayed on the ceiling.

The Calling of St Peter’s in the left lunette would have introduced his discipleship while opposite this was the *Naufragio*,³³⁶ “the shipwreck, from which one can be saved only through faith in Christ.” The lost scenes on the altar wall showed *St Peter Weeping* and *Feed my Sheep* in which Christ nominates Peter as his vicar on earth and universal shepherd of souls. In the *Tribute Money* “the entire idea of salvation is placed in a context of historical reality” while the *Healing of a Cripple* and *Raising of Tabitha* symbolise “the life giving power that emanates from Christ”. *St Peter Preaching* is “the announcement of mankind’s salvation”, and the *Baptism of the Neophytes* signifies the “Church’s power to forgive man’s sins through baptism in the name of Jesus Christ.” *St Peter Healing the Sick with his Shadow* symbolises “salvation granted by the Church through Peter” and the *Distribution of Alms*, “an indictment of those who sin against the sanctity of the Christian way of life for love of money or out of treachery”. The *Raising of the Son of Theophilus* “states once again that the True Word will save mankind and perform miracles”, and the *Disputation with Simon Magus* “teaches us that there is no connection between magical practices and the signs of salvation”. Finally, the *Crucifixion* represents “the sublimation and the essential moment of man’s reunion with Christ.”³³⁷

³³⁶ The *naufragio* or *navicella* image of a boat on stormy water was used as a symbol of the Church and associated with Peter who walked out onto the water as instructed by Christ, but lost faith and began to sink, before Christ rescued him. Matt. 14:28-33.

³³⁷ Ornella Casazza, *Masaccio and the Brancacci Chapel* (Florence Scala, 1990), pp.15-16. Casazza also acknowledges (in even briefer terms) the possibility of references in the frescoes to Felice Brancacci’s maritime interests, sea voyages, and inclusion in the *catasto* tax.

6.2.3 Theological themes

Beyond some discussion of Carmelite propaganda and preaching³³⁸, the theology of the scenes themselves has been given little consideration and form and setting usually take precedence over theological function and content. That the theology of the cycle has not been more studied is not a new complaint and a number of the contributors mention earlier work of a more theological bent, particularly a doctoral study by Astrid Debold-von Ritter,³³⁹ on whom many of them draw. She addresses the programme as a unified whole, giving greater weight to theological concerns than to contemporary circumstances, while acknowledging that these inform the mind-set of the time. In addition to the *Golden Legend* she suggests sources in medieval Petrine hymns and sermons, particularly with regard to the lost scenes of *St Peter Weeping* and the *Naufragio* on the altar wall, which she associates with Peter's role as protector of sinners.³⁴⁰ Her focus on the Petrine nature of the cycle includes the *Temptation* and *Expulsion*, which she links to the imprisonment and release of Peter. Alongside these theological concerns Debold-von Ritter believes that contemporary political and social interests are represented, as well as Carmelite support for Pope Martin V.

A concerted effort to offer a theological interpretation of the cycle without recourse to external events was proposed by Law Bradley Watkins³⁴¹ in a doctoral thesis of the same time (before the restoration of the frescoes). Watkins rejects the standard focus on contemporary social, political and economic factors as iconographic explanations. He argues that the frescoes relate primarily to the purpose of their building, namely a chapel for the celebration of the Mass, and that they are functional in purpose, perpetuating spatially the Christian concept of spiritual transformation, as exemplified by Peter.

³³⁸ See the chapters by Peter Howard and Megan Holmes in Eckstein, *The Brancacci Chapel, Florence: Form, Function and Setting*.

³³⁹ Astrid Debold von Ritter, "Studien Zum Petruszyklus in Der Brancacci-Kapelle" (Berlin, 1975). Unfortunately I was not able to consult this work first hand and references to it here are dependent on Eckstein, *The Brancacci Chapel, Florence: Form, Function and Setting*.

³⁴⁰ Having himself sinned, doubted and denied, and repented, received forgiveness, and been entrusted with the Church on earth and the keys of Paradise, Peter is an example and solace to repentant sinners.

³⁴¹ Law Bradley Watkins, "The Brancacci Chapel Frescoes: Meaning and Use," (1976).

More significantly, Andrew Ladis has balanced technical and formal analysis with theological content, interpreting the frescoes as a history of salvation mediated through their artistic form as well as their iconographic content, and demonstrating a concern “with the nature of earthly existence but also with the laws of human vision, for their content is indissoluble from their form and their technique.”³⁴² Jules Lubbock included a study of Masaccio’s frescoes in his recent work on Christian storytelling in art, arguing that the *Tribute Money* in particular presents an imaginative artistic response to doctrinal issues of the day (related to the papacy and Church taxation) and uses “narrative as a vehicle for doctrine”.³⁴³

6.2.4 Spiritual transformation

Watkins’ premise is that the cycle must be analysed in terms of the Chapel’s purpose, i.e. one must look to internal function rather than external events, to understand it. Watkins situates the images among their typical peers in Tuscan chapels in which the lives of the saints are presented, modelled on Christ, and demonstrating a spiritual transformation comparable to the transubstantiation of the Mass. The Brancacci frescoes show

Peter’s spiritual ascent from a bungling discipleship³⁴⁴ to a magisterial stature in the likeness of Christ, the whole enacted as an inner and symbolic transformation of the human into divine substance.

The cycle “is thus entirely commensurate with its symbolic use as chapel decoration, both having to do with an inner transformation of a spiritual kind.”³⁴⁵

Rejecting ‘external’ explanations for the iconography, Watkins claims that contemporary references are there, not to lead the viewer into Florentine history, but

³⁴² Andrew Ladis, *The Brancacci Chapel, Florence, Great Fresco Cycles of the Renaissance*; (New York: George Braziller, 1993).p.19

³⁴³ Lubbock. p.225

³⁴⁴ There is not much bungling in the scenes today but the original programme included *St Peter Weeping*, following his denial of Christ, on the upper register of the altar wall, and the *Naufragio* in which Peter loses faith.

³⁴⁵ Watkins.p.5.

to draw him into the scenes.³⁴⁶ Thus, the influence of the antique and the inclusion of contemporary detail imply not contemporary specificity, but universal significance. The frescoes ‘occur’ now as well as in the past, but the “sense of the Florentine present” creates immediacy rather than particularity.³⁴⁷ Similarly, while some faces were probably portraits recognisable to their contemporaries, Watkins argues that the individuals were not important. Rather, the universal and the particular are related, creating forms with “universal implication” through the “unrepeatable features of common humanity”,³⁴⁸ bringing “to classical generalisation the sense of the particular” and raising “the particular sitter to the level of the general.”³⁴⁹ The architecture of the scenes, combining the antique and Renaissance forms of the period, however contemporary, is fitted to the gothic form of the church and subordinate to this.³⁵⁰ He writes,

Precisely because the sculpture and architecture of the frescoes’ immediate present have been reshaped to fit a narrative sequence that was still in all respects medieval, it is evident that the style of the frescoes, though decidedly innovative, asserts the traditional role of a fresco cycle, not the contemporary events of Florence.³⁵¹

For Watkins, the iconography relates purely to the theme of spiritual transformation. His evidence for this is both iconographic – Peter is indeed transformed³⁵² – and formal. Focussing particularly on Masaccio, sometimes to the point of missing valuable formal elements in Masolino’s work,³⁵³ Watkins identifies stylistic elements in the painting with the meaning of the cycle, arguing that subject and form, iconography and composition, are integrated (for example in the healing

³⁴⁶ Ibid.p.54.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.p.52.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.p.52.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.p.53.

³⁵⁰ The Cistercian model as it was adapted in Italy and the standard form for *trecento* churches.

³⁵¹ Watkins.p.61.

³⁵² Arguably not once but many times during his lifetime and in the original, complete, cycle.

³⁵³ E.g. the two young men at the centre of the Tabitha scene whose role is arguably to draw the viewer into the scene by their contemporary aspect but also to symbolise the spiritual blindness of even the most beautiful of fallen mankind, see Ladis. p.50.

scene) such that both carry meaning and express transformation: physical occurrences symbolise spiritual change.³⁵⁴

Watkins reads the cycle as moving from the Expulsion³⁵⁵ of man through to his salvation and resurrection, implicit in the saint's martyrdom and explicit in his preaching, baptising, and miracles. He proposes that Peter³⁵⁶ is particularly relevant to the "transformation associated with the Mass" because he of all saints is like Christ and his vicar on earth³⁵⁷, "assimilated to Christ much as priest, congregation, bread, wine, and incense are mystically united in the Mass." Watkins argues that Peter acts in Christ's name in the same way that "the priest becomes Christ in that Christ acts and speaks through him. The priest is not the agent of the transubstantiation, but Christ." Without relying on strict parallelism between the scenes and the Mass, Watkins argues that the cycle is nevertheless formed by the same mindset regarding the "the perception of eternal verities in symbolic and mythological terms" and has "strong parallels in respect of Christ's life as the model of the lives of the saints, of Peter's special identification with Christ, and of the agency of Christ in both Peter and the officiating priest."³⁵⁸ Viewers are invited to become participants, as in communion, and to be transformed themselves.³⁵⁹

In addition to this transformative³⁶⁰ reading of the cycle's iconography and formal elements, in keeping with its chapel location, Watkins claims that the frescoes actually function to perpetuate the spiritual transformation celebrated in the Mass and exemplified in Peter's discipleship. Just as the Mass temporally re-enacts Christ's sacrifice through the offering of bread and wine which are spiritually transformed into his body and blood so, he argues, the frescoes spatially perpetuate

³⁵⁴ Watkins. pp.98-99.

³⁵⁵ Somewhat confusingly he relates the Adam and Eve scenes primarily to the altarpiece – the *Madonna del Popolo* – rather than to the cycle, but also tacitly acknowledges a relationship on the level of the history of salvation.

³⁵⁶ Watkins was unaware of the current view that Peter was chosen as the titular saint for Pietro di Piuvichese, the Chapel's original patron. He was therefore working on the assumption that there was no established association with a named Peter.

³⁵⁷ Watkins.p.116.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*p.118.

³⁵⁹ Most people took communion rarely at this time but male members of the congregation, at least, would have seen the elevated Host during the Eucharist.

³⁶⁰ I.e. having the capacity to be transformative for the viewer, without this necessarily obtaining in all cases.

spiritual transformation and the theme of salvation which they narrate and which the Mass celebrates. He writes,

[T]he idea of the perpetuation by means of time, through the Divine Office and liturgical year, is so marked that it is clearly the purpose of chapel decoration to perpetuate the efficacy by means of place...by somehow fixing the ritual action of the Mass and retaining it at the place where the mystery is enacted.³⁶¹

Indeed he goes further: “the fresco cycle is...essential and necessary to the redemptive function of the place.”³⁶² “It is there to act...to contribute to use.”³⁶³

Watkins concludes that its purpose is achieved “by the mere fact that it is there, irrespective of whether it is seen, since its main purpose is simply to perpetuate the sacrifice made at the altar.”³⁶⁴ Despite the developing humanist environment, Watkins places the Chapel in a medieval mind-set “wherein art was the handmaiden of theology”,³⁶⁵ seeing the aesthetic value of the fresco cycle as simply a means to an end, “augmenting its efficacy, not its visibility, which is only a by-product of its use.”³⁶⁶ Decoration here serves function: the “chapel was decorated much as a stone tool or weapon might have been millennia ago: to reveal its purpose, to make more efficacious its use.”³⁶⁷

Watkins’ assessment is bold, starting on the basis that the frescoes must be understood contextually, not in the sense of contemporary context generally, but in terms of their chapel location. This is eminently sensible, and his theological interpretation of the scenes is generally persuasive. However, he exaggerates his claims and underestimates the role of the viewer. In suggesting that the frescoes function to perpetuate spiritual transformation, even when not viewed, he oversteps

³⁶¹ Watkins.p114-115.

³⁶² Ibid.p114-115.

³⁶³ Ibid.p.118.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.p.115 Underlining original.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.p103.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.p.116.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.p103.

the capacity of his arguments and undermines them.³⁶⁸ Such a view of images verges on blasphemy, implying a magical efficacy unrelated to communication or interaction with the viewer. Watkins' surprising assertion that the aesthetic attractions of the frescoes serve to increase their efficacy in perpetuating Christ's sacrifice and the spiritual transformation of the Mass, rather than encouraging people to look at them, is completely counterintuitive. Although artists and craftsman have often paid attention to areas of their work that cannot be seen, knowing that God sees all, it is nevertheless nonsensical to suggest that the aesthetic attraction of the art is not there primarily to attract but to function, apparently independently. These frescoes were painted to be seen and the viewer should not be discounted in this way.

Even Watkins' dismissal of contemporary events as an appropriate lens for understanding the frescoes is too harsh. That the theological content must come first and must be assumed sufficient is a fair and welcome response, but this does not mean that nothing can be gained from understanding the many connections that contemporary viewers (and, indeed, the artists) might have made between the images and their world. There may have been (indeed it is likely that there should have been) more than one factor in choosing content and form, and the primacy of the theology does not rule out all other influences³⁶⁹.

The capacity of art to communicate many things through one image is part of its power. Even if the image were truly 'single minded', so to speak, with one purpose, one message, one means of communicating this, the image would be useless unless seen, and the introduction of a viewer fundamentally changes the nature of an image, bringing a host of potential references with which the image then interacts.³⁷⁰ It is in this interaction with the viewer, as well as the location, that the image becomes

³⁶⁸ Watkins appears confused to the point of self-contradiction on this point as he also writes that the frescoes are there "to contribute to use" and that the viewer must be participant rather than onlooker. Ibid.p.118.

³⁶⁹ See Lubbock's persuasive discussion of papal issues in the *Tribute Money*, 6.2.6.

³⁷⁰ This is, of course, equally true for later viewers who will come with all their own references and possibly make connections which were never intended but which are nonetheless potentially meaningful for the viewer, even if anachronistic. Once the artist has put down his brush he cannot control the relationship between image and viewer but it is in this relationship that the image functions.

powerful. Watkins recognises the importance of the relation of image and location, though he overextends his conclusions about this, but he says too little about the viewer. The relationship between image and viewer is, however, vital to his own interpretation of the frescoes in terms of spiritual transformation. Without participants in the Mass, without viewers, there is no transformation to effect.

6.2.5 Earthly and divine vision

Ladis takes a more satisfactory approach, reading the cycle on multiple levels, as biography, salvation history, and a discussion of human and divine vision and truth. At its simplest, the cycle is a biography, beginning with Peter's spiritual birth when he is called by Christ and showing, through various scenes, Peter's special role among the disciples and his proximity to Christ. The images can be read chronologically as an account of Peter's life. They also function on a more universal level as a history of salvation, within the context of the Adam and Eve scenes which frame the cycle. Here the chronology is less important:

[W]e are invited to make connections across time, to consider ideas suggested by visual analogies and contrasts, not only within a single scene itself, but also from one scene to another adjacent, opposite, or even diagonally across from it on another wall.³⁷¹

In Ladis' interpretation of the frescoes, the viewer is encouraged to question his view of things, to re-examine appearances, and to realise that things are not always as they seem. Not only are people transformed physically in the scenes, but Ladis identifies an emphasis on seeing, and a use of form and perspective which constantly require the viewer to consider what he sees and how he judges it. Throughout the cycle, but particularly in Masaccio's work, we see the "visual reality of earth and wind, of sunlight and shadows, of recognizable shapes and human emotions: the experiential world of the senses." Paradoxically however, this 'reality' is one which the viewer, who has seen Adam and Eve with their confused and painful entry to the world,

³⁷¹ Ladis, *The Brancacci Chapel, Florence*.p.23.

knows to be dubious. The scenes which follow the *Expulsion* show that there are two ways of looking, two kinds of light. Earthly and divine light reveal different things: that which “by the logic of natural laws we perceive visually” and that which by the light of heaven we “know by faith”. Masaccio painted “according to the truths of human vision and counterfeited the world we see with our eyes” but in his scenes, “the tangible reality of earthly vision has become a symbol of ignorance and deception, all the more compelling because it fools us too.” The earthly light is “paradoxical and false”, the divine light “abiding” and true. ‘Reality’ is full of illusion and the viewer is invited to see that just as the painting fools us with its realism, so reality fools us and we do not necessarily ‘see’ what is important and enduring.³⁷² This concept of the illusory nature of earthly vision is worked into Masaccio’s scenes so that within “a world that seems concrete but is not....both the form of nature and the form of the narrative point to something more...beneath the immediate surface”.³⁷³

This is a mystery but not irrational. Ladis believes that the mathematical principles of composition underlying Masaccio’s scenes, linking figures to each other and to their spaces, connecting the drama and the setting, unite form and content by their own “incontrovertible logic”.³⁷⁴ He writes

Masaccio, like Brunelleschi in his architecture, gave proof to [the humanist] Giannozzo Manetti’s assertion that the mysteries of the Christian religion are as logical as the axioms of mathematics.

Although what the viewer sees is illusory – the image in perspective is nevertheless two-dimensional – it has a rational basis. Ladis believes that this sound compositional basis is antithetically juxtaposed with the “emblem of earthly wealth” which appears in many scenes but which is shown to be superficial compared to spiritual wealth.³⁷⁵

³⁷² Ibid.p.40.

³⁷³ Ibid.p.42.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.p.44.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.p.45.

Ladis' interpretation rests on the two principle assertions as outlined above. First, the Petrine scenes are set in our world, within the context of the history of salvation, and the actions therein affect us. Second, our post-lapsarian view of things is not to be trusted and appearances can be deceptive. Contemporaries and subsequent admirers praised Masaccio's naturalism but Masaccio uses this to show that what we see is not always true, playing with perspective, emphasising the unexpected, and combining visual and metaphorical elements to reveal that earthly vision alone is untrustworthy. The sick can be healed, the dead resurrected, earthly wealth is subordinate to spiritual wealth and sinners can be redeemed.

Ladis' approach is helpful in understanding how compositional elements of the frescoes relate to and impart meaning and his analysis of the distinction drawn between heavenly and earthly vision is compelling and recognises the interaction of the viewer with the images. He pays little explicit attention to the factor of redemption and spiritual transformation, but this may perhaps be implicit in his understanding of the cycle as essentially a history of salvation.

6.2.6 Pro-papal policy

In his analysis of Masaccio's frescoes in the context of Christian narrative art, Lubbock claims that Masaccio made innovative compositional choices in order to make doctrinal points. He argues in favour of an interpretation based on Carmelite (and indeed Florentine) pro-papal policy, emphasising Peter as Christ's vicar on earth whose authority to bind and loose (resurrect, heal, and destroy) here will be mirrored in heaven. For Lubbock, "the whole chapel...is a major example of Carmelite propaganda for the primacy of the papacy against its many adversaries."³⁷⁶ He finds this theme expressed particularly in the *Tribute Money* and *Chairing of Antioch*.

³⁷⁶ Lubbock. p.223.

6.3 The scenes

6.3.1 Temptation and Expulsion

Among the commentators, Ladis pays most attention to these scenes and they are crucial to his reading of the cycle in terms of earthly and divine vision and the nature of perception, providing the lens through which to understand the rest of the cycle. In the *Temptation*, Adam and Eve inhabit a “nocturnal darkness...where they are shown with their eyes wide and bright” but the light and the eyes that perceive it change with the *Expulsion*.³⁷⁷ Now their eyes are “opened to knowledge” but they are “blinded by it”. Entering our world, their vision is not clear: Adam hides his face and,

touches his darkened sockets, and Eve lifts up her head to reveal deep gray gashes, where before we saw hazel spheres set in sparkling whites: as well as guilt, the horror of their emotion is also the hysteria of sudden and crippling blindness.³⁷⁸

Cast out from Paradise, Adam and Eve enter “the world of natural forms, natural space, and natural light”, moving towards the viewer and their new surroundings in “our space, our world”.³⁷⁹

[T]he gate of Paradise in the *Expulsion* is identified with the actual entrance to the Chapel and the fictive light of the murals is identified with the actual light of the window on the altar wall, both coming from the right side.³⁸⁰

As the gate closes behind them and the fiery Angel’s downward pressure expels them, the first parents walk into a “bleak desert” whose forms, “following legs and cutting through knees”, give “abstract force to the cadence of human steps”.³⁸¹

“Their connection with the viewer is also felt in the truthfulness of their anatomies,

³⁷⁷ Ladis, *The Brancacci Chapel, Florence*.p38.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*.p.40.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*.p.31.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*.p.40.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*.p.32.

in the naturalness of their movement, and in the strength of their emotion.”³⁸² Their story is his, his space theirs. The *Expulsion* thus serves to draw the viewer into the cycle, linking image and viewer spatially and corporeally, since Adam and Eve are physically like him and inhabit the same place.

Thus framed by the story of Adam and Eve, the cycle of Peter’s life becomes the saga of humanity’s abiding desire to return to God and the church’s role in guiding us past the beguiling temptations and in succouring us from the painful torments of the world.³⁸³

6.3.2 Tribute Money

Of all the Brancacci scenes this has excited most interest. Watkins finds in it confirmation of the symbolic integration of subject and form throughout the cycle. The circular groupings of figures around Peter or Christ are significant in this context and in *The Tribute Money* Watkins describes how,

Christ is the centre of the circle, his role ...being taken on by Peter in the scene below. Peter moves from his eccentric position³⁸⁴ (catching the fish which will allow him to make the payment, he in a mythological sense takes on the nature of Christ as the one who pays³⁸⁵) and through the healing and raising powers which mark him as Christlike, he assumes the center of the circle in which he is enthroned.³⁸⁶

Originally the *Calling of St Peter* would have been above this scene, in the lunette. Reading downwards, therefore, one would see the start of Peter’s discipleship, his relation to Christ expounded in the *Tribute Money*, and then his Christ-like role in the miracles and other scenes.

³⁸² Ibid.p.30.

³⁸³ Ibid.p.31.

³⁸⁴ Not unlike the cripples in other scenes.

³⁸⁵ The association of fish and Christ is an early Christian one and therefore comes after the story. While there may be typological links between the coin/fish with Jonah and the whale, and the resurrection, it is not clear that Peter becomes like Christ by catching the fish or that he takes on his nature. Rather, Peter is obedient in performing his role in paying the tax. He becomes part of the analogy with Christ’s atonement, paying for man’s sin.

³⁸⁶ Watkins.p.101.

Another example of physical occurrences symbolising spiritual change is in the baptism scene where the neophyte kneels before Peter who pours the water over him, recalling Peter crouching foetus-like by the sea to take the coin out of the fish's mouth in the *Tribute Money*. Their rebirth is “signified through the meaning of the event...carried out in form”³⁸⁷.

Ladis also links composition and content in this scene and it is a key example in his understanding of the mathematical structure of the frescoes as the unifying factor between form and content. The *Tribute Money* is divided into three sections, the central being the largest, the right hand being two thirds of this, and the left hand one third. Figures and space relate to each other within these proportions, and the elliptical central group of figures is both a single mass and “several interwoven geometrical forms encompassed within the dominant impression of a circle” around the linchpin of Christ at the centre. The rhythmic connections between figures progress from the centre and return again so that Ladis describes the group as “like a perfectly balanced equation [which] multiplies and divides, but also like a living organism, [which] expands and contracts from and to its heart.”³⁸⁸ The *Tribute Money* and its implied reference to Christ's willing sacrifice and humanity's salvation connects with the *Temptation* and *Expulsion* and brings the scenes a “full circle to rest in Christ, alpha and omega”.³⁸⁹

Lubbock's pro-papal interpretation similarly focuses on the *Tribute Money*. He believes that Masaccio drew on the precedent for depicting scenes of judgement - namely the Last Judgement presentation of Jesus with the disciples - and adapted this to show Jesus adjudicating between the Church and State on the matter of taxation. Peter on Jesus' right “represents the Church on earth and the papacy” while the “tax collector standing on the town side...represents the State” and “Jesus stands in the centre arbitrating the opposing claims of Church and State and announcing his verdict.” In “terms of God's law the Church should be tax free” but

³⁸⁷ Ibid.p99.

³⁸⁸ Ladis, *The Brancacci Chapel, Florence*.p.45.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.p.45.

pragmatism dictates that the Church pay its tax to retain political allies and so God would provide the necessary money.³⁹⁰ In Lubbock's words: "it is only through an even-handed and diplomatic agreement between Church and State that mankind can be redeemed from original sin and saved from eternal damnation".³⁹¹

6.3.3 Chairing of Antioch

Lubbock finds further emphasis on papal primacy through Peter's status in this scene in which he is raised above all others, including the ruler Theophilus. He notes the confusing question of spatial depth in this part of the fresco (Peter seems securely seated but it is not clear upon what) and makes the interesting suggestion that this might be intended as a "visual double-take", representing

a painting of a painting hung upon the wall of the courtyard of the Carmelite Church in Florence around which Carmelite monks³⁹² and parishioners are standing and kneeling in prayer, perhaps on the feast day of St Peter's Chair at Antioch, 22 February to which the story of Theophilus' Son is related in the *Golden Legend*.³⁹³

Such a visual device would certainly sit well with Ladis' theories about visual challenges in the cycle, another example of Masaccio "confounding the onlooker".³⁹⁴

6.3.4 St Peter Healing with his Shadow

Watkins argues that form carries as much meaning as subject matter in the depiction of the cripples healed by Peter's shadow. The three men represent the many that were healed, but also various stages of cure. The first, leaning on his crutches, is low to the ground, the second starts to get up, the third stands erect, watched by a fourth man, recently cured but still holding his stick. The more upright the figure, the more

³⁹⁰ Lubbock.p.209.

³⁹¹ Ibid.p.222. Lubbock believes that, although in the text Peter is not angered by the tax collector's question, Masaccio implies anger perhaps to "give expression to those voices within the Church at the time who strongly objected to paying State taxes. Ibid.p.210.

³⁹² The Carmelites were originally monastic but later took on the role of friars.

³⁹³ Lubbock.p.218.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.p.218.

definition there is in their depiction and the more articulate their gestures, but even the standing man cannot compare in his physicality with the figure of Peter, striding out of the picture towards the viewer. As Watkins writes,

Peter alone announces the full dimensionality of physical being, his head only is incisively modelled, his garment alone gathers and falls in full, deep folds...he becomes an image of wholeness. He culminates the trajectory of man's rise to articulate form and gesture; to full dimensional presence within...his space; and above all to the fullness of vision. Alone among those that see, he fixes his glance beyond any earthly object.³⁹⁵

The event is the curing of physical ailments, but this represents a spiritual transformation, and Peter is presented as a man in spiritual fullness as well physical health. The architectural form supports this, creating the impression of a "man emerging in an emergent space" while in the *Distribution of Alms*, Peter is "stable and detached" figure "in an expanding space."³⁹⁶

³⁹⁵ Watkins.p.82.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.p.84.

6.4 Further considerations

The approaches outlined above offer considerable theological insight into the fresco cycle, while the work of other historians and art historians, especially those contributing to volume edited by Eckstein, which has not been dwelt on here, provides a detailed picture of their context.

That the frescoes show the history of salvation, dealing with spiritual transformation as exemplified by Peter's discipleship and demonstrated in miracles of healing and resuscitation, that they warn of the need to see with the eyes of faith rather than being deluded by mere physical appearances, and that there are good reasons for seeing a pro-papal message in them, has been amply described. It has also been established that in communicating these messages the artists have merged content and form: in contrast to the forbidden fruit, the physically deformed, the dead, whose appearances belie reality, or potential reality, the images seem what they mean.

Even in detailed analyses however, too little attention has been paid to the interaction of the viewer and the pictures, and to the compositional use of the natural central focal point as a means of communicating what is essentially un-paintable, namely divine activity. It remains to be said, therefore, that - as elsewhere in Florentine religious frescoes³⁹⁷ - one of the ways in which the artists depict the un-paintable thing that one might call divine or spiritual energy or activity, is by their use of space. In these frescoes, the relation within a picture between figures and their space is composed so as to focus the viewer's eye on the person or space in whom or which there is a concentration of divine activity or potential. Since the pictorial space is physically part of the three-dimensional space in which the viewer is located, and by means of compositional and iconographic choices designed to create identification between the viewer and their space with the figures in the image and the pictorial space, the viewer is both drawn into the picture plane and draws out of it

³⁹⁷ E.g. the Bardi Chapel and San Marco. As in the Bardi Chapel, the protagonist comes to inhabit a space that, while physical is also spiritual, becoming an integrated whole, (recovering what was lost in Eden) affecting physical and spiritual things simultaneously, and making a whole of the physical and spiritual. See 4.5.1 and 4.6.

the spiritual import which relates to his own life. By virtue (or vice) of his corporeal humanity, the located and sensible viewer interacts with the image and its setting, and is able to absorb the possibility of the divine activity in the image as real potential in his own, three-dimensional, world.

In the Brancacci Chapel this process is accomplished in two particular ways: by drawing the viewer into the scenes, and by showing clearly where the spiritual core of the scene is. The significance of these techniques with regard to the relationship with the viewer's 'receptive' space, i.e. the potential impact of the images on the viewer's own spiritual awareness and understanding, has not been sufficiently stated in existing treatments of these scenes.

Firstly, the world of the picture plane draws into a unified whole the following temporally and spatially disparate elements: the contemporary viewer's world with the streets, buildings, fashions and people of his time;³⁹⁸ the (idealised) world of the New Testament, peopled with the disciples and those who figure in their exploits and set in countryside and anachronistic Renaissance townscapes; and the world of Genesis, the dark, essentially unlocated garden of Paradise where only trees and bushes are visible against the dark background. The gate of Paradise glimpsed on the far left hand side of the *Expulsion* joins the actual wall of the Chapel. Adam and Eve are propelled out of Paradise, into the New Testament world of the Petrine frescoes, and into the viewer's world, and the Petrine frescoes repeatedly draw in the viewer both by contemporary references, and by including the viewer in the composition.

³⁹⁸ Eckstein et al have explained the relevance of some scenes to the local community and the Carmelites in terms of contemporary interests, and Eckstein in particular has stressed the Florentine nature of the piazza in the *Raising of Tabitha* and *Healing of the Cripple*. Eckstein, *The Brancacci, the Chapel, and the Mythic History of San Frediano*. Ch.1.

The contemporary, the historical³⁹⁹, and the meta-historical⁴⁰⁰ - actions, effects and consequences - convene in these scenes under an overarching narrative which takes place in all three: the history of salvation, seen here in the progression from man's first sin to Christ's redemption, as demonstrated in the discipleship of Peter who is finally crucified like his Lord.

There have been detailed analyses of the space in individual scenes, and Ladis makes the important point that the *Temptation* and *Expulsion* scenes show clearly that Paradise is another place, and that Adam and Eve were cast out into our world. The rest of the fresco cycle thus takes place in this world, our world, where physical, sensory existence is disordered in that what we see and what we perceive are not always that same thing. The beautiful may be blind to the truth, luxury may be less valuable than poverty, the sick can be cured, the dead can rise, death can mean life and the innocent has paid for the sins of the guilty. What seems, is not always so, and what is, is not static, for things can change. The physical is a metaphor for the spiritual, both positively (the sick are cured, Peter is the image of the whole man) in a parallel with the transubstantiation of the Mass, and negatively (the luxurious may be sinful, the fruit which looks good to eat may bring sorrow). Our human existence has been redeemed, the price has been paid for us; like the cripples looking at Peter, we have only to see this salvation and we are transformed.⁴⁰¹

Beginning and ending the cycle, in the upper register on the pilasters, the *Expulsion* and the *Temptation* serve as parentheses for the cycle as a whole and situate the historical activities and their contemporary relevance within the meta-narrative of the history of salvation. On the left hand side as one looks at the altar, the *Expulsion* propels the sinful, shamed, Adam and Eve out of Paradise and into the viewer's world and the world of the frescoes. The grief and horror, the visible damage to their

³⁹⁹ This is not the place for a discussion of the historicity of the New Testament. To the contemporary viewer these events were historical and they are treated as such here.

⁴⁰⁰ Although much of the Old Testament would count as history on the assumptions of note 399, the *Temptation* and *Expulsion* take place so 'early' in man's history and have such far reaching consequences that this part of Genesis may be said to operate on a different temporal plane from the New Testament accounts of Christ and the disciples.

⁴⁰¹ C.f. Matt. 8:8: 'only speak the word and my servant shall be healed'.

eyes (and metaphorically to their ability to discern good and evil in spite and because of the fruit they have eaten), Eve's futile *Venus pudica* pose, and the barren world they enter are an emotionally shocking statement of the human condition and a stark contrast with the measured tone of the rest of the cycle and with the luminous flesh of their still innocent classical figures in the *Temptation*. The viewer is face to face with his own human remoteness from God and drawn powerfully into the cycle as it continues, logically developing the theme of sin and salvation, with the *Tribute Money*. The *Temptation*, in spite of its position on the right, is properly the chronological start of the cycle and of the history of salvation. Much has been written about these scenes, and many comparisons of style and treatment drawn between the two and their artists. Suffice to say that the *Temptation* is not only the beginning of the story but the end, a reminder as the viewer leaves the Chapel that temptation is present (Eve's arm is entwined around the tree, as the snake is), that it looks attractive, that it can beguile, and that the fruit which seems good to eat may bring, not enlightenment, but tragedy. Having seen the consequences of sin, and the redemption brought by Christ, exemplified through processes of spiritual transformations in the life and miracles of Peter, the viewer is warned against complacency. There hangs the beautiful fruit, there speaks the silver tongued serpent, and there humans carry on sinning through lack of obedience and spiritual discernment. The *Expulsion* is diagonally opposite the *Baptism*, the death of sin confronting the death and rebirth of baptism, while the *Temptation* is diagonally opposite the preaching scene, the Word of God confronting the words of Satan.

Secondly, and within this context, the pictorial space is composed so as to focus the eye on the locus of divine activity. The method is simple but it is a highly effective compositional strategy and has not been discussed in accounts of the cycle. In each scene of the main walls, and within subdivisions in the larger scenes, the centre⁴⁰² of the scene - the natural focal point⁴⁰³ - is the locus of divine activity, around which the figures group in variations on a semi-circle form. The viewer, standing in the three-dimensional Chapel, supplies the other half of the semi circles in the frescoes.

⁴⁰² This is an approximation. It may not always be the precise centre, but it is close enough to be a natural focal point.

⁴⁰³ Artists may deliberately place the focal point elsewhere for a particular effect, but this is not the case in the Brancacci Chapel.

The viewer's eye is drawn to the central focus around which all the activity is concentrated, and the viewer's body is simultaneously positioned so as to complete the image. The viewer thus becomes part of the scene.

In the *Tribute Money*, Christ is central, the hub around which the disciples gather in an arc. His gesture cuts across the disputed territory between the tax collector to his left, and Peter to his right. Their positions follow the standard association of the negative with the sinister side and the positive with the dexter. This violently charged space between Peter and the tax collector⁴⁰⁴ is neutralised by Christ's raised right hand which points both narratively towards the sea where Peter will find the fish with the coin, and meta-narratively towards Adam and Eve who, expelled from Paradise, walk into the viewer's world and almost into the *Tribute Money*, heading towards the altar. The link is implicit: Christ will pay for their sin. Peter is close to Christ and echoes his gesture,⁴⁰⁵ but he is taking on the tax man and the miracle is Christ's, not his, he simply carries out the instruction. The metaphorical act of payment in the *Tribute Money* is revealed by the interaction of the scenes within the cycle and Peter, framed by Adam and Eve, shows how men can be conformed to Christ even while fallen. In the background, the dead trees along the barren seashore contrast with two trees in leaf behind Christ and the apostles, a reference perhaps to the loss of paradisiacal life by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, and the renewal of life effected by Christ's death on 'the Tree'.

To the left of this three-part scene, Peter kneels in the centre by the water to catch the fish and take the coin. As Watkins noted, his crouching form is reminiscent of the neophyte being baptised and this is a form of spiritual rebirth. Redemption comes providentially at Christ's instruction and the obedient Peter, playing his part in this metaphor for salvation, finds the coin which will pay for him as well as for Christ, and is spiritually reborn. In the right hand section, Peter pays the tax collector. This is both a 'one off' event and an indication that, as the representative of the Church

⁴⁰⁴ As Lubbock pointed out, in the text Peter is not angry. Lubbock. p.210.

⁴⁰⁵ Perhaps questioning Jesus' instruction as incredible, perhaps affirming it in a gesture of defiance against the tax collector.

after Christ, Peter must continue the work of salvation in his service to Christ. The central point is the V-shaped gulf between the two men whose hands almost but do not quite touch. The separation is emphasised by the prominent post in the foreground. It has been suggested⁴⁰⁶ that the post may be a reminder of the Cross. This seems something of an imaginative stretch, but it does serve to divide the two men. The tax collector, blind to the identity of the man before him is (unlike the narrator Matthew) unrepentant and separated from Christ and the disciples, a marginal figure.⁴⁰⁷

Turning the corner onto the altar wall, Peter preaches about salvation to the thousands. Unlike Christ in the scene before, he does not take the central position, although the listeners form the familiar arc in front of him which the viewer completes into a circle. The central space here is empty, which is unexpected until one considers that the significance of the scene lies in the words spoken rather than in Peter himself. Since these are not depicted or inscribed, the space *is* the words. These are the spiritual message and its messenger; the listeners are the ground on which they fall and where they may or may not take root.⁴⁰⁸ The listening Carmelites are presumably taking proper note. Peter's gesture with his raised hand is reminiscent of the Elevation of the Host,⁴⁰⁹ suggesting that which he holds before the crowd (his words, emphasised by his gesture) and referring perhaps to Christ the Word. Spiritual transformation here is potential rather than actual, although the *Baptism* tells us that the outcome was the conversion of many.

In the *Baptism of the Neophytes* the central figure, kneeling in the water before Peter who pours water over him, is the spiritual locus. Peter is the agent, the water a physical symbol, and the transformation spiritual. Watkins identified a difference in the painting between the baptised and those awaiting baptism, seeing the former as more clearly delineated, more definitely men, and the later as indistinct. This is

⁴⁰⁶ Ladis, *The Brancacci Chapel, Florence*.p.36.

⁴⁰⁷ The separation is even more marked because of the change in the colour of the ground between them, possibly as a result of different *giornata*.

⁴⁰⁸ Mk. 4:3-8.

⁴⁰⁹ The equivalence of the gesture is not exact since the Elevation of the Host before a large crowd would require it to be lifted much higher, but the suggestion remains.

probably at least partly due to the state of the frescoes when he saw them, pre-restoration, but the point remains that the scene is a highly physical expression of spiritual rebirth. From the man famously trembling with cold to the beautiful figure in the water (a “hymn to male beauty”⁴¹⁰), to Peter’s own magisterial presence, flesh is visibly being redeemed.

The double scene of the *Healing of a Cripple* and *Raising of Tabitha* again presents physical transformation as a sign of spiritual status. The two scenes and the central piazza (clearly Florentine) which links them continue to use the centre of the image as the spiritual focus. Masolino shows the resuscitated Tabitha in the centre of the right hand scene, radiant in white and surrounded by amazed onlookers. The man in blue with a turban has not yet understood what is happening and intercepts the gaze between Tabitha and Peter, half looking at her, confused. To his right, the widow kneeling and looking at Peter appears more aware and therefore rightly focuses on Peter as the agent of the miracle rather than Tabitha. The gaze between Tabitha and Peter, standing just outside the loggia in which she is sitting up on her low bed, carries the force of her return to life out into the piazza beyond, where, on the left hand side, Peter tells the cripple who reaches out to him that he has nothing to give him but Christ, and orders him to walk. The central space between Peter and the cripple, across which their hands reach, is, as in the preaching scene, apparently physically empty but spiritually full. Peter gives the cripple Christ, and in so doing restores his health. The ‘empty’ space here is filled with Christ and pregnant with the miraculous healing about to occur.

Between the two narratives, daily life of a contemporary Florentine nature carries on. A woman walks with a child, another goes through a doorway, a widow wears her weeds, and things are set out on window sills. In the central foreground, two handsome young men dressed magnificently in contemporary fashion and the famous Florentine silk brocade, cross the piazza between the two scenes, talking to each other and oblivious of the miracles to either side of them. As Ladis noted, they

⁴¹⁰ John T. Spike, *Masaccio*, 1st ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995). p.118.

are beautiful and blind. Literally walking between Peter to their left and Peter to their right, they are so caught up in their worldly concerns that they do not see him or the spiritual transformations that he (or, rather, Christ through him) effects. In a cycle full of hands giving and taking, reaching out and bestowing, and of limbs damaged and healed, these men have hidden their hands in their fine clothes and appear utterly inefficacious.⁴¹¹ In this scene they are the potential locus of transformation, but one which shows no promise at present. As such, they are a warning to the viewer against worldly concerns and spiritual blindness. Perhaps the stones on the ground of the piazza are a reminder of the stony ground on which seed was sown, where the lack of soil meant that the plants withered quickly.⁴¹²

Filippino Lippi's scene of Paul visiting Peter in prison, largely dismissed by scholars as uninteresting, is nevertheless a reminder of human freedom and its consequences. In Eden, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were cast out; paradoxically, on earth virtue may result in imprisonment. Things are not always as they seem, the just are not treated with justice, and suffering for the sake of Christ is virtuous. There are further links to be drawn with Jesus' teaching about discipleship and virtue (including visiting those in prison⁴¹³) but the point is simple: Peter, looking out of the barred window, is physically imprisoned by the walls, but his soul is free having been redeemed by Christ. This point is emphasised by Paul's gesture, pointing upwards to the *Tribute Money* and its metaphor of salvation.

Next to this, the *Raising of the Son of Theophilus* echoes the structure of the *Tribute Money* above. Here Peter stands to the left and the onlookers form the usual circle around him, again completed by the viewer. The central space is occupied by the resuscitated son of Theophilus who rises from a bone strewn shroud (a reminder of

⁴¹¹ The young men are also wearing shoes. In general, the moral exemplars in these scenes are shown barefoot while the blind or wicked are shod. The rule is not constant: the notable exception is the tax collector who is barefoot, as are the men crucifying Peter, while the man in blue with a turban in the *Raising of Tabitha* has blue shoes (perhaps his amazement should be read as doubt), but nevertheless there is frequently a contrast between the barefoot apostles and other figures. The implied association may be that of entering a holy place, or of humility (or both). I am grateful to Roger Majerski for bringing this issue to my attention.

⁴¹² Mk 4.1-20; Matt. 13:1-23; Lk. 8 1-15.

⁴¹³ Matt. 25:36.

the End Times and the resurrection promised to all), hands raised in wonder or prayer, directly below Christ in the *Tribute Money*. The vertical link is clear, as is the appropriate response, embodied by Paul⁴¹⁴ who is already on his knees in prayer. Theophilus, the king, is enthroned but a marginal figure beside the real king above. The square marble blocks on the wall and the overhanging roofs concentrate the action towards the centre. The message of the scene is as much drawn from Paul, kneeling next to the resuscitated boy, praising God and bearing witness to his divine life-giving power, as it is from the resuscitation itself. Paul does what the viewer is supposed to do. The awareness of what is happening spreads out through the crowd and the boy looks up at Peter so that the viewer's eye runs up along the line of his gaze to the king who is still gazing over the heads of the crowd, unaware of the miracle. The three figures represent respectively the faithful hope for the future, the present presence of Christ, and the unbelief of the past.

The left hand section of the scene is occupied with onlookers and is really part of the larger image but its own central point shows two men discussing the resuscitation which they have just witnessed. They have not knelt in prayer as Paul has done, but they are at least paying attention to the miracle. In the right hand section, Peter is shown on the Chair of Antioch, raised above the men around him (and indeed above the king shown in the central scene), some of whom kneel, including the now bareheaded king and a Carmelite brother. Behind him, the wall covering acts as a cloth-of-honour and masks the structure of the throne so that Peter seems to be floating, hands in prayer, detached from the men around him. Although the central figure in the scene, attended to by all, he seems, and literally is, on another plane. Hands in prayer, eyes raised and gazing into the distance, Peter is barely present in the scene but points beyond himself to Christ.⁴¹⁵

In *Peter Healing with his Shadow*, Peter again seems disengaged from his surroundings. Striding out of the picture plane – a local setting in a Florentine street – and apparently into the Chapel, his passing shadow cures the cripples to his right,

⁴¹⁴ The identification is not proved but seems likely based on the visual evidence.

⁴¹⁵ See Lubbock's suggestion of a painting within a painting discussed above. 6.3.3.

to the astonishment of the man behind Peter and John. There is nothing particularly physical in his curing of them, the shadow itself is not prominent in the scene and Peter performs no action and makes no gesture. Simply passing by them, they have seen his full, redeemed, humanity and that is enough to be transformative. Their eyes are progressively opened (as are those of the viewer, looking at them) and without any emphasis on physical agency, their physical change is shown to represent a spiritual change. The deformed human being is made whole again. The focal point and the spiritual centre, is in the gaze of the standing, now-cured cripple with his hands together in prayer looking at Peter (and watched by the man with the red cap whose own understanding seems to come about by witnessing the attitude of the other). Touched simply by Peter's shadow, he has seen salvation and been healed.

To the right, the *Distribution of Alms* places Peter to the side of a circle of figures and again his physical agency – giving out coins – is downplayed. The spiritual activity is the charitable nature of the act, not the physical nature of the coins, and the virtue of charity itself occupies the centre of the scene. While the woman looks directly at Peter, apparently without shame, Peter himself looks down in humility, dignifying her poverty. Beneath the hands giving and receiving, the dead body of Ananias who would not give alms freely is a clear contrast to the mother and child receiving charity and, therefore, life in Christ.

Lippi's *Disputation with Simon Magus* and *Crucifixion* scenes generally receive less attention than Masaccio's and Masolino's work but he uses the same format of the circle of figures around a spiritual locus, to good effect. Thus Nero points angrily at Peter who has been duelling with the magician while in the centre of the group, an idol lies broken on the floor, horizontally aligned with the resurrected Tabitha above. Nero is blind, he does not see the difference between the false magic of Simon Magus and the true miracles of Peter. Rather than rejoicing, Nero is angry. Here should be the potential for change, for spiritual rebirth, but in Nero the possibility is as dead as the idol is broken. Nothing will come of this void. On the left hand side, the story reaches its conclusion with Peter's crucifixion. His powerful body is strung

up by ugly and twisted creatures while, to the right and left of the arc of onlookers, two figures look out at the viewer, involving them in the scene directly.⁴¹⁶ The archway in the city walls behind the cross shows a green landscape, not unlike a wide door opening back into Paradise, its verdant green creating a link with the leafy Paradise of the *Temptation* to its right.⁴¹⁷ On the pilaster, below the *Temptation*, Lippi's scene of the Angel courteously releasing Peter from prison while the guard sleeps reminds the viewer that, just as the Angel easily enters the apparently immutable and solid prison, rendering its very physicality meaningless, so the physical death of the disciple is not the final thing it seems.

⁴¹⁶ The vertical of the cross aligns with the verticals of the towers behind. It is not clear whether this links Peter with the Church (anachronistically since there would have been no such Christian buildings in Rome at the time) or the instrument of his death with the empire. The latter seems more probable.

⁴¹⁷ Although the positioning of the doorway beneath the rich young men in the scene above creates some ambiguity here.

6.5 Conclusions

In each scene, the artists use the natural focal point – the centre of the image – as the spiritual focal point, building the composition around this to concentrate the eye on it. This space is occupied by the most spiritually charged figure of that scene, the one in whom spiritual transformation is occurring, or has the potential to occur.

With the exception of the finding of the coin, the *Chairing of Antioch* and the *Crucifixion*, Peter does not take centre stage and even in these instances, the central point which is both visual focal point and the locus of divine activity is not properly Peter but divine grace. Peter's central position serves to point beyond himself to Christ: in his crouching obedience by the sea, through his upward gaze and prayerful hands in the *Chairing of Antioch* and by obvious analogy in the *Crucifixion* (upside down at his own request as an acknowledgement of his subordination to Christ). Peter is indeed filled with grace, a towering physical and spiritual force, but it is the divine grace itself, the actual or potential spiritual transformation that is central, not Peter (who is generally positioned to the side of the scene) himself.

In brief summary, the central point of each scene (running from left to right as one faces the altar, upper register to lower) is occupied by: Peter's obedient role in the metaphor of salvation; Christ; the payment of the tax as analogy for Christ's atonement; the words preached by Peter; the baptised neophyte; the gift of Christ to the cripple; the spiritually blind young men; the resuscitated Tabitha; Peter imprisoned but redeemed; the resuscitated son of Theophilus; Peter enthroned but pointing to Christ through prayer; the shadow touching the cripples and their gaze, looking at Peter; the act of charity above the corpse of the uncharitable Ananias; the crucifixion of Peter; the open gate leading to a green landscape, perhaps as an analogy for Paradise; the broken idol at Peter's feet; and the prison door through which the Angel leads Peter.

Where no specific transformation can be shown (as in the preaching and almsgiving) ‘empty’ space is used to signify the divine activity. This is reminiscent of the empty tomb which signifies the resurrection, and of the kenosis of God which precedes the Incarnation. Emptiness here is not void but pregnant with spiritual possibility.⁴¹⁸

The *material* space of the Brancacci Chapel was created as a funerary chapel for masses in memory of the dead, a privately funded space within a Carmelite setting, a place of worship and spiritual transformation. The frescoes fill its walls, encompassing the whole space and directing the viewer’s experience of it. The *visual* space of the pictorial plane is composed using the natural focal point – the centre of the image – as the spiritual focal point. Sometimes this means that the centre itself is apparently empty, or almost empty, but actually charged with divine activity or the possibility of it. At other times it is filled with the most spiritually charged figure of that scene. The viewer’s eye is compositionally directed towards these central spaces, and, as he stands in front of each scene, he becomes part of it, completing the semi-circle motif. The contemporary references invite the viewer to see that the world of the frescoes is his world just as much as it is the world of the New or Old Testaments, and that the three converge in the Christian life.

Formal elements of composition are integrated with subject matter so that the images are both message and messenger. Through the experience of attending to forms, the significance of the images becomes clear. They are narrative, but not therefore simplistic. Themes of spiritual transformation and the sweep of the history of salvation are embedded in formal and stylistic techniques. While looking at the images can reveal the truths they seek to convey, the images are self-conscious of their two-dimensionality. In the process of looking, therefore, the viewer is required to make judgements about the relationships between appearances and reality, a theme which is the subject of many of the scenes: what seems is not always so.

⁴¹⁸ See the discussion on sacred space in 2.4.

All these elements create interaction between the image and the viewer. Through this activity the images may be revelatory and, if the revealed truths of spiritual discernment, salvation, and transformation fall on fertile ground in what we have called the viewer's *receptive* space, potentially sacramental.

7 Inhabiting Vocation: the Convent of San Marco

Frescoes for the Cloister, Chapterhouse, dormitory corridors, and cells, including images of St Dominic with the Crucifix, a Triple Crucifixion, the Annunciation, and scenes based on events in the life of Christ; Fra Angelico, c.1436-1443.

The unique status and extraordinary beauty of the largest and most unusual fresco series known in a Dominican house and the legendary aura of their principal artist have long made these images normative⁴¹⁹ within the Church and among secular viewers and scholars. Attempts (including some theologically sensitive ones) to apply a single label or explanation to this series of images have, however, repeatedly failed to do them justice. This case study suggests a less competitive and more complementary integration of themes already identified in the frescoes, and offers a new interpretation of the series, arguing that it is best understood by paying attention to the spatial relationships around and within the images, a process which suggests that concepts of integration, incorporation and incarnation are most important in the encounter with these images. This incarnational nature may explain why the frescoes continue to have such resonance for modern viewers. As a physical expression of so central and mysterious a part of Christian faith, and of concepts of conformity to Christ and community in Christ which remain entirely relevant, the progression from integration to incorporation to incarnation, as presented at San Marco, may be applied well beyond its walls in the understanding that the person who accepts his vocation (whatever its nature) can become in himself an extraordinary, ordinary, place of God; that the structures of his life, if infused with worship, can be the house of God; that he too can bring God into the world through conformity to Christ.

⁴¹⁹ On the normative status of canonical artworks see, Viladesau. p.152.

7.1 The frescoes

The Cloister contains *St Dominic with the Crucifix* and five lunettes depicting *St Peter Martyr Enjoining Silence*, *St Dominic with a scourge*, the *Man of Sorrows*, *Christ Pilgrim Received by Two Dominicans*, and *St Thomas Aquinas*. The Chapterhouse has a triple *Crucifixion* with saints, surrounded by prophets and famous Dominicans. Upstairs are three frescoes in the dormitory corridors: an *Annunciation* at the top of the stairs; a *Crucifixion with St Dominic* at the head of the east corridor, and a *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Eight Saints*, known as the *Madonna of the Shadows*, on the east corridor. The cells for the friars, novices and lay brothers (on the east, south and north corridors respectively) have individual frescoes, while Cosimo de' Medici's private cells next to the library on the north corridor have a *Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints John the Evangelist, Cosmas, and Peter Martyr* and an *Adoration of the Magi* with an inset tabernacle showing the *Man of Sorrows*.⁴²⁰

Whether or not the San Marco frescoes are a cycle, a sequence, a number of groups, or simply individual images and whether, in the absence of any obvious chronological progression in their subject matter, there exists an iconographic programme (and, if so, what it is) are much debated questions. The answers proposed vary considerably, from the suggestion that Angelico, or even the individual friar concerned, chose the subjects as he pleased,⁴²¹ to complex schemes variously based on scholastic, humanist and commemorative logic. Given the long history of commentary on Angelico, the considerable range of theories and organising principles proposed is perhaps unsurprising, although the greatest differences in interpretation occur in studies since 1990. The most distinctive of these are by Georges Didi-Huberman, William Hood, and John Spike who view the frescoes through the lenses of scholastic exegesis, corporate identity, and humanist concerns, respectively.

⁴²⁰ The sources for the frescoes are the Gospels and the description of Dominic's prayer known as *De Modo Orandi. Bav, Ms Lat. Rossianus 3: De Modo Orandi*. See also William Hood, "Saint Dominic's Manners of Praying: Gestures in Fra Angelico's Cell Frescoes at S. Marco," *The Art Bulletin* 68, no. 2 (1986).

⁴²¹ See William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993). p.42.

7.2 Interpretations: scholastic exegesis, Georges Didi-Huberman

Didi-Huberman's extraordinary book, *Fra Angelico, Dissemblance and Figuration*, addresses the paradox of painting the divine incarnate and argues that Angelico uses 'dissemblance' to guide the viewer into multiple associations produced within an exegetical framework, through which the viewer approaches the central mystery of the Incarnation. He draws on patristic authors and the scholastic theologians who developed and extended their ideas in theological encyclopaedias, as sources both for the approach - the mentality which he believes created the images and that of their ideal contemporary viewer - and for the content of the exegetical meditations which he thinks the images invite. His own style is itself unusually exegetical and scholastic in its poetry, rich visual imagery, and imaginative associations between subjects.⁴²² He contrasts the model of scholastic exegesis which, he believes, persists in the work of Angelico and in the minds of the San Marco community, with the developing humanism of the *quattrocento*, and explains how their objectives, techniques, and language, were strikingly different.

The starting point for this enquiry was Didi-Huberman's own surprise on noticing multicoloured 'blotches' and 'patches'⁴²³ of paint on a number of the frescoes, including the corridor Annunciation, the *Noli me tangere* in Cell 1, and the *Madonna of the Shadows*. These apparently deliberate blotches seem strangely 'nonfigurative' and do not resemble what they are 'supposed' to represent (e.g. flowers, or polished marble). Didi-Huberman claims, however, that too often art historians are so conditioned by their preconceptions that they fail to be surprised by what they see, even when it is as genuinely surprising as a master painter of the Florentine *quattrocento*, a contemporary of Masaccio, apparently choosing to paint quite specific objects without verisimilitude.

⁴²² Too numerous and too specific in their details to consider properly here.

⁴²³ The term in the original French is '*taches*'. See the translator's note. Didi-Huberman. p.xiv.

7.2.1 Didi-Huberman's key terms

In attempting to explain this, Didi-Huberman's thesis turns on certain key terms and concepts of which 'exegesis', 'figure', 'ground' and 'place', and 'dissemblance' are foremost. These terms are carefully defined and, because they underpin his entire enquiry and occupy much of its discussion, require some explanation here.

Exegesis

Exegesis, the expansive work of patristic and scholastic theologians, involves making connections between things that may not have an evident, natural, or logical connection but which are imaginatively, creatively and poetically, rather than mechanically, linked. Didi-Huberman refers to the 'fourfold' interpretation of Scripture,⁴²⁴ and cites many exegetical works, ideas, and associations throughout his book, which is greatly informed by mining these sources to understand better the host of references which a single thing (character, object, event, etc.) might trigger in the learned and even not-so-learned minds of Angelico's contemporaries. Central to the practice of exegesis in this context is the idea that a great mystery of God, of the Incarnation, is not reducible to a 'simple' story about Jesus of Nazareth, the narration of past 'events'. For the Dominican at San Marco, the mystery of God incarnate, and thus of the entire 'incarnational cycle' from Eden to the final salvation, via the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ, was a "living present". The meaning of Scripture was unravelled by division and connection, by splitting and subdividing terms and concepts, and relating them to others or to other instances of themselves. The 'story' was a simple first step, an entrance to understanding multiple, deeper meanings. Preachers frequently constructed sermons using a similarly exegetical method through which "a constant, almost delirious practice of invention and the blossoming of meaning unfolded."⁴²⁵ Didi-Huberman believes that Angelico painted in a similar, overdetermined,⁴²⁶ exegetical fashion, using painted 'figures' to indicate and invoke multiple meanings and references beyond the bounds of the painted figure itself, not confining himself to the historical meaning - the "obligatory

⁴²⁴ See 2.3.1.

⁴²⁵ Didi-Huberman. p.41.

⁴²⁶ I.e. having multiple causes. See the discussion of Didi-Huberman's use of this term in 2.5.

threshold of visible recognition”⁴²⁷ - but expanding into allegory, tropology and anagogy.

Figure

In the scholastic context (in which Didi-Huberman situates the San Marco community of the 1430s) signs or figures of the ‘living present’ of Scripture mentioned above were to be experienced everywhere. The term and concept, ‘figure’ is, however, problematic. According to Didi-Huberman, its meaning is completely different in scholastic and humanist usage. He argues that scholastics understood ‘figure’ as a sign which, while materially linked to what it indicates, does not resemble it, while humanists understood ‘figure’ as a sign which resembles what it indicates, presenting the aspect of the thing it signifies. The Eucharist is a prime example of a scholastic figure. The consecrated Host is a living sign, a presence, and a non ‘figurative’ figure of Christ. The relation of sign to fact, figure to referent, is found, not in visual resemblance, but in the paradoxical nature of both the transubstantiation and the Incarnation to which it alludes, in which the divine and the material co-inhere.⁴²⁸

Didi-Huberman’s hypothesis is that Angelico’s understanding of ‘figure’ is unlike an art historian’s, indeed the humanist/art historical and the theological uses of the term are quite opposite. Angelico is positioned at an intellectual crossroads between the heterogeneous thought worlds of the theologian and prior of San Marco, Fra Antonino Pierozzi, and the art theorist Leon Battista Alberti but, in Didi-Huberman’s view, Angelico’s “semiotic world” exists within the scholastic framework in which he was trained and, while he made use of some of the developing techniques in

⁴²⁷ Didi-Huberman. p.45.

⁴²⁸ Ibid. p.35.

painting which reflected humanist concerns,⁴²⁹ he did so only when it served his exegetical and essentially scholastic purposes.⁴³⁰

Place

Place is another complex term in Didi-Huberman's vocabulary. According to Didi-Huberman, Plato's understanding of place is helpful in understanding how place functions in the San Marco images. Plato's ontological categories of ideal form and imitative or shadowy reflection do not really accommodate the idea of place but Plato, nevertheless, suggests that place is a receptacle, receiving the imprint of forms rather than having its own form. It enables the germination of forms and is therefore generative.⁴³¹

Albertus Magnus took this further, imagining place "in terms of a constant displacement of the orders of reality", moving from the physical to the metaphysical so that place is itself transformative, transiting from the physical to divine truths. As such it is active, creative, generative.⁴³² Didi-Huberman sees the platonic understanding of place as maternal, the receptacle in which the paternal cause imprints itself. Place is also dissemblant, since what is generated is unlike the place from which it is generated. Place is "something like the physical crucible of heavenly, paternal, and divine power", bridging a gap between the earthly and metaphysical. This is illustrated by the cosmology of Genesis in which the Word of God shapes the formless void, or by embryology as then understood, the paternal cause flowing into a maternal receptacle which is infused by it and generates a form.⁴³³

⁴²⁹ Primarily mathematical perspective which enabled greater realism and figures with lifelike physical and facial modelling, as painted by Masaccio.

⁴³⁰ Didi-Huberman approves of Angelico's methodological choice, even questioning whether the adjective 'humanist' can have "any rigorous meaning in painting." Didi-Huberman. p.45.

⁴³¹ Ibid. pp.169-71. This goes far beyond the Aristotelian idea of place as the space circumscribed between circumscribed things, a definition which is awkward in relation to the uncircumscribed divine. The concept of generativity is here related to a given form, not a '*de novo*' creation. It describes the instantiation rather than the form.

⁴³² Ibid. p.172.

⁴³³ Ibid. p.173.

Thus, for example, the Virgin's house in the corridor *Annunciation* "functions as a receptacle, a place of engendering". It "supports an entire network – topological and tropological – of incarnational figures" and it acts as a figure for the Virgin herself who in turn is the ultimate maternal, generative place. Similarly the Virgin's enclosed garden is a figure for herself, as she is a figure for the mystery of the Incarnation.⁴³⁴

Dissemblance

Place and figure are both important in the concept of 'dissemblance' or 'dissimilitude' which goes back to Plato's idea of a "dissemblance from oneself" which "engenders something like ontological ruin".⁴³⁵ Plotinus linked this to the state of being enmeshed in matter, an idea revised as a Christian expression of original sin, of materiality as separation from the divine. In this appropriation, "Dissemblance *from oneself* becomes dissemblance *from God*",⁴³⁶ the post-lapsarian state contrasting with man's original nature as the *imago Dei*. Nevertheless, from Augustine onwards there is an idea that although man's resemblance to God is damaged, leaving only a ruin, vestige, or trace of the *imago Dei*, this persists partially in the soul and thus salvation remains possible.⁴³⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite specifically links the ideas of dissemblance and figure/image, advocating the use of dissemblant figures. His texts were popular with scholastics and the San Marco library had copies. The *Celestial Hierarchy* opens with a theory of the figure and advocates dissemblant figures as the most perfect because they do not deceive the viewer into mistaking figure for subject. Since the uncircumscribable divine, in particular, cannot be figured accurately or completely in a resemblant way, dissemblance – using figures that are not explicit signs – is better able to elevate the mind and point the viewer towards God than resemblance.⁴³⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius indicates an apophatic theology of figures/images reflecting a dissemblant expression of God, ineffable and formless.⁴³⁹ Furthermore, the dissemblant figure has the causal virtue of being able to "transit us from the visible to something

⁴³⁴ Ibid. pp.175-8.

⁴³⁵ Ibid. p.46.

⁴³⁶ Ibid. p.46.

⁴³⁷ Ibid. pp.47-8.

⁴³⁸ Ibid. pp.50-52.

⁴³⁹ N.B. Dissemblance does not equate to direct negation.

beyond even the intelligible”. Thus an earthworm can be a figure of Christ because, rather than satisfying the viewer as an image, it prompts him to look beyond the inadequate figure for its cause. The link which enables the earthworm to be a figure for Christ is that Christ humbled himself more than even an earthworm. The viewer acknowledges the inadequacy of this relation - Christ is not defined by his earthworm-exceeding-humility – and proceeds to a higher contemplation of the true subject (the Incarnation). Beginning with the dissemblant figure, the viewer moves “toward the invisible proximity of mystery” which is beyond every figure.⁴⁴⁰ Every symbol is dissemblant since it belongs to “an order of reality inferior to what it signifies”, allowing the user to confess both the transcendence of the mystery and the immanence of the figures which point towards it. The dissemblance of the material figure indicates the divine mystery; the mystery validates the material image.⁴⁴¹ This paradoxical concept of figure is particularly relevant to the Incarnation - mysterious in its paradoxical uniting of the spiritual and corporeal, the divine and human - and thus the nature of the figure formed part of the scholastic apology for images.⁴⁴²

Dissemblance, the pictorial acknowledgment of the uncircumscribability of the divine, which acts as a doorway to multiple exegetical associations, nevertheless retains its link with its referent, though that link is not one of visual resemblance. Instead, Didi-Huberman claims, we should be looking, not for the subject, but for vestiges of it: it is not possible to paint the divine, only to indicate visual (dissemblant) traces of it. These traces approach the divine, prophetically indicating “the *image to come*”. Angelico’s aesthetics are thus “an aesthetics of limits...an aesthetics that knows itself and even...shows itself to be...imperfectly approaching the divine.”⁴⁴³ This explains what Didi-Huberman calls the “relative disfigurations”, the moments of deliberate dissemblance in Angelico’s paintings. These “constitute the quintessence of pictorial humility” demonstrating that the painting is a vestige or trace, rejecting the “aspect” in order to “reach the image”. Thus the “gaudily colored marble” of the *Madonna of the Shadows*, painted not as *trompe l’oeil* but as blatant

⁴⁴⁰ Didi-Huberman. p.47.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid. p.47.

⁴⁴² Ibid. p.5.

⁴⁴³ Ibid. p.49.

blotches of colour, is dissemblant: it is unlike real marble, and anagogically rejects the ‘aspect’, aspiring instead to the true image which is beyond pictorial means.⁴⁴⁴

Didi-Huberman argues that Angelico uses dissemblance to open up the image to contemplation and exegesis by disturbing the viewer. He describes how certain parts or elements of a painting negate or cloud what the painting mimetically affirms. Thus a painting of God incarnate may contain elements which point to the paradoxicality of this very subject, startling the viewer out of complacent acceptance of the image and into contemplation of the mystery. This dissemblance “presupposes” four pictorial practices: a “practice of *place*, hence the opacity of the medium, unlike the ‘surfaces’ that aim toward the ideal features of glass – of the window and of transparency”;⁴⁴⁵ a “practice of *sense*, understood as the mysteries of signification, unlike pure and simple ‘sensory’ sense”; a “practice of *nonverisimilitude*, in opposition to every poetics or rhetoric of verisimilitude”; and a “practice of *dissemblance*, in opposition to every aesthetic of the ‘figure’ understood as a mimetic aspect.”⁴⁴⁶ In this way, it would be possible to paint an *istoria*⁴⁴⁷ about Christ while knowing that the painting is only a vestige of the reality, in the same way that the *imago* persists in man’s soul as a vestige of what man was created to be.⁴⁴⁸ This “*aesthetics of the vestige*”, may be inspired and may acquire “an

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid. p.50.

⁴⁴⁵ Place is considered opaque rather than transparent because one cannot simply ‘see through’ it, like looking through a window at whatever lies beyond, without the window glass altering one’s perception of the object seen. Such transparency is not illuminating or edifying. The dissemblant figure’s opacity may, of course, be transparent in the sense of being illuminating or edifying.

⁴⁴⁶ Didi-Huberman. p.45.

⁴⁴⁷ The ‘story’ or event told through the narrative skill of the painter as prescribed and praised by Alberti in his seminal guide, written in the vernacular (alternative Latin spelling ‘*historia*’). Leon Battista Alberti, "De Pictura: On Painting," in *On Painting and Sculpture*, ed. C. Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972). See also 8.2.3. (Of course, according to Didi-Huberman, the painting at SanMarco is not of a humanist ‘*istoria*’ type.)

⁴⁴⁸ N.B. Dissemblance is not only a consequence or indication of human sinfulness; it is also a divinely created quality of creaturely relation with God and the ‘vestige’ as such is not necessarily ‘second rate’. Arguably, the concept of dissemblance is less about sinfulness and more about the use of apophysis to express the ineffability of God. See, for example, Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). Ch. 1, esp. p.26, and David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite, the Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003). E.g. p. 105. On analogy in discussion of beauty and the divine see pp.280-282, 300-303. See also Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* Part 1, Q1.9.

anagogical dimension...of *desiring*, at least, the inaccessible image”. It may be both a vestige, aware of its imperfection, and a yearning towards its object of desire.⁴⁴⁹

Dissemblance, figuration and the art of memory

These concepts of exegesis, figure, place, and dissemblance are usefully extended by considering the scholastic emphasis on the art of memory.⁴⁵⁰ Here figures function as instruments of theological recall. The figure can evoke a memory but it is related to the present and constitutive of the future. Dissemblant figures, the art of memory, and the sort of freely associative exegesis that is found in scholastic writing, sermons, and compilations of symbols and associative references,⁴⁵¹ sit comfortably together and suggest that colour, place, and matter cannot be reduced to simple descriptive attributes but act figuratively, in the sense of indicating that which they do not resemble.⁴⁵² This understanding of the figure as dissemblant, and as operating in same framework, or along the same organisational principles, as the art of memory, leads Didi-Huberman to reject as reductive assertions such as Baxandall’s claim that the Virgin Annunciate is portrayed in any of five mental/spiritual states (disquiet, reflection, inquiry, submission, and merit)⁴⁵³ and that the meaning of a particular painting of the Annunciation can be understood by identifying the Virgin’s psychological state. He argues that, not only does the Virgin’s state change far more than this, but that the Annunciation is not simply a narrated event but “*the place and time of a mystery*”⁴⁵⁴ and a painting of it is not so much a reminder of an event as the “memory of a mystery” whereby the painting “does not merely illustrate but also *produces the theological*, inasmuch as *its place produces the figure*.” That is to say, the event gives us a dissemblant figure by which to approach the mystery it indicates, thus returning to a discussion of place as

⁴⁴⁹ Didi-Huberman. p.49.

⁴⁵⁰ On the art of memory and the use of memory palaces (imaginary buildings whose layout is used to help one remember stories, arguments, collections of facts, etc.) see Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory, a Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* ed. A. Minnis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 2008). Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

⁴⁵¹ Of the sort compiled by Giovanni di San Gimignano in his *Catholicon*. See Didi-Huberman. p.26.

⁴⁵² Ibid. p.62.

⁴⁵³ Baxandall identifies five ‘states’ of the Virgin during the Annunciation: *conturbatio*/disquiet; *cogitatio*/reflection; *interrogatio*/inquiry; *humiliatio*/submission and *meritatio*/merit.

Baxandall, pp.51-56.

⁴⁵⁴ Didi-Huberman. p.67.

causal rather than simply locational, and of the Virgin as a material cause in the Incarnation and not simply a character or actor. Albertus Magnus wrote at length of the spatial figures that could be used of the Virgin⁴⁵⁵ and Didi-Huberman argues that these make us “see in the Virgin the place par excellence... of the *mystery*”; a “*figure-place*”.⁴⁵⁶

7.2.2 The scholastic and humanist approaches

These core concepts – exegesis, figure, place, and dissemblance - are the basis of Didi-Huberman’s work, although he draws on many additional terms. In discussing these concepts and their relevance to the frescoes, Didi-Huberman sets out a clear opposition between the scholastic and humanist approaches.

The scholastics understood a ‘figure’ as a sign whose aspect does not resemble its referent, ‘meaning’ as something sought in the depths – even the abysses – rather than on the surface, and ‘place’ as something which does not simply circumscribe some other, more important, thing but which is itself actively generative.

Furthermore, the dramatic, expressive gestures beloved of humanist art might well have been negatively perceived as ‘gesticulation’ by the scholastics, and condemned as excessive, hysterical, even perverted play-acting.⁴⁵⁷ The *istoria*, the story or ‘subject’ was, for the scholastics, only the necessary starting point for an exegetical journey to a much deeper understanding of polyvalent meanings, valuable because it pointed beyond itself and acted as a foundation that must be left behind in order to begin to plumb the depths of meaning.

For the humanists,⁴⁵⁸ the important thing was the *istoria* itself, understood in the classical, rhetorical sense as the historical and true, as opposed to the fabulous. The presentation of the *istoria* through inventive composition and gesture, was the great

⁴⁵⁵ For example the Virgin is characterised as a throne, a nest, and a temple among other spatial metaphors. Ibid. p.68.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid. p.68.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid. p.39.

⁴⁵⁸ See note 447 on page 161, and 8.2.3.

work of humanist painting, the “ultimate stakes of any pictorial composition.”⁴⁵⁹

Humanist painters rehabilitated the *surface*, which was to be represented ‘realistically’ with the painter basing his technique on the observation of nature and the use of mathematical perspective, and enlivening his subject with variety and expressive gestures to indicate a character’s emotional state. This style of painting was intended to open a ‘window’ in the wall and allow the viewer to look through into another world, very much like their own in its essentials, though idealised and arranged so as to represent a specific subject. Figures resembled their referents, beauty and grace were matters of surface composition, surface was glorified as the location of narrative, and place was essentially the boundary around that narrative.

Between the scholastic approach to Scripture, story, and sign, and the emerging humanism of the *quattrocento*, terms and concepts central to the former were quite literally “turned on their head and denied”. Thus Cennino Cennini’s guide for painters⁴⁶⁰ opens with “an invocation to God, the Virgin, and all the saints” while Alberti’s begins with “an homage to mathematicians and a demand for the autonomy of the painter’s point of view.”⁴⁶¹ Alberti advises the student of painting to observe nature rather than to read books; for him place is not “a divine virtue that engenders forms” as it was for Albertus Magnus, but a quality of the painted surface, a boundary line for the subject, while a sign is any visible thing and not a complex and “diffracted” structure of Biblical associations.⁴⁶² Most significantly, a ‘figure’, which for the scholastics was a sign indicating a reality to which it bore no necessary physical resemblance and which might indeed be dissemblant from its referent (as smoke indicates fire or a footprint the passing of a person without resembling them) was for Alberti quite the opposite. A figure, in painting, was no longer in contrast to a reality but a pictorial sign which indicated precisely what it resembled. Didi-Huberman does not mention the allegorical nature of many ‘humanist’ paintings, but their existence suggests that the ability to interpret images on more than one level was not entirely lost. What Didi-Huberman’s thesis implies, however, is that the

⁴⁵⁹ Didi-Huberman. p.43.

⁴⁶⁰ Cennino d'Andrea Cennini, *The Craftsman's Handbook "Il Libro Dell Arte"*, trans., Daniel V. Thompson Jr (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1954).

⁴⁶¹ Didi-Huberman. p.42. (Cennino Cennini c.1370-c.1440; Leon Battista Alberti, 1404-1472.)

⁴⁶² Ibid. p.42.

relation between aspect and allegory became more of an equation, and less of an exegetical process of imaginative association, i.e. that the range of meanings inferred from a painting was reduced and the means of arriving at them narrowed.

Alberti's thought world is therefore very different in many respects to the thought world of the frescoes and it is the confusion of the two which has, in Didi-Huberman's view, led to a misunderstanding of Angelico's work by art historians and historians. For example, Didi-Huberman strongly disagrees with Cristoforo Landino's assessment of Angelico, as presented by Michael Baxandall.⁴⁶³ He argues that no one who had seen the San Marco frescoes and who understood the context in which Angelico was working could have called them, among other things, *vezzoso*. Baxandall describes this word as untranslatable but interprets it as implying something "delightful in a caressing way", "blithely charming", and descriptive not only of, for example, the dancing angels of Angelico's panel paintings, but also of the formal quality of "tonal values". Alberti claims that painters should avoid using white on the grounds that it creates tension in an image and that the less white used the more *vezzoso*, in the sense of 'blithe', the image will be, and Baxandall writes that as "a style in which strong tonal extremes do not assault us, *vezzoso* is clearly a true description of Angelico's painting".⁴⁶⁴ Didi-Huberman's assessment is completely the opposite: he sees Angelico's use of white as plentiful and notes this as a striking and unusual aspect of his work.⁴⁶⁵

Landino's description of Angelico's work as *devoto* (devout) is hard to contradict at face value but again Didi-Huberman rejects Baxandall's explanation of its application to Angelico. Baxandall believes that both Angelico and Landino would have thought of devotion in the Thomistic sense as the "conscious and willed turning of the mind to God" through meditation, resulting in "mingled joy at God's goodness and sadness at man's inadequacy".⁴⁶⁶ However, he also understands *devoto* as corresponding to a style of sermon described as "easily understood and....good for

⁴⁶³ Baxandall. pp.147-53.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid. p.148.

⁴⁶⁵ Didi-Huberman. p.23.

⁴⁶⁶ Baxandall. p.149.

edifying and instructing the people”, a style supposedly used by the Church fathers, St Augustine, and other saints who “shunned elaboration and told us their divine inspirations in one coherent discourse”.⁴⁶⁷ Whether this is a fair assessment of the sermons of these men, and whether the category of sermon styles to which Baxandall appeals applies to Angelico is debateable. Didi-Huberman argues that the Thomistic sense in which Angelico would have understood devotion was not at all in line with easily-understood edification for the people, and should be seen rather as the foundation of religious practice caused extrinsically by God and intrinsically by contemplation of personal shortcomings and of the blessings of God. Such contemplation amounts ultimately to an understanding of the image of God in the self and is therefore an extreme and difficult (though blessed) undertaking.⁴⁶⁸ Didi-Huberman believes that Angelico would have aspired to this sort of devotion and that it is this which informs his paintings at San Marco.⁴⁶⁹ The sort of simple devotion which Landino may imply and which Baxandall certainly interprets him as implying is, Didi-Huberman believes, frankly contradicted by the frescoes, which are neither simplistically didactic nor ‘easy’, but intended to evoke meditation or contemplation in Aquinas’ difficult sense.

⁴⁶⁷ See *ibid.* p.150. and Didi-Huberman. pp.24-5.

⁴⁶⁸ Didi-Huberman. p.24.

⁴⁶⁹ Didi-Huberman suggests that Baxandall, like most historians and art historians, favours a simplistic approach to images as ‘the Bible of the illiterate’, justified by the *Libri carolini* and Gregory the Great’s letter to Serenus, although cf. Chazelle. Didi-Huberman believes that such texts arise in situations of “conflict over doctrine” and were written to reassure the anxious. They do not, in his opinion, reflect the complexity of the discussion about Christian images, and indeed seem to deny the power of images which has led to the “resistance and denial, defenses [sic] and compromises” surrounding them. Such ambiguity is the natural result of the “equivocation and multiplicity of meanings” which naturally predominate in images, to which the traditional view of Western Christian images fails to do justice. However, Didi-Huberman cites Giovanni di Genova, the Dominican writer of the *Catholicon*, a contemporary encyclopaedia, who defines images as having a triple function of resembling, recreating, and creating. These correspond to three religious imperatives: the instruction of the ignorant, eliciting feelings of devotion, and presenting the mystery of the Incarnation so that is daily before the eyes of the viewer and in his memory. Presenting this mystery is, Didi-Huberman argues, a far cry from simple didactic purpose and is unlikely to be achieved through simple mimesis. However, Giovanni di Genova’s description of the function of images implies a didactic, inspirational and commemorative function which appears to be very much in line with the traditional justification of images. As this is an approach which Didi-Huberman has argued fails to account for their true nature, his choice of an alternative understanding of images is perhaps not very alternative. Nevertheless, the point is well made that the aims and means of simplistic didacticism and an attempt to express the “most profound theological mystery of all” are some distance apart, and Angelico’s frescoes are not accounted for by the former. Didi-Huberman. pp.25-6. N.B. the ‘triple function’ of the images, while it does not correspond precisely to the Dominican motto of praising, preaching, and blessing, does approximate all three. The San Marco images present the mystery; bless the viewer by bringing the mystery closer to him and increasing his awareness of it; and praise by being a concrete expression of praise, and by eliciting praise from the viewer.

These examples show how differently Didi-Huberman believes the scholastics and humanists approached painting, how they thought it should function, and how they used terms which we now take for granted that we understand (not least because of the continued predominance of a humanist way of thinking and a humanist version of art history) but which may need to be understood more specifically in the light of their user.

7.2.3 Examples

To recap, Didi-Huberman's thesis is that Angelico is a scholastic, exegetical, painter, for whom the figure is a sign which need not resemble its referent, place is generative, and dissemblance expresses mystery. Angelico uses a theologically grounded pictorial practice of "dissemblance" as an exegetical strategy in paintings which are exegetical in the sense that they are not only like the things they represent but unlike them, and their dissemblance can thereby disturb or surprise the viewer into reconsidering the subject. Figurative painting does not only resemble what it represents by imitating its visual aspect: the dissemblance which a painter introduces in representing a subject can open a subject to exegesis. In particular, painters may use "a practice of dissemblance"⁴⁷⁰ to present paradox, as is the case with the depiction of the incarnate God or the moment of Incarnation at the Annunciation.

For example, in the *Noli me tangere* of Cell 1, Didi-Huberman identifies the 'red blotches' on the green meadow as being not at all like flowers ("If Angelico had wanted to paint a flower like a flower, he would have done so."⁴⁷¹) but exactly like (i.e. painted in the same way as) the Stigmata. He then shows how, by paying attention to this dissemblance (the 'flowers' are not like flowers but like something else: like the Stigmata) a whole range of exegetical connections are enabled. The red pigment is common to the Stigmata, Mary Magdalene's robe (a reminder of her sin), the flowers blossoming in this garden of the resurrection (a reminder of the expulsion from Eden) and the three little red crosses in the grass between Mary and

⁴⁷⁰ Didi-Huberman. p.3.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid. p.19.

Christ (suggesting the Passion).⁴⁷² The dissemblant figure of the red blotch thus moves associatively between human flesh and glorious risen flesh, sin and the cruciform halo, the lost Eden and the redemptive resurrection, sacrificial blood and the first fruits of spring blossom.

Further bright patches of paint are to be found below the *Madonna of the Shadows*, usually seen as a colourful *trompe l'oeil* of fictive marble and ignored in reproductions. Examining this lower register, Didi-Huberman argues that Angelico has not attempted to make the panels look like marble, ignoring the contemporary 'graining' technique in favour of an earlier spattering technique which has more in common with the work of Jackson Pollock than with the Italian Renaissance. The effect of this is to "obscure every effort of a *mimesis* of aspect" and to "foreground in a violent way the *material* existence" of the painted surface, emphasising that this is not marble but, rather, paint.⁴⁷³ This "relative disfiguration" displaces the marble, acting like an alibi for it, pointing out what is not there. On consideration, it is clear that marble would have no place in either the mentality or the decorative scheme of a Dominican convent, belonging as it does to an aesthetic category which encompassed the splendid, luxurious, sparkling, and even gaudy, although it is appropriate for the Virgin herself.⁴⁷⁴ Observing Angelico's treatment of the Virgin more widely, Didi-Huberman notes that in many cases he employs this colourful blotching technique on surfaces around the Virgin such as a throne or the wall behind her. He suggests that these "multicolored zones, odd in their formless audacity" serve to project forward part of the background, thus "subverting the representational system that attempts to present...with "verisimilitude"... a "spatial" composition". Instead, the colour "frees itself from perspective" and draws attention to the materiality of the painting.⁴⁷⁵ This makes perfect sense because, as every Dominican novice knew, the Virgin is the material cause of the Incarnation. Stressing materiality in proximity to the Virgin is thus entirely appropriate. Indeed, as Didi-Huberman describes, there exist a plethora of exegetical associations

⁴⁷² Giovanni di San Gimignano, in his 'Survey of examples and similitudes of things', explicitly links Christ himself with grass and flowers on the grounds that the flowers may be red and thus remind us both of sin and of the stigmata. Ibid. p.62.

⁴⁷³ Ibid. p.30.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid. p.31.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid. pp.33-4.

between the Virgin and stones - especially precious stones, including marble – as well as earth itself.⁴⁷⁶ These associations all acknowledge the materiality of her generative role in the Incarnation as the provider of the matter impregnated by the divine Word and the nourishment of the incarnated infant Christ. The dissemblant figure of the multi-coloured stone also plays associatively on the level of colour, with the red reminding us of the blood of the Virgin (the matter of the incarnate Christ according to Augustinian embryology⁴⁷⁷) and the blood of Christ's sacrifice.

It is not possible here to do justice to Didi-Huberman's analysis of the two Annunciation scenes, or to the density of exegetical associations which he explores, but, since they form the major part of his analysis a brief summary is needed to indicate the main lines of his thinking in this respect, by way of illustration of the discussions above.

Didi-Huberman argues that, because the Annunciation is not simply 'an' event in time and place but 'the' time and place of the mystery of the Incarnation, it needs exegetical rather than Albertian figures which not only illustrate the 'event' (as per Baxandall's scheme⁴⁷⁸) but produce the mystery. The figures produce places which in turn generate figures. The figures are place and time, and place and time are figures for the mystery of the Incarnation. The Virgin herself is not just a character in a story but a figure for the mystery of the Incarnation, a figure which is the place of the Incarnation, a generative locus, a place with causal virtue.⁴⁷⁹ The Virgin, whom Albertus Magnus describes as a place of sanctity and worship, listing many "spatial figures" for her, is in fact "the place par excellence, that is, the receptacle, the throne, the chair, the nest, the dwelling, the temple, etc. of the *mystery* – of the Word – that transits into her." As a figure-place for the mystery of the Incarnation, Angelico often positions her in a "tripartite architectural structure" suggesting the

⁴⁷⁶ Didi-Huberman refers to a substantial literature about the symbolism of stone, especially multicoloured and sparkling stone, as a figure for both Christ and the Virgin, and cites sources that Fra Angelico would certainly have known. Ibid. pp. 55-6 and 63-7.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid. pp.69-70.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.p.67. See note 453 on page 161.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.pp.67-68.

Trinity and her role as its receptacle.⁴⁸⁰ The corridor *Annunciation*, which is inscribed ‘*Salve Mater pietatis et totius trinitatis nobile triclinium*’⁴⁸¹ implies that the Virgin is “symbolically the structure of the place that pictorially contains her.”⁴⁸²

Depicting the moment of Incarnation is, necessarily, materially and temporally challenging to the painter. In response to such a challenge, Didi-Huberman believes that Angelico does not describe the “where or when of the Annunciation” or specify a precise moment within the event. The scenes do not suggest Nazareth, they lack Albertian ‘variety’ in the form of props and gestures and, although Angelico employs Albertian construction he does so not in the service of an *istoria* but in order to subvert it in a dissemblant fashion.⁴⁸³ He recognises that ‘realistic’, ‘historical’ painting is no more able to represent the mystery of the Incarnation than it is able to create a real event in a real space and time.⁴⁸⁴ The presence of St Peter Martyr as a witness in the Cell 3 *Annunciation* deprives the scene “of any plausible place...even of its episodic character”, deliberately rendering it achronic.⁴⁸⁵ Materially speaking, Angelico presents the Incarnation as the moment of “*form being formed*”, leaving patches of what Didi-Huberman calls “*inchoate color*” as figures of the “virtual figure, the figure to come...the *promised form*”. The figuratively material also has a figuratively temporal significance: the visible is valuable not for what it shows but for what it expects, what it ‘prefigures’, and the Virgin Annunciate is, of course, supremely expectative, not only of the new Adam, the re-creation of man, but also of the Crucifixion. Thus the Annunciation is both a figure of motherhood and of death, of prefiguration and of commemoration.⁴⁸⁶ All this accords with Pierozzi’s understanding of the Annunciation, as organised under the categories of Scripture, mystery and eschatology. The Annunciation is the fulfilment

⁴⁸⁰ The triple form also echoes the M of Maria.

⁴⁸¹ Literally, ‘Greetings, dutiful mother, the noble triple-couch of the whole Trinity.’ The Latin ‘triclinium’ implies both the dining room in which three sides of the dining table were flanked by couches on which the diners reclined, and the couch itself. The phrase is perhaps better translated as ‘Hail, O Mother of Mercy, and noble resting place of the Holy Trinity.’ See Diane Cole Ahl, *Fra Angelico* (London, N.Y.: Phaidon Press, 2008). p.137.

⁴⁸² Didi-Huberman. p.68.

⁴⁸³ Thus, for example, the seated Virgin in the corridor *Annunciation* is far too large for her house to be ‘realistic’ and the vaults and columns of the house itself do not make architectural ‘sense’.

⁴⁸⁴ Didi-Huberman. pp.112-3.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p.114.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p.74.

of Scripture, a past prophecy becoming a present which creates the future, bringing all times and tenses together in one moment; it is a mystery which flowers in a plethora of exegetical details; and it is a final cause, the redemption of sin, the salvation of humanity, the point on which all Christian beliefs converge.⁴⁸⁷

The Virgin Annunciate is the place *of* the Incarnation, and that place is a figure *for* the Incarnation. She is also a figure of the time of the Incarnation, which is to say the entirety of Christian time. The feast of the Annunciation on the 25th of March was the Florentine new year,⁴⁸⁸ and the celebration of the Annunciation was a recapitulation of “time in its entirety”, a figure for prophecy and fulfilment, prefiguration and commemoration.⁴⁸⁹ This mystery is unfigurable in the Albertian sense of a “configuration of the visible world”⁴⁹⁰ but figurable in the scholastic, dissemblant sense. The believer must make the historical moment present through his Ave Maria and by following the Virgin’s example of contemplation, piety, and devotion.⁴⁹¹ The Annunciation becomes not an *istoria* with ‘a meaning’ but a series of relations, a structure of meaning and dynamic connections between many things, and a painting of the Annunciation must imply through figures, rather than make explicit through mimesis.⁴⁹² Didi-Huberman writes:

Just as the time of the Annunciation produces something quite different from a simple moment in history, the place cannot be reduced to the simple circumscription of a space.⁴⁹³

The event of the Annunciation in which the divine passes into the human “also diffracted the idea of space into the four senses of Holy Scripture”⁴⁹⁴ so that the painted place of the Annunciation can only ever be “a topology of displacement... a place-network, a *locus-traslattivus*.”⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid. pp.115-8.

⁴⁸⁸ Also, supposedly, the date of the creation of the original Adam. Ibid. p.124.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid. p.126.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid. p.119.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid. p.118.

⁴⁹² Ibid. pp.120-6.

⁴⁹³ Ibid. p.154.

⁴⁹⁴ See 2.3.1.

⁴⁹⁵ Didi-Huberman. p.155.

Didi-Huberman discusses a number of painterly strategies (including the associations with marble and precious stones already mentioned) for expressing the mystery of the Incarnation, through spatial composition and symbolic objects. For example, the corridor *Annunciation* contains the figure of the column which acts as a focal axis, facing both the characters in the scene and the viewer, and as a threshold of intercession from which the Virgin is addressed,⁴⁹⁶ thresholds being a significant element in paintings of the Annunciation because of the symbolism of crossing without damaging, penetrating while leaving intact.⁴⁹⁷ The column “contributes to defining ...an austere space, in the image of the young woman who inhabits it” and the “small room, visible in the background, attests to its rigorous character” (it is clearly modelled on San Marco), while the column itself suggests scriptural associations.⁴⁹⁸ Thus it not only supports the “edifice of the story” but is in itself “an emblematic place of mystery.”⁴⁹⁹

The Virgin’s ‘place’ in the corridor *Annunciation* is on the right, but she is positioned both near an edge (beyond the column) and in the centre of the building in which she sits, of which we see only two of three implied bays. She is displaced from the centre of the image as a whole, but occupies the centre of her house, as a queen before whom the Angel (above whom the Virgin would tower were she to stand) is kneeling, acknowledging that at the moment of the Incarnation the Virgin becomes the superior being. The architectural part of the picture has been shifted to the right to make space on the left for the garden of spring flowers, a reminder of the historical place of the Annunciation (Nazareth meaning flower).⁵⁰⁰ It is also a reference to the garden of Eden and is thus a “garden of sinister memory...of nostalgic memory...the place of the Fall”⁵⁰¹ and the border between loggia and garden separates not only these but the Fall and the promise of redemption (evoking

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid. pp.144-5.

⁴⁹⁷ Hence the frequent use of symbols such as a glass vase or a window through which light passes without damaging the glass. N.B. the threshold imagery of the Baroncelli Chapel. See 5.4.5.

⁴⁹⁸ The column may be linked to Christ’s flagellation, divinity, Old Testament pillars of clouds and fire, the apostles as pillars of the church, the Scriptures themselves and the inner virtues. Didi-Huberman. pp.144-7.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid. p.149.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid. pp.155-6.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid. p.157.

the Garden of Gethsemane), the expulsion of Adam and Eve and the promise of the second Adam born to a new Eve.⁵⁰²

The red blotches which Didi-Huberman noted in the *Noli me tangere* reappear in the flowers of the corridor *Annunciation* (and in the blood of Peter Martyr which replaces the flowers in his own garden of martyrdom in Cell 3), simultaneously blossoming and bleeding. The white of these meadow flowers is also significant. Didi-Huberman traces Angelico's use of this white throughout the frescoes, noticing how he "places and displaces" it so that the "luminous white" which fills the "large frontal wall" in the *Annunciation* of Cell 3 reappears elsewhere. The picture space has been drastically simplified in this "radical and troubling *Annunciation*,"⁵⁰³ and the composition is humble in its sparseness. The central white ground (reflecting the whiteness of the cell) separates the Angel and the Virgin, distance (space) itself acting as a dissemblant figure for the proximity of the mystery communicated by the Angel and effected at that moment.⁵⁰⁴ The startling whiteness recurs in the infant Jesus' swaddling clothes and the altar in the *Presentation*, and as the white dove in the *Baptism*. It highlights the mount in the *Sermon on the Mount*, is spread out at the *Last Supper* as the table cloth, and characterises all the Crucifixions. It is used for the sepulchre, the shroud, and finally "the glorious whites of the clouds and of the risen Christ's robe".⁵⁰⁵

This unusually ubiquitous white figurally relates the scenes and, perhaps, reminded the friars of their own white tunics, symbols of vocational purity, under their black cloaks. Clothing oneself is a kind of transformation, a dissemblance from the self, and the Dominican habit was associated with ritual, memory, and chrism, as well as vocation.⁵⁰⁶ Didi-Huberman explores the figure of the garment, of the folded cloth, the bent knee folding the humble body, and the folding back of time and place in the viewer's gaze in terms of a bringing together of edges, of extremes, a way of

⁵⁰² Ibid. p.158.

⁵⁰³ Ibid. p.227.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid. p.231.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid. p.78, 230-1.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid. pp.232-3.

changing what is seen without changing its fundamental material, as a robe is folded back to reveal something, or closed to cover it. For Didi-Huberman the fold is a figure for the viewer's "aesthetic incorporation" of the mystery, that is, for imitation of "Mary's incorporation of the divine Word" by "*looking from within at what we see facing us*", a movement of the soul contemplating the mystery of the Incarnation.⁵⁰⁷

The colour and shape of the Virgin's folded garment in Cell 3 takes one back to those patches of colour which Didi-Huberman finds so significant and which were the starting point of his exploration of dissemblance and figuration. Not only is the Virgin not dressed in blue (and microscopic analysis has shown that there was never any blue colour in this fresco), but the area of her garment around her knees is, in Didi-Huberman's view, strangely distorted, even deformed, a "*pure agitation of the colored material, diffused in incomprehensible lines*".⁵⁰⁸ It appears unfinished but that is highly unlikely, and Didi-Huberman suggests that this inchoate, agitated, folded area of the Virgin's garment is, once again, a dissemblant figure for the process of the Incarnation in which humble matter is transformed.

7.2.4 In summary

Didi-Huberman's exploration of the frescoes through the lens of scholastic exegesis is a *tour de force* and presents a treasure house of interpretative associations which greatly enrich the viewer's experience. Whether his central thesis is valid or not, looking at the images with these associations in mind enhances understanding of how a Christian image might function generally, and the experience of particular images. His commentary is therefore a very valuable contribution to the on-going discussion about Christian art, and a fascinating and unusual guide to looking at the frescoes themselves. Furthermore, regardless of questions of scholasticism and humanism, Didi-Huberman's awareness of the relationship between the images as

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid. p.225.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid. p.228. Whether this area of the Virgin's garment is as 'deformed' as Didi-Huberman says is debateable. The unfinished – 'unformed' - impression is much more evident.

part of a greater system in which each makes sense only by reference to and in the light of its fellows is accurate and well put. He writes:

Fra Angelico's images, in calling out to one another, seem to warn the beholder: you cannot understand one image - one biblical story - without having trod the path of all the others. The Bible is not a chronicle, but a system where the destiny - the chance for salvation - of the human race has to be understood.⁵⁰⁹

The question of whether Didi-Huberman is 'correct' remains. Did Angelico think in the way Didi-Huberman suggests? Was he an exceptional innovator who remained true to the scholasticism that was being overtaken by humanism? Did the friars look in the way that he believes they looked (or should have looked)? Were their eyes and minds attuned to this process of viewing as exegetical association? Was Pseudo-Dionysius influential in the ways Didi-Huberman suggests? These are questions which scholars have been unable to answer conclusively and it seems very unlikely that the kind of evidence which would provide conclusive proof will ever be found, but some strong alternatives have been put forward.

In complete contrast, Spike contends that rather than representing a dying but - in Angelico's hands - still virtuoso scholasticism, the frescoes reveal a growing humanist influence flowing particularly strongly from the Convent's patron, Cosimo de' Medici. Like Didi-Huberman, Spike believes that Pseudo-Dionysius was an influence on the frescoes, but in an entirely different way and with entirely different effects. Didi-Huberman's work also differs strongly from that of Hood. Although contextual in the sense of being deeply embedded in what he believes to be the contemporary thinking behind these images and the thought processes of their viewers, Didi-Huberman's analysis lacks the emphasis on the context and location that Hood provides.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid. p.163.

7.3 Interpretations: corporate memory of a golden age, William Hood

Hood's monograph on Angelico at San Marco interprets the frescoes as primarily an expression of the corporate identity of the Observant Dominicans, in much the same way that a diary reflects its writer or a civic festival its townsfolk. He argues that Angelico "created visual memory" within his community to "revivify a legendary period when the Order of Preachers was pure and spotless."⁵¹⁰ Hood believes that the frescoes are a coherent ensemble but that they do not follow a single programme directing the subjects.⁵¹¹ Rather, the Cloister and corridor frescoes form a "cohesive group of related though discrete parts" and the cells fall into three corridor groups. There is a conceptual unity throughout based on the relevance of the images to the friars of San Marco and their position "within highly articulated Dominican contexts".⁵¹² Subject matter and composition are dictated, not by a programme devised by someone like Pierozzi, or Fra Giovanni Dominici,⁵¹³ but by the location of the image and the status of its viewers. The sources for the frescoes are the "practices of liturgical custom specific to the Dominican reform" rather than "theological texts"⁵¹⁴ and their purpose is to elicit a physical and mental response from the viewer.

⁵¹⁰ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. pp.ix-x.

⁵¹¹ Cf. Giorgio Bonsanti, whose work appeared after Hood's had been written, precluding detailed engagement with it, and focuses primarily on determining autograph works and on Fra Angelico's workshop. Giorgio Bonsanti, "Gli Affreschi Del Beato Angelico," in *La Chiesa E Il Convento Di San Marco a Firenze, II* (Florence: Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, 1990). Didi-Huberman's claims, without suggesting a 'programme', as such, imply a unified and unifying mentality and context behind the images which are as significant as a programme, if less predictable in their outcomes. It would not be possible, for example, to identify a "missing" fresco on the basis of Didi-Huberman's analysis, but he suggests a strong thread binding the frescoes to each other and to their viewers. Due to publication timings, Hood does not engage with Didi-Huberman's work in detail (despite their sometimes contradictory interpretations). Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.xi. Spike (writing after Hood) identifies a unifying thread, though not a predictive programme, in the dormitory frescoes.

⁵¹² Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.xii.

⁵¹³ As suggested by Miklós Boskovits but rejected by Bonsanti, Hood, and Spike. Hood does suggest that Fra Giuliano Lappacini might have selected the Chapterhouse Crucifixion texts. Ibid. p.189.

⁵¹⁴ Hood's understanding of 'liturgical' is broad. By 'theological texts' he apparently means commentaries rather than Scripture and is evidently excluding the *De modo orandi* which he identifies as the source for the novices' frescoes. Ibid. pp.200-7. Hood's desire to separate text and image is based on his understanding of the nature of Dominican prayer and meditation, particularly in contrast to the Franciscan mode, but sometimes becomes confused. See also Hood, "Saint Dominic's Manners of Praying: Gestures in Fra Angelico's Cell Frescoes at S. Marco."

Most importantly, Hood understands the frescoes as expressing the revived corporate memory of the community and its interpretation of the liturgy and Constitutions of the Order,⁵¹⁵ presenting images consonant with the reformed mentality and encouraging corporate integration through the imitation of Dominic.⁵¹⁶ A 13th century Dominican chronicle describes the golden age of the early friars and the inexpressible “spirit of religious fervour which pervaded the Order”.⁵¹⁷ It was this which the Observants wished to revive, and which Hood believes influenced Angelico:

Just as liturgical action re-presented and thus re-enacted God’s saving deeds, so too did the ritual behaviour of a religious community in its convent re-present and revivify its own reasons for being...The paintings mediated myth and history; the past and the present, the invisible and the visible, the ideal and the real. Before all else they represented what the Dominicans believed to be both true and essential for their individual and corporate well-being. For Fra Angelico the painter no less than for Fra Angelico the priest, representation was a sacramental activity.⁵¹⁸

The frescoes intersected with the friars’ daily lives at every point and were intended to facilitate the conformity of the individual to the community. Most present a Dominican exemplar whom the friars were encouraged to imitate, particularly Dominic, who modelled himself on Christ.⁵¹⁹

Physicality was important in the quest for conformity of the individual to the community and its founder. The chronicler, Humbert of Romans, describes how

⁵¹⁵ Reproduced and translated in Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*; *ibid.* pp.279-301.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.2.

⁵¹⁷ Humbert of Romans, *Vitae fratrum*, cited by O.P. Fr Bede Jarrett, ed. *The Lives of the Brethren of the Order of Preachers* (London Burns, Oates and Washbourne Ltd, 1924). p.133.

⁵¹⁸ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p18. Hood qualifies his use of the term ‘sacramental’ as applied to both frescoes and the life of the friars as meaning that they effect the transcendent reality of which they are a sign. p.149.

⁵¹⁹ Hood distinguishes between affirming *identity with Christ* - as he suggests that the Franciscans did with St Francis and *likeness to Christ*, the resemblance achieved by Dominic and aspired to by the friars. Cf. Long in relation to the Bardi Chapel, 4.2. Not all Franciscans saw Francis as an *alter Christus*, but all Christians were supposed to attempt *imitatio Christi*.

external actions reveal internal motivations so that one can gauge the state of a person's soul by considering their gestures. Similarly, one can affect the state of the soul through the disposition of the body: physicality influencing spirituality.⁵²⁰ The clearest example of this relation between physical and spiritual states is the illustrated text, *De modo orandi*,⁵²¹ popular at the time and advocated by Pierozzi, in which a supposed eye-witness describes Dominic's attitudes while praying, explaining nine different positions and the state of mind which they reflected. *De modo orandi* states that "one can induce a particular state of mystical consciousness by deliberately assuming a particular physical gesture" and enabled the friar to train himself to be like Dominic by physically imitating him.⁵²² The proper response to the images of the founder (and other exemplars) is thus one of imitation, leading to conformity and integration within the community.

7.3.1 Art and architecture

The harmonious integration of art and architecture unites subject matter, composition, and location in the Cloister frescoes,⁵²³ while in the dormitories Hood argues that we see "Fra Angelico's acute sensitivity to the evocative power of painted architecture, even though that architecture be a fiction of engineering".⁵²⁴ The image of Dominic dominates the Cloister, directly opposite the entrance whose size and shape it mirrors, while the lunettes articulate the architecture, indicating the purpose of each doorway.⁵²⁵ Art and architecture work together using a few repeated motifs to create an effect of "ineffable serenity" which heightens, by contrast, the viewer's response to the frescoes. The integration initially achieved by spatial motifs and the placing of the frescoes is supported by the composition and colouring of the frescoes. Instead of the dramatic chiaroscuro modelling then popular, Angelico creates low reliefs, using "subtle rather than dramatic undulations of light

⁵²⁰ Matters such as diet, clothing, sleep, and movement could all be pertinent to the state of the soul. Humbert pays particular attention to movement, gesture, and deportment, advising novices, for example, to keep their eyes downcast and bow their heads slightly when they walked to show humility in their hearts.

⁵²¹ *Bav, Ms Lat. Rossianus 3: De Modo Orandi*. See Hood, "Saint Dominic's Manners of Praying: Gestures in Fra Angelico's Cell Frescoes at S. Marco."

⁵²² Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.157.

⁵²³ *Ibid.* p.164.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.* p.164. See particularly the corridor *Annunciation* discussed below.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.* p.162.

across the surfaces in the picture”. The compositions thereby “reinforce, rather than resist, the planarity and integrity of the wall surfaces.”⁵²⁶ Thus, in *St Dominic with the Crucifix* the figure is incredibly life-like, while the ground is a bare indication of a flat space.⁵²⁷ This planarity presents the fresco’s ‘background’ space as that of the Convent wall, while the figure in all its detail belongs to the viewers’ space.⁵²⁸

7.3.2 Framing

This collapsing of the distance between viewer and image is further supported by frames. Hood believes that these are the mature expression of the artist’s “interest in the frame as an arbiter of meaning, as the boundary between the viewer’s empirical experience of an object and his intellectual experience of realities that could be conjured only through the fiction of painted forms.”⁵²⁹ While a few frescoes have elaborate frames, the flat simplicity of the painted bands around most demarcates them without separating them from their walls.

Hood sees the frames as signposts, indicating the meaning of the image, although he argues that only the friars⁵³⁰ would be able to read the “visual symbols” correctly through the frame of “strict observance of the Dominican Rule and Constitutions”⁵³¹ and respond appropriately with “an action of the body in harmony with an action of the mind.”

At their deepest level the frescoes at San Marco resonate with the sounds of a life that was self-consciously and straightforwardly sacramental, and that, like the paintings, effected the transcendent reality of which it was the earthly sign.

⁵²⁶ Ibid. p.162.

⁵²⁷ Ibid. p.162.

⁵²⁸ This is highlighted by the unusual frame around the lunette of Peter Martyr which, unlike the others, is “pierced with tiny perspectives that...open up pictorial space, barely suggested otherwise in this or any of the paintings in the cloister” as well as suggesting that the frame itself is a carved moulding, part of the building. Peter’s halo overlaps the frame, bringing him out of the picture and into the friars’ space. Ibid. p.149.

⁵²⁹ Ibid. p.149.

⁵³⁰ And presumably, to some extent, the art historian concerned with such matters.

⁵³¹ Although of course these did not envisage dormitory frescoes on the scale or of the nature of Fra Angelico’s works.

The 'frame' is therefore "not only the boundary that contains an image and modifies the conditions under which it may be viewed" but any number of "visual devices that guide the beholder's participation in the sacred mysteries embodied by the images", including colour, verisimilitude, light, locations, and spatial composition.⁵³²

Ultimately, although Hood does not use the phrase, the frame through which they were to be viewed was the 'frame of mind' of the friar.

Hood claims that this is not a question of the artist inviting the viewer into his world, beyond the frame, since artist, image, and viewer already shared a world.

No one at San Marco doubted that those realities summoned to the eye by the frescoes were far surer and more lasting than the contingencies of life in a Florentine convent.⁵³³

This is a fair comment but an artist's 'world' is not simply a question of mentality and belief, but of vision, of the capacity to see the 'contents' of that mentality and belief in a particular way and to express that visually such that others may expand their own understanding and experience. In this sense Hood does not do justice to Angelico's vision. Indeed, he operates from the premise that the frescoes reflect a "personal vision" only inasmuch as an individual friar remains an individual within his community, claiming that such personal "vision was almost entirely subsumed in a corporate mentality" and that the frescoes' meaning is "to be sought in behavioural customs rather than in theological abstractions".⁵³⁴

Whether personal vision and corporate mentality are as opposed as this contrast might imply, and whether there was really such a dichotomy between "behavioural customs" and "theological abstractions", are debateable points. Certainly there is a difference between performing specific rituals, or offering hospitality to strangers in conformity with the Constitutions, and conducting complex theological exercises. Arguably, however, such activities are but opposite ends of the spectrum of

⁵³² Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.149.

⁵³³ *Ibid.* p.149.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.* p.x.

Dominican life, in which the physical and ‘behavioural’ were closely integrated with (and informed by) the mental and ‘theoretical’, with the two converging on an all-encompassing practice of spirituality which incorporated study,⁵³⁵ private prayer, community worship, preaching, and the routines of daily life. Hood’s distinction may therefore be somewhat anachronistic, which is surprising given his interest in the specificities of Observant life. It may be that Hood intends, reasonably enough, to refute what he sees as a mistaken categorisation of Angelico’s work as ‘personal vision’ in a way that fails to situate the painter in his religious milieu, and to provide a counterweight by stressing the influence of the Dominican context. The ‘personal’ nature of Angelico’s vision need not, however, be opposed to the context in which he worked. It is more likely to be an exceptional example of personal artistic vision nourished by communal context. Aside from this, Hood’s understanding of the images as framed by their Observant context, as sacramental, and as requiring a mental and physical response is a coherent and persuasive interpretation of their function.

7.3.3 The frescoes

In the attempt to evoke a physical and mental response in the viewer and integrate him closely with his community, Hood argues that Angelico “developed methods of representing the inner life of the mind and heart that broke down the barriers separating images from beholders”, to evoke the memory of the early friars and pour that memory into the lives of the present friars.⁵³⁶ These methods include the integration of art and architecture, the planarity of the backgrounds in the scenes, and the framing devices.

Cloister

Hood believes that this explains the unique Cloister frescoes which, he argues, are intended to evoke imitation of Dominic rather than legitimate the Order, as was the

⁵³⁵ Even in an Observant house in which the status of study was, admittedly, lessened.

⁵³⁶ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.165.

case with the cloister decorations of contemporary communities.⁵³⁷ Thus, instead of the standard continuous frieze of foundation narratives, the San Marco Cloister presents six discrete frescoes which punctuate the grammatical structure of the architecture, with the focus on Dominic.⁵³⁸ Through their colouring and integration with the architectural space the images are set within the life of the community, and Dominic, embodying the reformed ideals of “self-denial” and “vulnerability”, encourages the friars to “persevere in their imitation” of the early Dominicans.

Hood exaggerates somewhat in this analysis. The modest simplicity of the San Marco Cloister frescoes contrasts, for example, with the triumphalism of the Spanish Chapel at Santa Maria Novella, but they proclaim their own institutional identity just as clearly. Where the Spanish Chapel presents a great and glorious Order, perhaps designed to attract new members and surely intended to bolster community self-esteem, San Marco presents the Observant return to original principles and the imitation of the founder. The ends and the means differ in appearance, but the purpose of both is to represent the (idealised) character of the Order. Hood’s argument that the friars were supposed to relate to the San Marco images in a unique manner does not depend on denying any affinity with other convent images, however striking the stylistic contrast.

The large Cloister figures of Dominic and Christ are very detailed and clearly intended to be scrutinized at close quarters, which indeed they would have been as the friars passed by at least six times a day, going to and from the choir.⁵³⁹ The composition is a version of the standard founder portrait but unusual in scale, colour and individuality. As an active image of the Saint, Hood considers it “more akin to representations of St Francis receiving the Stigmata, for example, than to Benedict holding a copy of the Rule” as was more usual in such portraits.⁵⁴⁰ He believes that this presentation of Dominic as a real man, weeping with penitence and love for

⁵³⁷ Ibid. p.162-164.

⁵³⁸ Ibid. p.162.

⁵³⁹ Ibid. p.154.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid. p.154. There is another link with Francis in that the image is apparently based on the Tree of Life fresco by Taddeo Gaddi in the Santa Croce refectory, where Francis is shown holding the base of the tree. p.155.

Christ crucified, reflects the 14th and early 15th century hagiography, particularly the writings of Pierozzi who stressed Dominic's likeness to Christ in his self-sacrifice. Entering and leaving the choir, the friars were invited to follow his example. The lunettes similarly require an active response, each issuing an instruction appropriate to the room whose doorway it surmounts.

Chapterhouse

As in the Cloister frescoes the minimal indication of space in the vast Chapterhouse Crucifixion makes the figures stand out all the more, their detailed treatment and the luxurious materials employed adding to this effect.⁵⁴¹

Like all chapterhouse images, the scene relates the saving death of Christ to the Order and its work, but the "community of believers" presented here is unusual in the range of founders and reformers included and the suggestion of at least implicit allegiance with them.⁵⁴² Each saint is shown "in a unique response", inviting the viewer

to participate in the collective act of remembering that is the central psychological reality of the Passion liturgy...and...the central psychological goal of Dominican meditation.⁵⁴³

Saints John the Baptist and Mark (patrons of Florence and the Convent respectively) look at the viewer, John directing him to the Crucifix and Mark to his open gospel,⁵⁴⁴ introducing image through text. In this respect Hood believes that the Crucifixion is like the cell frescoes which assume "the viewer's intimate familiarity with a text" and precipitate "a series of thoughts around the mystery portrayed through, though never represented by, the painting."⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴¹ Ibid. p.168.

⁵⁴² Ibid. p.186.

⁵⁴³ Ibid. p.190.

⁵⁴⁴ The text is now illegible but was presumably the opening of the Passion account.

⁵⁴⁵ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.190. This seems somewhat at odds with Hood's assertion that the images are not based on theological texts but on liturgical custom but is probably

The composition is a hybrid of the ‘populous’ Crucifixion type and the mendicant tradition of including their own saints “more as exemplars for meditation than as characters in a story”.⁵⁴⁶ Many of the faces are generalised, others are clearly based on life but idealised, and still others are essentially portraits. Hood believes that Angelico’s

painstaking attention to ancillary details like body hair or skin texture...forced beholders into an uncomfortable confrontation with the unique psychological presences of individual human beings.

The Crucifixion and the reaction of the group around the Virgin are seen through the eyes of the saints who respond to them as “*taking place in their minds*”⁵⁴⁷ rather than as historical witnesses, recalling the “entire liturgy of Holy Week” and the “public commemoration of the mystery of salvation through the Church’s liturgy.”⁵⁴⁸ This process of shared remembering served to “[form] a community of individuals around an irreducible core of essential common values.”⁵⁴⁹

Dormitory frescoes

Hood divides the dormitory frescoes according to standard model, placing the lay brothers on the north corridor, and the novices and clerics *in clausura*,⁵⁵⁰ on the south and east.

Novices

The Constitutions governed every aspect of the novices’ lives. The aim “was to achieve an absolute harmony of the inner with the outer man, an integration of intention and act”⁵⁵¹ and “conformity to the group consciousness of the Order”.⁵⁵²

representative of the tension within this distinction between text and practice which repeatedly disturbs Hood’s thesis as he seeks to emphasise the behavioural references and impact of the frescoes.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid. p.169.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid. p.190. Original italics.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid. p.190.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid. p.190.

⁵⁵⁰ Literally enclosed, cloistered, i.e. for the friars alone.

⁵⁵¹ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.199.

⁵⁵² Ibid. p.207.

Thus the body, mind, and soul had all to be carefully governed.⁵⁵³ The friars were encouraged to model their prayer on Dominic as described in *De modo orandi*.

Hood's study of *De modo orandi* suggests that it was much used by the San Marco friars at this time to achieve greater spiritual conformity through physical mimesis. The novices' frescoes, which show Dominic before a Crucifix (rather than witnessing the Crucifixion) in seven of the nine prayer positions⁵⁵⁴ could serve as "mnemonic devices for techniques in Dominican spirituality that novices learned in nearly every aspect of their training" indicating "the degree of intimate reciprocity between a friar's most personal moments in prayer and those times elsewhere when he prayed in the company of others" when "bows, genuflections and prostrations" were part of "ceremonial behaviour in the choir and convent".

Clerics

The mature clerics, familiar with Scripture, theology, and liturgy, were given more complex images.⁵⁵⁵ These have compositional and iconographical unity,⁵⁵⁶ sharing a common basic format and, according to Hood, credible, naturalistic space.⁵⁵⁷ Hood believes that the subjects are based, non-sequentially, on the major feasts of the liturgical calendar, enabling the friars to recall the "liturgical panoply surrounding the major feasts", which were important preaching days. He describes the frescoes as emphasising the viewer's mind rather than his heart and designed, not for "unique mystical experience" but "the integration of public liturgy into the mystical life of the friar."⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵³ Ibid. p.199.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid. pp.201-7.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid. p.207. Hood describes the messages of these cells as more 'sublime'. This is a problematic term and one which I shall avoid to prevent confusion.

⁵⁵⁶ With the exception of the *Noli me tangere* in Cell 1, which Hood groups with the north corridor cells for "reasons of subject matter and execution" and the Novice Master's cell (22) which echoes the imagery of the novices' cells, with the Virgin of Humility in place of Dominic. Ibid. p.210.

⁵⁵⁷ This is true by comparison with the novices' cells but the naturalism and credibility of space in for example, the *Mocking of Christ*, or the *Coronation of the Virgin*, is debateable.

⁵⁵⁸ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.224. I doubt whether such a clear distinction applies.

Hood's suggestion seems reasonable, although the subjects could equally well be taken as key episodes in the life of Christ which are, after all, the reason for the feasts. Given that they are not presented sequentially the distinction may not be very important since in either case the scenes would surely have brought to mind both the gospels and the feast days. A more pertinent question is how they function, and here Hood continues his interpretation in terms of location and the viewer's status, with the clerics' scenes developing the instruction begun in the novices' cells and directing the friar's spiritual state through physical conformity.

Like the novices' scenes the clerics' have Dominican exemplars,⁵⁵⁹ in attitudes derived from *De modo orandi*. Although the clerics' scenes are closer to depictions of events, Hood argues that they are still not properly narrative, directing attention to the "prayerful responses" of the exemplars, rather than to the episodes presented.⁵⁶⁰ This contentious claim is tied up with Hood's argument that the frescoes are not illustrations of texts but "text substitutes". He describes Dominic's prayer as arising from reading a text and says that although he prayed before a Crucifix it was not the Crucifix or "any other external object" that prompted his prayer. "Rather it was typically 'Dominican' of him that prayer arose as he was reading in order to get ready for preaching."⁵⁶¹ Hood sees the frescoes as substitutes for texts in "the same way that the Crucifix is the substitute for the prayer modes in the novitiate cells" and argues that this explains why the Dominicans and saints in the frescoes seem to be at a distance from the scenes in which they are placed, being

related to the action in the fresco in the same way that Dominic is related to the Crucifix in the novitiate cells...inflected...as much to the beholder as to the mystery revealed in the painting.⁵⁶²

Hood is right in his observation that the Dominicans in the clerics' scenes continue to act as exemplars, and that they are simultaneously related to both viewer and

⁵⁵⁹ With the exception of Cell 1, the *Noli me tangere*, which Hood believes was used by the master of the laybrothers and groups with the laybrothers' cells.

⁵⁶⁰ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.212.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.* p.216.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.* p.216.

scene, which sets them at some distance from the scene itself. His analogies are, however, too involved and quickly become confused. In particular, the suggestion that Dominic's prayer was prompted by reading, not by 'external objects', does not sit easily with the view that the frescoes are a substitute for texts (being external objects but not texts). The analogy of the Crucifixes of the novices' cells as a substitute for prayer modes is also unconvincing: surely they are illustrations of these modes of prayer (as Hood implies in his discussion of them as essentially didactic), designed to teach the novices how to pray. The source of the confusion seems to be Hood's desire to differentiate between an affective, imaginative, Franciscan piety and a more abstract Dominican spirituality.⁵⁶³ It is a fair distinction in principle but exaggerated: the weeping Dominic is clearly responding affectively to the fact of the Crucifixion, even if this is the result of a textual and/or abstract meditation rather than imagining himself personally at the scene. Perhaps the point might have been made more clearly if Hood could accept a degree of narrative in the clerics' scenes. It is not necessary to eliminate all trace of narrative in order to recognise that these frescoes direct the viewer to relate to certain events as Dominic or another exemplar would.

Lay brothers

The lay brothers' cells contain narrative scenes, mostly from the Passion (though non-sequential). Some are without Dominican exemplars.⁵⁶⁴ Hood describes the Crucifix-based scenes here as properly Crucifixions, rather than images of Dominic with the Crucifix as found elsewhere, and sees them as neither didactic, like the novices' cells, nor mystical, like the clerics', but narrative, illustrative paintings.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶³ Ibid. p.227-228. There is not space here to discuss this distinction in any detail but it is not clear that it is as strong as Hood implies.

⁵⁶⁴ Dominic appears in the Crucifixion scenes of Cells 37, 40, 41,42, and 43 which Spike suggests were for the lay brothers, Cells 31, 33, 34, 35, and 36 being for visitors. See 7.4. Only *Christ in Limbo* (Cell 31), the *Sermon on the Mount* (Cell 32), and the *Entry into Jerusalem* and *Betrayal of Judas* (Cell 33) are completely without exemplar so Hood's point is perhaps less significant than it might appear.

⁵⁶⁵ The *Temptation of Christ* in Cell 33a may be taken as part of the Passion cycle as the reading for the first Sunday in Lent. Cell 32 may have been a schoolroom for the lector, being opposite the library and depicting Christ teaching in the *Sermon on the Mount* in Cell 32. Cell 37 is much larger than the others and has a fresco derived from the Chapterhouse Crucifixion, suggesting that it may have been a meeting room for the lay brothers and their master. Hood suggests that Cell 1 on the east corridor, which he had excluded from the clerics' programme, was for the friar in charge of the lay

The difference in decorations reflects the different circumstances of the lay brothers, whose activities tended to be manual, and who were generally of lower social origins and less well educated than the clerics. Hood describes the purpose of their frescoes as essentially narrative and sometimes ‘effectual’, enabling lay brothers to identify with the subjects. The inclusion of the busy housekeeper, Martha, as an exemplar in the *Agony in the Garden* would have been particularly appropriate.

Cosimo de’ Medici’s cells

Cell 38 contains a Crucifixion scene which Hood titles *Jesus Consigning His Mother to St John* since this is the narrative moment chosen. It was clearly designed for Cosimo: Saints Dominic and Cosmas (Cosimo’s onomastic saint) are witnesses, while John was the patron of Cosimo’s father.

The *Adoration of the Magi* in Cell 39 celebrates the Medici association with the Magi, as a “personal icon of power and attainment”, a political statement as well as theological one.⁵⁶⁶ It is densely populated and richly coloured, like the Chapterhouse Crucifixion, while the combined *Adoration* and *Man of Sorrows* (set in a tabernacle niche in the lower part of the fresco) suggest strong links with the San Marco altarpiece, dedicated to Cosmas and Damian, representing Dominican and Medici interests, and underscoring San Marco’s role in the annual Magi Procession.⁵⁶⁷ In Cosimo’s private Chapel the frescoes were thus the equivalent of an altarpiece.

Despite the political aspects of the Medici-Magi dynamic, there is no reason to suppose that Cosimo’s religious beliefs were insincere or that the extraordinary achievement of having a personal cell in a Dominican convent was motivated by anything other than a genuine desire for a private space for prayer and

brothers. Unlike the other cells on the east corridor, Cell 1 has no Dominican exemplar in its fresco and “its subject is a biblical narrative fully told and placed within a highly naturalistic setting”, more in line with the scenes in Cells 31-44. Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.241-2.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid. p.252. A procession of the Magi was painted by Angelico’s assistant, Benozzo Gozzoli, in the Medici palace chapel nearby.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid. pp.250-2.

contemplation, among the friars whom he supported. The frescoes painted for his private devotion are, as elsewhere, determined by location and viewer, tailored specifically to Cosimo's own needs, and intended to provoke meditation and worship.

Corridors

Hood pays little attention to *St Dominic with the Crucifix* at the intersection of the north and east corridors, concentrating on the *Annunciation* at the top of the stairs and the *Madonna and Child with Eight Saints* on the east corridor. The latter is very like an altarpiece in its composition, colour, and gilding. It is likely that the friars gathered here for the matins of the Virgin and the image "presented an ideal communion of saints to the real community of friars gathered before it".⁵⁶⁸

The *Annunciation* is addressed not only to the friars but to the lay brothers, Cosimo de' Medici, and visitors. The viewer approaches by the staircase and therefore from below, as if kneeling, and is reminded by an inscription to say a Hail Mary. The relationship between the pictorial and architectural space is perhaps the most complex among the frescoes. Angelico borrows from the Convent architecture only to subvert its reality and replace it with another in the image.⁵⁶⁹ The painted architecture deliberately harmonises with the built architecture while simultaneously separating itself from this, being completely fictional. The arcades bear no relation to the vaulting and the scale of the figures make them far too large for the building they occupy. Although the implied moulding of the frame sets the image into the wall, the internal space is not rationalised, the orthogonals of the perspective construction "only loosely intersect" and the proportions are not realistic.⁵⁷⁰ As Hood lucidly explains, the San Marco frescoes are

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid. p.262.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid. pp.264, 267.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid. p.268. See also Paolo Morachiello, *Fra Angelico: The San Marco Frescoes*, trans., Eleanor Daunt (New York: Thames Hudson, 1996). p.35. Morachiello provides helpful diagrams illustrating the perspectival treatment of various scenes, including the corridor *Annunciation*.

on the threshold that separates what is empirically verifiable from what may be ascertained only subjectively. The former is the domain of the senses, the latter of the mind, and Fra Angelico repeatedly used the sense of sight to gain access to the beholder's imagination, so that the image might mediate the beholders' inner and outer selves.

The corridor *Annunciation* is the “epitome of his efforts in this regard.”⁵⁷¹

In functional terms, the *Annunciation* fitted the Constitutions' requirements regarding images, and punctuated entry and exit between the dormitories and the rest of the convent with dedication to the Virgin.⁵⁷² The friar is expected to repeat the Angel's words and to genuflect. As Hood explains,

the friar's entire action – the action of his body and the silent action of his mind as he prayed – exactly imitated the angel's action in the painting. Just as the pictorial space drew his empirical experience onto the higher plane of the representation, so too it drew his mind and body into the sacred colloquy. Through his memory the painting transformed the beholder into a living witness of salvation history.⁵⁷³

The image would also remind the viewer of the Dominican vocation. The Virgin Annunciate consents to “a course of action that will disrupt her life” with a willingness to obey God at any cost. This is the “ideal disposition of a Dominican friar” who now looks at the Virgin, dressed in a white robe and dark cloak (which she supposedly gave the friars for their habit as a mark of her favour) and sees his abbot and his vocational guide.

7.3.4 In summary

Among scholars of the San Marco frescoes, Hood is perhaps most aware of the nature of life in the Convent and how this illuminates meaning in the images. At

⁵⁷¹ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.264.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.* p.271.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.* p.272.

times, however, it seems that his own zeal for the Observant community allows him to overlook the highly unusual nature of the painter, and the possibility of more in his paintings than a recreation of a golden age. Hood's essentially anthropological approach (it would be equally applicable to a union, confraternity, or school) restricts his analysis to specific aspects of the original context in a way which, despite his interest in its religious aspect, does not always do justice to their genuinely theological nature.

Hood's desire to separate text and image, creates confusion. He correctly questions the "commonplace but highly arguable assumption of the primacy of word over image that runs through the literature of art history"⁵⁷⁴ but struggles to separate them. Thus on the one hand he argues that the images are not illustrations of texts, but text substitutes, and on the other that Dominican prayer results from reading and not from 'external objects'.⁵⁷⁵ Hood's meaning is fairly clear - the image portrays a mystery and looking at it should lead to prayer, as directed by the exemplars who mediate between viewer and scene – but his argument becomes opaque and the analogies have weaknesses. The same problem arises when he differentiates between Franciscan and Dominican spirituality. Again, his meaning is clear: the San Marco images represent a more abstract, moderate, less immediate, form of spirituality and correspond to a similar type of meditation, while the Franciscan mode is more passionate, affective and unmediated. This may have some truth but such a bald distinction between the two forms fails to account for the tears in Dominic's eyes, the prostrations, and the intense expressions which make it clear that he is experiencing something deeply affective, even if its origin was in contemplating theological abstractions rather than imagining himself at the Crucifixion. There may be difference of tone between the two orders, but Hood exaggerates it to the point of confusion.

By emphasising the role of the exemplars, Hood effectively overlooks the possibility of there being multiple important aspects to the images. He looks at the exemplars,

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid. p.156.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid. p.216.

but not at what they are looking at. This is not to suggest that Hood thinks the subject matter entirely dispensable, or even insignificant (he seeks to explain the rationale behind the choice of subjects) but the impression given is, nevertheless, that subject matter is less important than the prayerful response as modelled by the exemplar. This sits uneasily with the images themselves where every aspect of composition, colouring, modelling, and expression shows that the artist has worked thoughtfully and deliberately, on the 'subjects' as well as the exemplars, a seemingly unnecessary effort if the primary value of the image were a lesson in prayerful attitudes. It is doubtful that Hood meant to suggest quite such a stark opposition of purposes, but his focus on the didactic and demonstrative purposes of the images overshadows any interest in the subjects themselves, in a way which is inevitably, though surely unintentionally, reductive.

This approach also leads to an awkwardness in terminology as Hood tries to define the novices' images as 'didactic', the clerics' as 'mystical', and the lay brothers' as 'narrative' and 'illustrative'. His emphasis is roughly correct, but it is not possible to distinguish the purposes of the images quite so distinctly or to separate them so clearly, and the labels are unhelpful. There are differences of emphasis but not complete separation, which is unsurprising if one considers (as Hood does) the life of the community to which these images belong, in which people had different, but never totally separate, roles.

In other respects Hood's analysis of the frescoes is excellent and he identifies important aspects of their purpose and how they achieve it, noting the significance of location, sacramentality, and the effect of physical deportment on spiritual state. These are issues which deserve further consideration, especially by the modern viewer whose relation to the images is not conditioned by the Observant life but who may yet be able to experience aspects of the frescoes which express this, and go beyond it in a broader Christian understanding.

7.4 Interpretations: innovative humanism, John Spike

Spike aims to counteract the view that Angelico was a “precious gothic relic who had lived on into the time of Masaccio”⁵⁷⁶ and show that he

possessed one of the most innovative and responsive pictorial minds of the early quattrocento – and that his contemporaries admired him for precisely these qualities.⁵⁷⁷

He sees Angelico as straddling two eras and wants to demonstrate that “Christian piety and Renaissance humanism were by no means exclusive” and that the San Marco frescoes are deeply informed by humanism.⁵⁷⁸ Indeed, he believes that Angelico was an active participant in contemporary theological debates and that his paintings display “an unequalled command of rhetorical techniques (and linguistic accuracy in his inscriptions) that no one had ever previously translated into the medium of painting”, and an exceptional reconciliation of humanism and Thomism.⁵⁷⁹

Spike links the Observant movement itself to humanist interests because of its concern with historical authenticity, and the return to the Order’s original way of life.⁵⁸⁰ He also describes the ‘humanist’ atmosphere engendered by the Council of Ferrara-Florence which brought distinguished Greek philosophers to the city and “prepared the way for the Neoplatonism that would flourish in the second half of the quattrocento”.⁵⁸¹ Rather than a ‘New Jerusalem’, Spike argues that Florence resembled classical Athens and that in the “reconciliation of Christianity to Greek and Latin culture” the Florentines wanted to “adapt classical ideas to their Christian faith”, supported by the discovery of “authoritative precedents in the church fathers”.

⁵⁷⁶ John T. Spike, *Fra Angelico* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996). pp.72-3. Cf. 2.4.3, 8.2.7, 8.2.8.

⁵⁷⁷ E.g. Cristoforo Landino, Ambrogio Traversari, Palla Strozzi, Cosimo de’ Medici, Pope Eugenius IV, and Pope Nicholas V.

⁵⁷⁸ For a summary of humanist themes of the period see Spike, *Fra Angelico*. pp.61-2.

⁵⁷⁹ Spike is referring to the question of whether the immortality of the soul (and corruption of the body) is problematic for the doctrine of divine creation and particularly for the Incarnation. Ibid. p.11, 68. Spike’s argument here, and his understanding of Augustine’s writings about the body and soul, are debateable. For a discussion of attitudes to the body, continence, and celibacy, from early Christian times to the early Middle Ages, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

⁵⁸⁰ Spike, *Fra Angelico*.p.23.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid. p.61.

Among others, but perhaps most significantly, Augustine had identified Christian attitudes to God, the Logos, creation and the divine light in neoplatonic thought, and allowed the borrowing of classical philosophy if useful for preaching the gospel.⁵⁸² Most importantly for Spike, Augustine provided the reconciliation sought between “the Greek love of wisdom and the incarnation of Christ” by arguing that the many attributes of the Triune God can be summarised in a single unifying attribute of wisdom,⁵⁸³ thereby harmonising the specificity of Christian teaching and the more generalised profundity of Greek philosophy.

7.4.1 The frescoes

This is the atmosphere in which Spike thinks the frescoes should be understood. Starting with the Chapterhouse, he notes the highly unusual (for a Dominican setting) arrangement of saints from other orders alongside the usual Dominicans, seeing in this selection a “personification of the humanistic themes of *pax fidei* and *concordantia catholica*” realised temporarily “in the union of the Greek and Latin churches in July 1439.”⁵⁸⁴ Spike sees the inclusion of the Erythraean Sibyl (whose prophecy - as recorded by Augustine in the *City of God* - speaks of the resurrection) as an indication of the discussion of wisdom and Incarnation at the intersection of Greek and Latin thought.⁵⁸⁵

Turning to the dormitory frescoes, Spike notes that neither sequence nor content belong to a “single biblical text or iconographical tradition” but that, while the frescoes do not reflect the kind of compartmentalised depiction of doctrine to be seen in the Spanish Chapel at Santa Maria Novella, there are nevertheless “distinct patterns of organization” which refute any suggestions that the cell decoration was random or chosen by the occupant.⁵⁸⁶ The “sole constant” in the frescoes is the “presence of Christ” either through a Crucifixion or “as the resurrected spirit or as the logos ...incarnated in the Virgin Annunciate” but the “striking distinctions” in

⁵⁸² Spike is referring to the *Confessions*, vol. VIII and *De Doctrina Christiana*. Ibid. p.61.

⁵⁸³ Ibid.p.62.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid. pp.59,60.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid. p.55.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid. p.62.

the spiritual nature and artistic style of the frescoes which have “frustrated every attempt to define the underlying principles of this arrangement” suggest that the “explanation for this program must be sought outside of the usual art historical frameworks.”

7.4.2 Pseudo-Dionysius as a source for the dormitory programme

Spike therefore looks to theological and philosophical texts for explanation, arguing that if an educated Renaissance man (such as a cleric or visitor from the Council of Ferrara-Florence) saw a non-systematised text or series of paintings, which “presented dreamlike images instead of historical narratives”, he would have “immediately recognized the non-discursive method of Plato”.⁵⁸⁷ Spike therefore looks for a Platonic writer known to both humanists and Thomists, to account for these scenes,⁵⁸⁸ and identifies Pseudo-Dionysius⁵⁸⁹ whose “Platonic terminology...aroused the enthusiasm of the Florentine humanist”, and whose works were in the San Marco library. In his *Celestial Hierarchy*, Pseudo-Dionysius “organised the clergy into three ascending levels”, each with three subdivisions, according to the degree of their initiation into the Christian mysteries. The categories are distinguished by the principles of purification, illumination and perfection.⁵⁹⁰ According to Spike, these categories and subdivisions can be mapped onto the cell frescoes, according to the capacity of their occupants to understand the Christian mysteries.

The novices have “relatively simple scenes of the founder saint in prayer before the crucified Christ”. Cells 15-21 are thus ‘purificatory’ and are

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid. p.64.

⁵⁸⁸ Spike is of course assuming that the frescoes were intended to be seen by the educated Renaissance man whom he thinks of as their ‘ideal viewer’.

⁵⁸⁹ Although he dismisses the idea that the unnamed ‘prophet’ figure in the Chapterhouse Crucifixion is Pseudo-Dionysius, arguing that he was not a pre-Christian prophet and that his inscription is not Pseudo Dionysian. Spike, *Fra Angelico*. p.58. See also Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.188; Morachiello. p.196.

⁵⁹⁰ Spike, *Fra Angelico*. pp.64,65.

the only aspect of the San Marco decorations that conform to the letter of the Dominican constitutions, which foresaw iconic images in the cells of only the Crucifixion, the Virgin, or Dominic.⁵⁹¹

Cells 22-29 may have been for younger friars and those not yet ordained. These images and their viewers belong to the second category of initiates into the Christian mysteries, in which they are illuminated.⁵⁹² These cells are also frescoed with Crucifixions but their “meditations are pursued into greater depth and expanded in scope”. Thomist dogma is evoked but the “more complex themes of the Resurrection” are absent. Expanding on the Passion theme, Cell 26 shows *Christ in the Tomb*:

[a] traditional representation of *Corpus Domini*, an essentially Dominican theme, since the liturgy for this feast was believed to have been written by Saint Thomas Aquinas, who is shown kneeling with pen and text in hand.

Among this Passion imagery, Spike sees the *Baptism* in Cell 24 as unusual and explains its presence as “a rite of illumination”, appropriate for those who have been purified and are now sufficiently illuminated to contemplate certain sacred things, but who are not yet perfected.⁵⁹³

Cells 1-9 were for ordained friars who, as priests, were “enlightened into a perfect understanding of those things which they had previously only contemplated”, representing the “third and highest rank of this Dionysian hierarchy”. These images are famous for their “visionary character” and belong, on this reading, to the category of perfection. The Prior’s cells, 10 and 11, have subjects appropriate to his office: the *Presentation* has a purificatory fire burning on the altar which Spike

⁵⁹¹ Ibid. p.65.

⁵⁹² Ibid. p.65.

⁵⁹³ There is in fact no conflict between the imagery of baptism and of the Passion since Christ’s baptism is the start of his formal ministry which leads to the Passion and in baptism the neophyte is baptised into the death of Christ as well as into his life (Romans, 6:2-5). See also the discussion of baptism and death with regard to the Tornabuoni Chapel at 9.3.2. Furthermore, the figure of the Baptist implies proximity and understanding, but not ultimacy: he is extraordinarily close to Christ, his kinsman and prophet, honoured with the baptism of his Lord, and yet he has to climb on a rock and stretch up to reach Christ.

suggests is “inspired by the Dionysian emphasis on fire as an agent of purification”, linking the Prior to his novice charges, while the *Madonna and Child with Augustine and Thomas Aquinas* includes a reminder of the father of the monastic rule which the Dominicans adopted and of their greatest theologian, both “emblematic of the theological training of the friars.”⁵⁹⁴

Spike believes that since Pseudo-Dionysius does not relate the miracles and narratives of Christ to this third level of initiation, “we must look elsewhere for the explanation of the selection and arrangement of the mysteries” in the remaining cells.⁵⁹⁵ He notes Didi-Huberman’s exposure of “a treasure trove of references to Pseudo-Dionysius and...Saints Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas” in the corridor frescoes, and Morachiello’s hypothesis that these “fundamental mysteries” tell the “entire story of Salvation”. Spike thinks Morachiello’s scheme insufficient to “resolve the program” but agrees that the “first three cells comprise a conceptual triad” which is illustrated in the corridor frescoes. He develops this in the following triadic scheme, reflecting Albertus Magnus’ dictum that Christ was conceived in order to be born, born in order to suffer and suffered that we might be redeemed.⁵⁹⁶

Cell	Story	Mystery
1	Noli me tangere	Resurrection
2	Lamentation	Passion
3	Annunciation	Incarnation
4	Crucifixion	Passion
5	Nativity	Incarnation
6	Transfiguration	Resurrection
7	Mocking	Passion
8	Maries at Tomb	Resurrection
9	Coronation of the Virgin	Union with God

⁵⁹⁴ Spike, *Fra Angelico*. p.65.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid. p.66.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid. p.67.

Looking at Cells 1-9 as three triads, Spike observes a subtle formal unity in each based on a repeated common motif. The motif of the first triad is “a chamber with a rounded opening”. This “appears twice as the mouth of the sepulchral cave” and also “as the vaulted chamber of the Virgin” suggesting an accepted association in Renaissance art between womb and tomb.⁵⁹⁷ Christ is hidden in the womb for nine months and in the tomb for three days, as a seed is hidden in the earth and brings forth fruit.⁵⁹⁸ The central triad has a cross motif appearing in the *Crucifixion* in Cell 4, as a “tau” (T shaped cross) superimposed on the stable in the *Nativity* in Cell 5 (though this is very debateable), and in Christ’s cruciform posture (emphasised by the red cross on his halo) in the *Transfiguration* of Cell 6. In the third triad, Spike identifies the motif as the altar which he finds in altar-like steps of the *Mocking of Christ* in Cell 7, while the tomb itself in the *Women at the Tomb*⁵⁹⁹ in Cell 8 is altar-like. Spike believes that these horizontal stones are echoed in the clouds in the *Coronation of the Virgin* in Cell 9, which “seem to be the vestiges of altar-like forms”.⁶⁰⁰

While Spike is right in identifying repeated motifs of womb, tomb, cross and altar, the way in which he attaches them individually to three successive triads of cells seems forced, and fails to account for the presence of motifs other than the one assigned to each group. The *Transfiguration* contains a large white mandorla not dissimilar to the Virgin’s vaulted chamber; the globe in Christ’s hand in the *Mocking* is glowing and translucent, reminiscent of the circular shapes of the *Coronation* which are far more prominent than the horizontality of the clouds (as Spike acknowledges) and more like the womb form; the altar appears as a proper altar in the Cell 10, which is outside Spike’s triad structure; and there is an altar-like sarcophagus in the *Lamentation* of Cell 2. The motifs are more widely applicable than Spike allows and do not belong to specific groups.

⁵⁹⁷ See Didi-Huberman. pp.77-8, 193.

⁵⁹⁸ Jn 12:24.

⁵⁹⁹ Usually known as the *Three Maries at the Tomb*. In fact, four women, including the three Maries are depicted. The fourth woman is presumably Salome. Mk.16:1. See note 991 on page 389.

⁶⁰⁰ Spike, *Fra Angelico*. p.68.

Spike says less about the north dormitory, noting its inferior artistic quality and seeing no relation here to the Pseudo-Dionysian hierarchy. He describes Cells 31-36 as “narrative scenes in which, for the sake of historical accuracy, no Dominicans are represented” but which have an “abundance of references to Roman and classical antiquity”. Spike thinks they reflect learned humanist concerns and suggests that these cells were not for uneducated lay brothers but for visitors using the library.⁶⁰¹ The *Descent into Limbo* would be an appropriate subject for humanists “concerned that their beloved philosophers of antiquity should escape from perdition”, the *Sermon on the Mount* shows Christ “holding a scroll” surrounded by a circle of disciples like Socrates teaching his pupils, the inclusion of Mary and Martha in the *Agony in the Garden* may be drawn from a patristic source known to such scholars, and the inclusion of the Sanhedrin representative in the *Arrest of Christ* suggests a humanistic level of philological attention to detail.⁶⁰²

Spike considers the Crucifixions in Cells 40-43 more suitable for the lay brothers. “The inclusion of Dominican saints endows these paintings with the character of meditations” and the lay brothers, more experienced than the novices who simply emulate their founder in prayer, were able to “contemplate decisive moments of the Crucifixion story”.⁶⁰³ Cell 37 may have been their meeting room as Hood suggests, its triple Crucifixion reflecting the Chapterhouse image and emphasising the salvation of the good thief, an ordinary sinner who repents his wickedness.⁶⁰⁴

7.4.3 In summary

Spike believes that although Angelico’s theological training “made him uniquely equipped to execute a pictorial program capable of bearing an immense theological weight without collapsing” he could not have instigated a cycle which uniquely goes outside the Dominican Constitutions.⁶⁰⁵ He rejects Pierozzi as the programme

⁶⁰¹ Cf. Hood who groups them with the lay brothers’ cells, 37 and 40-43. Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*.p.241-242.

⁶⁰² Spike, *Fra Angelico*. p.69.

⁶⁰³ Ibid. pp.69,70.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid. p.70.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid. p.70.

designer (as Miklos Boskovits argues⁶⁰⁶), agreeing with Bonsanti and Hood that there is no conclusive evidence for this and noting that Pierozzi's chronicle, written in the 1450s specifically criticises sumptuous decoration in Dominican houses. Spike believes that the programme advisor must have been a humanist scholar in Cosimo de' Medici's employ,⁶⁰⁷ on the grounds that Cosimo's position at San Marco (and in Florence) was extraordinary and that laymen could be theologically learned and have strong influence over churches that they supported.

Spike may well be correct about the advisor, but his elimination of Pierozzi and Angelico as possibilities overlooks the fact that they respectively permitted and painted the frescoes. Even if Cosimo and a favoured scholar initiated the idea, it seems unlikely that, in spite of Cosimo's influence, the Prior would have permitted something he expressly disapproved of, or that Angelico would have painted it. It seems unlikely too that Cosimo would have demanded the frescoes had the Prior or painter been against them. He might have wanted to display them to the influential members of the Council of Ferrara-Florence, but the frescoes were by no means his only opportunity for impressing them (he had been impressing them for some time by bankrolling the Council which he had been responsible for bringing to Florence). So while Angelico and/or Pierozzi may not have initiated the idea, the concept cannot have been distressing, or totally alien to the friars. That the images are outside of the Constitutions need not exclude the painter or Prior from their potential formulators: they go beyond what the Constitutions dictate, but they do not expressly break rules. Pierozzi's condemnation of sumptuous decoration in Dominican houses might suggest, not that he disapproved of the frescoes, but that he did not see them as sumptuous, and indeed, with the possible exceptions of the Chapterhouse *Crucifixion* and the *Madonna of the Shadows*, they are very modest. It seems more likely that he saw the frescoes as acceptable and therefore exempt from his generic criticism. His toleration of them in his convent argues that he had squared them with his Dominican conscience, and perhaps this was not so difficult. Even Savonarola,

⁶⁰⁶ Miklos Boskovits, "La Fase Tarda Del Beato Angelico," in *L'uomo Di Fronte All'arte. Valori Estetici E Valori Etico-Religiosi, Atti Del 55 Corso Di Aggiornamento Cultural Dell'università Cattolica, La Spezia, 8-13 Settembre 1985*(1986). pp.17-20. Cf. Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.xxxi.

⁶⁰⁷ Spike, *Fra Angelico*. p.71.

famous for burning pictures on ‘bonfires of the vanities’ did not have the images removed when he was Prior at San Marco in the 1490s.

Spike’s pattern of Nativity, Passion and Resurrection themes is clumsy and one suspects that any appearance of a pattern is due to the underlying structure of the Christian faith rather than to specific artistic exegesis of this. Similarly the identification of certain motifs in these groups is both over and under-stated. Much more valuable is Spike’s mapping of the categories of the *Celestial Hierarchy* onto the dormitory frescoes which not only provides a different insight into Pseudo-Dionysius from Didi-Huberman’s but adds to the sense of progression identified by Hood in his analysis of the difference between the novices’ and clerics’ cells, positing a category of younger, less experienced (perhaps not yet ordained) clerics and situating the friars’ development within a ritual structure moving from purification to illumination to perfection. This model of Dominican training and spiritual progression adds yet another layer to the understanding of these images, whether one sees the suggested influence of Pseudo-Dionysius as a sign of scholasticism (as per Didi-Huberman) or humanism (as per Spike).

7.5 Conflicting interpretations?

Taken as a whole, the literature about San Marco includes some of the most theologically aware art historical discussion of the frescoes considered in this thesis. Each of the approaches outlined above has some merit from a theological point of view. Didi-Huberman's scholasticism, Spike's pious humanism, and Hood's Observant conformity provide three helpful and theologically informed perspectives. These interpretations are partially at odds with each other (especially Didi-Huberman and Spike), but in many instances they are not as incompatible as might be expected (or as their authors might think) and Hood specifically asks that his work be read as "complementary rather than competitive".⁶⁰⁸

The desire among art historians to find a single source for the programme (or a definitive argument for there being no programme), or to label the mentality of the artist and/or the original viewers with a single or predominant characteristic, is not helpful. The possibility of the artist and original viewers being informed by, interested in, and able to live reasonably comfortably with, a number of different influences is barely considered. This is a distorted perspective: in reality, people frequently entertain more than one idea or attitude simultaneously, and there is no obvious reason to think that the Observant Dominicans were so single minded, so strangely ahistorical, that their mentality was created and defined by a single philosophy or set of ideas. As the range of interpretations proposed itself demonstrates, the San Marco community was living in a period of considerable change. The ideas and methods of the scholastics were gradually being overtaken by the rise of humanism, so that Angelico and his contemporaries were between two paradigms. They might not have been wholly wedded to, or opposed to, either. If Angelico grew up and was trained in a scholastically-minded world, it does not follow that he must have rejected all humanism; and if he was receptive to the possibilities that humanism was opening up, it does not follow that he rejected the past. It is not impossible that the frescoes reflect elements of a dissemblantly-figurative imagination, multiple referential associations, the structure of the *Celestial Hierarchy*, and the daily life of an Observant community, all at once. In order to

⁶⁰⁸ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.xi.

understand these images, it may be necessary to look, not through a single lens, but with both eyes, wide open to everything that might be around and within them.

Florence at the time was a hotbed of theological discussion and a globally important trading centre; San Marco was a new Observant community patronised by one of the richest and most powerful men in the world; the building itself contained the traditional hospice for needy travellers and an internationally significant humanist library. The situation in Florence and in San Marco was so unusual historically, geographically, politically, financially, theologically, and philosophically, as to suggest that one should expect the unexpected in the San Marco community of the 1430s and 40s. That its occupants might have reflected their unusual situation seems highly likely and the presence of a unique series of frescoes may be explicable at least partially by their unusual production context.

This is not a preamble to claims about what Angelico and his contemporaries did and did not intend by or read from the frescoes, since it is not the purpose of this thesis to uncover authorial intentions or reconstruct the original viewing experience. It is simply to say that interpreters of the frescoes may have tried too hard to isolate the elements of the ‘mind-set’ that created and viewed them, and to question whether that is realistic or helpful. Some aspects of these interpretations are mutually exclusive, but rarely necessarily so. If, for example, the frescoes reflect the *Celestial Hierarchy* that does not mean that they do not reflect scholastic associations between the Virgin and coloured marble, and if they present exemplars of ideal Dominicans in ideal prayerful attitudes, it does not follow that they do not also reflect the themes of Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection: it may in fact make it *more* likely.

It is clear that Angelico was not trying to imitate the developing ‘humanist’ style of painting (although he used elements of it when it suited him) and that he was not concerned with chronological narrative. This does not mean that the images are not concerned with history, or with narrative. It might, however, mean that they have numerous meanings and purposes and that, in a complex environment, their apparent

simplicity is no more an indication that they have single messages (or a single manner of communicating, related to a single 'mind-set') than the Dominican habit indicates that the man wearing it has only one thought in his head. Christianity is, after all, remarkably good at synthesising apparently incompatible events and concepts, being both intensely simple, and endlessly complex.

Insofar as the scholastic, humanist, and Observant concerns which they manifest are mutually exclusive (and the boundaries of such exclusion might be narrower than they seem), the 'correct' interpretation of the frescoes is unresolved and likely to remain so. As such, the value of the work of Didi-Huberman, Hood and Spike is perhaps best treated as cumulative. Didi-Huberman's analysis is deeply enriching but often overlooks questions of context and location; Spike's attempt to let piety and humanism coexist opens up informative source material but perhaps emphasises Cosimo de' Medici's patronage at the expense of the friars as daily viewers of the images; and Hood's interest in the reformed Dominican ideals situates the frescoes very strongly in the context of Dominican life, although his essentially anthropological art historical method sometimes leads him to highly pertinent observations without pursuing their theological implications further.

7.6 Further considerations

Despite such extensive commentary the analysis is not exhaustive (a testament perhaps to the skill of the artist and the depth of meaning which these apparently simple images contain) and further consideration of the frescoes yields yet more of their significance.

7.6.1 Integration, incorporation, incarnation

The terms integration, incorporation, and incarnation appear frequently in the art historical discussion of the frescoes. They are, however, more than simply descriptive of the relation between image, architecture, and Dominican life; image, individual, and community; image and Dominican consciousness. They express three stages of likeness, bond, and inherence, which pertain, in the first place, not to the friar as part of his community but to Christ incarnate.

Hood talks about training the friars to model themselves on Dominic, to achieve likeness with him. He describes how the novices' frescoes reflect the process of directing the inner self through outward behaviour so that the novice becomes conformed to the group: the "Order's sense of *treditio* became as it were incarnate in every friar". He does not, however, take these concepts of conformity and incarnation any further, and never explores the analogy with Christ's Incarnation which they so clearly suggest. He uses the term 'incarnate' but describes the friar modelling himself on Dominic, rather than on Christ, taking pains to distinguish the Dominican emphasis on 'likeness to' Christ from the Franciscan emphasis on 'identity with' Christ. He even mentions how the novices left their homes and families, and gave up their property, to join the Order, but does not address this in expressly apostolic or Christ-like terms.⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid. p.207.

Whatever the differences between Dominican and Franciscan spirituality, Dominic's primary relation was to Christ, and his mission was to spread the orthodox word about Christ, based on a deep, personal relationship with Christ. The same is true of other Dominican saints: for example, in the *Nativity* of Cell 2, Peter Martyr's relationship with Christ is highlighted in the red of the blood on his head and the red of the cross on the Christ Child's halo. The logical progression of Hood's observations lies in the idea that conformity to the community is effectively short hand for conformity to Christ as imaged by that community. The community is thus conformed to Christ, and the individual to the community only insofar as the community demonstrates, mediates, and facilitates that conformity. The purpose of the integration, incorporation, and incarnation of the friar within the community is to support his becoming like Christ, as Christ became like man. These pictures are made to be lived with more than any others considered in this thesis. They are not to be visited in the way a church painting is visited, but are a physical part of daily life, present in all areas. They relate to each other, to each daily action, to the fabric of existence in the Convent, physical and spiritual – a physical life as permeated with spirituality as the plaster is with pigment, such that the two are inseparably fused into something new – the image of christoform life, or at least, to use Didi-Huberman's terminology, the dissemblant figure of christoform life, since, although the ideal may never be achieved, the attempt indicates the goal. Hood writes that the images - whose proximity to their viewers (spatial barriers between them being diffused by devices of positioning, framing, and relief) speaks of "the immanence of the divine in a fallen but redeemed world"⁶¹⁰ - are sacramental, but again does not extend this to its theological conclusion: that each friar is an effective sign of the wider community and the community an effective sign of Christ.

The relation between image and building is one of support and highlight, of opened pages of a book, of a passage read out loud, of a thought among an entire structure of thoughts, an activity among a whole life of activities. The structure continues, supporting, enabling; the image is seen against this background, it makes sense within it, just as the action of the friar makes sense within his life as a Dominican.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid. p.162

The images integrate with the space so that the friar integrates with them. Integration is, of course, an extremely important aspect of communal life under a rule of obedience. The friar is to be conformed to the image he sees, and the images together are an image of the community. The images image the community which they form, and were formed by the community to maintain that form.

While Hood focuses on integration, only briefly touching on incarnation and then apparently shying away from it, Didi-Huberman talks at length and with great sensitivity and acuity about incarnation, though from a different perspective. He is particularly interested in the Annunciation images and how they portray the moment and manner of the Incarnation. He describes how the Virgin is the place of the Incarnation, the generative maternal receptacle whose matter is infused by the divine and nourishes the Logos incarnate as the house and mother of God. His discussions of the Incarnation, and of the figure as place and as time, however, stay with the image and with the viewer only insofar as he is supposedly engaging in the wonderful associative references which its 'figures' suggest. Didi-Huberman is (understandably) so absorbed in the image itself that he does not often step back into the Convent space, into the corporeality of the viewer, and draw the import of the images into the viewer's life. He can hardly have intended to imply a separation between the image and viewer since his 'method' is fundamentally connective and associative, bringing things together rather than pulling them apart, but his conclusions should be taken further. If the Virgin is a figure for the place of the Incarnation, then the Convent of which she is Abbess is surely a figure for the Christian life, a figure for a place of God, for a generative and nourishing place of incarnation where the friars give their physicality to spirituality that they may manifest Christ in their lives.⁶¹¹ Something of this generativity is perhaps implied by the green border along the base of the corridor *Annunciation* which is sprouting leaves. The framing of the scene sets it *into* the wall, part of it rather than something beyond it, and the border, traditionally a dividing line between 'reality' and image, is a place of growth and flourishing.

⁶¹¹ Indeed, the absence of the Virgin's usual book and/or reading desk contributes to the focus on the person of the Virgin as the place of incarnation.

Furthermore, if the images are figurative in a dissemblant manner, inviting exegetical proliferations, then they are also analogous to the minds and bodies of those viewers, with each point of reference, each thought, being connected to many others in a network of understanding like a memory palace⁶¹² but also like the physical structure and operation of the brain itself with its different regions and synaptic pathways, or like the blood cells circulating around the body, reaching each member at some stage, and connecting them, carrying nourishment, removing waste, fighting infection, enabling life. The conformity of viewer to image is thus, potentially, not only a matter of learning the appropriate physical deportment characteristic of the appropriate spiritual state, and thereby influencing and demonstrating the spiritual through the physical, as Hood suggests, but a conformity which is analogously already part of the physical and spiritual nature of the viewer who is already made in the image of God and whose vocation is to reflect that. The frescoes do not only present a model to follow in the form of a saintly exemplar, they also present a structural reflection of the self as that self is called to be, physically and spirituality integrated and christoform.

The corpus of images unites the discrete parts of the Convent tying them physically, mentally, spiritually, into a christoform shape, as the dove of the Holy Spirit (now barely visible) once united the two spaces of the corridor *Annunciation*;⁶¹³ it reflects and directs the dedication of the individual friar's body in all its discrete parts and in its systematic whole - whose physicality and spirituality are mutually inherent - to the service of Christ; and it mirrors the community of friars in which each brother depends on his fellows, and the community as a whole depends on each individual systematically serving Christ through that community. As St Paul says, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."⁶¹⁴ The frescoes express that incarnational connectedness of community in Christ.

⁶¹² See note 450 on page 161.

⁶¹³ See note 975 on page 385.

⁶¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:12.

The corporeal analogies suggested by the frescoes highlight their systematic nature, in the sense that they represent and relate key elements of Christian theology, and reflect the way in which these are related as parts comprehensible only in terms of the whole, and vice versa, the whole being more than the sum of the parts. Each image indicates the others not simply in a network of theological incidents but in the way that the head, or arm, or leg indicates the person to whom they belong. The images thus give visual form to the nature of the community which created and used them and to the nature of the beliefs which are its foundation.

That the Incarnation was relevant to the community at San Marco goes without saying, but as Spike has indicated, it was also a topic of specific contemporary interest, a focal point in the debate between the Eastern and Western churches and a key issue for humanists who wanted to reconcile the Greek principle of wisdom with the Incarnation of Christ. The art historical analyses of San Marco repeatedly point towards an incarnational theme and stop there. This should be taken as a starting, rather than an end, point since the incarnational nature of the relationship in the San Marco images between material, visual and receptive space is clear.

This may be why the San Marco frescoes continue to have such resonance for modern viewers, as a physical expression of so central and mysterious a part of Christian faith, and of concepts of conformity to Christ and community in Christ which remain entirely relevant. Though at times more difficult to 'read' because of the Dominican vocabulary of the images, they are nonetheless as suitably addressed to the modern viewer as to the original. The progression from integration to incorporation to incarnation as presented in San Marco may be applied well beyond its walls in the understanding that the person who accepts their vocation (whatever that may be) can become in himself this extraordinary, ordinary, place of God; that the structures of his life, if infused with worship, can be the house of God; that he too can bring God into the world by his conformity to Christ.

7.6.2 Kenotic and generative spaces

The incarnational nature of the frescoes, their conformed corporeality, permeates San Marco but, importantly, it does not *fill* it. Just as striking as the integrated, incorporated, incarnated forms, is the manner in which San Marco, both structurally and in its imagery, embraces space.

The corpus of images and the proximity and interrelation of material, visual, and receptive space which they achieve, is never a question of decoration⁶¹⁵ in the sense of filling up or embellishing space. When space is crowded, the potential for the new, additional, or different, may be reduced. Form, or forms, however desirable, can squeeze out possibility. Space can cradle possibility; out of space, something new can appear. The San Marco frescoes (as a whole and in many individual instances) delicately balance desirable, desired form, and the source or possibility of that form in the generativity of emptiness.

The Cloister paintings depart from the norm in being unusually sparse, and the dormitory paintings, in spite of the complexity of some images, retain highly significant, apparently ‘empty, spaces. Thus the dark empty tomb in the *Noli me tangere* (Cell 1) and *Lamentation* (Cell 2), the central space between the Angel and the Virgin and the illuminated bare wall in the *Annunciation* (Cell 3), the black, empty V-shaped tunnel of the sky behind the Crucified Christ (Cells 4, 23, 25, 29, and 30), the tomb-like, womb-like cave behind the stable in the *Nativity* (Cell 5), the incandescent white mandorla around Christ in the *Transfiguration* (Cell 6), the empty approach to Christ ironically raised up in the *Mocking of Christ* (Cell 7) and *Christ at the Column* (Cell 26), the empty sarcophagus in the *Women at the Tomb* (Cell 8), and the brilliant white space between Christ and the Virgin in the *Coronation* (Cell 9), all present mysterious, empty, spaces as significant (sometimes central) elements of their content and composition.

⁶¹⁵ Although that term is used generically of fresco painting.

These significant voids should be linked to Didi-Huberman's apophatic concept of dissemblance, of emptying out likeness to avoid any sense of "univocal signification".⁶¹⁶ The places of greatest mystery require an element of emptiness: like the closed door or high wall which indicates the mystery of the moment of the Incarnation in many *Annunciation* images, the empty spaces indicate unfigurable divine activity. The apparent emptiness is significantly generative. Out of the virginal womb, the incarnate Christ; out of the darkness of the Crucifixion, the Resurrection; out of the empty tomb, the risen Christ. The void is at the beginning of creation, and for the Dominican friar, and indeed for anyone accepting a vocation of whatever nature, the emptying out of the self and the leaving behind of personal ties and possessions, in a way that would be interpreted today as dispensing with the 'ego', is the beginning of letting in Christ.

The physical structure of the Convent reflects and perpetuates this process of emptying out in order to let in, of empty space becoming generative. The Convent today is, of course, far more empty than it would have been as a working community (although there are often many people, there is no furniture, nothing permanently occupying the living spaces) but even then, empty spaces would have been characteristic of the building. The cells would have been sparsely furnished, the corridors empty, while the double cloister structure places two large open air spaces in the centre of communal life. This is not an emptiness on the scale of the barren landscape behind Dominic with the Crucifix, or the empty depth of the tomb, but it is an incorporation of space into place that recognises and protects the importance of space, of emptying out, to creativity and letting in. Thus the kenotic structure of the building and some of its images is a necessary part of their incarnational structure. The Convent and its frescoes are a material and visual reminder (to 15th century friars or modern visitors) of vocation, and of its purpose of conformity with Christ, known to humans through the self-emptying of God in Creation and the humility of the Incarnation, and reflected by humans in the process of dying to the self and living in Christ.

⁶¹⁶ Didi-Huberman. p.52.

7.7 Conclusions

The *material* space of the frescoes is the Convent, and within that the Cloister, corridor, or cell to which the images belong. The location *within* the Convent is as important as being located *in* the Convent in determining the nature of the image. In this way, the frescoes interact with their surroundings and become part of the daily life of the community, being situated throughout the Convent, and thus throughout the rhythm of the day. The friar would see at least ten frescoes each day, each one at least twice, and many more often.⁶¹⁷ The Cloister and Chapterhouse frescoes communicate to the entire community, while the dormitory frescoes are appropriate to the expected level of spiritual training of the novice, cleric, lay brother, visitor and patron. The modern visitor's exploration of the building is articulated by the images one discovers as one moves through the Cloister and its surrounding rooms and up into the dormitories.

The frescoes are exceptionally well integrated with their architectural surroundings, not only in terms of pigment in plaster, but in Angelico's use of frames, the low relief and indicative, rather than realistic, backgrounds which barely disturb the wall surface, and the use of architectural motifs drawn from the building itself, all of which break down the spatial barriers between the image, the building, and the viewer. Thus in the corridor *Annunciation* each curve of the vaults echoes both the Angel's wing and the curved arches of the Convent itself. The Virgin occupies a physical space that relates to the Convent and a private space from which even the Angel is separated, expressed in the interior quality of her expression as well as the composition of the scene. The *visual* space of the images is thus remarkably close to its material space. The purpose of this is directly related to the *receptive* space of the viewer, whose consciousness the frescoes are intended to inform, and conform. The continuity between the material and visual spaces is as nearly complete as is possible without becoming *trompe l'oeil* and their combination reflects and shapes the ideal

⁶¹⁷ The five lunettes and Dominic with the Crucifix would be seen frequently throughout the day, the three corridor images passed at least twice on the way to and from the friar's cell, and the cell fresco at least twice, morning and evening. The Chapterhouse fresco would also be seen frequently.

viewer's⁶¹⁸ interior space, and presents any viewer with an image of deeply attractive harmony.

The integration of material and visual space with the intention of forming the viewer's *receptive* space has been remarked on by Hood in particular and in part or by implication by others, if not precisely in the tripartite formulation favoured here. The theological implications of this intensely conditioned and proximate relationship between material, visual and receptive space have not, however, been pushed to their full extent.

The integration of the visual space with the material space creates a relationship between the visual space and its location which is natural, undeniable, and literally bonded. The integration of the original Dominican viewer with his material space is also unusually powerful, the Convent being his home, his place of prayer, study, work, and rest, a continuous physical presence expressing all aspects of his vocation, including his preaching (if any) for which he leaves the Convent and from which he returns to it. Unlike a chapel which is visited at specific times, or even the Church of San Marco next door, where the friars worshipped, the Convent is all encompassing and the friar's relationship to it is unique. His integration with the visual space of the frescoes, embedded in the material space which he and they share at all times, as co-inhabitants rather than as visitor and visited, is thus unusually close. As the friar walks between the images, he pulls with him the threads of one before, so that the figure *in* one image becomes a figure *of* another image. To take Didi-Hubermann's opening example, the blood of the *Crucifixion* sows the *hortus conclusus* of the *Annunciation* and the garden of the Resurrection, with flowers of new life. Each instance of divine mystery is figured by another such, as one figure activates another.

That the frescoes' subjects speak so specifically of and to both the outward aspects of the friar's daily life and his internal consciousness as he performs its many tasks

⁶¹⁸ The original viewer or the theologically sensitive modern viewer.

and rituals, and as he prays, is simultaneously almost tautological and revelatory. If one thinks, in Tillich's terms, of art as correlational,⁶¹⁹ the 'answers' of these frescoes are very precisely correlated to the 'questions' of their original viewers' lives. These questions and answers are in an important respect specific to the Observant Dominicans for whom the frescoes were painted, but they are not for that reason irrelevant to the non-Dominican and/or modern viewer. Questions of vocation, of conformity to Christ, of the primary tasks of the Christian life, of prayerful response to the gospels, and of community, remain crucial and the frescoes continue to present relevant answers. The complete and harmonious integration of worship in daily life, of individual in community, of generative space within an enabling and upholding structure, and of the acceptance of a vocation of conformity to Christ (whether as a Dominican or in other ways), are messages which can speak as strongly to the modern as to the original viewer, and are as pertinent now as ever.

That the images continue to speak in this way is partly thanks to the durability of the medium which has preserved them in such good condition. However, fresco is also perhaps the most analogously appropriate medium for communicating these San Marco messages of integration, incorporation, and incarnation. The fusion of pigment and plaster, the adherence of plaster to wall, and the continuity of image and building are themselves apt metaphors for the mutual inherence of human flesh and divine spirit, and of the necessity of both to the manifestation of the whole. Medium and message are literally and metaphorically united and these images may fairly be described as theology incarnate.

⁶¹⁹ See note 15 on page 17.

8 Covenants and Connections: the Sassetti Chapel, Santa Trinita

Scenes from the Life of St Francis, Ghirlandaio, 1479-1485.

Although the portrait faces and Florentine locations in these scenes might seem to invite the modern viewer to look outwards from the images to find confirmation of their content in the events and customs of contemporary life, this case study argues that a richer experience of the frescoes may result from focussing on the presentation of the protagonist, St Francis, and on the complex spatial and spiritual relationships which he mediates. It suggests that Francis, the patron's name saint, is portrayed here as the lynch pin in a network of spiritual relationships: the connecting point between Christ, the Church, the laity, and the natural world. These spiritual connections are explored spatially in the interaction between the Chapel's material space, the pictorial space within the images, and the viewer as he stands among them. Acting as an anchor in each scene, and as the bond between the scenes of the cycle, the figure of Francis binds them in a web of associations and provides a foundation from which to understand them individually and as a whole. The cycle's spiritual and spatial connections carry theological messages of promises made and covenants fulfilled, and the coherence of content and form supports Francis' role, not as alter Christus, but as mediator of those covenants. Ultimately these themes of covenant, fulfilment, connection, and mediation are as relevant to contemporary Florentines as the identifiable portraits and buildings, and they remain entirely relevant for the modern Christian viewer.

8.1 The cycle

The entrance lunette shows the *Vision of Augustus*, with David portrayed as a statue to the left and the Sassetti coat of arms beneath. The vaults contain four sibyls. The cycle proper is arranged in two tiers on each side wall and three on the altar wall.⁶²⁰ The left lunette depicts the *Renunciation of Worldly Goods* with the *Stigmatization* below. The right lunette shows the *Trial before the Sultan*⁶²¹ and beneath it the *Funeral of St Francis and Verification of the Stigmata*. On the altar wall are the *Confirmation of the Rule*,⁶²² with the unusual scene of the *Raising of the Roman Notary's Son* below and, on either side of the altarpiece on the lowest tier, donor portraits of Francesco Sassetti and his wife, Nera Corsi.⁶²³ The altarpiece of the *Nativity* is also by Ghirlandaio.⁶²⁴

A chronological viewing begins with the *Renunciation of Worldly Goods*, followed by the *Stigmatization*, the *Trial before the Sultan*, the *Confirmation of the Rule*, the *Funeral of St Francis and the Verification of the Stigmata*, and finally the *Raising of the Roman Notary's Son*, with the donor portraits and altarpiece below, so that the viewers' eyes must switch back and forth rather than progressing sequentially. The reason for the arrangement would seem to be a desire to place the *Confirmation* and *Raising* scenes above the altar. The latter constitutes a miracle scene, "crucial in any cycle relating to a saint, for it was the one that presented proof of his or her holiness",⁶²⁵ while the former might seem an unusual emphasis in a non-Franciscan setting, requiring further explanation. The altar wall scenes, though different in content and composition, both feature Florentine settings and contemporary portraits, the significance of which will be further discussed below.

⁶²⁰ For an analysis of the cycle arrangement see Lavin. pp.203-212.

⁶²¹ See note 199 on page 69.

⁶²² This scene is usually identified as the confirmation of the Rule by Honorius III rather than the approval by Innocent III (as in the case of the Bardi Chapel scene). The basis on which the Sassetti identification is made is not entirely clear. See note 134 on page 58.

⁶²³ Regarding the life of Francis see 4 and 11.

⁶²⁴ For source references see note 136 on page 58. The story of the Notary's son is told by Bonaventure but is not included in all translations of the text. See St Bonaventure, *The Life of St Francis of Assisi* (North Carolina: Saint Benedict Press TAN Books, 2010). Ch.16. p.135.

⁶²⁵ Steffi Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*, trans., R. Stockman (New York, London: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1996). p.140. Although, of course, the *Stigmatization* could have served this purpose.

8.2 Interpretations

8.2.1 Varied interpretations

Art historical interpretations of the cycle have identified various themes and most, while emphasising a particular aspect, acknowledge that the programme is fairly complex.

Berenson dismisses Ghirlandaio's work as genre paintings full of self-important people,⁶²⁶ while Warburg's analysis, particularly of the portraits, sees genuine religious devotion allied to contemporary humanist concerns.⁶²⁷ Borsook and Offerhaus read the programme as a "homogenous scheme on the basis of the chapel's dual dedication to Francis and Christ's Nativity"⁶²⁸ with subsidiary themes of peace, reconciliation with the papacy, Florence as the New Rome, and birth and death. In their view the frescoes thus unite Sassetti's "spiritual, personal and patriotic interests" while also representing "the ideals of Republican Florence" and pointing towards future "imperial pretensions."⁶²⁹ Patricia Rubin likewise identifies a plethora of concerns in the cycle, but interprets it through the lens of the Florentine practice of keeping *ricordanze*, notebooks in which significant family information was recorded. Most recently, Roettgen has argued for a greater emphasis on the Last Judgement, which he sees as the core of the cycle's content. These themes are explored briefly below.

⁶²⁶ Bernard Berenson, *Italian Painters of the Renaissance Ii. The Florentine and Central Italian Schools* (London: Phaidon, 1952). pp.27-28. See Jean K. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio Artist and Artisan* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000). p.1.

⁶²⁷ Aby Warburg, "Bildniskunst Und Florentinisches Burgertum 1: Domenico Ghirlandajo in Santa Trinita; Die Bildnisse Des Lorenzo De' Medici Und Seiner Angehöriger," in *Gesammelte Schriften: Die Erneuerung Der Heidnischen Antike*, ed. G. Bing (Berlin: H. Seeman, 1932). pp.93-94. Aby Warburg, "Bildniskunst Und Florentinisches Burgertum 1: Domenico Ghirlandajo in Santa Trinita; Die Bildnisse Des Lorenzo De' Medici Und Seiner Angehörigen," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, ed. Kurt W. Forster (Los Angeles: 1999). p.186. Cadogan. pp.8-9.

⁶²⁸ Eve Borsook and Johannes Offerhaus, eds., *Sassetti and Ghirlandaio at Santa Trinita, Florence, History and Legend in a Renaissance Chapel* (Holland: Davoco Publishing, 1981). p.55

⁶²⁹ *Ibid.* p.10.

In addition to such thematic interpretations, Ghirlandaio's frescoes have invited comment on the relation between classical and Christian elements of the programme, the compositional and narrative (*istoria*) aspects of the scenes, and the exceptional portraiture.

8.2.2 Classical and Christian elements

Sassetti was an antiquarian in his own right but the programme was probably designed in collaboration with his humanist friend Bartolomeo Fonzio to create a harmonious combination of "classical learning and Christian belief".⁶³⁰ Borsook and Offerhaus note the erudition and careful selection of the classical motifs adorning the tombs. They see no specific connection between the classical imagery and the Christian themes of the Nativity and the life of Francis, but neither is there dissonance since the pagan and Christian elements, while distinct, are harmonised within the overall scheme which incorporates multiple themes and contemporary concerns.⁶³¹ Although not fully explained, this assertion seems fair if only because the division of imagery appears to be aligned to its location within the Chapel and to themes of rebirth and resurrection. The tombs, as the place of the dead, are associated with the pagan imagery that was superseded by the coming of Christ, as seen in the vision of Augustus which depicts a transition from a pagan world to a Christian one (a theme further reflected in the classical ruins of the Nativity altarpiece). The carvings and inscriptions refer to happy marriage and unity in faith.⁶³² So it does not seem inappropriate to apply pagan motifs to the dead, while the donor portraits show that the faith of Francesco and Nera is not dead with their corpses in the tombs, but alive and praying earnestly, as represented on the altar wall. This is not to denigrate the classical: Sassetti was a learned man and his peers valued classical learning and art, but it may explain the division of imagery by location.

⁶³⁰ Cadogan. p.93.

⁶³¹ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds.p.26.

⁶³² Ibid. p.26.

8.2.3 Composition and *istoria*

The humanist and theorist of painting, Leon Battista Alberti, recommended the use of variety when painting an *istoria*.⁶³³ Variety would encourage the spectator to dwell on details and thus gain enjoyment from the picture. It would also allow him to identify characters, locate them, and understand their actions and expressions.⁶³⁴ The inclusion of a contemporary portrait would particularly serve to draw in the viewer. Such variety, however, was not to be a matter of the random dispersal of realistic elements, but carefully structured to facilitate understanding of the narrative. According to Jean Cadogan, Alberti's concept of composition sought to harmonise action and description by marrying pictorial depiction with classical narrative to represent both the physical and spiritual meaning of a scene.⁶³⁵ Baxandall has argued that humanist painters achieved this end through a compositional technique based on the structure of periodic sentences⁶³⁶ used in rhetoric, which gradually build up their meaning until it is complete,⁶³⁷ and that he sought to portray the psychology of his characters as well as their actions: mimesis was not enough, the figures must 'speak' to the viewer, encouraging empathy and inspiring moral responses modelled on the exemplars.⁶³⁸

If there was an opposition in earlier art, as Hans Belting claims, between a documentary style, recording events, and a psychological style, which presents personality and motive,⁶³⁹ Alberti's concept of painting aimed for something all encompassing, which could accommodate both mimesis and emotion, form and meaning. Furthermore, Borsook and Offerhaus suggest that a growing emphasis on man as *imago Dei*, brought about through a "renewed appreciation of the incarnation" meant that God was seen to have

⁶³³ Alberti. pp. 79, 81, 93,103.

⁶³⁴ Cadogan. p.85.

⁶³⁵ Ibid. p.87.

⁶³⁶ A sentence which is not grammatically complete until the final clause. Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). Part III.

⁶³⁷ Although Baxandall does not relate his observations to Ghirlandaio and whether Ghirlandaio thought that he was acting in this way is unclear.

⁶³⁸ Cadogan. p.87.

⁶³⁹ Ibid. p.86. Citing Hans Belting, "The New Role of Narrative in Public Painting of the Trecento: Historia and Allegory," in *Pictorial Narrative in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Herbert Kessler and M. Shreve Simpson (Washington: John Hopkins University, 1985). p.152.

conferred on the things of this world a legitimacy, even a sanctity that was quite different from the otherworldliness of medieval thought. Hence the natural world in all its particulars could, in certain cases, provide a glimpse of paradise.⁶⁴⁰

Alongside the encouragement to painters to render life in all its varied detail, and the sanctioning of the natural as locus of revelation, there was a strong humanist interest in history and the importance of historical exemplars as inspiration for the civic life of the city and individual morality.⁶⁴¹ Ghirlandaio's style could serve as a model for the ideal of painted *istoria*, marrying these interests in a clear and orderly fashion.

8.2.4 Portraiture

Portraiture is, of course, a particularly strong instance of mimesis and signified more than the features of the face alone could convey. Alberti praised painting for its ability to bring the dead to life⁶⁴² and make the absent present, and portraiture became important in defining individual and family identity.⁶⁴³ The inclusion of identifiable portraits in an *istoria* gives credibility to the scene. The contemporaries become eye-witnesses, they "serve in part as testimony to the truthfulness of the scene depicted"⁶⁴⁴ and because the viewer can relate to the eye witness, he is brought closer to the event.⁶⁴⁵ Sassetti's presence in the two altar wall scenes affirms their veracity and expresses his faith. Roettgen goes so far as to say that, "Having one's likeness appear in such contexts was virtually the same as taking clerical vows,

⁶⁴⁰ Cadogan. p.87. See also John W. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome, Rhetoric, Doctrine and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, C.1450-1521* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1979). pp.138-152.

⁶⁴¹ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. pp.55-56.

⁶⁴² Alberti. p.61.

⁶⁴³ See 8.2.9. Also Patricia Rubin, "Domenico Ghirlandaio and the Meaning of History in Fifteenth Century Florence" in *Domenico Ghirlandaio 1449-1494, Atti Del Convegno Internazionale Firenze, 16-18 Ottobre 1994*, ed. Wolfram Prinz and Max Seidel (Florence: Centro Di, 1996). pp.97-107.

⁶⁴⁴ Roettgen. p.174.

⁶⁴⁵ Cadogan notes that the female portraits are closer to the interior of the Chapel, protecting their privacy, and the male ones closer to the exterior, i.e. more publicly visible. Cadogan. p.90. It is not clear, however, how visible any of the frescoes would have been to the public, and the altar wall, where the majority of portraits are situated, would actually have been easier to see than either of the side walls, since it gets more light, especially in the morning. It is therefore doubtful whether this was a consideration.

perhaps even professing of the ideals of the Franciscans.”⁶⁴⁶ Inserting one’s image into a painting is *not* the same as making a lifetime commitment of religious service, but the presence of a portrait must surely have affirmed the subject’s sympathy with the event and its protagonist, or their hope of similar treatment: a portrait in a chapel (preferably close to the altar) was clearly a better aid to salvation than one at home.

Ghirlandaio’s portraits⁶⁴⁷ are neither the traditional donor supported by a patron saint appealing for intercession, nor the subject dressed as a character in the action, but are set on the edges of the scene in contemporary dress, at times observing the action, at times detached. Sometimes compared to a Greek chorus, or the audience for a miracle play, the portraits are nevertheless highly specific, creating a link between the sacred events and the lives of contemporary viewers, but their own topicality is reduced by their connection with the sacred scene.⁶⁴⁸ They exist “somewhere between the static, isolated donor portrait and the active participant” and have an “ambivalent spatial and psychological relationship to the narrative action”⁶⁴⁹ Aby Warburg saw their inclusion as a way of showing a personal relationship between the subject of the portrait and the holy characters of the sacred events. He compared them to the wax *ex votos* in Santissima Annunziata,⁶⁵⁰ suggesting that contemporaries would not have found such portrait inclusions strange or profane.⁶⁵¹ The *ex votos* perpetuated the subject’s presence in the sanctuary, mediated between the earthly congregation and the divine and saintly presences, and placed the subject under their continued protection. Devotional portraits may have been meant to operate in the same way. If the donor and his family and friends felt a religious loyalty to the holy people depicted (as Francesco Sassetti no doubt felt for Francis), then their presence in the frescoes was a request for the saint’s protection, a way of

⁶⁴⁶ Roettgen. p.145

⁶⁴⁷ For an interesting and unusual take on art historical study of portraiture in this period see Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Portrait, the Individual and the Singular: Remarks on the Legacy of Aby Warburg," in *The Image of the Individual, Portraits in the Renaissance* ed. Nicholas Mann and Luke Syson (London: British Museum Press, 1998).

⁶⁴⁸ Cadogan. p.90.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p.88.

⁶⁵⁰ Contemporary Florentines placed life sized, fully dressed, wax models of themselves at Santissima Annunziata as a votive offering and a form of prayer for divine protection. Lorenzo de’ Medici offered such a model after surviving the Pazzi Conspiracy. See Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Phaidon, 1970). p.122.

⁶⁵¹ Cadogan. p.89.

physically and permanently expressing that religious bond. The literature about the *ex votos*, suggesting that they had a genuinely devout function, is a persuasive corrective to the cynical view that donor portraits were prompted solely by a desire for earthly glory.⁶⁵² One may speculate that the presence of identifiable Florentine locations in the altar wall scenes functioned similarly to the donor portraits, allying the city with sacred events, presenting it as a city of God, home to the faithful, and requesting divine protection for it.

So portraits were intended to: engage the viewer; assert the truth of the sacred event; express the subject's faith; perpetuate his prayers; and place him under divine or saintly protection. In addition they were a record for posterity and a model of the subjects' exemplary behaviour. Furthermore, a portrait in a funerary chapel may express the hope of being resurrected as the subject appears in his portrait. Roettgen writes,

Sasseti took care that his portrait was presented, just as he wished to be resurrected on the Day of Judgment, next to his sarcophagus, which was adorned with allegories of his virtues.

His soul (and those of the other portrait subjects) would benefit from masses said there. In the case of Lorenzo de' Medici, Sasseti was returning a favour: Lorenzo had included Sasseti among the portraits in the Chapel at the Medici Palace.⁶⁵³

8.2.5 Peace

Borsook and Offerhaus identify a number of references to peace in the cycle. In the *Confirmation*, the arches above Francis are apparently based on those at the so-called Temple of Peace⁶⁵⁴ in Rome which supposedly fell down when Christ was born; the

⁶⁵² This is not a new idea. Savonarola thought such portraits idolatrous, and criticised their makers and commissioners. Roettgen. p.174.

⁶⁵³ Ibid.p.145.

⁶⁵⁴ Borsook and Offerhaus identify them as based on those of the Temple of Peace. Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.46. Reviewing their work, Amanda Lillie claims that the "similarity is slight" and that the arches are purely compositional rather than symbolically potent. Amanda Lillie, "Francesco Sasseti and Ghirlandaio at Santa Trinita Florence - History and Legend in a Renaissance Chapel - Borsook, E. Offerhaus J.," *Burlington Magazine* 126, no. 974 (1984).p. 294.

grisailles around Francesco's tomb are based on coins made during the time when Vespasian began the Temple of Peace; broken columns from the Temple reappear in the altarpiece *Nativity*; David was known as a bringer of peace; and *The Vision of Augustus* may remind the viewer of the coming of Christ and therefore of peace, particularly because of the eucharistic association with the IHS trigram which was itself a symbol of peace.⁶⁵⁵

Following the turmoil after the Pazzi conspiracy in 1478, peace was agreed between Florence and the papacy in 1480, thanks to the diplomatic embassy of Lorenzo de' Medici to Sixtus IV. There was clearly a strong desire for peace at this time, and Ghirlandaio was among the Florentine artists who painted for the Pope, in a form of artistic diplomacy. Borsook and Offerhaus believe that, although the Pope depicted is Honorius rather than Sixtus IV, and the ambassadors who went to Rome are not present among the portraits, this scene nevertheless shows accord between Florence and the Papacy, under the aegis of the Temple of Peace. They also connect Sassetti's precarious professional position between 1480 and 1485 (due to failures at branches of the Medici bank) with the theme of peace. This does not seem to be a clear link, although it might explain the prominence of the Medici in Sassetti's Chapel: Lorenzo's public support for Sassetti was greatly appreciated (Sassetti wrote that in his devotion to Lorenzo he dedicated his life, his belongings, and even his children, to him) and Sassetti seems to be acknowledging this in the portraits.⁶⁵⁶

8.2.6 Florence as the New Rome

The Vision of Augustus depicts Rome with its senate square, the Campidoglio,⁶⁵⁷ although the fresco is damaged and high up, so this is not easily identified by the modern viewer.⁶⁵⁸ Looking beyond this scene into the Chapel, one sees the Florentine equivalent of the Campidoglio, in the form of the Piazza della Signoria with the Palazzo Vecchio on the left hand side and the Loggia dei Lanzi ahead. The

⁶⁵⁵ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.30.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid. p.50.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid. p.35.

⁶⁵⁸ The Pantheon and Trajan Column are more visible.

building to the right of the Palazzo Vecchio may be part of San Pier Scheraggio (rather than St Peter's in Rome where the Confirmation actually took place). Borsook and Offerhaus claim that this visual link affirms what the Florentines believed to be a historical link between the two cities, namely that Florence had been founded by Romans and that Florentine families were descended from Roman ones (as the Corsi were believed to be). After Rome's decline, Florence had become a great city and her inhabitants were proud of their heritage.

Florentines were not alone in believing their city to be a New Rome, but situating events that historically took place in Rome (the *Confirmation* and the *Raising*) in Florence, would have resonated with viewers. Borsook and Offerhaus note that Poliziano had recently discovered copies of ancient texts in the Medici library which suggested that Augustus, celebrated as the ruler of a peaceful and prosperous age (and believed by the medieval historians to be the founder of Rome) had also led the founding of Florence. They suggest that this would have seemed relevant to Florentines so soon after the peace with the papacy and may explain the prominence of Poliziano's portrait which appears twice. The idea of Augustan Florence became popular among humanists and was accepted generally. The Sasseti Chapel presents Florence as a New Rome⁶⁵⁹ and patriotism and religious devotion are merged in scenes representing both sacred events and "Florence as the site of spiritual and political renewal".⁶⁶⁰ Amanda Lillie argues that rather than making Florence the New Rome, "Ghirlandaio made the depiction of Florence so compelling that any association of Rome with these events is dismissed from the viewer's mind." The point is really that "the Confirmation takes place on Florentine terms."⁶⁶¹ The two views are less opposed than they might seem: arguably, a city whose portrait could displace all thoughts of Rome has taken Rome's place, at least in the minds of the viewers, and is therefore, by default, a New Rome. As with the portrait figures, the portraits of the city engage the viewers and draw them into the scene, to bear civic witness - as a whole city - to the sacred events depicted, and to confirm their continuing relevance for contemporary Florence and her citizens.

⁶⁵⁹ Florence was also thought of as a New Jerusalem. See note 115 on page 47

⁶⁶⁰ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. pp.52-55.

⁶⁶¹ Lillie. p.294.

8.2.7 Birth, death, and resurrection

While Sassetti was waiting to acquire the patronage rights to the Chapel, his eldest son, Teodoro, died and another son, named after his brother, was born. Warburg claimed that these events explain a change in the plans for the cycle which originally included the *Apparition at Arles*, a scene replaced by the less familiar miracle of the *Raising of the Roman Notary's Son* in which a dead child is restored to life by appeal to Francis. The Chapel was reputedly decorated in fulfilment of a vow and it is possible that such a vow might have been prompted by the death and birth of his sons. The birth of another son so soon after the death of the eldest may also explain choice of the *Nativity* for the altarpiece, and the dual dedication of the Chapel to Francis and the Nativity.⁶⁶² The *Vision of Augustus* is also connected to the Nativity, as it was “revealed to the emperor that the pagan world would give way with the birth of Christ to an era of peace.”⁶⁶³

The Chapel is, however, a funerary chapel and burial place, and death is prominent alongside birth. The Sassetti tombs are visible (not hidden under the pavement) and the donor portraits show them kneeling before the altarpiece, between their tombs and the promise of resurrection in the infant Christ. Christ himself lies in front of an antique sarcophagus (serving as a manger), indicating both an empty tomb - and hence the resurrection - and salvation through the coming of Christ and the replacement of pagan antiquity with Christianity. The Nativity was a popular theme for altarpieces because of its eucharistic significance, but is here linked thematically to the resurrected life that the faithful patrons hope for.

Roettgen attempts to separate the theme of resurrection from the patrons' personal concerns and ally it to the Chapel's dedication to the Nativity.

[T]he assumption that a particular miracle scene was here presented as a direct analogy to an everyday, private experience is based on modern notions. In the pictorial programs of family chapels, especially, the hierarchy of the

⁶⁶² Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. pp.18-19.

⁶⁶³ Ibid. p.30.

Christian champions was strictly observed, so as to conform to the prescribed steps of *intercessio*. If the concept of resurrection is illustrated more fully in the Sassetti Chapel than in other family chapels it is because the overriding subject matter was the birth of Christ as evidence of divine grace and salvation.⁶⁶⁴

Roettgen may be right to warn against anachronistic interpretations but the unusual subject matter and the presence of contemporary portraits suggests that the distinction between a standard miracle scene and the “direct analogy to an everyday private experience” is too sharp. It is not clear what process of intercession Roettgen is referring to here, or why it would conflict with a miracle of personal significance to the donor, involving his patron saint. Nor is it clear why Roettgen privileges the Nativity above Francis, since the Chapel is dedicated to both. Although the altarpiece is of the Nativity the cycle relates to Francis and the programme as a whole functions through the connections that it makes rather, than by one aspect overriding another.

8.2.8 Judgement

According to Roettgen, the *Vision of Augustus*, the sibyls, the figure of David (a prophet of the Last Judgement⁶⁶⁵), and the Nativity, “make it clear that the dominant theme... is the birth of Christ and his return as world judge.”⁶⁶⁶ The theme of the Nativity has been generally acknowledged but Roettgen puts more emphasis on Judgement than other scholars. In his view, the Florentine settings and Tuscan landscapes should be understood, “not merely as secular celebrations of familiar cityscapes but as visual proof that the events depicted are actually taking place.” He argues that they link the narratives to the lives of individual viewers, while placing the local settings in the history of salvation. Rather than a patriotic or political statement, the prominence of Florentine settings should be read as bestowing a historical reality on the scenes of Francis’ life, and including Florence and the parish

⁶⁶⁴ Roettgen. p.147.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid. p.146. Roettgen does not elaborate on this but he may be thinking of psalms which relate to judgement, such as Psalm 97. David is also interpreted typologically as a Christ figure.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid. p.146.

of Santa Trinita in “the narrative of God’s grace, foretold by the sibyls and demonstrated by the birth of Christ.”⁶⁶⁷

One might argue that patriotism, politics, and the history of salvation are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The truly devout and patriotic Florentine could see Florence as a city of God, a New Jerusalem as well as a New Rome, and express patriotic and pious feelings in the same breath.⁶⁶⁸ This said, Roettgen makes a valid point in asserting the spiritual concerns of the Chapel above the political ones: ultimately Sassetti was concerned for his immortal soul and the souls of his family and this must surely have been the primary reason for endowing the Chapel and choosing its decoration.

8.2.9 Ricordanze

Patricia Rubin has likened the family chapels painted by Ghirlandaio for the Sassetti and Tornabuoni (at Santa Maria Novella) to *ricordanze*, the notebooks in which family records of financial transactions, rites of passage, religious, civic and political events, alliances of kinship and friendship, incidences of illness, military affairs, and matters of honour, were all carefully written down, and which were often kept locked away, used to instruct the next generation in household and business management, and eventually passed on to them as prized possessions. Elements which might seem disparate today, were linked in the 15th century mind. Like the record books, the frescoes of the Tornabuoni and Sassetti chapels combined

the traditions of religious storytelling and of family recordkeeping, the developing art of humanist historiography, and the learned tastes and propagandist goals of the circle of Lorenzo de’ Medici and his supporters.⁶⁶⁹

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid. p.147.

⁶⁶⁸ See 2.4.3, 8.2.7.

⁶⁶⁹ Rubin. p.99.

Rubin argues that religious images had long been used for instruction and that, from the 14th century on, viewers were implicitly seen as participants in the sacred narratives depicted. Given the care with which *ricordanze* were kept private, it might seem perverse to present similar information on chapel walls. These were, however, gated private chapels, and Rubin sees the Sassetti Chapel as an independent space in which family memory could be safely deposited.⁶⁷⁰ The presence of family members and friends in the scenes, “juxtaposes past event with present participation” and argues the “interdependence of individual, corporate, and ecclesiastical interests”.⁶⁷¹

This is entirely in accord with contemporary humanist interest in historiography and the accompanying mentality which saw individual and civic destiny, personal honour and civic greatness, as intimately linked.

As such it was attached also to traditions of prophecy and praise that promoted ideas of Florentine greatness. Such ideas were being actively and elegantly propagated by the learned associates of the leading families, associates given conspicuous places in these murals...[Thus] the traditional function of religious narrative, which was to provide inspirational models for devotional behaviour, was amplified to encompass a wider realm of social and civic comportment. Generic roles are given specific faces. The projective and prescriptive powers of painting were employed to create exemplary truth.⁶⁷²

At a time when being ‘seen’ was a term equivalent to being fit for public office, and when power was increasingly in the hands of small ruling group,

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid. p.103.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid. p.104.

⁶⁷² Ibid. pp.106-107. Rubin seems to be using the term ‘projective’ in the sense of ‘projecting oneself into the scene’ rather than with prophetic or eschatological associations. The image is prescriptive because it models good actions and projective because it shows contemporary people witnessing and affirming those actions.

[b]eing seen as a sober, prudent, and wise citizen among a powerful clan with influential supporters, upholding the ritual life of the city, was a glamorous proof of belonging.⁶⁷³

Ghirlandaio's talent for harmonising such a mixture of elements into a legible scheme was perhaps one of the reasons for his popularity at this time, when images could be used to present familial, political, intellectual and religious ideals simultaneously. In his frescoes for the Sassetti and Tornabuoni, "family memory was well-served and devotional stories well-told."⁶⁷⁴

⁶⁷³ Ibid. p.107.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid. p.107.

8.3 The Scenes

8.3.1 Vision of Augustus on the Capitoline Hill, David, and the Sibyls

The *Vision of Augustus* may have been the only scene generally publicly visible⁶⁷⁵ but is strongly connected to the interior cycle. The viewer looks up at the visionary scene, whose prophetic function is reiterated by the sibyls in the vaults, and down into the Chapel where it is fulfilled in the Nativity altarpiece. He is reminded by the sarcophagi (real and painted), and the numerous visual references to death, that the vision refers not only to Christ's coming but to his judgement of the world (i.e. his return). Indeed the Franciscans referred to the Last Judgement in their readings for the first Sunday in Advent.⁶⁷⁶

8.3.2 Renunciation of Worldly Goods and Stigmatization

The focus of the *Renunciation* is on the Bishop covering Francis with his cloak, while Francis' father and his friend present a second pair of figures, set back and to the side of the central encounter, in what Cadogan identifies as a characteristic narrative feature in Ghirlandaio's work, where a central encounter contrasts with a subsidiary one.⁶⁷⁷ By contrast, Giotto's Santa Croce version is a dramatic lateral arrangement of figures, with the central space empty, the focus apparently on the leap of faith that Francis has taken and the disjunction between his old and new lives.⁶⁷⁸

Patricia Rubin claims that Ghirlandaio's scene presents Francis' renunciation of his worldly past as "humble submission to authority" and his father's anger as "resignation"⁶⁷⁹ while the calm onlookers belie the "outrage and misunderstanding

⁶⁷⁵ It is likely that there was a gate though its height and the degree to which it obscured the interior are unclear. In any case, the Chapel's situation and the absence of any window mean that it is generally dark.

⁶⁷⁶ Roettgen. p.146.

⁶⁷⁷ Cadogan. p.100.

⁶⁷⁸ See 4.3.1.

⁶⁷⁹ Cf. Lavin who describes him as "viciously angry". Lavin. p.204.

that beset the beginning of his mission”, all set against the background of Geneva where Sassetti made a fortune.⁶⁸⁰ She asks why this reading of Francis’ life was “not viewed as perversion” and can only suggest that perhaps a Vallombrosan church allowed “greater latitude”.⁶⁸¹ This may be so, or it may be that Ghirlandaio’s style is generally less dramatic than Giotto’s, and that this suited the taste of his period, when detail, architectural structure, and perspectival compositions were desired, perhaps at the expense of other, more emotionally intense elements.⁶⁸² Below the *Renunciation*, the *Stigmatization*, which also clearly draws on the Santa Croce version but expands the cast, embellishes the landscape, and reduces the drama, supports this view.

8.3.3 Confirmation of the Rule

The *Confirmation* presents a striking compositional variation on Giotto’s version. It is also unusual in setting the scene in Florence, against a background of Florentines going about their daily business, separated from the papal court by little more than a hanging and what Borsook and Offerhaus call “a vaguely defined vaulted structure” in what would be an “otherwise completely Florentine setting”. Ghirlandaio, among others, was “not only recasting Florence in Roman form but contemplating a Rome rebuilt according to Florentine formulae.”⁶⁸³

The essential element of the scene, Francis and his brothers before the Pope, is taken almost directly from Giotto, though reversed and expanded to include two rows of clerics, the scene in the foreground, the complex architecture, and the Florentine background. The design was changed to include the Medici boys and their tutors and the Florentine background, separating the scene into three planes. Roettgen claims that this

⁶⁸⁰ In itself a stark contrast to the poverty espoused by the Franciscans, and a reminder of Sassetti’s need to dedicate at least some of his wealth to the Church. N.B. Lavin claims that Teodoro I was manager of one of his father’s banks in Geneva and that the town is included in his memory. This does not appear to be mentioned in any other study of the cycle. Ibid. p.204. Amanda Lillie argues that the city is not Geneva. Lillie.p.294. See note 1047 on page 451.

⁶⁸¹ Rubin. p.103.

⁶⁸² See the discussion of composition and *istoria* at 8.2.3.

⁶⁸³ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. 46-48. See also 2.4.3, 8.2.7, 8.2.8.

helps to establish the different levels of reality represented by the Florence of the portraits and background and the episode from Church history.⁶⁸⁴ The portraits of family members and homages to important personages associated with it could thus be accommodated without intruding on the sacred space in the center.⁶⁸⁵

The question then must surely be, why these three separate spaces and scenes should have been brought together here. Borsook and Offerhaus believe that the change of location from Rome to Florence reflects the contemporary idea of Florence as the New Rome. Another possibility is that, just as the *Raising* may have been changed to connect an event in the Sassetti family history with a sacred event, so the *Confirmation* is being related to contemporary politics and the recent peace between Pope Sixtus IV and the Florentines. Roettgen disagrees with the political interpretation, arguing that the scene expresses devotion rather than political propaganda.⁶⁸⁶ Earlier art historians, however, tended to prioritise the political interpretation.

The children climbing the stairs have also been variously interpreted. Warburg suggests that they are coming to greet their father and his guests, while Roettgen thinks the difference of physical level may reflect social status, with children and *familiari* occupying a lower rank. In the humanist and civic literature of this period there is an emphasis on the importance of bringing children up properly because they represent the future: upright, moral citizens were valuable to a peaceful and prosperous civic life.⁶⁸⁷ A parallel may be intended between the children climbing the stairs to their father who is in charge of their upbringing, and Francis receiving approval for his rule and being henceforth responsible for the spiritual guidance of his brethren.

⁶⁸⁴ As well as the Florence of today, as seen by the modern viewer.

⁶⁸⁵ Roettgen. p.144.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid. p.144.

⁶⁸⁷ Arnold V. Coonin, "Portrait Busts of Children in Quattrocento Florence," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 30, (1995). p.66.

8.3.4 Raising of the Roman Notary's Son

Whether or not the scene was changed to allude to the two Teodoros,⁶⁸⁸ it seems inevitable that family members would have thought of them when looking at this scene, and been comforted by the miraculous story and its placement above Christ on the altarpiece, reminding them of salvation and life after death. In the altarpiece, the Christ Child lies beside an antique sarcophagus which is serving as a manger, while above him in the fresco, the resuscitated child is still sitting on his funeral bier. Life and death are very closely juxtaposed. Originally the fresco also featured a sarcophagus, in front of the bier, and the altarpiece was lower, coming to the level of the painted cornice between the lowest and middle registers, whereas now the top of the altarpiece juts into the fresco, obscuring the damaged sarcophagus.⁶⁸⁹ There is also something sarcophagus-like about the marble lined staircase in the *Confirmation* above (of which we see only part of the top step), which gives the impression that the figures climbing the stairs are ascending from an underworld, and relates the two scenes further through the theme of children rising, by means natural and miraculous.

A further link between the middle and lower registers of the altar wall, and between the *Raising* and the altarpiece, is created by the three part division of the scene, with the bier in the centre, around which the protagonists are grouped, and the two choric groups of onlookers. These three groups are aligned respectively with the altarpiece itself, and the donor portraits of Nera and Francesco to the left and right of the retable. Thus above the altarpiece is the group around the child's bier, above Nera is the group including portrait figures of her daughters and their husbands, and above Francesco is a group of men, many of whom seem to be contemporary portraits. On both levels the contemporary faithful flank the sacred event.⁶⁹⁰

⁶⁸⁸ As Borsook and Offerhaus argue, following Warburg. Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.19.

⁶⁸⁹ Roettgen. p.142.

⁶⁹⁰ See *ibid.* p.142.

8.3.5 Donor portraits

On either side of the altar, Francesco Sassetti and his wife, Nera, appear in donor portraits between their tombs and the Nativity altarpiece, as if converting the pala into a triptych. The fictive marble backgrounds against which they are set are not really niches, but are nevertheless architecturally distinct from both the Chapel and the other fresco scenes. Arguably these are not traditional donor portraits in that there is no patron saint recommending the donors to the Virgin and Child but this is hardly necessary since Francesco and Nera are surrounded by images of Francis. Roettgen sees the donor portraits as still belonging to the earthly realm, but “as if the barrier between the earthly sphere and the heavenly one has been lifted”⁶⁹¹ and it is true that they are transitional images, situated between corpse and resurrection, between death and new life in Christ.

8.3.6 Trial before the Sultan, and Funeral of St Francis and Verification of the Stigmata

Again Ghirlandaio has borrowed from Giotto’s frescoes at Santa Croce. The gestures of the Sultan (his right arm crossing his body diagonally to point at the fire) and Francis (hand raised, pointing at his head) are directly copied, and the basic arrangement of the Sultan in the centre, Francis and the brothers to the right, and the priests to the left is the same. The contrast that Giotto created between the faith of Francis and the ‘faithlessness’ of the Sultan’s priests, and the conflicted pose of the Sultan are thus retained.

Ghirlandaio has, however, accommodated the scene to the spatial treatment of his period, exchanging Giotto’s lateral arrangement for a setting with considerable depth⁶⁹² in which the figures are disposed in a Masacciesque semi-circle and the background landscape disappears into the distance behind the Sultan. He has also adjusted the composition to the lunette shape of the picture field. Instead of Giotto’s

⁶⁹¹ Ibid. p.145.

⁶⁹² Cadogan claims that Ghirlandaio retains the limited depth of Giotto’s scene, but in fact Ghirlandaio’s treatment has considerable depth, using strong perspective, while Giotto’s is much more shallow. See Cadogan. p.93.

standing friar, Ghirlandaio's friars kneel behind Francis so that their figures behind him elegantly follow the curve of the lunette. In contrast, the standing figures of the priests opposite seem almost too large beside the arch and only remain 'within' the picture space because they are about to exit it, just 'behind' the arch. Indeed one man's head is already slightly cut off by it.

Cadogan rightly notes that the man in yellow pointing to the fire while the priests try to leave is based on the tax collector in Masaccio's *Tribute Money* and functions, like him "as a fulcrum between the sultan's followers at the left and the fire and St. Francis at the right". Ghirlandaio has modified his posture so that his right hand gesture

echoes that of the sultan, further linking the right and left halves of the composition [and]... knitting together...the disparate elements of the story spatially and chronologically through the disposition of the figures and their glances and gestures.⁶⁹³

Giotto's influence continues in the *Funeral* whose basic composition is based on the Santa Croce scene with Francis on the bier surrounded by his brothers while the sceptic Jerome verifies the stigmata.⁶⁹⁴ It has been recast, however, in terms inspired by the Brancacci Chapel. Giotto's simple bier has been replaced with a rich damask with gold motifs, and the church itself is now a Brunelleschian, classically ornamented structure, far removed from the plain room depicted in Santa Croce. Sassetti's tomb lies below the depiction of his patron's own death in the hope that Francis will be his intercessor at Judgement Day and that, like Francis, he will be resurrected into a heavenly life.

⁶⁹³ Ibid.p.100.

⁶⁹⁴ Davies describes Jerome as a physician. Gerald S. Davies, *Ghirlandaio* (London: Methuen and Co., 1908). p.81. Bonaventure, however, describes him as a soldier and sceptic. Bonaventure, *The Life of St Francis of Assisi*. p.122.

8.4 Further considerations

From a theological perspective, and within the parameters of this thesis, there are two distinct gaps in the art historical interpretations of these scenes which should now be considered.

8.4.1 Gaps in art historical interpretations

Art historical analyses focus on the scenes with the most ‘historical interest’, i.e. those with the most contemporary portraits and with Florence as a background, and relate these to contemporary events and ideas (e.g. Florence as the New Rome and the importance of peace at this period), and/or to themes of birth, death and resurrection. While the contemporary references must surely have been present in the minds of the viewers (whether or not they were significant factors in the programme design), and while the birth-death-resurrection theme is of primary importance in a funerary chapel with an altarpiece of the Nativity, what seems to get lost in these interpretations is the significance of Francis himself, who is discussed relatively little beyond noting that he is Francesco Sassetti’s onomastic saint and intercessor at the Last Judgement.⁶⁹⁵ Discussion of Francis in the *Confirmation* is invariably secondary to discussion of the portraits and Florentine background (and how the scene was altered to include these), and his presence in the *Raising* is almost overlooked in favour of the portraits and the (undeniably) strong link between the resuscitated child, the Nativity altarpiece below, and the funerary chapel, i.e. the life-death-resurrection theme. These are valid concerns and the discussion is illuminating, but the focus on them has been at the expense of the protagonist. This is in sharp contrast to the literature surrounding the Francis cycle in the Bardi Chapel which is largely occupied with the depictions of Francis himself.⁶⁹⁶

The second gap relates to the use of space in the images. Much has been said about some spatial matters, namely the importance of the Florentine locations as settings

⁶⁹⁵ Lavin does acknowledge Francis’ role, successfully linking Francis to other themes in the Chapel, but her treatment of the Chapel as a whole is brief.

⁶⁹⁶ See 4.2.

for sacred events which happened elsewhere, and the placement of certain frescoes in respect of the Sassetti tombs (the *Funeral of St Francis* above Francesco's tomb, and the donor portraits between the tombs and the altar). In addition, scholars have described the influence on Ghirlandaio's work of both Giotto and Masaccio and how Ghirlandaio borrowed essential relationships between figures from Giotto's treatment, using Giotto's scenes to establish the core of the *Confirmation*, the *Trial before the Sultan* and the *Funeral*, while drawing on Masaccio's technique to compose groups of figures in settings with much greater depth than Giotto ever approached, distributing them in elegant arcs around central encounters. What has barely featured in such discussions, however, is the spatial aspect⁶⁹⁷ of the viewer's interaction with these scenes, or how the presence of a viewer among them shows up additional, spatial, aspects of the cycle's communication of theological content.

The art historical interpretations described above offer pertinent insights into the fresco cycle, though perhaps not as exclusively as their proponents make out.⁶⁹⁸ They are not, however, comprehensive, and it is important to remember that these images are a cycle of Francis and that they may be more fully understood by considering the significance of the protagonist, and by attending to the spatial techniques used to convey the frescoes' meaning to the viewer.

8.4.2 Francis as the link within a web of spiritual connections

Throughout the cycle, Francis is presented as the connecting point between heaven and earth, between secular life and sacred events and, ultimately, between the viewer and God. As the viewer stands in the small Chapel space, surrounded closely on three sides by the frescoes, altar, and tombs, his eyes moving from one wall and tier to another, Francis is the point by which he orientates himself to each scene and from which he begins to interpret its narrative. In the discussion of portraits as a means of engaging the viewer, it has been forgotten that, while Ghirlandaio did not paint

⁶⁹⁷ As opposed to the viewer's recognition of portraits or locations.

⁶⁹⁸ For example, portraiture is not the sole 'key' to appreciating the cycle, while the *ricordanze* interpretation barely considers compositional matters beyond praising Ghirlandaio's skill in handling elegantly multiple concerns.

Francis' physiognomy from life, Francis is the protagonist in all the interior narrative fresco scenes, and remains the most recognisable figure long after other faces have been forgotten or their identity become disputed. Francis was, moreover, a very personally engaging saint. As a mendicant friar, his life was one of ministry to the world, and the popularity of the Franciscans in Florence is attested to by the vast scale of Santa Croce and the piazza in front of it where crowds would gather to listen to the preachers. He was a very 'approachable' saint, someone who had lived locally, whose image was widely disseminated on panel paintings, and whose order remained prominent. By taking Francis as the anchor point in each scene it can be seen that the cycle presents a web of spiritually significant themes and events, linked by the saint not only to each other but to the viewer.

In the *Renunciation*, the saint takes a bold step and is welcomed by the Church, as witnessed by the townsfolk and (unwillingly) his own father. Francis changes his relationship to the world around him, exchanging the material wealth of mercantile transactions for relations with other people that are modelled on Christ. This is the start of the cycle both chronologically, and psychologically as far as the viewer is concerned: from now on Francis is there 'for them', an exemplar of the moral life, a spiritual mentor, and an intercessor.⁶⁹⁹

In the *Stigmatization* directly below, Francis is affirmed by Christ himself (not just his representative, the Bishop) and affirms his dedication to Christ. As well as being visionary and miraculous, the story and its image here are of reciprocity in giving and receiving: Christ gives Francis his own wounds; Francis gives his body (and his earthly life) to Christ. Francis' own body is a locus of spiritual transformation as signified by his gaze, fixed upon the vision, and his outstretched arms, opening the space of his body in an orant gesture of awe and praise which is also one of welcome (the Bishop's gesture in the *Renunciation* above where he opens his arms to Francis is an echo of Francis' broader gesture here), like opening a door to allow someone

⁶⁹⁹ See discussion of the Bardi *Renunciation*, 4.3.1. Goffen argues that the *Renunciation* is the beginning of St Francis' imitation of Christ, while Long sees it as a formal statement of the legitimacy of Francis' conversion as approved by the Bishop, without any celestial activity, rather than an act which anticipates the *Stigmatization*.

(Christ) new entry. The golden rays from the Christ-seraph connect Francis and the vision, and imprint the spiritual, physically.

Where the witnesses to the *Renunciation* were a few citizens, here they are more varied and significant. Unlike Giotto's *Stigmatization*, where Francis is alone in a bare and minimal landscape, Ghirlandaio presents a lush and populated scene with a small town, large city, broad river, birds and animals and, most importantly, other people who witness something extraordinary. Brother Leo is facing away from the vision as seen by Francis, but is clearly witness to the event, if not to the vision in its totality, as he shields his eyes from the light.⁷⁰⁰ The two friars in the background, who seem to be an addition of Ghirlandaio's to the story, presumably do not see the Christ-seraph itself⁷⁰¹ but they point towards it and one shields his eyes in a gesture like Leo's. As for the horsemen fording the river, their eyes seem to be directed towards the falcon attacking the duck. It is possible that they too see the visionary light, but the birds are more immediately in their line of sight and they are probably hunters, using the falcon to catch their birds.⁷⁰² The presence of additional witnesses, and the role of the huntsmen does not seem to have been remarked upon in discussions of this fresco but, if it is the case, as I suggest, that the friars witness something of the event while the hunters (despite their upward glances and the gesture of the man with his hand to his eyes) see only their quarry, then the scene becomes divided into two quite distinct halves so far as the background is concerned. On the right, the city of Pisa would represent worldly affairs, while the huntsmen represent its citizens, engaged in worldly pursuits. On the left, Leo and the other friars witness the brightness of the vision which appears to Francis, against the backdrop of La Verna, where Francis had his mountain retreat. The two sides are linked by the figure of Francis in the centre, with the falcon and duck above him, and

⁷⁰⁰ Regarding the presence of Brother Leo and other witnesses see Arnold Davidson, "Miracles of Bodily Transformation, or, How St Francis Received the Stigmata," in *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison (New York & London: Routledge, 1998).

⁷⁰¹ In any case the Christ-seraph is angled towards Francis and the friars would be seeing it sideways on, and so the Christ figure would be hidden by the blazing seraphim.

⁷⁰² It is tempting to relate the falconers to romances of chivalric Christian knights (remembering that Francis himself had been a knight, although these figures seem to be just hunters) from a century and more previously, and to wonder if there is any link between the falcon and Christ, as in the *Corpus Christi Carol*, 'The Falcon hath borne my make away'. I have not been able to substantiate this connection but it might reward further investigation.

the vision to his right in the top left hand corner of the picture. Nevertheless, there is no sense of a rift between the two: Francis bridges them and we see them in relation to him.

A web of connections branches out from this central figure of Francis: to Leo, his trusted fellow friar; to the Franciscan order in general as represented by the friars in the background and (anachronistically) the village of La Verna with the church built on the site of the vision; to the world beyond and the laity to whom the Franciscans ministered, as represented by Pisa and the huntsmen; and perhaps even to the animal kingdom as represented by the deer, Francis being legendary for his rapport with the animals and birds. A number of different spatial 'levels' are linked by this web.

There is the space which is Francis himself: a locus of hierophany, he occupies space continuous with the rest of the scene, and yet his miraculous vision and stigmatization set him apart. Then there is the heavenly space occupied by the vision, and the everyday space⁷⁰³ of the background which is partially transformed on the left hand side as Leo and the two other friars become aware of the vision and the church at La Verna testifies to the later veneration of this event, while on the right is the untransformed world, waiting for Francis' mission. The Saint's open gesture of welcome links the everyday physical reality and the spiritual, heavenly reality of Christ. He becomes the point of connection, the open pathway between the heavenly and the earthly, connected by the golden rays issuing from the Christ-seraph. The effect of the spiritual is spiritual, but it is also physical (the wounds) and there are physical witnesses to it. This is a stigmatisation but it is also typologically similar to the Transfiguration: the witnesses see a transformation but do not fully understand its significance.

Ghirlandaio's presentation of this scene is less dramatic than Giotto's treatment, and more complex in the connections it suggests between Francis' stigmatization and his mission to the world. This is not to say that its diffusion is more theologically

⁷⁰³ In Roettgen's words, "the miracle is anchored in the reality we know". Roettgen.p.141.

significant than Giotto's intense rendering, but the difference in the artists' use of space to convey content is symptomatic of the cycles more generally.

In the *Confirmation*, the central event of the papal approval of the Franciscan Rule is based on Giotto's version but, rather than Giotto's isolated event in which the receiving of the Rule alone is important, Ghirlandaio presents the significance of the event more generally, relating it to Franciscan ministry in Florence. Behind the papal court, and barely separated from it, the Piazza della Signoria is filled with Florentines going about their business so that the central scene is 'sandwiched' between the painted Florence in the background and the three-dimensional Florence behind the viewer. This city will be a major locus of Franciscan activity, and the viewer sees here how the Franciscan Rule relates to his own life as a citizen in Florence through the friars who come there. In the foreground, the Medici boys and their tutors, ascend the stairs to meet Sasseti and Lorenzo de' Medici (who greet them with gestures which, while not specifically blessing, echo the Pope's gesture behind them). The direction of their movement up the stairs follows the same trajectory as that of Francis kneeling on the steps of the papal throne and reaching up to receive the Rule, while a cleric turns round from the central scene to inspect the new arrivals, further linking the scenes. Clearly some parallel is indicated here, and the most obvious explanation is that the fathers of prominent families must guide and teach their children as the Pope guides the Franciscans and as the Franciscans guide the laity.⁷⁰⁴ As before, Francis is the anchor point in the picture, connecting papal authority handed down from St Peter - and therefore, ultimately, Christ - to the lives of everyday citizens in Florence, and providing an exemplar for bringing up children to be moral and responsible citizens, capable of fulfilling their duty to Church and City.

In the *Raising* below, Francis appears posthumously as a vision, miraculously resuscitating the dead child. The incident is located in front of Santa Trinita, and populated with portraits of contemporaries, including many of the Sasseti family,

⁷⁰⁴ E.g. Davies, *Ghirlandaio*. p.74.

who stand as witnesses to the event, though not engaged in the actual narrative. The viewer stands before the altarpiece where the Christ Child lies beside an empty sarcophagus and looks up to the sarcophagus and bier in the fresco, to the child sitting up, and to Francis appearing above him. The vertical connection makes the simple point that faith in Christ leads to resurrection, and that Francis is both the exemplar of the faithful and their intercessor. As he was transformed by the stigmata, so he can effect transformation in others, through Christ. The implication is that such occurrences are not limited to the past: faith in Christ and prayer to Francis can transform the contemporary world too.

In the *Trial before the Sultan* the focus on the Sultan as the locus of the action is less clear than in Giotto's treatment of the scene, being set further back and behind a very bright and prominent fire in the central foreground. In part this emphasises the contrast between Francis' readiness to enter the flames and the Sultan's reluctant priests. However, the viewer stands directly in front of the fire, opposite the Sultan, creating a cross whose four points are Francis, the man in yellow pointing the priests towards the fire, the Sultan, and the viewer. The viewer is therefore in the same relation to the Sultan as the man in yellow is to Francis. As he stands challenging the priests to enter the fire, the viewer is in the position of challenging the Sultan to make a leap of faith (as Francis is willing to do). He is also, however, being challenged *by* the Sultan to enter the fire and profess his own faith, like Francis, and unlike the Sultan's priests. Both the Sultan's indecision and his gesture⁷⁰⁵ demand a response from the viewer. Whereas Giotto focussed on the Sultan's conflicted state, Ghirlandaio opens the scene outwards into the Chapel, including the viewer and challenging him to profess his own faith, using Francis as his model.

Ghirlandaio's *Funeral* also borrows from Giotto, differing primarily in the absence of the soul being assumed into heaven. Instead, this is implied by the direction of the viewer's gaze which runs up from Francis' face, left of centre, to the friar kneeling close to him in grief on the far side of the bier, to the sceptic Jerome and the

⁷⁰⁵ The Sultan's gesture may be one of choice (choosing Christianity) or command. Cf. the same subject in the Bardi Chapel, 4.3.4.

notary, to the friar standing behind the notary,⁷⁰⁶ and thence up to the Crucifix on the altar in the apse behind, which is directly above the standing friar's head.⁷⁰⁷ The soul itself is not shown but the eye sweeps naturally from Francis up to the Crucifix, signifying the saint's physical and spiritual link with Christ, and assuring the viewer of Francis' resurrection. If anything, this composition brings the viewer more closely in contact both with Francis and with faithful belief in the resurrection of the dead, since what we see is not the soul being assumed into heaven but the link between Francis and Christ. This is a link to which the viewer is invited to attach himself through the example provided by the friar kneeling in front of the bier. This friar is closest to the viewer's own position and models the correct response to the scene, kneeling and venerating the saint with his Christ-like wounds. The visual implication is that, by coming close to Francis, one comes close to Christ, a connection made not only on the basis of the stigmata with which the saint was blessed, but spatially, through the composition of the scene. Again Francis is the linking figure, making the connection with the viewer, offering a way into spiritual transformation.

As an 'anchor' in each scene, Francis is the foundation from which the viewer understands the individual scenes and the cycle as a whole. There are strong precedents for seeing Francis as a foundational figure: Francis himself had received a vision at San Damiano in which Christ told him to rebuild the Church, and Pope Innocent III had approved the Franciscan order after his initial objections because of a dream in which he saw the Lateran Basilica about to collapse, but propped up by a humble friar like Francis. Both Francis and the ecclesiastical authorities saw it as his job to reinvigorate the Church, and in Florence Santa Croce eventually became the headquarters of the inquisition, taking over from the Dominicans at Santa Maria Novella in maintaining the official line. The Franciscan Order, though divided by

⁷⁰⁶ Celano describes Francis' close relationship with Brother Elias of Cortona whom he appointed as vicar-general c.1221 and who still held that office at the time of Francis' death. He was privileged to see the stigmata during Francis' life time, and after Francis' death he wrote to the friars informing them of this. For references see the index entry on Brother Elias in Celano. p.393. Thomas of Ecclestone, author of the *Analactaca Franciscana*, records that Elias had been a notary in Bologna before joining the Franciscans. The clothing of the figure next to the sceptic Jerome suggests that this is meant to be Elias in the garb of a notary, lending formality to the verification of the stigmata.

⁷⁰⁷ The Crucifix is also the point of convergence of the lines of the upper architecture. See Davies, *Ghirlandaio*. p.79.

in-fighting, was seen as a force that cleansed and renewed the Church and inspired greater faith. Francis' foundational role in the frescoes is thus in tune with his role as the re-builder of the Church, and sits well with the idea of renewal in the golden Augustan age, with Florence's role as a New Rome, and with the theme of birth, death, and resurrection which is so prominent in the Chapel (see above).⁷⁰⁸

8.4.3 Franciscus alter Christus or Francis as mediator

Ghirlandaio's use of Giotto's cycle at Santa Croce has been demonstrated, and it is clear that he borrowed considerably from the earlier master, while presenting a very different treatment of the subject, as is hardly surprising given a distance of more than a century and a half between them and the artistic developments in that time. The debate about whether Giotto's Francis is presented as an *alter Christus* was considered earlier in relation to the Bardi Chapel.

In brief, Goffen argues that in the Bardi Chapel we see Francis as *Franciscus alter Christus*, based on Bonaventure's biography of the saint.⁷⁰⁹ However, she claims that Giotto's treatment succeeds in presenting Francis in such a way as to overcome divisions between the Conventual and Spiritual factions, which, she notes, were derived from tensions experienced by Francis himself as he sought to balance private prayer and public mission.⁷¹⁰ Long disagrees with this interpretation on the grounds that it was the Spirituals rather than the Conventuals who interpreted Francis as *alter Christus* and that Francis' identification with Christ is actually played down in the cycle. Instead, the cycle illustrates "Francis's role as an exemplar for the faithful"⁷¹¹ being divided into "his calling, his way of life, and his approval by God"⁷¹², and presenting a moderate vision of the order, emphasising the official sanction of the Church and downplaying the theme of poverty. She argues that the Bardi cycle

⁷⁰⁸ I am grateful to Ben Quash for bringing to my attention the theme of renewal as distinct from resurrection.

⁷⁰⁹ Rather than Celano's earlier one which had been suppressed and replaced with the official version by Bonaventure, used by the Conventuals,

⁷¹⁰ Goffen.p.77.

⁷¹¹ Long. p.90

⁷¹² Ibid. p.90

illustrates the Franciscan way of life, which naturally involves *imitatio Christi* but does not necessarily equate it with *alter Christus*.⁷¹³

If Giotto's presentation was moderate, then Ghirlandaio's is even more so. Rubin noted the absence of "outrage and misunderstanding" in the *Renunciation*, and the apparent acceptance of what should be a jarring portrayal of Francis' rejection of worldly goods against a background of the city where Sassetti made a fortune, asking why this reading was "not viewed as perversion".⁷¹⁴ However, the cycle is not dramatic. The only scene containing any conflict is the *Trial* and there the conflict is that of a heathen ruler struggling with the possibility of conversion, and an open challenge to the viewer to determine and defend his own position as a Christian, in imitation of Francis. Francis' likeness to Christ here is based on perfect *imitatio Christi*, rather than actual identification with Christ, as *alter Christus*. This is not a cycle of the radical Francis and there is no pictorial tension between the imperial ruler Augustus (or indeed Lorenzo de' Medici, or Sassetti) and the Saint who espoused poverty, chastity and obedience. Augustus is remembered as a bringer of peace and prosperity, and Francis is no threat to the Church or civic authorities. Indeed, with the exception of the *Trial*, he *demand*s very little of the viewer. He is the intercessor, the bridging point between God, Church, and layman: a mediator rather than challenger or judge.

Francis is able to be this bridging point, this mediator, because he is both active in the world, and the perfect example of *imitatio Christi*, as physically attested by the stigmata. Francis' own christoform body mediates his vision and his approval by Christ. Christ has made his mark on Francis, who opened his body to Christ for him to imprint, thereby opening the possibility for man of becoming more like Christ. Thus Francis is, in himself, an image, though a divinely 'painted' one,⁷¹⁵ and the

⁷¹³ See 4.2.

⁷¹⁴ Rubin. p.103.

⁷¹⁵ An *acheiropoieta*, so to speak.

portrayal of his mediation in images seems particularly appropriate, suggesting a mediation of grace that is highly visual. Francis mediates his vision physically.⁷¹⁶

Form and content in this cycle are thus perfectly attuned in the figure of Francis and he is presented as mediator, as bridge between humanity and God, both in earthly life and after death. The funerary theme of the *Raising*, the sarcophagus in the *Nativity* and the saint's *Funeral* (placed above Sassetti's tomb) indicates strongly Francis' role as intercessor for Sassetti and his family after their deaths. The *Raising* in particular suggests that Francis is active beyond death, while the verification of his stigmata proves his efficacy through his likeness to Christ.

As well as being an effective intercessor, Francis seems to mediate between the many themes expressed in the frescoes. By acting as the connecting point between Christ, Church,⁷¹⁷ and laity, the figure of Francis also harmonises the diverse themes of peace, reconciliation, Florence as a New Rome, life, death and resurrection, political affiliations and family matters. As intercessor he represents the individual, as an approved re-invigorator of the Church he represents ecclesiastical authority, and as stigmatized saint he represents Christ. If Francesco Sassetti were ever in doubt about the possibility of harmonising the many aspects of his life, with its intertwined secular and religious concerns, he could not have chosen a better saint than Francis, as presented by Ghirlandaio. This is not the Francis of earlier fresco cycles (he is less radical than the presentation at Santa Croce and far removed from the Assisi cycle), but a moderate, mediating, interceding, saint who smooths out frictions in this life, gently embodies good and humble behaviour, and offers hope of resurrection in Christ.

⁷¹⁶ I am grateful to Ben Quash for noting the physicality of Francis' role as a mediator.

⁷¹⁷ I.e. the clerical hierarchy.

8.4.4 Technical lessons from the Brancacci Chapel

Ghirlandaio applied what he had learned from studying the Brancacci frescoes⁷¹⁸ to his work at Santa Trinita. In particular, he adopted Masaccio's characteristic compositional device of a central event to which the eye is drawn and around which all the activity is concentrated, surrounded by a semi-circle of onlookers which the viewer himself completes into a circle, becoming part of the scene. Since this technique has been discussed at length with regard to the Brancacci frescoes, there is no need to do so again here, but suffice to say that much of what was said about the techniques used in the Brancacci Chapel to involve the viewer in the scene and convey content through spatial manipulation also applies to the Sassetti Chapel. This is particularly true of the *Renunciation*, *Trial*, *Funeral* and (in a modified form) *Raising*. The use of these techniques is instrumental in achieving the connections between Francis, Christ, the world of Franciscan ministry, and the viewer.⁷¹⁹

8.4.5 Foreground and background

Another technique which creates these connections, and forms this web of relations, is Ghirlandaio's development of the relationship between foreground and background.⁷²⁰ This is important both technically, in terms of his skilled handling of perspective which gives his scenes considerable credible depth, and in terms of the significance of relation between foreground and background in terms of communicating content. Such a relationship barely exists in Giotto's scenes, with their limited depth, and is only used in a few scenes in the Brancacci Chapel and to a much lesser extent (in the Oltrarno piazza in the *Raising of Tabitha and Healing of a Cripple*, the *Tribute Money*, and perhaps the countryside glimpsed through the archway in *Crucifixion of St Peter*).

⁷¹⁸ And possibly the lost fresco known as the *Sagra* that was once at Santa Maria del Carmine, which was recorded as including many contemporary portraits.

⁷¹⁹ See 8.4.2.

⁷²⁰ Ghirlandaio's landscape and townscape backgrounds are influenced by Netherlandish art but his employment of them on the left wall at Santa Trinita appears to convey content rather than solely to display his talent in the fashionable style of the time.

In the *Vision of Augustus*, the trigram sunburst is in the point of the lunette, dominating a wide sky above Rome. The space between Augustus and the sibyl opens out into a broad vista of Rome, as seen from a height (supposedly from the Capitoline Hill). The vision has significance not only for Augustus and his companions in the foreground, but to the great city in the distance below. Directly beneath the sunburst, breaking into the picture plane, is the Sassetti coat of arms in ceramic, surrounded by a garland of fruit and flowers in Della Robbia ware. The circular shape echoes that of the sunburst above, creating a strong visual link between the two and suggesting that Augustus' vision is of personal importance for the Sassetti. The lower half of the garland cuts into the archway, placing the family both in the picture plane above – linked to the vision - and in the Chapel below, where depth becomes not only a matter of pictorial perspective but of three-dimensional architectural space.

In the *Renunciation*, the relation that Francis, kneeling in the central foreground, has to the background scene of a prosperous looking trading city (whether it is Geneva or not, it is clearly a port) changes fundamentally as he discards his rich clothes for the protection of the bishop's cloak. He is no longer determined by that world, taking from it wealth but spiritually constrained by familial obligations and that very prosperity; instead he renounces the world in order to give *to* it. His relation to the world is radically altered so that from now on it is expressed in spiritual terms: he offers ministry, and he asks for Christian charity. Giotto set this scene of Francis' translation from the secular to the spiritual against the Episcopal Palace, indicating the protection and strength of the Church; Ghirlandaio sets it against the world that Francis will minister to, expressing the change in his orientation as much in terms of the world he will serve as in terms of the Church which welcomes and approves him. Similarly, in the *Stigmatization*, Francis' relation to his brothers, the secular world, and perhaps the animal kingdom, is redefined through his receiving of the stigmata.

On the altar wall, the Florentine settings inform the viewer that what happens here is directly relevant to their own lives. We see the world 'as it is' (or 'as it was' for the contemporary viewer) and we see also the spiritual transformation that Francis

effects in it. Florence is presented as a city of God, perhaps a New Rome, with religion as the warp and weft of public and private life. In the *Confirmation*, the Florentine setting is literally the backdrop to Franciscan life: the brothers receiving their rule will minister to this city. We have moved from the sweeping landscape of the *Stigmatization* where Francis' relation to the world was redefined, to the specific case of Franciscan ministry to Florence. In the *Raising*, the incident is transported to the piazza in front of Santa Trinita: the viewer is invited to transform his view of the Florence, starting just outside Santa Trinita, and to invoke Francis as a protector of family and city, two primary concerns of the contemporary viewer.

Where the left wall depicts broad landscapes as backgrounds to Francis's approval by Church and Christ, and the altar wall relates his earthly ministry and continued heavenly protection to Florence, the landscapes and buildings in the scenes on the right wall are of less importance. Here, the relation between foreground and background attaches to what occupies the central space at the deepest point of the scene, i.e. the Sultan in the upper scene, and the Crucifix on the altar in the lower. The Sultan represents the universal scope of Francis' mission to the world (including the heathen of foreign lands) and the conversion that he effects,⁷²¹ while the Crucifix represents the assumption of Francis' soul into heaven and his resurrection and relates the Saint's physical likeness to Christ, through his stigmata, to Christ's suffering on the Cross, and therefore Francis' role as an intercessor for Sassetti and others.

The exception to the rule is the pair of donor portraits. Francesco and Nera have no background depth to relate to. As Roettgen correctly remarks, they are between the earthly and heavenly spheres,⁷²² and one must assume that their images are no longer related to anything earthly but defined by their perpetual prayers, directed towards the Christ Child in the altarpiece.

⁷²¹ The Sultan converted secretly for reasons of political expedience, convinced by the strength of Francis' faith in being willing to enter the fire, as compared to the cowardice of his own priests.

⁷²² Roettgen. p.145.

8.4.6 Connections as covenants

Having established the nature of the cycle as a network of connections between the heavenly and the earthly, anchored in each scene by Francis himself, one might ask what these ‘connections’ consist of. They are not solely mimetic, relating a representation to its subject. Nor are they purely active or efficacious: the donor portraits are intended to perpetuate their prayers and their faith in Christ and the resurrection he brings, while the portraits in narrative scenes may, as discussed above, bear witness to the truth of sacred events and express the faith of their subjects, but the narrative scenes themselves are not like this. The connections seem rather to be variations on a theme of promises, commitments, and covenants, and concomitant incidents of fulfilment, proof or attestation. In the web of these connections, the viewer is assured that divine promises are fulfilled, by reference to past promises and fulfilments (e.g. the *Vision of Augustus*) and future ones (the implicit promise of the resurrection and Francis’ presence as intercessor).

In the entrance lunette, Augustus sees a vision of the child (here represented by the IHS trigram) who will come to rule and judge the world, a promise of the future.⁷²³ He erects an altar on the site, and the promise of the coming ruler links Old Rome in the valley below to the New Rome that is Florence, in the Piazza della Signoria and at Santa Trinita, depicted on the wall of the Chapel, where the altarpiece celebrates the fulfilment of Augustus’ vision in the Nativity.

Francis is accorded the Church’s protection when he leaves the secular world and dedicates his life to Christ. His own vow is reciprocated, first by Christ’s representative (the Bishop who welcomes him into the Church) and then by Christ himself through the vision of the Christ-seraph and the imprinting of the stigmata, which are a physical seal of Francis’ spiritual relation with Christ.⁷²⁴ This is attested at the verification of the stigmata by Jerome, as recorded by the former notary,

⁷²³ The legend describes the Virgin and Child.

⁷²⁴ Bonaventure describes the stigmata as a seal. See Goffen. p.67.

Brother Elias,⁷²⁵ while the depth of Francis' faith is proved by his readiness to walk through the fire before the Sultan.

The approval of the rule creates a covenant between the papacy and the Franciscans and establishes formally the commitment that a friar makes on entering the Order. The juxtaposition of this scene with the Medici boys and their tutors being greeted by Sassetti and Lorenzo de' Medici implies correspondence between the Pope's covenant with the Franciscans and the commitment of these leading citizens to their families and the next generation. Children themselves are a kind of covenant, a promise of the future, equated with new and continued life⁷²⁶ and welcomed as a divine blessing as God blessed Abraham and Sarah, Joachim and Anne, and Zachariah and Elizabeth. On the altar wall, the Christ Child on the altarpiece is vertically linked with the resuscitated notary's child, and with the children ascending the stairs in the Confirmation scene. So we look from the Son of God, to the son of the miracle in times past, to the contemporary Medici sons, on a vertical axis which presents life as blessed by God and full of promise in the guise of the next generation. For Sassetti, having lost one son, the birth of another must have seemed like a divine blessing and affirmation of his family's future, and Sassetti was said to be fulfilling a vow in endowing the Chapel, possibly related to death of one son and birth of another. Finally, Sassetti's tomb lies directly beneath the *Funeral of St Francis*, close to his patron saint whom he hopes will intercede for him at the Last Judgement, as he has interceded for the notary's son in the *Raising*.

One might reasonably ask whether these covenants, expressed as promises, commitments, and fulfilments, imply a Doubting Thomas-like need for proof. The tone of the cycle, however, suggests otherwise: the lack of dramatic tension in these scenes has been noted already, as has the way in which Ghirlandaio harmonises various (potentially conflicting) themes. Rather than a need for proof, the cycle expresses affirmation and an atmosphere of fulfilment, whether of promises already fulfilled, or of faith in their fulfilment in the future. As the vision of Augustus

⁷²⁵ See note 706 on page 242.

⁷²⁶ Coonin. p.64.

became flesh in Christ, as Francis promised himself to the Church and Christ and received earthly and divine seals of approval (the latter verified at his death), as he ventured martyrdom to convert the heathen, and as he resuscitated the dead child at the invocation of his friars, so he will intercede for Sassetti and his family, who have affirmed their faith by representing themselves as witnesses to the sacred events, and in perpetual prayer. Whether Sassetti's faith was as sure as the frescoes imply, or whether they present an ideal, is impossible to know, but the viewer is clearly invited to see that the visions of Augustus and Francis are assurances of promises that are then, visibly, fulfilled, and that the miracles of the *Stigmatization* and the *Raising* are likewise fulfilments of God's covenant with humanity. In this context, Francis himself is a form of covenant between God and human beings, fulfilling his promise to God in life, in willingness to suffer, and in posthumous intercession.⁷²⁷

Contemporary Florentines would have understood promises, covenants, commitments and alliances, not only as biblical concepts expressing the relationship between God and humanity, but as vital elements of their own daily lives, as recorded in their family notebooks. Sassetti was a banker and a prominent citizen, versed in the legalities and formalities of trading and finance. He and his contemporaries would have been used to making agreements, having them witnessed and recorded by notaries (such as the one in the *Funeral*) and carrying out their commitments as men whose financial, political, and social positions depended on being as good as their word.

⁷²⁷ I am grateful to Ben Quash for encouraging me to consider the theme of proof as allied to promise fulfilment.

8.5 Conclusions

The frescoes use the intimate *material* space of this small funerary chapel to establish a network of connections among which the viewer stands, turning from one wall to the next, reading the images horizontally, vertically, diagonally. The content of these cross references is rich and varied, relating to numerous themes within the frescoes' imagery, but in each case Francis is the pin or anchor that connects one point and the next. The connections themselves can be seen as covenants or commitments, threads that bind Christ, Francis, the Church, laymen, and the secular world, through events that indicate or invite faith.

The *visual* space of the frescoes portrays these connections and covenants through depictions of spiritually charged, transformative and transformatory⁷²⁸ moments. Francis leaves the secular world, obtains papal approval of his rule, prepares to walk through fire, receives the stigmata which are verified after his death, and performs a posthumous miracle. He makes a commitment and receives ecclesiastical and divine approval; he proves his faith and his faith is itself proved in the verification of his wounds. The use of local and contemporary settings, particularly Florentine ones, supports the web of spiritual connections between events in the life of the Saint and the lives of contemporary Florentines, especially the Sassetti and their friends. From a theological perspective, the figure of Francis himself fulfils the role of the 'engaging portrait'.⁷²⁹ He attracts the viewer and offers them a way to a transformed reality, while the compositional technique and placing of figures draws the viewer into the scene as witness (as in the left wall scenes), participant (as in the right wall scenes), or direct beneficiary (as in the altar wall scenes where Francis' activity is immediately related to contemporary Florence).

In nature and form, the frescoes are an ideal medium for communicating Francis' transformed, gracious, humanity, and his relationship to the world to which he ministered, to his supplicant, Francesco Sassetti, and to the viewer. The relationship of the two-dimensional frescoes to the 'reality' they reflect is analogous to Francis'

⁷²⁸ I.e. having the potential to be transformative, as in the case of the *Trial before Sultan*. See note 360 on page 127.

⁷²⁹ The figure whose familiar face 'invites' the viewer into the scene.

relation to the world. Both are physically part of ‘reality’ but distinguished from it by the absence of certain features usually assumed of this reality, such as three-dimensionality, or ‘secular’ pursuits. In dispensing with certain aspects of ‘reality’ Francis, and the frescoes of his life, are reduced (in the sense of evaporating the unnecessary) to an intense concentration of the essential, such that those absences are distilled into presence: a kind of ‘hyper-reality’ which is both recognisable and transformative. Francis’ proven faith is verified by the Church and by God, the one shaping his life within the structure of the authority of apostolic succession, the other imprinting his flesh such that his own bodily existence becomes a verification of God’s covenant with humanity in Christ. Francis is the visible fulfilment of that promise, and his christoform image – seen in his actions and in his wounds – is challenging and fertile, propagating *imitatio Christi* by transformative encounter with others, so that they too may become images of Christ.

The nature of Franciscan ministry⁷³⁰ – as travelling, mendicant preachers – brought the friars into contact with people of all ranks and occupations, and thus with ‘the world’ in all its diversity. That the Sassetti frescoes include multiple themes and concerns, (including life, death and resurrection, the Nativity, the Last Judgement, the peace with the papacy, humanist interests such classical art and literature, Florence as the New Rome, *istoria* as exemplum, and the uses of portraiture, as well family matters as detailed in *ricordanze*) is thus entirely in accord with a cycle of Francis, whose mission was, after all, to the world.

The attentive viewer follows these threads within and between the scenes, and sees there the connections between his own life, the lives of contemporaries, the life of Francis, and the promised life of the resurrection. Surrounded by images of life and death, he is invited to join himself to a network of spiritual activity in the physical world, in faithful hope of the life to come, a hope expressed three-dimensionally in a cruciform shape, extending from the altarpiece on a vertical axis to the scene of the resuscitation, and on a horizontal axis towards the donors and their tombs. There may also be a temporal element to the viewer’s experience of this spatial arrangement, as his gaze travels in a long arc from the Augustan vision to its

⁷³⁰ At least in its early days, and to some extent thereafter.

fulfilment in the Nativity altarpiece, a short arc from the *Renunciation* to the *Stigmatization*, and another longer one, running across the Chapel, to the *Verification*. This heightens the viewer's physical engagement with the images, requiring him to look back and forth from one image to another.⁷³¹ The viewer is both physically part of the network by virtue simply of his presence in the Chapel, and potentially spiritually part of it, if he so wills. The frescoes open themselves to the viewer through this spiritual web, and enable a connection which is both physically and spiritually mediated (echoing the intense physical mediation of the spiritual which characterises the stigmatization) between the *visual* space of the images and the *receptive* space of the viewer.

⁷³¹ I am grateful to Ben Quash for noting the temporal element in the viewer's experience.

9 A Transformative Deësis: the Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella

Scenes from the Lives of the Virgin and St John the Baptist, Ghirlandaio, 1480s.

John the Baptist is the patron saint of Florence and of the cycle's donor, while the Church is dedicated to the Virgin, beloved by the Florentines and nominal abbess of the Dominicans. Understandably, therefore, their selection as protagonists in the Chancel Chapel of the city's largest Dominican church has attracted little comment. This case study argues that the juxtaposition of the Virgin and the Baptist has considerable theological significance beyond their patronal status and explores their relationship to each other, to the function of the Chapel, and to the viewer. There are striking similarities in the transformative roles of the Virgin and Baptist and in their relation to birth, baptism, death, and resurrection. As such they are closely linked to the transformative eucharistic and funerary functions of the Chapel. Ghirlandaio's compositional strategies link the pictorial spaces to the Chapel space, creating a large-scale deësis group,⁷³² and resonating powerfully with the life of the viewer, whether contemporary or modern.

⁷³² The Deësis (Greek for supplication or intercession) is the grouping in art of Christ in Majesty with the Virgin and John the Baptist. See Ken Parry and others, eds., *Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). The motif may date to the fifth or sixth century and was described in the seventh century by St Sophronius of Damascus who recorded a dream in which he saw an image with Christ in the centre and the Virgin and Baptist on either side. Sophronius of Damascus, *Encomium Ss Cyri Et Joannis Pg, Lxxxvii 3557/8d*. See Ernst H. Kantorowicz, "Ivories and Litanies," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5, (1942). p.70 n.4 and Melanie McDonagh, "Devotion to St John the Baptist in England in the Middle Ages" (Cambridge, 2003). p.68. Writing about the frescoes by Nardo de Cione in the Strozzi Chapel nearby, Joachim Poeschke describes the altar wall Last Judgement as "a variant of the Deësis scheme [with] Mary and John the Baptist appear[ing] as intercessors, with the apostles enthroned below them." The altar retable shows Christ enthroned giving book and keys to Saints Thomas Aquinas and Peter, presented by the Virgin and Baptist. Poeschke says that Orcagna's original frescoes for the Chancel Chapel included the lives of both the Virgin and the Baptist. Poeschke. pp.338-339.

9.1 The cycle

The side walls depict the lives of the Virgin⁷³³ and Baptist,⁷³⁴ with one scene from each cycle intersecting with the altar wall below a *Coronation of the Virgin* and the Dominican saints, Thomas Aquinas and Peter Martyr. The left hand wall depicts, from left to right: the *Expulsion of Joachim* and the *Nativity of the Virgin* on the lowest tier; the *Presentation in the Temple* and the *Marriage of the Virgin* on the second; the *Adoration of the Magi* and the *Massacre of the Innocents* on the third; and the *Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin* in the lunette. On the right hand wall, from right to left, are: the *Annunciation to Zachariah* and the *Visitation* on the lowest tier; the *Birth of the Baptist* and the *Naming of the Baptist* on the second; the *Baptist Preaching* and the *Baptism of Christ* on the third; and *Herod's Feast* in the lunette. Below the altar wall lunette, flanking the window, are *St Dominic Burning Heretical Writings* and the *Martyrdom of St Peter Martyr*. The middle tier has the *Annunciation* (beside the *Marriage of the Virgin*) and *The Young St John Departing for the Wilderness* (beside the *Naming of the Baptist*). The lowest tier has donor portraits of Giovanni Tornabuoni and his wife Francesca.

⁷³³ Source references: Matt 1; Lk 1; de Voragine, *The Golden Legend, Readings on the Saints*. Vol.1. pp.37-43;78-84, 196-202; Vol 2. pp. 77-97, 149-158.

⁷³⁴ Source references: Matt. 3; Mk 1; Lk. 1, 3; Jn 1; *ibid.* Vol.1. pp.328-336; Vol.2. pp.132-140. See also Fra Domenico Cavalca, "Vita Di San Giovanni Battista," in *Volgarizzamento Delle Vite De' Santi Padri* (Milan: 1830). Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, "Giovannino Battista: A Study in Renaissance Religious Symbolism " *The Art Bulletin* 37, no. 2 (1955). Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, "Giovannino Battista: A Supplement," *The Art Bulletin* 43, no. 4 (1961).

9.2 Interpretations

In spite of fluctuations in Ghirlandaio's artistic reputation,⁷³⁵ art historians have long been impressed by the scale of the Tornabuoni project and the conformity of the hands that painted it. The main interest, however, has lain in identifying the portraits. Aby Warburg's discussion of the portraiture and its purpose provided a defence of the piety of the patrons in spite of the obvious display of wealth and power which the Chapel represents, and others have continued this research.⁷³⁶ Recent discussion of the Chapel has focussed on the themes of patronage and family concerns⁷³⁷ and/or Ghirlandaio's narrative style.⁷³⁸

9.2.1 Narrative skill

Lavin describes the double cycle as "absolutely without parallel in the history of art" in its harmonious progression: the scenes move "smoothly from the nave to the altar wall on every tier" and the two sides mirror⁷³⁹ each other "with no issue of chronological precedence" as "the two Lives are meant to be read in concert".⁷⁴⁰ Not only is Lavin excited by the unique programme layout - a simple arrangement which "reads in continuous, unbroken rhythmic continuity" - but she sees it as replacing "fifteenth-century freedom in visual order" with a "visual balance" which represents a "soothing reassurance of doctrinal stability."⁷⁴¹

Lavin identifies perspective and figure grouping as key to the narrative flow. The architecture is mostly "centralized and frontal" and the "[p]erspective is used with

⁷³⁵ See 15.2, 16.2.

⁷³⁶ Aby Warburg, "Bildniskunst Und Florentinische Fruhrenaissance" in *Aby Warburg, Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Dieter Wuttke (Baden-Baden: 1980). See also Rubin.

⁷³⁷ E.g. Rubin. Patricia Simons, "Patronage in the Tornaquinci Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence" in *Patronage, Art and Society*, ed. P. Simons, F.W. Kent, and J.C. Eade (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

⁷³⁸ E.g. Cadogan. and Lavin, *The Place of Narrative: Mural Decoration in Italian Churches 431-1600*.

⁷³⁹ Lavin appears to be referring to arrangement rather than content.

⁷⁴⁰ Lavin, *The Place of Narrative: Mural Decoration in Italian Churches 431-1600*. pp.210-212.

Lavin does not explain the relation of the Virgin and Baptist, simply claiming that the harmonious scenes do not vie for priority. The brevity of her comments, related to composition, style, and geometry rather than to the protagonists, is no doubt because her analysis is only a short section of a longer book.

⁷⁴¹ *Ibid.* pp.210-212. Doctrinal stability would, of course, have been a Dominican priority.

accomplished understatement, the viewpoint becoming slightly more oblique as the tiers rise.” The result is the perception that, although the scenes are high up and the natural light “works against the narrative...the action nonetheless seems relatively easy to view.” She argues that, with the exception of the *Birth of the Virgin* and *Visitation*, “asymmetricality is used to reinforce the movement of the narrative” but the protagonists and figure groupings are centralised and the landscapes in the preaching and baptism scenes come together at their intersection to “unify the tier as a whole”.⁷⁴² Lavin’s statements about asymmetricality and centrality are not as contradictory as they might seem although, unhelpfully, she does not expand on them. An analysis in terms of horizontals and diagonals might be more revealing, and will be discussed below.

In Lavin’s opinion, the “portrait spectators in the lower, more accessible tiers” which dominate many commentaries, “add their presence to the scenes unobtrusively and without interrupting the narrative flow.”⁷⁴³ She sees them as accessories to the narrative rather than protagonists, and her verdict is thus one of harmony, stability, and clearly legible narrative in which the contemporary figures are comfortably accommodated and the stories of the Virgin and Baptist progress in an orderly fashion. This smooth chronology might seem “obvious and inevitable” but Lavin believes it is a “classic statement, subtle in concept and suave in execution” which demonstrates that Giovanni Tornabuoni had an “excellent rapport with the Dominicans of Santa Maria Novella” and which she thinks suggests that he “embraced straightforward religious values in an almost antihumanist way.” By this Lavin seems to mean that although the portraits are numerous, their presence does not reflect an individualist agenda since “little or no reference is made to private feelings or experiences.”⁷⁴⁴ Arguably, however, the humanist interest in history and the relation of significant past events to the present, could be sufficient reason for the insertion of contemporary figures in historical events.⁷⁴⁵

⁷⁴² Ibid. p.211.

⁷⁴³ Ibid. p.212.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid. p.207.

⁷⁴⁵ To all intents and purposes the sacred events of these narratives were considered to be historical.

Cadogan's more detailed analysis⁷⁴⁶ is effectively summarized here:

Ghirlandaio dramatizes the sacred stories through a hierarchy of narrative incident, reduction of action to a single encounter between two figures, construction of symmetrical, clear, and monumental spatial design and orderly profusion of detail. This sacred world, idealized yet recognisable, is opened to the viewer through the candid gazes of the portraits who view it or through the exemplary behaviour of the narrative participants. The decoration as a whole, knit together by the serenely confident classical structure of the enframing architecture, is perhaps the foremost example of early Renaissance art, in which naturalism and classicism, empiricism and idealism, illusion and decoration are held in a precious, fleeting equilibrium.⁷⁴⁷

Cadogan discusses the role of portraiture⁷⁴⁸ but focuses on the communication of narrative through the depiction of space, action, and time, as Ghirlandaio's great talent. The space she characterises as "lucid" and "monumental" with "self-contained" scenes constructed using convincing Albertian single point perspective (except for the landscapes) and inhabited by their figures.⁷⁴⁹ Skilful foreshortening and complex architectural structures create legible narrative spaces while, as Roettgen notes, the framing devices reflect the "forms and colours"⁷⁵⁰ of the painted architecture. It might be overstatement (particularly regarding the landscapes) to say that "the wall and picture space become one",⁷⁵¹ but the frames blend well with the scenes, especially the architectural ones. Given the scale of the Chapel and the difficulty involved in looking at more than a couple of scenes at once, each must stand independently, as well as in concert with its neighbours. In this respect the framing devices helpfully delineate each scene while harmonising the whole.

⁷⁴⁶ Cadogan focuses exclusively on Ghirlandaio, whereas Lavin's book is wider in scope.

⁷⁴⁷ Cadogan. p.90.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid. pp.87-90. See also 8.2.4.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid. p.74.

⁷⁵⁰ Roettgen. p.171.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid. p.171.

The spatial construction – the fore and middle ground defined by architecture – helps to make the action ‘legible’, not least because, as Cadogan points out, the “main action takes place in the foreground” with “subsidiary action in the background”. Thus in the *Expulsion*, the action is “described as a single, potent encounter between two figures which are isolated from the other[s]”. The main encounter is between the priest and Joachim, which is made more legible by comparison with the High Priest. Spatial and architectural symmetry and coherence, and the placement of figures, all contribute to the “clarity and legibility”.⁷⁵²

Within these legible spaces, action is conveyed by expression, posture, and complementary figures. In the *Expulsion* Joachim’s surprise, the priest pushing him, and the lips parted “as if speaking” all impart energy to the scene, while the contrasting action of the acceptable sacrifice behind them shows the offerant being “drawn into the center, while Joachim is thrust out”.⁷⁵³

The third aspect of narrative is time and although the static medium of paint is challenging in this respect, 15th century artists used perspectival spatial structures to create different locations within a picture field and define the various moments in a sequential narrative, rather than depicting the same figure many times in a single picture.⁷⁵⁴ With the exception of Anne in the *Birth of the Virgin*, Ghirlandaio avoids the repeated figure, and in the synchronic scene of the *Feast of Herod* he combines the Feast and the Decollation of the Baptist without repeating the figures, by including the Baptist’s head but not the beheading.⁷⁵⁵ He also avoids dividing the picture into different locations for different incidents. As in the *Expulsion*, two complementary actions occur, each explaining the other. The dancing Salome moves downstage towards the centre, coming from the viewer’s right, while the head is brought in upstage left.

⁷⁵² Cadogan. p.75.

⁷⁵³ Ibid. p.75.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid. p.81.

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid. p.82.

Their actions are complementary...as is their role in the story of the Baptist's martyrdom; Salome's dance is the beginning, the severed head the end; her action is the cause, the servant's presentation the effect...simplification of narrative incident and clarity of spatial and figure design contribute to the legibility of the narrative.⁷⁵⁶

Cadogan describes Ghirlandaio's narrative technique as having Giottesque "economy" and "clarity",⁷⁵⁷ and his practice of structuring the action both to narrate and interpret the story as reflecting Giotto's narratives which,

depict an episode of great drama in a story, but allude also to actions preceding or following in which the physical and emotional implications of the event can be read in the accompanying figures.⁷⁵⁸

Giotto is, of course, an influence on all subsequent Florentine painters and Ghirlandaio would have known his Peruzzi frescoes at Santa Croce, where the *Annunciation to Zachariah*, *Nativity and Naming of the Baptist*, and *Feast of Herod* provided prototypes for later works. However, Giotto is influential rather than prescriptive in Ghirlandaio's work. Even allowing for more than 150 years between them, it is hard to compare Ghirlandaio's complex spatial construction, illustrative detail, and plethora of portrait figures, with Giotto's economy of content and design. For all Ghirlandaio's legibility and clarity, his interest in narrative involves an Albertian concern with representational detail and variety which is a far cry from Giotto.⁷⁵⁹ Perhaps because of this, Ghirlandaio's scenes never achieve the concentrated effect of Giotto's. Although both artists use spatial construction to convey psychological drama, the density and intensity of meaning which characterises Giotto is always somewhat dispersed in Ghirlandaio's scenes by the long inventory of their contents. The motives and intentions of his characters have to be disentangled from this and the eye taken beyond the decorative and illustrative detail, so that the scenes, however legible, never reach a Giottesque level of

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid. p.84.

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid. p.77.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid. p.84. So, for example, the *Expulsion* stands for the prehistory of the Virgin's birth, implying the Annunciation to Joachim and his return to Jerusalem.

⁷⁵⁹ Alberti recommended the use of varied detail to engage the viewer. See 8.2.3 on the same effect in the Sasseti Chapel.

psychological drama. Giotto's compositions are sparse compared to Ghirlandaio's, using abstraction and reduction to define the core of each narrative and focussing intensely on protagonists. Ghirlandaio's, with their detail and decoration, delight the eye but the focus is necessarily less intense.

'Drama' is not a stable term, and what is considered dramatic by one person, or at one time, may not seem so to another or in a different period, being partially conditioned by personal response. Cadogan uses the *Expulsion* and the *Feast* as her main examples when discussing Ghirlandaio's narrative skill, and her analysis of the complementarity of the main and subsidiary actions, and of cause and effect, is fair. However, she is primarily concerned with rehabilitating Ghirlandaio's reputation and these examples demonstrate his narrative technique most clearly. She says little about the many less dramatic scenes, which, although they too have narratives, do not illustrate her analysis so well. The absence of commentary on these scenes may be due to space constraints in her book, but the *Expulsion* and *Feast* scenes are exceptions in the cycle and should be treated as such.

9.2.2 Patronage

Simons explores the cycle through the lens of patronage and concludes that it represents the concerns of the friars, patron, and artist,⁷⁶⁰ achieving the "honourable decoration of a prestigious site", displaying the "magnificence of the patrons", and exhibiting the artist's skill.⁷⁶¹

In acquiring the patronal rights to the Chapel Giovanni Tornabuoni was making an impressive statement of commitment to the Dominicans at Santa Maria Novella, and to the city, and buying the largest amount of sacred wall space available. From the artist and programme selected it is clear that he wanted to project a particular image

⁷⁶⁰ Ghirlandaio and his brothers are depicted in the *Expulsion of Joachim* in a similar manner to the Tornaquinci patrons on the other side of the same picture.

⁷⁶¹ Simons. p.221.

of his family, comment favourably on the city of Florence, and ally himself with the Dominicans and their orthodox piety.

Simons thinks that the “long-standing family association” with Santa Maria Novella “enabled, possibly required, a virtual mythology of patronage to form one of Ghirlandaio’s central themes”,⁷⁶² as conveyed by the portraits and the association of the *Madonna of the Snow* in the stained glass with the city of Florence, and Giovanni Tornabuoni himself (see below). This family mythology is both civic and religious and, amidst the discussion of portraiture, it must not be forgotten that the altar wall - especially the parts most visible from the nave - is a jigsaw whose interlocking pieces unite Dominican saints in the pious exercise of stamping out heresy and perpetuating orthodoxy on earth with the Virgin, Baptist, saints, and patriarchs in heaven. The portraits of the donors in prayer, represent an aspiration to these higher spheres.⁷⁶³

The altar wall is thus dominated by the Dominican saints, Thomas Aquinas and Peter Martyr (with Dominic in the window), and scenes relating to the Virgin (venerated as the nominal founder of the Order and abbess of their houses) especially her *Coronation*. From the nave, the congregation would have been best able to see these scenes, along with the patron saint of Giovanni and of Florence, in the *Young St John*⁷⁶⁴ and *Coronation*. The Chapel’s most public aspect is thus Dominican, while family-specific elements require closer inspection.

9.2.3 The portraits

The discussion of portraits in the Sassetti Chapel applies equally to the Tornabuoni Chapel,⁷⁶⁵ although these portraits require further consideration. They appear on the lower two – most visible - registers and consist of the donor portraits on the altar

⁷⁶² Ibid. p.222.

⁷⁶³ For Tornaquinci patronage see 16.1.

⁷⁶⁴ A popular subject in Florence. See Lavin, "Giovannino Battista: A Study in Renaissance Religious Symbolism ". Also, Lavin, "Giovannino Battista: A Supplement."

⁷⁶⁵ See 8.2.4. Patricia Rubin’s comments are equally relevant to the Tornabuoni Chapel.

wall, and many family members and notable contemporary Florentines in the *Expulsion*, the *Birth of the Virgin*, the *Annunciation to Zachariah*, the *Visitation*, and the *Birth of the Baptist*.⁷⁶⁶ Most are male (in the Temple scenes closer to the nave) but women are included at the births and the *Visitation* (i.e. in the domestic scenes further from public view).

In the *Expulsion*, the two groups of onlookers are headed by Giovanni Tornabuoni's son Lorenzo on the left and Ghirlandaio on the right. The left hand group is less "physically and psychologically active" in the scene and has a more choric role, like the figures in the *Annunciation to Zachariah* opposite. Nevertheless, Lorenzo's "position of prominence is assured as the head of the group...occupying the foremost plane, in the first mural of the Virgin's cycle". Like Ghirlandaio, his pose is confident and he looks out at the spectator. Cadogan believes that these two figures,

bracketing...the narrative field...suggest a similarity in their roles: as the patron's son invites the spectator's contemplation of the mural, the artist's pointing hand claims recognition for the work.⁷⁶⁷

Ghirlandaio's hand on his breast might be a gesture of adoration, or a reminder of his artistic skill, "paralleling the Tornabuoni gift of money", or both. Perhaps, along with the signature in the *Birth of the Virgin*, Ghirlandaio was staking a claim for his family in their church, in the process of exalting the Tornabuoni in theirs,⁷⁶⁸ and perhaps both patron and artist were also making an offering with true religious sincerity.

Vasari writes that the portraits included members of the ruling elite of Florence, men of government and letters, and thought that their inclusion in the *Annunciation to Zachariah* showed that "the most notable persons came to these sacrifices".⁷⁶⁹

Warburg's analysis of the role of portraiture did much to reconcile pious intentions

⁷⁶⁶ See 16. For identification of the portraits see Simons. p.237-238; 241-243. Also Roettgen. pp.174-177.

⁷⁶⁷ Cadogan. p.13.

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid. p.13.

⁷⁶⁹ G. Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters* (London: J.M.Dent and Sons, 1927). Vol.2 p.74.

and public display, and many subsequent scholars have taken this line.⁷⁷⁰ Thus Roettgen claims that while the portraits may seem a profane intrusion on the sacred scene, they are in fact “bearing witness to blessings God has granted the city” and confirming that “God’s grace rests upon them” as it did upon Zachariah.⁷⁷¹ For Simons, whose interpretation is built around themes of patronage, the opening scenes of both cycles have “patronage at the heart of their content and form”. Both express “the fertility and continuity of a family, the narrative of offering and prayer before an altar, the implicit message of hope and future salvation”, and both allow “the presence of many witnesses or patron portraits in idealized spaces.”⁷⁷² She follows Warburg in describing the portraits in the *Annunciation to Zachariah* as “[w]itnesses, performers and donors... ‘signatories’ in a ‘religious foundation charter’”.⁷⁷³ This is also proclaimed by the inscription, attributed to Poliziano, on the archway on the right: “In the year 1490, when the most beautiful of cities, owing to its wealth, its conquests, its undertakings and buildings, enjoyed prosperity and peace.”⁷⁷⁴

The inscription and architecture present an ideal Florence in the guise of a New Rome and a City of God, its triumphal arch and military reliefs suggesting glory “both civic and Christian”,⁷⁷⁵ as implied by the dual nature of the triumphal arch/apse structure of the Temple. Simons thus interprets the fresco’s “central meaning” as the glory and triumph of both city and family, and as related to the promise for the future embodied in the Baptist,⁷⁷⁶ and the “triumph of the Christian soul over death” which is the hope expressed by a funeral chapel.⁷⁷⁷

John’s role is referred to in an inscription from Isaiah on the apse, which appears in the Missal for the feast of the Baptist’s Nativity: “The Lord called me from the

⁷⁷⁰ See 8.2.4.

⁷⁷¹ Roettgen. p.175.

⁷⁷² Simons. p.244.

⁷⁷³ Ibid. pp.238-239.

⁷⁷⁴ Quoted in Roettgen. p.174.

⁷⁷⁵ Simons. p.239.

⁷⁷⁶ Presumably because he heralds the coming of Christ.

⁷⁷⁷ Simons. p.240.

womb”.⁷⁷⁸ The opening scene of the Johannine cycle thus “announces John’s mission, his fulfilment of prophecy and his sanctification even before birth – a meaning which reverberates with John’s position as patron saint of Florence.”⁷⁷⁹ Another inscription, from Psalms, comes from the offertory rite: “[Let] my prayer [be counted] as incense before thee”.⁷⁸⁰ The priest standing, like Zachariah, before the altar, would read this and cense the altar and then the congregation. Simons writes,

No more appropriate inscription could accompany this ‘patron portrait’, where the offering of the *consorteria*’s donation (both *chiesetta*⁷⁸¹ and chapel), and its prayer for eternal salvation, are forever visualized.⁷⁸²

She interprets this inscription and the one from Isaiah as a call for salvation and God’s answer to that call with the sending of John who heralds the coming of Christ.

In the *Annunciation to Zachariah*, the Tornabuoni simultaneously attend a “family gathering”, take a “peaceful *passeggiata*”, and witness a “civic ceremonial occasion”. Their clothing presents them as “statesmen and patrician elders in a public piazza-cum-religious sanctum, surrounded by their clients, associates, and Florentine worthies.” They suggest “unity”, “continuum”, and “solidarity”, a message intended to support their standing in the city as a “*consorteria*, of proud ancestry and noble stature”, generous donors of the original Dominican church, “worthy citizens” continuing their patronage.⁷⁸³ Simons believes that they “stand as observers of or participants in – the ambivalence...is a deliberate one – what Warburg called ‘a miracle play’.” Their perpetual presence in the fresco reinforces the family mythology of a noble and pious house, embodying in paint the hope of salvation expressed in masses for their dead. Simons sees them not as individuals but as family representatives, exemplifying its “heritage, good works and reputation”.⁷⁸⁴ It seems more probable, however, that the portraits stood both for the individual and

⁷⁷⁸ Isa. 49:1.

⁷⁷⁹ Simons. p.239.

⁷⁸⁰ Psalms 141.2 translated in *ibid.* p.240.

⁷⁸¹ The small church donated in 1221.

⁷⁸² Simons. p.240.

⁷⁸³ *Ibid.* pp.238-239.

⁷⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p.241.

the family group, just as they were both individuals and Florentines, and patron saints were both themselves, per se, and the intercessory representatives of those whom they protected: the dichotomy between the individual and the group is unnecessary here.

The Chapel decoration exalts the house of God, the pious Tornabuoni, and the noble, godly city of Florence. The portraits support all three, with Giovanni presented as both supplicant and proud representative of family and city.⁷⁸⁵ Regardless of precise identifications of the portraits, they fulfil multiple functions, religious, familial, and civic, in an era when those three spheres were inseparable.

9.2.4 The settings

Unlike the Sassetti Chapel whose altar wall scenes have identifiable Florentine locations, the Tornabuoni frescoes have idealised rather than accurate settings, though with a strongly Florentine and contemporary flavour, suggesting through visual similarity, a spiritual similarity and connection between Florence and the sacred locations of the lives of the Virgin and Baptist. As discussed, the inscription and architecture of the *Annunciation to Zachariah* suggest an identification of Florence with the City of God.

Furthermore, Simons claims that the window scene of the *Madonna of the Snow* refers to the new church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome and to the “Virgin’s protective and symbolic link with the church” more widely. Coming shortly after the reconciliation between Florence and the papacy the idea of building up the Church, must have resonated with contemporary viewers. Here the Pope and Emperor stand before “an idealized view” of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence “another church dedicated to the Virgin (whose building began on the feast day of the Purification)”, already visually allied to Santa Maria Novella in Andrea Buonaiuti’s Chapterhouse

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid. p.241.

fresco. In the Tornabuoni window the “legendary narrative” is relocated from Rome to Florence, “or rather an idealized City of God”. Similarly,

contemporary illustrations of Augustine’s famous text used Florence instead of Rome as the City seen by Augustine, so that Florence was ‘simultaneously city of man and city of God.

The message, according to Simons, is that a “Florence inhabited by the Tornaquinci is an ideal and renovated *polis*, a City of God in its earthly form.”⁷⁸⁶

Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome may have had additional relevance for Giovanni Tornabuoni who had rented the benefice of Santa Maria Maggiore in Florence and maintained it. The “consecration of a major Mariological church...may also allude to the donation or the original ‘chiesetta’” given by the Tornaquinci.

Whether referring to an ancient family action or to Giovanni’s beneficent remodelling and enlarging of that heritage at several Tuscan sites, or more probably to both, the scene makes an explicit and appropriate reference to patronage and to a harmony between secular and religious worlds guided by the Virgin’s intercession.⁷⁸⁷

Finally, the presence of the young Baptist in the *Purification* in the window may be read as advocacy for Florence in the Temple, by “her chief patron saint and advocate.”⁷⁸⁸

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid. pp.244-246. The Tornaquinci is the wider family group or *consorteria* to which the Tornabuoni belonged and to which the patronal rights to the Chapel were granted. Simons in particular prefers to refer to the Tornaquinci rather than the Tornabuoni Chapel.

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid. pp.246-247.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid. p.246.

9.3 Further considerations

The interpretations discussed above focus on the artist's narrative skill and themes of patronage, both of which are significant for understanding the purpose and execution of the frescoes. However, further consideration of Ghirlandaio's spatial composition, and how this enables the communication of both narrative content and comment on it, is revealing. Lavin attributed the programme's harmonious appearance to its chronological sequence and geometrical arrangement, but it seems that Ghirlandaio's use of two compositional strategies and the interleaving of these also contribute significantly. Ultimately, questions of spatial composition relate to Ghirlandaio's portrayal of action and engagement of the viewer, and suggest a different assessment of his depiction of drama than, for example, Cadogan's evaluation.

In addition, little has been said about the choice of the Baptist as a subject, alongside the Virgin, beyond noting his patronal status and relating the Isaiah inscription in the *Annunciation to Zachariah* to his mission.⁷⁸⁹ The relation between the Baptist and the Virgin has been overlooked, apparently because scholars have assumed that the two cycles do not, generally, correlate. In fact, the pairing of the Virgin and Baptist has interesting parallels.

The following paragraphs attempt to develop understanding of Ghirlandaio's spatial composition as a communicative technique, and of the relation of the Virgin and Baptist, before offering further observations about the frescoes and a brief analysis of the relations between the material, visual, and receptive spaces of the Chapel, its frescoes, and its viewer.

⁷⁸⁹ See 9.2.3

9.3.1 Two compositional strategies

Lavin's remark that "asymmetricality is used to reinforce the movement of the narrative" and Cadogan's analysis of the complementarity of main and subsidiary action in the *Expulsion* and the *Feast* are both essentially comments on Ghirlandaio's use of spatial composition and figure placement to communicate and comment upon action. These interpretations, though too limited in scope, are a valuable pointer towards a greater understanding of Ghirlandaio's use of space in the Chapel.

Asymmetricality not only reinforces movement, as Lavin says, it also carries positive or negative force, and distinguishes the 'negative' scenes in particular. In the *Expulsion* and the *Feast*, the asymmetry indicates dissonance. It presents the primary and subsidiary action, links cause and effect respectively, and indicates that something is wrong. Ghirlandaio uses a downward trajectory, a diagonal (emphasised by the shadows) cutting across the picture plane and creating a line of tension through the image, which, like a straining muscle, is not visible on the surface but nevertheless supports the weight of the entire composition, binding together the two (asymmetrical) focal points of the image which would otherwise break apart. In the *Expulsion*, the straining line of tension is fairly short and tight; in the *Feast* it is more extended. In both, the protagonists are off centre and the trajectory of their movement is towards the 'front' of the picture such that if they continued in this direction, they would 'leave' the picture and arrive in the Chapel space. The absence of any lower border to the *Expulsion* (the painting simply meets the wooden *spalliera* below) enhances this. The Chapel space is, of course, another sacred space, a latter day Temple. Two ways of interpreting the relation of Chapel to Temple space suggest themselves with regard to the *Expulsion*. One might see Joachim as poised between the two and properly in neither, being genuinely cast out. Or, as will be explored further below, one might see the Chapel space as a place of expulsion in the sense that it is a place in which there is awareness of sin, of the need for somewhere in which right relation to God can be renewed. The Chapel is sacred space but it exists because of the sinfulness presupposed by the need for atonement and salvation. These two 'negative' scenes are joined by a third – the *Massacre* –

which is unique in the cycle and in which diagonals in every direction create violent chaos.

In contrast to these negative, asymmetrical scenes with downward (or chaotic) diagonals, the *Presentation* uses a strong, positive diagonal marking the line of the Virgin's ascent of the Temple steps, with the Virgin herself central. Another positive, though less marked, diagonal is found in the *Annunciation to Zachariah*. Here the central space is occupied by the altar apse, framed by Zachariah and Gabriel. Gabriel's movement is indicated by his fluttering garments which, along with his shadow, suggest an entrance from the viewer's left. However, although his garments flutter behind the men to his left, his left foot is in front of them, as if his entrance had taken him straight through the space they occupy. The shadow does not resolve this: it indicates the light and the angle of Gabriel's body rather than where he has come from. This strangeness increases the sense of Gabriel as a supernatural being and implies that the figures are not present at the actual event, but are witnesses to its significance for them in another time and place. The diagonal of Gabriel's entry is not especially strong but it is a positive, forward, ascending movement in contrast to the downward trajectories of the *Expulsion*, *Feast*, and *Massacre*.

In the *Baptist Preaching*, a stony path on the hillside runs on an upward diagonal from behind John to Jesus's feet, connecting them. Its pale colouring against the greens, reds, and blues of the grass and garments highlights the link between John and Jesus and ensures that, although John is facing away from Jesus, he still points the way towards him. John is the central figure and the immediate subject, but Jesus is about to take that place in the *Baptism*. The subject of John's preaching is thus visually indicated by the connecting line between John and Jesus: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord."⁷⁹⁰

The positioning of Jesus, John and the path converts John's complex, not to say confusing, statement that, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he

⁷⁹⁰ Jn 1:23.

was before me,”⁷⁹¹ into a simple, comprehensible visual arrangement in which Jesus is literally behind John but raised above him. The stony uphill path also suggests that the path of Christ is not easy, and the next scene depicts the first step on that path, namely baptism: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me...I have baptized you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”⁷⁹²

In the remaining scenes, the movement of figures and narrative action mainly takes place on the horizontal plane, and the protagonists tend to be central. In the *Marriage*, Mary and Joseph form a central group before the High Priest, their hands meeting over his white robe.⁷⁹³ In the *Birth of the Virgin* (with the exception of the small meeting figures of Joachim and Anne) the figures are again placed horizontally, parallel with the front of the picture. The central figure of the whole is the young woman identified as Giovanna degli Albizzi, but the scene is effectively divided into two parts of the house, and the central figure of the bedroom is the infant Virgin. The *Adoration* places the Virgin and Child in the centre and, since most figures are kneeling, there is little movement except in the background, while in the *Dormition and Assumption* the Virgin is again central and the only movement is her own vertical ascent. Most figures in the *Visitation*, *Birth of the Baptist*, *Naming of the Baptist*, and the *Baptism of Christ*, are placed on horizontal lines with the protagonists at the centre, and minimal movement.⁷⁹⁴

Three scenes on each wall are thus marked out by their use, to varying degrees, of diagonal trajectories. Strong downward trajectories are associated with negative events, while the diagonals associated with positive events are upward trajectories. In general the frescoes bring together their protagonists in a sedate and dignified fashion, and the majority use the horizontal axis to do this, but the positive diagonals

⁷⁹¹ Jn 1:30.

⁷⁹² Mk 1:8

⁷⁹³ Cf. the Baroncelli version. See 5.3.3.

⁷⁹⁴ The ‘nympha’ figures excepted. See note 812 on page 281.

are associated with the path towards God⁷⁹⁵ and the path away from him (either by expulsion or by sin) is indicated by the reverse.

This raises the question of why Ghirlandaio did not use 'positive' diagonals for the remaining 'positive' scenes. This may be partly due to precedents for depicting these subjects: birth scenes, for example, typically presented the new mother in her bed with the infant being tended by nursemaids sitting in the foreground. It is also possible that there is some division by category, with 'horizontal' scenes tending to be those depicting events which have obvious comparators in the viewer's daily life: birth, visiting new mothers and their babies, marriage, naming, and baptism, were all a standard part of normal life in a way that expulsion from God's house, the dedication of very young children possessed of miraculously precocious abilities, mass infanticide, the coming of the Messiah, and angelic annunciations were presumably not. The division is certainly not clear cut since immaculate conceptions, greeting the mother of God, naming a child while divinely dumbstruck, preaching the coming of the Lord and baptising him, are not exactly 'normal' either. The more static, 'horizontal' scenes are all to some degree exceptional or even miraculous in their own right (they would not merit inclusion otherwise), while more mundane versions of being included or excluded from a sacred community surely occurred in contemporary life. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a difference of tone between scenes that portray comparators of the normal rites and practices of Christian life, albeit with saintly protagonists, and the even more exceptional events. Whether this was a deliberate strategy or a natural coherence of form and content is unclear, but the result is that the more unusual, 'diagonal', scenes and the more quotidian, 'horizontal', ones are interspersed, preventing a build-up of dramatic tension and contributing to the relatively placid tone of the cycle as a whole, in keeping with the limpidity of many of its scenes.

⁷⁹⁵ As, of course, is the Assumption of the Virgin.

9.3.2 The Virgin and the Baptist

The choice of the Virgin and the Baptist as the subjects of the programme needs no justification beyond the obvious, the Virgin being both the primary intercessor for all Christians and the object of particular Dominican veneration, and the Baptist being both Giovanni Tornabuoni's onomastic saint and the patron saint of Florence. These are sufficient reasons and capacity of the Chapel allows for a double cycle without restricting either subject. This said, the general lack of comment on the interaction between the two cycles, seems short-sighted. There are very strong connections between the natures and roles of the Virgin and Baptist and, while Ghirlandaio does not develop these visually through parallel scenes, their joint presence in a funerary and eucharistic chapel is enough to bring them to mind, especially to an audience used to inferring such connections.⁷⁹⁶ Their two cycles surround the high altar, where Christ's sacrifice is celebrated, and the tombs where the patrons' bodies await judgement and resurrection, and should be understood in reference to these. The Virgin, the Baptist, the Eucharist, and masses for the dead all speak of birth, death, judgement, transformation, and new life.

The Virgin and Baptist both prepare the way of the Lord: the Virgin physically, by conceiving, giving birth to, and nurturing him, the Baptist as his herald. As Christ's forerunner prenatally, in life, and after death, John is the first to recognise Christ (leaping in his mother's womb), he initiates Christ's adult mission by preaching his coming and baptising him, and he was believed to have gone into Limbo to foretell Christ's coming to the souls there.⁷⁹⁷ Both give up their bodies to and for him, the Virgin as his mother, and the Baptist through his death.⁷⁹⁸ As Christ's precursors and 'enablers', their roles are both transformative. The Virgin's own body –

⁷⁹⁶ Presuming contemporary responses is risky but Florentines were familiar with the lives of the Virgin and Baptist, and would, in particular, have associated the latter with the mosaic decoration of the Baptistery where all Florentines were baptised and whose scenes of Judgement would surely have linked ideas of baptism and death in their minds.

⁷⁹⁷ On the Baptist as forerunner see Mt 3:11-16; Mk 1:2, 1:7-8; Lk 3:15-16; Jn 1:6-9, 1:15, 1:19-35. For the tradition of the Baptist going before Christ into Hell see Daniel Sheerin, "St John the Baptist in the Lower World" *Vigiliae Christianae* 30, no. 1 (1976).

⁷⁹⁸ John's death came about because he spoke out against the immorality of Herod Antipas' marriage to his brother's wife, Herodias. Martyred for upholding an inconvenient morality and refusing to bow to traditional authority, he is a forerunner of Christ. For discussion of the relation of John the Baptist to the Last Judgement as seen in the Revelation to John the Evangelist, see O'Hear. pp. 71-77, 87-91, 102. On the Baptist as an angel see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, "The 'King's Advent': And the Enigmatic Panels in the Doors of Santa Sabina," *The Art Bulletin* 26, no. 4 (1944).

physically like ours but spiritually elevated by her Immaculate Conception and her acceptance of her divine vocation - is itself transformed, and she gives birth to a new life which will transform mankind's relation with God and in which we are all invited to participate. As the Mother of God she is both distinguished from the rest of mankind (as her Dormition and Assumption prove) and opens up a new spiritual possibility for all mankind.

The concept of material and spiritual transformation is, of course, entirely appropriate to a eucharistic setting in which the bread and wine are substantially transformed while maintaining their outward appearance, as the catechumen is through baptism. John also 'gives birth' in the sense that he preaches a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Entering the water, the repentant neophytes die to their old selves and lives to emerge transformed, reborn into a new life, cleansed of their original sin. As Paul writes in Romans,

How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.⁷⁹⁹

John's baptism is with water but he indicates the ultimate transformation that will come with Christ, who baptises with the spirit.⁸⁰⁰ Such transformation is the prayer embodied by a funerary chapel whose owners hope to be 'reborn' after death, resurrected into a new life with Christ. Baptism – by water and the spirit – brings death to the old, sinful, self, and rebirth in Christ. It is a foretaste of the resurrection, and by washing away original and accumulated sins, it prepares the soul for acceptance into heaven. The Virgin, the Baptist, and the Host all offer the repentant Christian spiritual transformation.

The Virgin and Baptist both embody purification, her purity being represented in her Immaculate Conception, Presentation in the Temple, Virgin Birth, and Purification, and his by his own miraculous birth to a barren woman as announced by an angel,

⁷⁹⁹ Rom. 6:2-5.

⁸⁰⁰ Matt. 3:11; Mk. 1:8; Lk. 3:16. Jn. 1:26-34.

signifying his prenatal grace, and by the purificatory baptism which he preaches. John's ascetic image as a wild man of the desert eating locusts and honey and dressed in camel's hair, reinforces this.⁸⁰¹ The figures of the Virgin and Baptist represent the state of grace which follows confession and penance, in which the catechumen approaches baptism, the communicant receives the Host, and the dying hope to die.

As intercessors for the dead, and patrons of the Church, Santa Maria Novella, the Dominicans, Florence, and Giovanni Tornabuoni, the Virgin and Baptist are both generally and specifically concerned with the many people connected to the Chapel. The Orthodox composition known as the Deësis - a pictorial version of the intercessions of the Mass - was uncommon in Western art but these frescoes are effectively a Chapel-sized deësis, with Christ in Judgement represented by Christ crowning his mother and by the altar itself. The Baptist is traditionally associated with judgement: his preaching warns of judgement and, as Christ's forerunner he is celebrated in Advent, connecting the coming of Christ with judgement.⁸⁰² Here he not only warns but intercedes for those he has warned. The intercessory roles of the Virgin and Baptist are supported by the way in which they act as bridges between humanity and God. Physically like us but spiritually elevated they are exemplars of perfection and allow us to become more like Christ. The Virgin delivers Christ incarnate and John baptises Christ whose own baptism is greater: he enables Christ to become more like us, and vice versa.

Their lives are therefore ideally suited to the Chapel. They offer purification, they facilitate the coming of Christ, they bring about spiritual transformation, and they intercede for the dead. Their roles align perfectly with Dominican obedience to the Virgin's will through a mission of prayer and preaching (like the Baptist), pointing the penitent on the right path to Christ; with the patrons' aspiration to be resurrected and join the company of heaven through the intercession of the Virgin and the

⁸⁰¹ Regarding John as ascetic and penitent see, for example, Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Catherine Murphy, *John the Baptist, Prophet of Purity for a New Age* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003). James A. Kelhoffer, *The Diet of John the Baptist: "Locusts and Wild Honey" in Synoptic and Patristic Interpretation* (Tübingen: WUNT 17 Mohr Wiebeck, 2005).

⁸⁰² Matt 3:7-12; Lk. 3: 7-9, 3:16-17.

Baptist who is both onomastic saint and their civic patron saint; and with the eucharistic function of the Chapel in which the Host represents the possibility of new life in Christ through the keeping of his commandments and the grace of God.

9.4 The scenes

With these considerations of spatial composition, dramatic tension and the relation of the Virgin and the Baptist to each other and to the viewer, in mind, a further look at the frescoes prompts the following observations. They do not, in general, negate previous comments, but expand upon these to suggest a more holistic response to the frescoes.

9.4.1 Expulsion of Joachim

The gulf of empty space between the High Priest at the altar and Joachim is dramatised by the tension of the diagonal between them and the shadows that reinforce it, the only asymmetrical aspect of the composition. Within the orderly architecture and flanked by complementary figures bringing sacrifices or observing the scene, the two pairs of figures – the High Priest with the man bringing an acceptable sacrifice, and Joachim with the priest expelling him – are polar opposites on the diagonal running across the central part of the composition and disrupting the orderly progression of architecture and sacrifice. The implication of this arrangement is that things are out of kilter, that something disorderly and improper has happened: Joachim's childlessness disrupts the proper order of things and spoils the natural sequential symmetry.

At one end of the diagonal, the High Priest reaches for the offered lamb while at the other a priest pushes away Joachim and his rejected lamb. The altar scene is essentially one of reciprocity: although the High Priest is elevated, his arms reach towards the offerant, meeting at the lamb. The Temple sacrifice belongs to the Old Testament world but the meeting of God (represented by the High Priest) and man (represented by the offerant) over a lamb, in an exchange in which both parties give and receive benefit, is a strongly New Testament (and particularly Johannine) image: the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world⁸⁰³ replacing the Old Testament model of sacrifice. Christ's acceptable atonement – his sacrifice, his blood – is the divine and ultimate atonement, and replaces animal sacrifice. Christ

⁸⁰³ Jn 1:29.

becomes the intersection and meeting place between God and humanity, replacing the Temple rituals. The acceptable sacrifice is both in contrast to Joachim's unacceptable offering, and an indication of the changes in the relationship between God and humanity that are heralded by the Immaculate Conception which comes shortly after Joachim's expulsion, and which is indicated in the left corner of the next scene.

In contrast, the postures of Joachim and the priest mirror each other but, as they are both moving forwards and away from the altar, there is no reciprocity. The priest stands behind Joachim - their legs and bodies at exactly the same angles - looking downwards at Joachim from the entrance step to the Temple and pushing him out. Joachim, cradling his lamb, looks up to his right while moving forwards. Simons believes that (in contrast to many earlier depictions) Joachim is shown heading towards the scene of the *Birth of the Virgin* rather than

towards an isolating void... his momentum following on from the priest (who is not at the usual expelling distance) and integrating with the nearby group of witnesses. No longer isolated or forlorn, Joachim clings to the lamb in a protective but not desperate manner, soon to be assured and childless no more.⁸⁰⁴

This is a considerable overstatement. Joachim is not walking into the *Birth* scene and his confused backward glance (he is not looking where he is going) and the posture and expression of the priest convey a purposeful but not quite violent sense of action.⁸⁰⁵

While the composition does not have the dramatic bleakness of Giotto's or Gaddi's treatment,⁸⁰⁶ Joachim's posture is conflicted. He moves forward to the right, but

⁸⁰⁴ Simons. pp.242-243.

⁸⁰⁵ Cadogan. p.75.

⁸⁰⁶ Ghirlandaio's style in general does not have this kind of psychological drama, the *Massacre of the Innocents* being a possible exception, although even this is presented in such a classical style that its presence, although surprising, seems to owe more to an interest in the classical than in the horror of the event, and its effect is to merge with the classical friezes and other decorations in scenes such as the *Birth of the Virgin*, rather than to stand out as a moment of drama and violence.

looks up to the left, suggesting a questioning rather than an acceptance of events, and he is not integrated with the group on the right but opposed to them. The four men look towards the Temple and the action, with the foremost raising his hand, apparently to prevent Joachim from coming too close, his legs apart in a defensive rather than a welcoming posture, as if he had just stepped back to avoid contact. Joachim is not looking at him and if he continued on his current trajectory would walk out of the picture and into the Chapel, rather than joining the group. At least in this scene, expulsion involves moving from two-dimensional to three-dimensional space and joining the sinners in the Chapel who stand in need of the salvation foretold by the events its walls.

Simons also suggests that the

narrative moment and the rejection is contrasted with the acceptable offerings from...suppliants who approach the altar from the side at which Lorenzo Tornabuoni and his associates witness the donation.⁸⁰⁷

This is true although there are also offerants approaching from the other side with a lamb and doves, presumably the woman's offering after childbirth (an event also depicted in the window). The purificatory reference is supported by the inscription on the Temple frieze: "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple."⁸⁰⁸ Simons notes that this prophecy of the coming of Christ (the "messenger of the covenant") is found in the liturgy for the Feast of the Purification and that Christ was presented at the Temple and Mary purified there after giving birth. The connections seem apt, although the link between the event with which the life of the Virgin begins (the expulsion of Joachim) and later events in her life and the life of Christ, does not mean that, as Simons believes, "Joachim need show little perturbation"⁸⁰⁹ because all will be soon be well. On the contrary, Joachim is dismayed and confused by his expulsion because it is equivalent to exile, and separation from God (otherwise the act of expulsion would be neutral and would not be depicted here). Ghirlandaio's moderate portrayal contrasts with more dramatic

⁸⁰⁷ Simons. p.243.

⁸⁰⁸ Malachi 3:1. The abbreviated inscription reads: VENIET AD TEMPLUM SANCTUUM SUUM DOMINATOR.

⁸⁰⁹ Simons. p.243.

treatments, but it is not as reassuringly bland as Simons claims. She may be right that the “Tornaquinci could be confident that their offering would be accepted and salvation assured”⁸¹⁰ but they had the benefit of hindsight and could view the scene from their own, post Crucifixion and Resurrection standpoint. Perhaps they saw their donations to the Church as the offerings presented “in righteousness”, “pleasing to the Lord”,⁸¹¹ but that is a statement about their contemporary attitude, and not about Joachim.

9.4.2 The Birth, Presentation, and Marriage of the Virgin

Despite its luxurious setting, the *Birth* is a quiet, un-dramatic scene which places the sacred event in the contemporary world rather than drawing the viewer into an historical or transfigured reality. Movement occurs only at the edges, where Anne and Joachim embrace and, more energetically, where the figure of the servant girl suggests a hurried entrance, her skirts fluttering behind her as she leans forward to pour out the water. Like the woman with the basket of fruit in the *Birth of the Baptist* she injects movement and a sense of the outside world into the scene and engages the viewer’s eye.⁸¹²

Roettgen, commenting on the unusual positioning of Mary in the middle distance in the *Presentation* scene (most protagonists are in the foreground) describes her as “almost...an afterthought”. On the contrary, her positioning determines the composition, and if her placement further back in the pictorial space requires a little more effort from the viewer, the two “incongruously small” boys in the foreground and the “oversized nude man seated on the stairs” are, as Roettgen himself agrees, intended to “call attention to the figure of the Virgin mounting the stairs” and catch the viewer’s eye, respectively. Furthermore, the Virgin is the only figure looking out at the viewer, inviting him to observe her action and perhaps follow her example, or at least comment on it as the crowd around her does. The Temple steps are cut off

⁸¹⁰ Ibid. p.243.

⁸¹¹ Malachi 3:3-4.

⁸¹² N.B. Warburg’s unpublished discussion of the *nympha* figure. See Gombrich. pp.10-11. See 16.3.4.3, including note 1120, on page 490. In the *Presentation* the Temple Virgin whose blue dress flutters as she rushes to greet the Virgin is of the same type.

by the fresco's edge, giving the impression, as Roettgen observes, that those standing and sitting on them "have just left the actual space of the chapel."⁸¹³ This is not quite the case because they are facing the wrong way for this, but if one looks up from the left hand side of the Chapel, the impression is that the viewer could easily mount the steps and join the painted figures.

As is usual in Presentation scenes, the Virgin is the focal point, a child in a moment of transition between her home and parents, and the Temple and God. Her ascent of the steps suggests ascent and assent to a divine vocation and reminds the viewer of her obedience in following the divine call. The *Marriage* which follows is also, of course, divinely ordained, but the Virgin's acceptance of vocation in the *Presentation* is a foretaste of the Annunciation.

In the *Marriage*, the couple stand slightly apart, their figures curving forward so that their hands meet before the High Priest who holds each by the forearm, their heads lower than his. Their postures suggest humility, their expressions quiet solemnity and, as in the Baroncelli version⁸¹⁴ their hands come together against the pure white robe of the High Priest. This is the central and focal point of the image, framed by the curve of their bodies which trace an arch, joined in the centre by the priest, mirroring the archway above them and the apse beyond. Their figures are conformed to the Temple architecture, suggesting that their coming together perpetuates this house of God and pointing the viewer forward to the time when the Virgin will become the dwelling place of God incarnate, a temple housing Christ who will himself replace the old Temple with the temple of his body. Although this represents a radical change in religious thinking between the Old Testament Temple practice and the New Testament recognition of Christ as God incarnate, it is also a matter of continuity, of God's on-going care of and purposes for humanity, and it is this aspect of continuity and stability within the unfolding of the history of salvation which is emphasised here.

⁸¹³ Roettgen. p.171.

⁸¹⁴ See 5.3.3.

9.4.3 Adoration of the Magi, and Massacre of the Innocents

Architecture again supports content in this scene with a ruined triumphal arch behind the Virgin and Child suggesting the triumph of Christ and the new life of Christianity after pagan times. Material triumph crumbles behind spiritual triumph, a message highlighted by the peacock – symbol of eternity – perching on a beam, and the campanile in the distance which represents not only a typical detail in the Tuscan landscape, but a reminder of the Church that the infant Christ will inspire.

In shocking contrast to the kneeling Magi, grouped respectfully around the Virgin and Child, is the *Massacre of the Innocents* to the right. Vasari admired this as the finest scene, praising its judgement, inventiveness, and artistry, and singling out the mother clutching the hair of a soldier as particularly skilful, being impressed by her expression of pain and revulsion and the soldier's cruelty and rage.⁸¹⁵ His critique accords with the Albertian instruction to elicit empathy with the subject of the painting, through animation and expression.⁸¹⁶ This said, Vasari describes one of the innocents as still suckling while suffering a wound to the throat and thus drinking as much blood as milk,⁸¹⁷ a subject which is not present in the scene and suggests that Vasari was drawing on stock praise from classical sources,⁸¹⁸ rather than attending to Ghirlandaio's treatment. The composition suggests a classical battle scene (reinforced by military friezes on the triumphal arch), and the women in particular, with their frenzied movements and billowing *all'antica* garments, could be mistaken for maenads were it not for the plethora of slaughtered infants.

This scene is unique within the programme for its movement, energy, violence, and spatial composition. Everywhere else is order and progress. Even the negative diagonal trajectories of the *Expulsion* and *Feast* consist of a single line crossing an otherwise orderly composition. Here it is only the architecture which represents the dignified stature of 'how things should be' and perhaps reminds the viewer that this

⁸¹⁵ Vasari. Vol 2. pp73-74.

⁸¹⁶ Alberti. p.83. See Roettgen. p.174.

⁸¹⁷ Vasari. Vol.2. pp.73-74.

⁸¹⁸ Pliny records such an image by Aristeides (Pliny 35.98-100). See Cadogan. p.86.

too is part of the history of salvation, while the action seems to contradict this violently. The *Massacre* is also unique in not having a protagonist, leaving the viewer, appropriately enough, little guidance on where to look or how to make sense of the drama. The confusion is heightened by the fact that, from the ground, the viewer is positioned almost under the horses' hooves, which threaten to crash down on him. It is thus the most engaging of the scenes in terms of involving the viewer and imparting the experience of the event, which is, as Roettgen notes, one of the seven sorrows of the Virgin and the iconographical antithesis of the *Adoration* next to it, (one of her seven joys).⁸¹⁹ The *Massacre* is also linked to Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, depicted in the window scene of the *Madonna of the Snow*, which housed relics of the Innocents. The *Massacre* (in which the Holy Family does not, of course, appear, having escaped to Egypt) is thus bound up with the life of the Virgin in whose cycle it is incorporated.⁸²⁰

9.4.4 Dormition, and Assumption of the Virgin, and Coronation of the Virgin

Roettgen claims that the *Dormition and Assumption* and the *Coronation* reflect the “demands of the Dominicans” and the Chapel’s 14th century dedication to the Virgin of the Assumption. He assumes that the walling up of three oculi above the lancet windows indicates that Giovanni Tornabuoni “was required to bow to the wishes of the order”⁸²¹ and that since Orcagna’s original cycle had been a life of the Virgin the friars wished to follow this.⁸²² Roettgen argues that the “form and sequence” of the Dormition, Assumption, the gift of the girdle (depicted in the window) and Coronation are “far from satisfactory” in presenting what is meant to be a “single iconographic statement” of the culmination of the Virgin’s life.⁸²³ In contrast,

⁸¹⁹ Roettgen. p.173. This parallelism does not seem to occur elsewhere in the cycle. The narrative contrast is a necessary one, rather than establishing a theme of the joys and sorrows in general. The antithetical nature of the narrative and, indeed, of the Virgin’s life as reflected in her joys and sorrows is not particularly expanded here.

⁸²⁰ And perhaps with the life of the Baptist since some traditions described Elizabeth fleeing with the infant John from Herod’s soldiers. E.g. Bishop Serapion, "The Infancy of John from Bishop Serapion’s the Life of John the Baptist," in *The Lost Book of the Nativity of John*, ed. Hugh Schonfield, J. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1929).

⁸²¹ How the programme was decided upon is not known and, while the Dominicans must surely have approved of the final selection and positioning of the scenes, it is not clear that Giovanni Tornabuoni went against his own wishes to accommodate theirs or that the closing of the oculi would indicate this. The interests of the patron and his friar hosts need not have been in opposition.

⁸²² Roettgen. p.170.

⁸²³ Ibid. p.170

Simons believes the programme was chosen by a process of “mutual manipulation” in which Giovanni Tornabuoni, the Dominicans, and the artist interacted in a surprisingly un-hierarchical fashion to achieve everyone’s goals.⁸²⁴

It is true that the scenes are not smoothly continuous, involving two walls and two media but, arguably, placing the *Coronation* in the altar wall lunette makes sense as this is the most publicly visible area and the most prestigious location, directly above the altar in prime view of the nave. It is distinguished from the *Assumption* which is the end of the Virgin’s earthly life, being presented in its own right and bringing together angels, patriarchs, and saints in a vision of orderly adoration in heaven towards which the donors, friars, and the congregation direct their prayers.

9.4.5 Annunciation to Zachariah

The portraits here have consistently drawn scholars’ attention, making it one of the more analysed scenes, and Simons’ discussion of the relationship between the “extended patron portrait”,⁸²⁵ the architecture, and the inscriptions presents a convincing case for interpreting the setting as an idealised version of Florence as the New Rome, a renovated and glorious city.⁸²⁶

Little has been said, however, about the main event and the protagonists. The diagonal trajectory of Gabriel’s entrance was discussed above and it is his movement, within an otherwise static scene – both in terms of figures and colouring – which creates the narrative. Against the deep reds and purples of the portrait figures’ robes, Gabriel’s golden garments are all the more striking and the flash of contrasting colour emphasises his dynamic entry. Zachariah displays some movement as he turns to Gabriel, but Gabriel has real *élan*, his garments billowing behind him. Their interaction before the altar, Gabriel’s purposeful message bearing, Zachariah’s arrested stance, and the slight asymmetry of their otherwise almost

⁸²⁴ Simons. p.221.

⁸²⁵ Ibid. p.237.

⁸²⁶ See 9.2.4.

mirror images (one foot forward, one hand raised), is the real point of this scene. The portrait figures are secondary to this angelic visitation which is perhaps the most intense encounter in the programme.⁸²⁷

The portrait figures may be witnesses to the event in that they wish to ally themselves with it, to create a link between themselves in 15th century Florence and Zachariah in the Temple, but they make a solemn chorus rather than an engaged crowd and few are even looking at the encounter. Lavin remarks that the portraits are integrated into the narratives without interrupting them⁸²⁸ but in fact they are not really integrated, as Gabriel's trajectory *through* the figures on the left makes clear. Their presence is a secondary layer, rather than integral to the primary scene. That they are not directly engaged with the action supports this: their presence claims a relationship with the event, rather than actual involvement. Their choric voice says that Gabriel's annunciation to Zachariah in the Temple remains significant for them in the 15th century, that as Florentines they look to the Baptist as their patron saint and honour the events leading to his birth, and that they inherit and benefit from a sacred legacy whose events are 'current' for them because important to them, and which can thus be represented in contemporary locations and surrounded by their own contemporary figures. They are not, of course, suggesting historical involvement and their figures thus remain separate from the action.

Simons believes that the

'piazza' occupied by the congregation or *corpo* of the church replaces the fourth chapel of a centralized temple so that the Tornaquinci stand figuratively, as well as literally, within the confines of a family chapel.⁸²⁹

However, it is hard to see this suggested arrangement in the limited structure depicted and the Temple architecture itself is less convincing as such than the

⁸²⁷ The *Visitation* depicts an intense encounter, although without the angelic element (that the unborn Baptist leaps in Elizabeth's womb is something the viewer knows, rather than sees), while in Joachim's expulsion the protagonists do not look at each other.

⁸²⁸ Lavin, *The Place of Narrative: Mural Decoration in Italian Churches 431-1600*. p.211.

⁸²⁹ Simons. p.240.

Temple in the *Expulsion* opposite and suggests an elaborate shrine more than a temple complex. That the Temple space does not extend forwards into the ‘fourth chapel’ of a Greek Cross plan church, but only into an open piazza, in fact reflects the ‘double layer’ effect of the encounter between Zachariah and Gabriel – which nobody but the protagonists witnessed – and the contemporary ‘witnesses’ whose portrait figures flank this, bearing witness to it rather than literally seeing it.

9.4.6 The Visitation, Birth of the Baptist, Naming of the Baptist, Baptist Preaching, Baptism of Christ, and Feast of Herod.

Although these scenes are among the least discussed of the cycle (with the exception of the ‘nympha’ figure in the *Birth*), there are spatial and compositional elements worth considering.

Continuity between the *Annunciation to Zachariah* and the *Visitation* is expressed by the frieze which runs from one to the other. In the *Visitation*, the triangular arrangement of the figures of the meeting women is reminiscent of Joachim and Anne in Taddeo Gaddi’s *Meeting at the Golden Gate* in the Baroncelli Chapel.⁸³⁰ The space between the women is covered protectively by their cloaks and arms and, although their pregnant forms are not visible, the contemporary viewer would know that this space encompasses the unborn John the Baptist and Christ.⁸³¹ The connection between John and Jesus which is established in this scene by the meeting of their mothers, is developed more visibly in their adult life, in the *Baptist Preaching*, where a stony hillside path diagonally connects John and Jesus, in a visual reminder that John points the way to Jesus and that the path of Jesus is hard. The line of the cliffs in the *Preaching* and *Baptism* scenes almost meets in the centre of the wall, linking the two and connecting the Baptist’s preaching with his baptising of Christ who, for the only time in the cycle,⁸³² takes centre stage. As discussed above, the *Feast* scene is notable for its two complementary points of action (as in the *Expulsion*): Salome dancing and the presentation of the head. Although the

⁸³⁰ See 5.3.2.

⁸³¹ As shown elsewhere in this study, apparently empty, barren, or insignificant spaces are often deeply significant. See especially 4, 7, and 10.

⁸³² He also appears in the *Coronation* on the altar wall, although the event is as much if not more about the Virgin.

Decollation is not shown, the causal link between the events is clear in Ghirlandaio's synchronic narrative.

9.5 Conclusions

Ghirlandaio's frescoes of the Virgin and the Baptist interact with the *material* space of the Chapel and its funerary and eucharistic functions. In spite of the programme's scale and the physical distance between the viewer and some scenes, Ghirlandaio makes spatial connections between the Chapel space and the space within the pictures which bridge this distance, particularly in the *Expulsion*, *Presentation*, *Massacre*, and *Annunciation to Zachariah*. In the *Expulsion*, Joachim heads out of the Temple towards the viewer, suggesting that as he continues he will enter the Chapel. At the beginning of the Marian cycle, the viewer is thus in the position of the expelled, out of God's favour, but witness to God's plan for Joachim whose expulsion is a short lived prelude to the Virgin's life. Although he stands in the sacred space of the Chapel, the purpose of that space is to turn people back from sinfulness and into right relation with God. The viewer is thereby reminded that although he begins outwith God's favour, through the intercession of the Virgin⁸³³ (and the Baptist) he may be saved. Furthermore, if the viewer is in the place of expulsion, he is simultaneously in the privileged position of knowing what will happen both to Joachim and in the Christian story of salvation. The privilege of being aware of sinfulness (one's own and humanity's) and of the revelation of Christ, brings the responsibility to respond appropriately. As if to reinforce the responsibility which this position carries, the side steps of the Temple in the *Presentation* seem to rise out of the Chapel space, being cut off by the 'front' of the picture plane, as if the viewer could climb out of the Chapel (out of expulsion) and into the scene, emulating the Virgin's own ascent as she prepares to dedicate her life to God. In the *Massacre*, the viewer is positioned underneath the horses' hooves, with the Innocents, about to be trampled in the chaos of flailing limbs and swords as Herod's soldiers kill indiscriminately, intending to destroy the infant Christ. The portrait figures in the *Annunciation to Zachariah* stand in a piazza which is neither fully part of the Temple structure nor separate from it and which seems to extend into the Chapel, an in-between space occupied by the contemporary witnesses who belong both with the contemporary (or modern) viewer in the Chapel and in the Temple.

⁸³³ An intercession which is both bodily in the sense of giving birth to Christ on earth, in whom there is reconciliation with God and new life, and petitionary, in her pleading with Christ the Judge for mercy on sinners.

The programme arrangement means that the universally legible scenes which need no additional narrative context to be understood, and which express both Dominican and Tornabuoni interests, are projected from the most publicly visible space on the altar wall. The focus is the *Coronation* in the huge lunette. Below this the Dominican saints assert their orthodoxy, and the Virgin (patron of the Dominicans and protector of all Christians) and Baptist (patron of the city and the donor) act as exemplars and offer the hope of intercession at the Last Judgement, while the donors kneel, their prayers perpetuated by their images, claiming the Chapel as their own whilst retaining humility in their discreet position on the lowest register, half tucked behind the altar.⁸³⁴ The purpose of the Chapel is thus defined as the glorification of God in heaven where Christ crowns the Virgin, according to the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the Dominicans, under the guidance of the Virgin and the Baptist, for whose intercession the pious donors pray. Anyone viewing from the nave could hope that the Virgin who delivers Christ to the world (whose body is present in the Host), their city's patron saint who preaches the baptism of repentance and leads people to Christ, and the Dominicans in whose church they were standing, would help them to win a place in heaven through repentance and acceptance of Christ.

The frescoes of the side walls in general relate not only to the visual space of the Chapel but to the city beyond it through the use of contemporary architecture and portrait figures. What happens in the visual space of the frescoes is thus significant beyond Santa Maria Novella, extending to the city and further. The *visual* space of the frescoes presents a world which is contemporary in appearance but idealised. Here Florence is a New Rome, a city of God, and an appropriate setting for the sacred events depicted. In the context of baptism, one might say that the city itself is presented as rejuvenated and reborn, washed of sin and dedicated to Christ. In the Baptistery of San Giovanni where all citizens were baptised,⁸³⁵ they were received into life in Christ, baptised as Florentines in a perfect example of civic religion.⁸³⁶

⁸³⁴ They would have been more visible to contemporaries as the altar was originally lower and closer to the nave.

⁸³⁵ See, for example, William Levin, "Advertising Charity in the Trecento: The Public Decoration of the Misericordia in Florence" *Studies in Iconography* 17, (1996).

⁸³⁶ See, for example Richard C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991). p.48. On the relevance of the imagery on the Baptistery doors see Eloise Angiola, M., "'Gates of Paradise' and the Florentine Baptistery," *The Art Bulletin* 60, no. 2 (1978).

Ghirlandaio's style belongs to an age which celebrated the relation of the contemporary and historical, and the concept of a rejuvenation of classical ideas and ideals, along with their artistic and architectural manifestations and their civic and familial implications, was of paramount interest to the great and the good. His scenes therefore relate the historical events of the Old and New Testament to the contemporary world by placing them in contemporary surroundings and, at times, appointing eminent Florentines as witnesses to their on-going significance to the godly city of Florence and her noble citizens. The viewer is to be drawn into the scene by a particularly engaging figure and to recognise his own world – its places, styles and people - reflected there, the implication being that the events thus situated are definitive and prescriptive for him too. The contemporary aspect, and the many portraits, indicate this continuity of significance: the events depicted remain relevant to the lives of the Florentines who see themselves as part of the history of salvation and God's divine plan, and indeed to the modern viewer. They *bear witness to* the scenes, rather than being witnesses *at* them. The Virgin and Baptist therefore 'belong' in the Florentines' piazzas, churches, palazzos, and countryside because they are part of the life of the city and the individuals portrayed here. By interweaving himself, his family, and his city with the lives of the mother and herald of Christ, Giovanni Tornabuoni expresses his hope of integrating all parties into the heavenly scene of the *Coronation*. These dignified, sedate, and orderly scenes project an idealised world which is both a compliment paid to contemporary Florence and her elite, and an aspiration, just as the kneeling donor figures believe themselves to be part of a generous and devout family, and aspire to join the company of heaven.

Ghirlandaio composes the *visual* space so as to communicate narrative content and comment upon it, indicating the dissonance and tension of negative events through asymmetry and downward diagonal trajectories, while positioning the protagonists centrally and using upward diagonals in 'positive' scenes. This spatial composition is the most potent factor affecting the viewer's *receptive* space when in the Chapel. He is invited to see a correlation between dissonance and asymmetry in spatial construction and figure placement, and events which are contrary to the will of God, while the proper order of things, as divinely ordained, is correlated with harmonious,

regular architecture, and purposeful but measured progression in the 'positive' scenes. The viewer's visual experience, not just *what* they see but *how* they see it, is the agent of communication here, and although the viewer is not generally 'included' in the frescoes (as in the Brancacci Chapel) compositional devices such as the Temple steps, the horses' hooves, or the piazza space of the *Annunciation to Zachariah* which seems to extend into the Chapel space, enable the viewer at times to bridge the gap between the Chapel's material and visual spaces.

Ghirlandaio's scenes do not have the dramatic intensity of Giotto, nor do they involve the viewer as Masaccio does, rather they present, in an almost exclusively measured and rational fashion, the dissonance of actions which are contrary to God's will, and the harmony of those which manifest his favour, ultimately represented by the orderly circles of saints and patriarchs in the *Coronation*, each occupying an appointed place in heaven, and all contributing to a harmonious, divinely ordained scheme. The frescoes may therefore be described as essentially aspirational, expressing the desire of the donors that their lives and their city reflect this divine order on earth and that, by the intercession of the Virgin and Baptist, there may be a place for them after death in the divine order of heaven.

10 Conclusion

The concluding sections of each case study have already covered much of what might be said here and there is no need to reiterate these at length. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the common themes which have emerged from the analysis of the case studies and assess the validity of the methodology proposed at the outset.

With regard to the methodology, it is clear from the case studies that this is indeed a theologically generative way of looking at these particular frescoes. Art historical study has not exhausted their significance and by applying a theological hermeneutic for images as described in the Methodology, to the cycles examined, it has been possible to uncover important theological aspects within them and to understand them as sophisticated pieces of visual theology with the capacity to express complex theological ideas in powerfully engaging ways. The conclusions formed about each case study demonstrate the validity of the method as a constructive means of enriching the modern viewer's theological engagement with these historical Christian images and illuminating their on-going relevance as valuable Christian resources. I am confident that it will be transferrable to other images and art forms.

In section 2.1, I noted the lack of discussion of an appropriate theological methodology for interpreting art, despite the expanding literature in the field of theology and the arts. I hope that this study has begun to fill this gap, that it will prompt discussion and contributions or refinements from others, and that it will encourage and facilitate similar studies of images. I intend to continue using this method in my future work and hope that this will develop the methodology further and enable greater theological understanding of a wider range of images.

Returning to the frescoes explored in this thesis, in addition to conclusions specific to individual case studies, certain theological themes and constants have emerged. Perhaps the most obvious constant is the way in which all the cycles support the tripartite space structure described in the methodology and applied in the analysis of the images.⁸³⁷ Looking at the images in terms of their material, visual, and receptive space, and the connections between these, was illuminating in all cases. These three types of space manifest and make sense of each other and it is likely that this is particularly so in these frescoes because of their nature as ‘incorporated’ images.⁸³⁸ This tripartite spatial structure gives the images a communicative elasticity which belies their smooth, flat, static surfaces and stretches across spaces and ‘into’ the viewer, creating, resisting, and balancing tensions and interpersonal dynamics within the images and between the images and the viewer. Thus, for example, the Sassetti Chapel creates a cat’s cradle of connections between the images in its cycle (and the viewer), while the San Marco frescoes ‘call out’ to each other from one space to the next as the viewer understands each one in the context of the others.

These patterns and networks, encourage the viewer to see not only the material ‘space’ of the building, but the lines of connection which cross it, linking figures, objects, and places. As Didi-Huberman so eloquently and subtly demonstrates with regard to the San Marco frescoes, the scholastic exegetical process is relocated from page to painted surface. In so doing, the connections created are not only between one text and another, one concept and its associates, but between one situation, person, or event, and another. The viewing process which traces these threads is one of recognising the divine suffusion of creation, God’s permeation of creation, and the present implications of historical events.

If the material space represents the fundamental and necessary condition and context for the images, the visual space their contingent particularity, and the individual, receptive, space their (potentially on-going) effect in the viewer, then the tripartite spatial structure reflects the triune nature of God as he is everywhere and always,

⁸³⁷ See 2.4.5

⁸³⁸ See 2.2.2

God as he is particular in Christ, and God as he is always present to the individual in the Holy Spirit. This is not to make a specifically trinitarian claim about the images but the tripartite spatial structure of these incorporated images has an analogous 'economy' of its own and does encourage reflection on the constant context, the particular manifestation, and the on-going communication, embodied in the viewer's encounter with the images.

Out of this constructive dialogue between the material, visual, and receptive spaces comes a strong affirmation of the value of particularity and locatedness.

Individuality is dignified and the presence and influence of Christ, historical and meta-historical, affects everything. Revelation is simultaneously specific and personal, and universally relevant and applicable. Peter healing the cripples with his shadow strides onwards, towards the viewer's space in the Brancacci Chapel: the transformation which Christ effects through him comes forward from the image to meet the viewer, to offer him, likewise, the transformation of this vision of redeemed humanity. Francis receiving Christ's seal of the stigmata in the Sassetti Chapel is shown connected to the Franciscan brethren, 'secular' society, the animal kingdom, and the viewer. Dominic, kneeling at the foot of the Cross in the San Marco Cloister demonstrates his own particular, personal, prayerful relationship with Christ, and models this relationship for the friars who passed his image daily. These images repeatedly present the particular revelation of Christ as relevant to their viewers as a generalised group, and invite each particular viewer to respond. As such the frescoes handle the paradox of the universality and particularity of Christian revelation with a subtlety which both acknowledges their nature as indicative rather than exhaustive, and asserts the meaningful quality and content of the encounters between viewer and image.

These encounters and the viewers' responses are transformative. Each of the cycles explored presents spiritual transformation, experienced, understood, and expressed through literal and metaphorical physical transformation. At San Marco, the friars are given specific physical models to follow, intended to conform them to Christ and to the life of the community, underlined by the repetition of Incarnation, Passion, and

Resurrection in the images. In the Bardi Chapel, Francis makes an initial leap of faith – portrayed in literal, spatial terms – and gradually moves into a central space of spiritual fullness. In the Brancacci Chapel, Peter moves from a crouching, watery re-birth to striding spiritual authority and finally to crucifixion like his Lord. In the Baroncelli Chapel, journeys represent spiritual progression and the path of vocation. Here spiritual transformation begins with revelatory events which are compositionally situated in threshold spaces. These represent transitional space, places of vulnerability, of openness, present moments between life before and a changed life hereafter, and the possibility of the unexpectedly transformative.

If thresholds are places of possibility, empty spaces are even more radically so.⁸³⁹ The generative potential of emptiness reflects divine kenosis prior to creation and symbolises the human psychological need to ‘make space’ in oneself to allow the reception of revelation and the beginning of the change which that engenders. Thus in the Bardi Chapel, Francis crosses an apparently empty gulf at the centre of the first fresco of the cycle, as he makes the transition from a secular to a spiritual life. In the Brancacci Chapel, Peter preaches into the empty air, filling it invisibly with the Gospel and inspiring the conversions symbolised in the following baptism scene. At San Marco, the womb and tomb motifs, as well as the blank wall and floor space of the *Annunciation* in Cell 3, the black gulf of the V-shaped valleys behind Crucifixion scenes, and the bright circles of light behind the *Coronation of the Virgin* and the *Baptism of Christ*, all use emptiness to express spiritual intensity, divine activity, and imminent spiritual rebirth or development.

In the Baroncelli Chapel the need for these empty spaces is fulfilled instead by threshold settings, but in Ghirlandaio’s frescoes the absence of this kind of emptiness may in part explain their comparative lack of drama. The Tornabuoni frescoes employ ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ diagonals to structure compositionally the tension, resolution, and progression of their narratives, while the Sassetti frescoes (despite the empty sarcophagus/manger of the altarpiece) primarily present and reinforce the

⁸³⁹ See 2.4.4.

structure of associations between the transformative events, their protagonist, and the viewer, rather than concentrating on the transformations themselves, although the intensity of Francis' relations with Christ and the world is due in part to the kenotic process which the saint has undergone, setting aside worldly things to focus exclusively on prayer and ministry.

While empty spaces can be crucial to the marriage of content and form, this is not to say that occupied space is less significant, and who or what is central in the images is revealing. This is most obvious in the Brancacci Chapel where the central space is occupied by the persons and events in whom divine activity is most concentrated, and in the Bardi Chapel in which Francis gradually comes to occupy the central spaces.

The presentation of spiritual transformation through spatial, physical metaphors (as in the relationship between spatial centrality and spiritual density/intensity in the Bardi and Brancacci frescoes, and the transformative journeys of the Baroncelli) is most clearly demonstrated in the San Marco frescoes with their emphasis on conformity to Christ, the christoform composition of the self, and the structured life of the vocational community. All the cycles, however, speak of vocation, of the process of the individual becoming fully orientated towards God. Images are a particularly suitable medium for this subject because of the similarity between vocation, in which the person acts in a certain way in order to become as they are meant to be, and a viewing process in which the viewer looks in a certain way in order to understand how they are meant to be. Both involve a relational process of becoming by doing.

Finally, and most importantly, all the frescoes express the mystery and the present relevance of the Incarnation, the mutual inherence of the physical and the spiritual, content and composition, pigment and plaster. They present a new, redeemed, post-resurrection view of creation in which materiality does not, or need not, equate to separation from God. Places and people (sometimes specifically identifiable,

sometimes generally recognisable) are loci of hierophany, epicentres of divine activity which breaks into and transforms creation within the images' visual space and, by virtue of their connections with their material space and the viewers' receptive space, into the viewers' lives. These images are an anti-dualist confession of faith in which content and composition, content and medium, concept and form, image and viewer, interpenetrate to enable material revelation of the divine, with potentially transformative effects.

11 Bardi Chapel Appendix

11.1 The Chapel and its patrons

The Conventual Franciscan church of Santa Croce was begun in 1295, replacing an earlier church, and soon attracted patronage, resulting in the many decorated chapels of which the Bardi Chapel is one of the earliest. The Bardi family were among the wealthiest merchants and bankers of their time and had allegiances to the papacy, the Angevin royal house (including, at this time, Robert of Anjou and his recently canonised brother, Bishop Louis of Toulouse), and the pro-papal Guelph party. The Bardi were also patrons of Santa Maria Novella and Santo Spirito, but their endowments in Santa Croce represent the most conspicuous family patronage of any Florentine church of the time. In addition to the Chapel of St Francis, painted by Giotto, they endowed chapels dedicated to St Louis of Toulouse, St Laurence and the Martyrs, and St Sylvester and the Confessors. It is the St Francis Chapel, however, which is generally known as ‘the Bardi Chapel’. The reasons for such extensive Bardi patronage at Santa Croce are unclear as no documentation survives, although the prominence of the Franciscan Order on the spiritual scene may be sufficient reason for patronage by a powerful, wealthy and well-connected family. Despite internal conflict between the Conventual and the Spiritual factions,⁸⁴⁰ the Franciscans were a highly successful Order and held in papal favour. Santa Croce was the biggest church in Florence, larger even than the Dominican Santa Maria Novella, and the Franciscans had taken over charge of the Inquisition in Florence from the Dominicans in the late 13th century.

The Bardi Chapel is situated next to the Chancel, on its south side, to the right of the high altar. The precise dates of its building and decoration are unconfirmed but the building work was probably finished around 1310 and the frescoes painted between

⁸⁴⁰ The Spirituals represent a more radical, ‘reformed’ Franciscan observance which they believed to be closer to the way of life espoused by the earliest friars. The Conventuals were less strict in their adherence to matters such as institutional poverty. The Spirituals were later known as Observants, a term also used for reformed Dominicans such as the friars at San Marco.

1310 and 1328.⁸⁴¹ The Chapel is tall and narrow, with a window in the east wall above the altar which was originally surmounted by a Crucifix by Ugolino da Siena⁸⁴² and later by what is now known as the Bardi Dossal (a narrative panel of Francis' life from the 1240s, which arrived in the chapel in 1595⁸⁴³). Alongside the Chancel Chapel, frescoed by Agnolo Gaddi and dedicated to the Holy Cross, and the chapel to its north, dedicated to the Virgin, the three represent the main foci of Franciscan devotions: the Incarnation, the Passion, and the Order's founding saint.

⁸⁴¹Rona Goffen dates the frescoes to between 1310 and 1316, arguing that there was a compelling reason to decorate the Chapel as soon as possible because the Florentines renewed their allegiance to Naples in 1312, following the visit of King Robert of Naples and his consort (both Franciscan tertiaries), in 1310. Goffen suggests that the visit might have prompted either the start of the work, or hastened its conclusion, as the Bardi sought to display publicly their spiritual credentials (and political allegiance). Goffen. pp.57-59. Joachim Poeschke, however, places the frescoes considerably later, on stylistic grounds. Poeschke. pp.227-229.

⁸⁴² Goffen. p.53. and n.25. p.113.

⁸⁴³ Cook. p.143.

11.2 The artist

Boccaccio famously referred to Giotto (c.1266 -1337) as having “brought back to light an art which had been buried for centuries” (i.e. classical naturalism)⁸⁴⁴ and commentators maintained this line of praise. Vasari writes that,

when the methods and outlines of good painting had been buried for so many years...he alone, although born in the midst of unskilful artists, through God’s gift in him, revived what had fallen into such an evil plight....⁸⁴⁵

His contemporary fame was widespread - his patrons included the richest and most powerful of the clergy and laity – and his influence far reaching. In commissioning Giotto to paint their private chapel, the Bardi were emulating the great (if not always the good, as the Scrovegni Chapel commission might suggest⁸⁴⁶) among their contemporaries.

Although art historians have re-evaluated earlier assessments of painting before Giotto, and of Giotto’s own innovations and impact, he remains one of the single most significant and influential Western artists, as the vast literature on his life and work attests.⁸⁴⁷

⁸⁴⁴ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans., George Henry McWilliam (London: Penguin, 2003). VI, 5.

⁸⁴⁵ Vasari. Vol.1. pp.65-66.

⁸⁴⁶ Although see Laura Jacobus, *Giotto and the Arena Chapel, Art, Architecture and Experience* (London Harvey Miller Publishers, 2008). Jacobus suggests that usury is not the determining factor in the Arena Chapel cycle.

⁸⁴⁷ For a helpful introduction and guide to this body of art historical discussion see A. Derbes and M. Sandona, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Giotto* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press 2003).

11.3 The frescoes

11.3.1 The cycle

The side walls of the Chapel are each divided into three scenes of equal width, with a lunette at the top, and two rectangular fields below, separated by unobtrusive decorative bands. The scenes of the upper and middle tiers have strong vertical elements in their architectural structures and the position of their figures, while the lowest scenes are constructed on horizontal lines, creating a firm visual base for the whole cycle. The cycle consists of scenes of the life of St Francis based on early biographies.⁸⁴⁸ The altar wall depicts four Franciscan saints: Clare, Louis of Toulouse, a fragment of Elizabeth of Hungary and an empty niche possibly occupied by Anthony of Padua or Louis IX of France, in fictive niches.⁸⁴⁹

11.3.2 Renunciation of Worldly Goods

The cycle begins in the top left lunette with *The Renunciation of Worldly Goods*. Against the backdrop of a large wall enclosing a fine episcopal palace, the scene depicts the moment at which Francis returns his clothes to his father (their original purchaser) as a gesture proclaiming his renunciation of the world and the dedication of his life to Christ. Two groups of figures are presented facing each other across a dramatically charged central space. On the left, a group of townsfolk (representing the laity) is spearheaded by Francis' father, holding his son's clothes, as he leans angrily forward as if to strike him, but is restrained by two men behind him. On the right is a group of clerics, including the Bishop, who stands immediately behind Francis at the fore. Behind the clerics are more townsfolk and, on both sides, children are prevented from throwing stones at the saint. Francis stands naked, haloed, with his arms lifted in prayer and his eyes raised to heaven, protectively encircled by the Bishop who stands on the palace steps, an authoritative figure, a head above the others, holding his cloak around the young man.

⁸⁴⁸ Stories of the life of Francis were well known at this time. For source references see note 136 on page 58.

⁸⁴⁹ See notes 137, 138, 139, and 140 on page 58.

11.3.3 Approval of the Rule by Innocent III

Opposite the *Renunciation* is the *Approval of the Rule*, where Francis and twelve brothers kneel before Pope Innocent III enthroned between two cardinals. The setting is a classical building with a bust of St Peter (patron saint of the Franciscans and Santa Croce) in the pediment identifying it as the papal basilica of St John Lateran and two additional onlookers⁸⁵⁰ standing on either side in its porticoes or ante-rooms.

Innocent III had initially turned Francis away, refusing his request to found the Order, but changed his mind after a dream in which he saw Francis supporting the tottering edifice of the Church. He therefore approved the rule which Francis wished his Order to follow, allowed the brothers to tonsure their hair (Francis and one friar are already tonsured in this scene), and accorded them a preaching mission. This approval, given in 1209, was verbal. Later Pope Honorius III confirmed the Franciscan rule in writing.⁸⁵¹ Long says that the scene is sometimes misidentified as the Confirmation of the Rule by Honorius III.⁸⁵² This is understandable given that Innocent and Francis are holding a scroll between them, while the Pope holds out his hand in blessing, which could easily suggest that the Pope was giving Francis the document. The inscription on the scroll, however, identifies it as the Rule, i.e. the document which Francis had written, rather than a papal document approving this.⁸⁵³

11.3.4 Apparition at Arles

The *Apparition at Arles* depicts Francis appearing during a sermon by Anthony of Padua. According to Bonaventure, Anthony was preaching on the subject of the Cross when Brother Monaldo saw a vision of Francis with his arms stretched out like a cross. The other brothers present did not see the vision but were filled with the consolation of the Holy Spirit.

⁸⁵⁰ The role of these figures is questionable. Long notes a suggestion that they are similar to “contemporary depictions of Biblical personages... which would seem to suggest that Francis’ mission encompassed both the Old and New Testaments.” Long. p.96. n.28.

⁸⁵¹ Ibid. p.95.

⁸⁵² Ibid. p.95.n.24.

⁸⁵³ See Goffen. p. 68.

Giotto shows a wing of a cloister and a chapterhouse beyond it with some of the brothers inside (their heads just visible above the window ledges between the two⁸⁵⁴), some sitting on benches in the cloister walk. Anthony is on the left, haloed, his hands hidden in the folds of his habit sleeves. Francis is in the centre of the composition, the only full-length figure, his arms curving upwards and his hands showing the stigmata.

In the Bardi fresco, Brother Monaldo is one among several friars with their heads lifted who seem to see Francis.⁸⁵⁵ Possibly Giotto meant to show that more than one friar was aware of something happening, even if they did not see Francis directly, although Goffen assumes that Anthony is still speaking and that more than one friar is actually witnessing the vision, and remarks upon Giotto's distinction between the friars who see and those who listen.⁸⁵⁶ It has also been suggested that the intention might have been to remove the focus from an individual friar and show that Francis is present among the friars as a group.⁸⁵⁷

11.3.5 Trial Before the Sultan

During the Fifth Crusade, Francis went to the East on a proselytizing mission, willing to become a martyr in the process. Having obtained an audience with the Sultan,⁸⁵⁸ Francis preached so impressively that he was invited to remain at the court. His response was to offer to prove his faith by walking into a fire and he invited the Sultan's priests to do likewise, in order to see whose faith was greater. On hearing Francis' words, the Sultan's priests began to slip away and the Sultan told Francis that he did not think any of them would undertake the challenge. When Francis offered to enter the fire alone the Sultan forbade it and gave him valuable presents which Francis refused as insignificant, worldly goods. Bonaventure links Francis' rejection of wealth and his willingness to enter the fire, describing the fire

⁸⁵⁴ This arrangement of chapterhouse and cloister was usual and meant that more brothers could participate than could necessarily fit into the chapterhouse itself.

⁸⁵⁵ Long, p.102.

⁸⁵⁶ Goffen, p.70.

⁸⁵⁷ Cook, p.148.

⁸⁵⁸ Regarding the Sultan see note 199 on page 69.

as a furnace of poverty; he also associated Francis' stigmata with fire, a proof of the Saint's flaming love for Christ.⁸⁵⁹

The court is indicated by the luxurious green and yellow wall hanging and architectural decoration. The Sultan occupies a magnificent inlaid marble throne with a pediment which is raised on two steps, setting him half a man's height above the other figures. Francis, on the right, calmly prepares to walk into the fire to prove his faith and his God while, on the left, the Sultan's priests slink away, lifting their cloaks as if to cover themselves (from sight, or from seeing, or both) with consternation in their expressions, undeterred by the palace attendants, one of whom points back at the fire and clenches his fist under his sleeve. Another friar stands behind Francis, his hands clasped under his habit. The Sultan looks to his right towards the departing priests who will not face the challenge and points with his right arm, across his body, to Francis and the fire on his left.

11.3.6 Funeral of St Francis and the Verification of the Stigmata

Beneath the *Apparition*, the *Funeral of St Francis and the Verification of the Stigmata* shows Francis laid out on a bier, surrounded by friars, with groups of mourners at either side. Those to the right have been carrying the bier while those to the left are preparing to conduct the funeral. A sceptic named Jerome, is inserting his fingers into the wound in Francis' side, while other friars hold his hands and feet and kiss the wounds there. One brother looks upwards to where Francis' soul is ascending to heaven, carried by angels. This friar's

pose and gesture....appear as part of the brothers' generally emotive behaviour, but he is strongly silhouetted against a blank wall, thereby directing the spectator's attention to the most important aspect of the event.⁸⁶⁰

⁸⁵⁹ See note 243 on page 86. See also Goffen. pp.72-72, n.67, p. 122 and n.73, p.123.

⁸⁶⁰ Long. p107.

11.3.7 Visions of Brother Agostino and Bishop Guido

On the lowest tier, opposite the *Funeral*, Giotto painted the posthumous appearances of Francis to Brother Agostino and Bishop Guido. The fresco has been badly damaged by the addition and then removal of a funerary monument which destroyed large areas of the plaster. The scene conflates two events: the left side shows the dying Brother Agostino who, having been mute for some time, saw a vision of Francis ascending to heaven, and cried out to his leader to wait for him, before dying. On the right is Bishop Guido, who was on pilgrimage at the time of Francis' death and had a dream in which the saint informed him of this.

11.3.8 Stigmatization

Above the entrance to the Chapel and visible from some distance is the *Stigmatization*, generally considered to be the greatest surviving treatment of the subject by Giotto.⁸⁶¹ Francis was the first recorded recipient of the stigmata and the Franciscans considered this a divine seal, confirming God's approval for his life and sanctity. The event was treated as the most important of his life, although his wounds were only fully revealed (and verified) at his death. In the earliest account, the vision was described mysteriously, with Francis himself not understanding it at first, but later texts gave more clarity and detail to the event and Bonaventure writes that Francis saw Christ appearing like a seraph.⁸⁶²

Above the Chapel entrance, Francis is shown at the mountain retreat of La Verna where he went to meditate and pray. In the background is the craggy landscape of the mountain with only a few trees relieving the stark rock, and the darkness of a cave contrasting with the pale stone of the mountain. A falcon sits near the top of the mountain and was said to have woken St Francis each day for matins.⁸⁶³ On the

⁸⁶¹The others being the altarpiece in the Louvre and the fresco in the Legend of St Francis at Assisi. There is on-going debate about the authorship of the Legend of St Francis.

⁸⁶² See Cook. p.153.

⁸⁶³ For sources see Goffen. p.61 and n.17, p.116. Goffen notes that the falcon is mentioned in the *Little Flowers of St Francis* but I was not able to find the reference to the falcon in the Heywood, ed. It is, however, described in Celano. II:168, p272.

right side is a church (one was later built on the site), behind which the landscape is hilly and the sky dark.

Francis kneels in the foreground, his right knee on the ground, his left knee raised, and his arms and hands lifted as he turns to look in awe at the vision of the Christ-Seraph, crucified and enfolded by its wings. Long believes that,

Although the pose looks awkward...its narrative implications are clear: the saint has been kneeling and praying turned toward the left, when some signal alerts him to the presence of the seraph behind him. Without arising, he pivots his body on the fulcrum of his left knee in time to receive the stigmata...⁸⁶⁴

Francis' posture and even the folds of his robe suggest the surprise with which he has been interrupted in prayer but his astonishment is coupled with greeting, there is no sense of shrinking from the vision or the wounds which are being imprinted on his hands, feet and side, linked by golden rays to the hands, feet, and side of Christ.⁸⁶⁵

⁸⁶⁴ Long. p.114.

⁸⁶⁵ Goffen notes that the golden rays that piece St Francis' flesh had become an artistic convention but Bonaventure had not recorded the manner in which the wounds were actually received, only that the seraph had impressed upon Francis a "miraculous likeness" and that the marks of nails appeared on him. Goffen. p.62.

11.4 Bardi Chapel images⁸⁶⁶

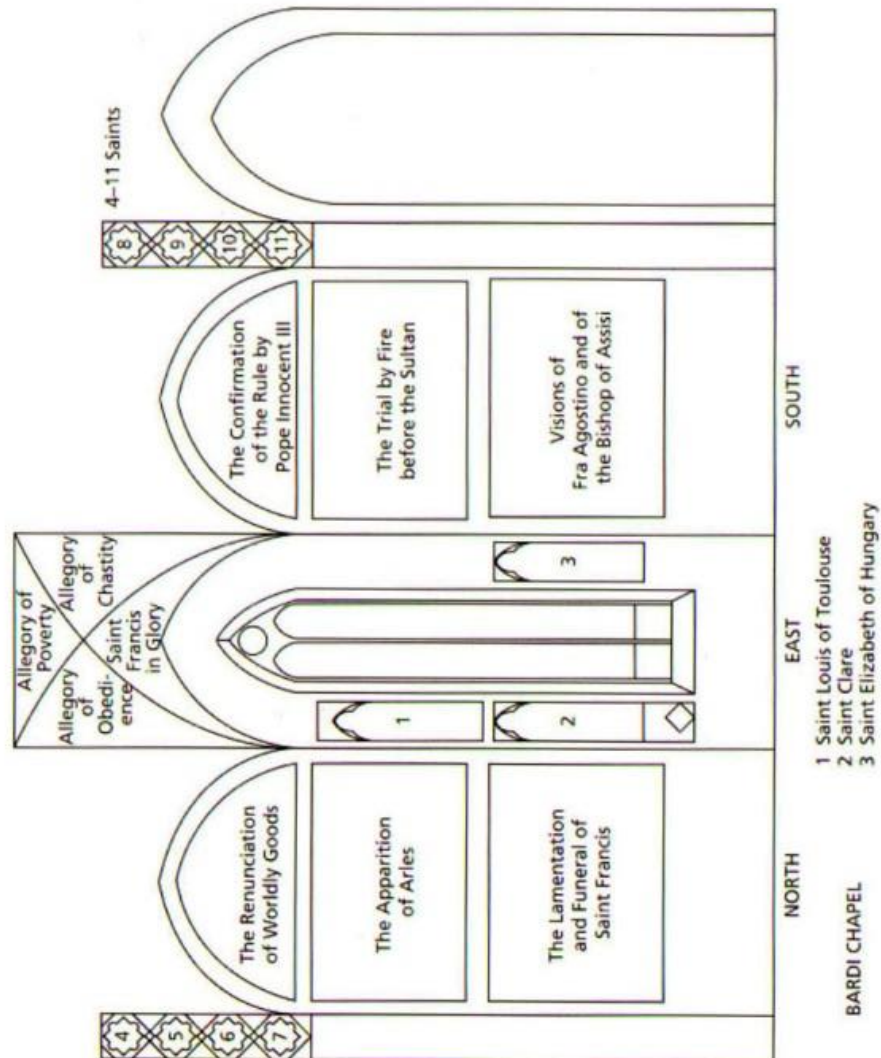


Figure 1 Bardi Chapel, Diagram

⁸⁶⁶ These images are taken from photographs published in Poeschke. Plates 129 and 140-147, pp.230-231, 241-249. This diagram is included to show the lay out of the cycle and the working titles of some images may differ in this thesis from those used by Poeschke. All such titles have, in any case, been applied retrospectively.



Figure 2 Bardi and Peruzzi Chapels, from the transept



Figure 3 Bardi Chapel, *Stigmatization of St Francis*



Figure 4 Bardi Chapel, Left wall: *Renunciation of Worldly Goods; Apparition at Arles; Funeral of St Francis and Verification of the Stigmata*

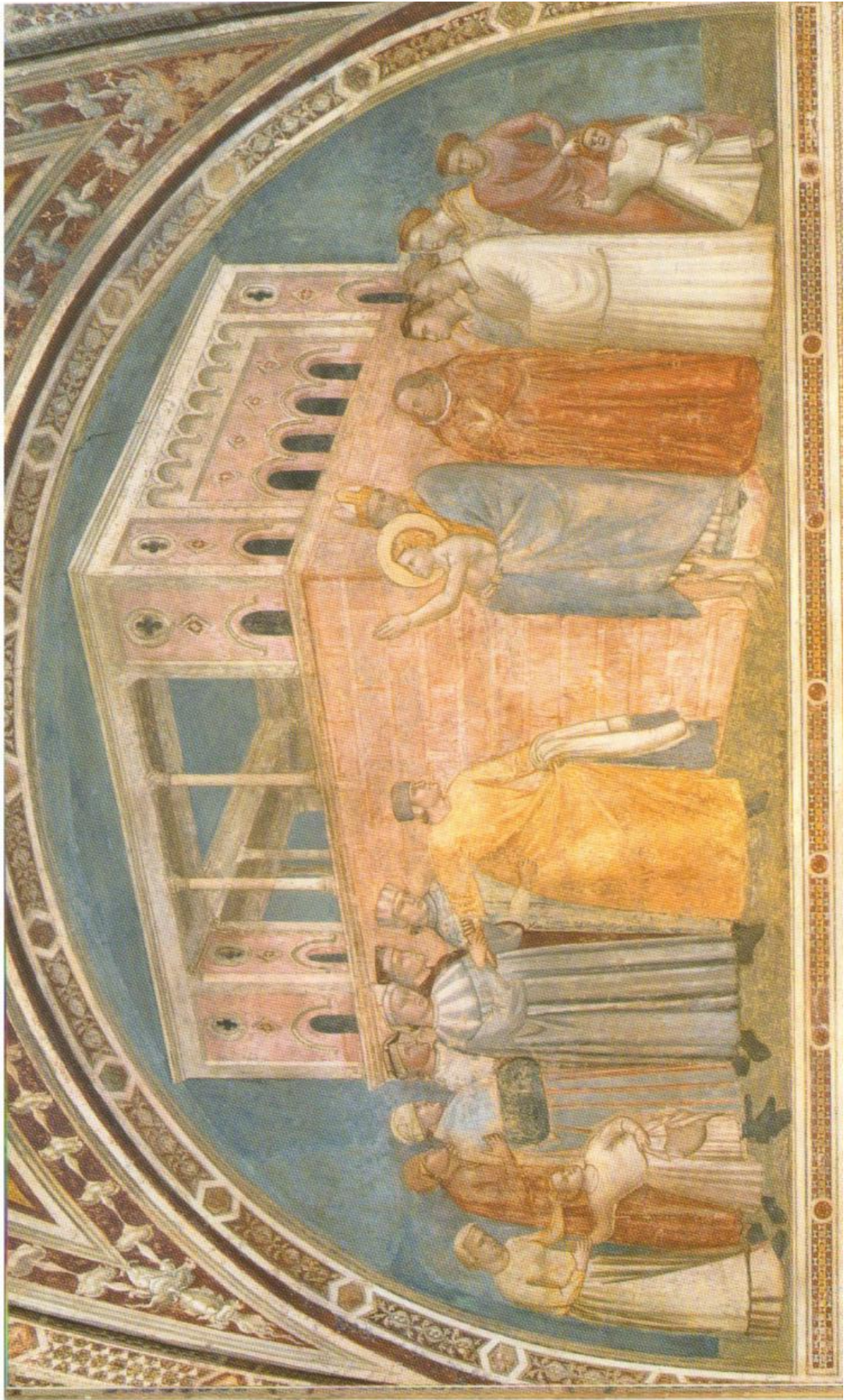


Figure 5 Bardi Chapel, *Renunciation of Worldly Goods*



Figure 6 Bardi Chapel, *Apparition at Arles*



Figure 7 Bardi Chapel, *Funeral of St Francis and Verification of the Stigmata*



Figure 8 Bardi Chapel, Right wall: *Approval of the Rule by Innocent III; Trial before the Sultan; Vision of Brother Agostino and Bishop Guido*



Figure 9 Bardi Chapel, *Approval of the Rule by Innocent III*



Figure 10 Bardi Chapel, *Trial before the Sultan*

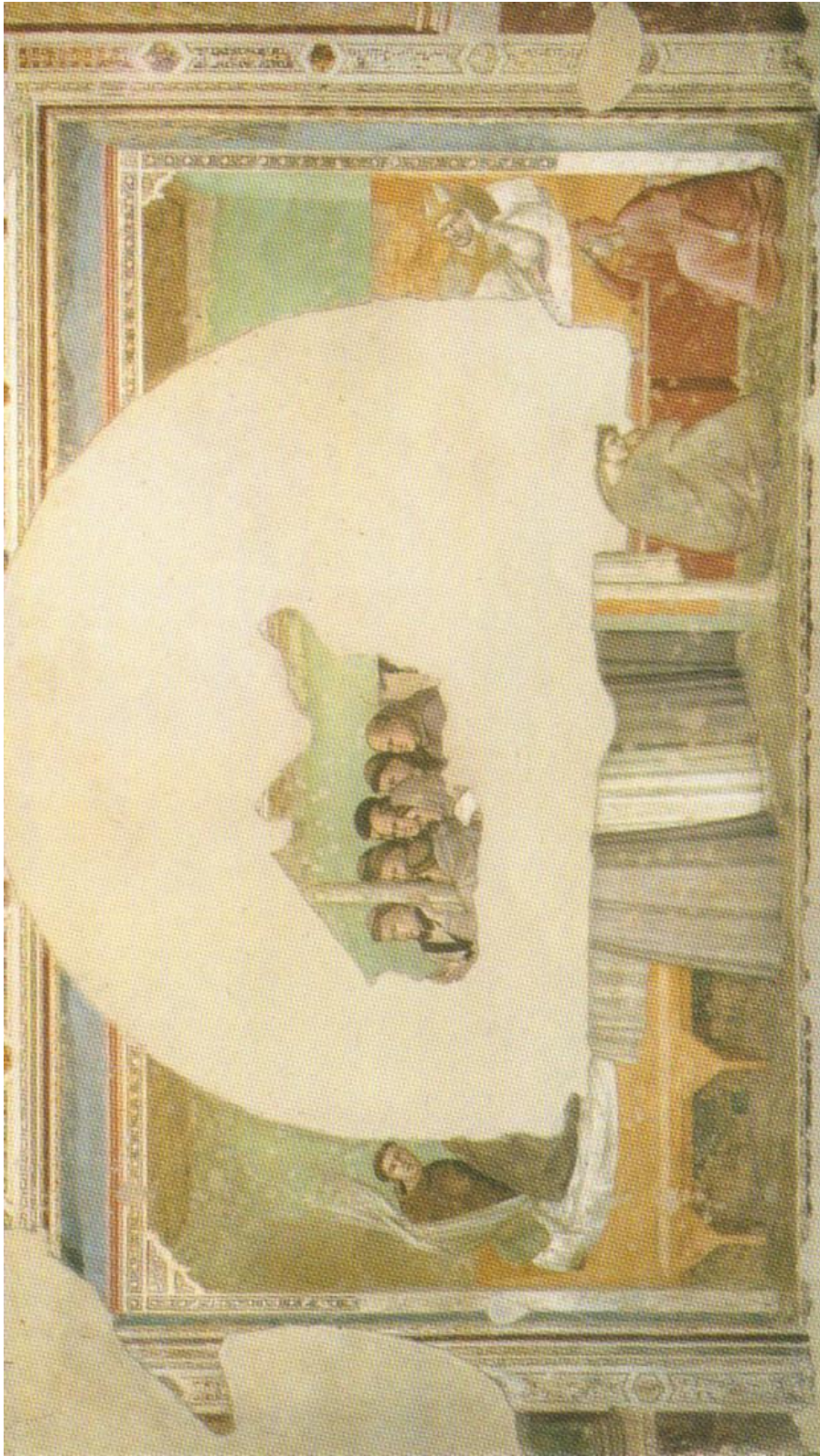


Figure 11 Bardi Chapel, *Visions of Brother Agostino and Bishop Guido*

12 Baroncelli Chapel Appendix

12.1 The Chapel and its patrons

The Baroncelli Chapel, situated off the east end of the south transept of the Franciscan church of Santa Croce, was begun in 1328⁸⁶⁷ and represents a unique survival of a 14th century chapel in almost its original state and with a nearly complete decorative programme comprised of frescoes, stained glass, statuary,⁸⁶⁸ altarpiece, and tomb monument. The frescoes and stained glass have been ascribed to Taddeo Gaddi since the 16th century⁸⁶⁹ and the attribution consistently accepted.⁸⁷⁰ Gaddi is also believed to have painted the half-length *Madonna and Child* on the tomb monument.⁸⁷¹ The precise date of Gaddi's frescoes and glass is debated, lying between 1328 and 1334.⁸⁷² No commissioning documents for the decoration survive but the tomb monument is inscribed with the names of five donors from the Baroncelli banking family: Bivigliano, Bartolo, Salvestro Manetti, Vanni, and Piero Bandini. The Chapel's dedication to God and the Virgin Annunciate is also recorded on the tomb monument.⁸⁷³ The patronal presence in the Chapel is discreet, confined to the tomb monument and coats of arms above the entrance archway and in the stained glass window, whose saints may be the patrons of the five Baroncelli donors.⁸⁷⁴

The Chapel is approached up five steps from the transept pavement and consists of two bays. The archway into the first has pilasters on either side with a statue of Gabriel on a ledge on the left and the Virgin on the right. The intrados of the entrance arch and the archway to the second bay are frescoed, as are the vaults of each bay and the walls of the first, which depict scenes from the life of the Virgin.

⁸⁶⁷ According to the inscription on the tomb monument.

⁸⁶⁸ Sculptor apparently unknown.

⁸⁶⁹ Diana Norman says from the 15th Century. See Norman, ed. p.174.

⁸⁷⁰ Recorded by Albertini in 1510. See Poeschke. p.250.

⁸⁷¹ The monument itself was probably made by Giovanni di Balduccio. Ibid. p.250.

⁸⁷² For a summary of suggested dates see Poeschke. Ibid. p.251.

⁸⁷³ Cited in Norman, ed. p.169.

⁸⁷⁴ Ibid. p.175.

The altar is on the south wall of the first bay, in front of the Chapel's single lancet window with original glass. The archway to the second bay is to the right of the altar. The retable of the *Coronation of the Virgin* is original and signed by Giotto, although it may have been made by his workshop.⁸⁷⁵ Its current frame is a late fifteenth century addition and it is missing a roundel which would have sat in the pinnacle of the frame of the original pentaptych, and depicts God the Father with angels, two of whom reflect his glory in little mirrors.⁸⁷⁶ On either side of the Virgin are four panels covered in ranks of saints and angels, and the predella images include Christ displaying his wounds, Saint Francis displaying the stigmata, and St John the Baptist, patron saint of Florence.⁸⁷⁷

The original stained glass window depicts *St Francis Receiving the Stigmata* with Francis on the left in one small lunette and the Christ-Seraph on the right in another, and the Baroncelli arms in the roundel at the top between them. The uppermost tier of the glass has Saints Peter and John the Baptist, the second tier Saint Louis of Toulouse and Sylvester, and the third Saints John the Evangelist and Bartholomew. Sylvester, Peter and Bartholomew are the patron saints of three of the Baroncelli donors listed on the tomb monument and it is highly likely that the remaining two had a connection with other saints in the window since it was possible to have different baptismal and legal names at the time.⁸⁷⁸

⁸⁷⁵ See for example *ibid.* p.172.

⁸⁷⁶ See Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné.* p.31.

⁸⁷⁷ Two further saints have, apparently, not been identified.

⁸⁷⁸ Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné.* p22.n.1.

12.2 The artist

Taddeo Gaddi was a Florentine pupil of Giotto's, reportedly working with him for 24 years. His work has received a mixed reception. He was praised by Cennino Cennini (c.1390) and Filippo Vanni (c.1400) who saw him as Giotto's heir and the equal of the ancient architects. Giotto's influence on Gaddi is certainly clear in his majestic figures, handling of volume, and interest in interior space. His detailed architectural compositions are significant in the depiction of his narratives, situating the action with care. Ghiberti similarly characterised Gaddi as a very learned master of marvellous ingenuity. Vasari's entry on Gaddi is much more pedestrian, describing him as a follower of Giotto whose only additional interest lay in his use of colour and emotional expression. Later commentators continued to see his proximity to Giotto as a limitation, Gaddi being neither the equal of Giotto nor sufficiently innovative in his own right to win favour. In the 20th century this opinion has been partially revised, with scholars noting his use of light and handling of mass as distinctive. When Andrew Ladis wrote his monograph on Gaddi in 1982, it was the first major work on the artist and a welcome development in understanding his art.⁸⁷⁹ Gaddi's surviving and recorded work is exclusively religious and his most important commissions were for Santa Croce.⁸⁸⁰ The painting in the Baroncelli Chapel is of uneven quality, probably due to the necessary use of assistants.

⁸⁷⁹ For a fuller description of Gaddi's historical reception see Ladis' Preface. Ibid.

⁸⁸⁰ Rona Goffen, "Gaddi, Taddeo, Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue-Raisonné - Ladis, A.," *Renaissance Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (1984). p. 461.

12.3 The frescoes

12.3.1 The cycle

The fresco cycle consists of scenes from the life of the Virgin taken from the *Golden Legend* and the Gospels.⁸⁸¹ In addition to the narrative scenes inside the Chapel there are frescoes on the outside of the entrance wall, visible as one approaches the Chapel, and on the two intradoses and in the vaults. The entrance wall depicts Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, paired on either side of the archway and holding scrolls foretelling the Virgin Birth. Below them on the right is the *Resurrection of Christ* and below this the tomb monument with the *Madonna and Child*. On the left is *Christ among the Doctors*, badly damaged by the insertion of a door to the sacristy which cuts into the fresco. The intrados of the entrance arch contains Old Testament figures⁸⁸² and the vaults of the first bay contain the four cardinal virtues,⁸⁸³ while the second has the theological virtues and Humility.⁸⁸⁴ Below the narrative scenes on the left are two fictive niches containing liturgical items,⁸⁸⁵ in a line of blind arches backed with faux marble. The window jambs show fifteen virtues⁸⁸⁶ and the pilaster to the right of the altar has figures of David and Jesse. The archway between the two bays of the Chapel shows the Evangelists, Christ, the Virgin, St Jerome, and three Church Fathers. The left wall of the Chapel is divided into a lunette and two lower tiers showing the *Expulsion of Joachim* and *Joachim's Dream* in the lunette, the *Meeting at the Golden Gate* and the *Birth of the Virgin* on the first tier, and the *Presentation of the Virgin* and the *Marriage of the*

⁸⁸¹ For source references see note 244 on page 88.

⁸⁸² Set in quatrefoils, the figures are (from left to right): David, Judith, Moses, Ruth, Gideon, Balaam, Schebna, Aaron, Joel, and Solomon.

⁸⁸³ Set against gold backgrounds in octofoils the personifications are: Prudence (with a spherical astrolabe or armillary sphere), Justice (with a sword, rod, and scale or steelyard), Fortitude (with a shield, club, and lion's pelt) and Temperance (with a sickle).

⁸⁸⁴ These vaults contain personifications of the three theological virtues, Faith, Hope and Charity, with Humility filling the fourth vault. They are in grisaille against blue backgrounds, creating a stronger sense of illusionistic space than the cardinal virtues, while the chiaroscuro of their modelling makes their figures more vivacious. Poeschke. p.253. For a more detailed discussion of the Virtues see Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. pp.33-34.

⁸⁸⁵ These depictions of two carafes, a pyx, a paten, a candleholder, and a missal are considered an early example of still life painting.

⁸⁸⁶ The virtues repeat those of the vaults, with the addition of Mercy, Chastity, Purity, Obedience, Poverty, Trust in God and Fear of God. Poeschke includes a helpful annotated diagram of the entire decorative programme. The identification of the personifications of Trust in God and Fear of God are uncertain. Poeschke.p.254.

Virgin on the second. The altar wall lunette shows the *Annunciation to the Virgin* on the left and the *Visitation* on the right. The first tier depicts the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* on the left and the *Nativity* on the right, and the second tier depicts *The Christ Child Appearing to the Magi as a Star* and the *Adoration of the Magi*.

12.3.2 Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple and Joachim's Dream

The Temple is depicted as a tall basilica with a large central nave and two narrow side aisles supported on thin columns with carved capitals and rounded arches. The architecture is exquisitely detailed and clearly based on accurate observation of real buildings, but it is unusual in its extraordinary elongation, the absence of a right hand wall (the columns being open to the outside with three temple-goers standing or kneeling half in, half out of the building), and the difference of scale between the building and the figures. If, as Gardner suggests, it is meant to be viewed from the transept of the main church, i.e. sideways on, then the building becomes more credible, but Gaddi's brilliant painting has not yet achieved convincing interior space.

The High Priest stands beside a carved altar and directs Joachim out of the Temple, his lamb in his arms. To the right another man brings a lamb - an acceptable offering - watched by a priest on his right. Another temple-goer kneels, hands on the floor beside the altar, looking at Joachim leaving. To the left of the scene, three men of varied ages discuss the event, the one closest to Joachim putting up his right hand as if explaining something to the others, while touching the Temple column with his cloaked left hand as if linking himself with the building that Joachim is leaving. Joachim himself looks back at the High Priest with an expression that combines anger, hurt, and incomprehension.

On the right hand side of the lunette Joachim is depicted among his flocks on a bare and rocky hillside. The nocturnal scene is lit by the brightly glowing Angel who appears to Joachim to tell him that his wife, Anne, who was thought barren, will bear

a child, and that he must go home. Two shepherds to Joachim's right look on, one of them pointing at him, while a third in the bottom right hand corner looks out at the viewer, surrounded by sheep. His sheepdog looks up at the Angel, though the sheep ignore it (as in the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* on the altar wall). A stream comes out of the rock near Joachim and down to the sheep on the flat ground below, perhaps suggesting the life-giving power of God who makes a barren womb conceive.

12.3.3 Meeting at the Golden Gate and Birth of the Virgin

The top left hand section of this scene has been lost but fortunately this is its least important area. Joachim and Anne are shown meeting against a background of Jerusalem and the high city wall, depicted in considerable architectural detail. To the right are three attendant ladies behind Anne; to the left, a shepherd accompanying Joachim and carrying a lamb and a basket, reminds the viewer of the journey they have taken.

To the right of the *Meeting*, the story continues with the *Birth of the Virgin*. This scene is badly damaged in the upper half, almost obliterating Anne in her bed on the right. In the foreground are two charmingly tender nursemaids, one sitting on the ground with the infant Mary in her lap, the other kneeling and reaching forward to hold her hands, beside a bowl in which they have bathed her. In the loggia to the left, another maid with her overskirt tucked up appears to be handing a bundle of linen to two women.

12.3.4 Presentation of the Virgin and Marriage of the Virgin

Gaddi's skill in depicting architecture is most prominent in the *Presentation*, which was much admired by contemporaries and copied extensively. The Temple is the same basic construction as in the *Expulsion*, but here it has been expanded, and enlarged. The three-aisled basilica structure is retained and two loggia type side buildings have been attached. The Temple is situated at the top of three sets of steep

steps which occupy as much space as the Temple itself. Another building has been placed close by on the left, where a woman leans out from her window to observe the scene. Anne and Joachim watch as the Virgin ascends the steps, looking back at them, while the High Priest and his attendants wait at the top, in the Temple itself. Anne's hand is raised in blessing and a number of onlookers watch from the loggia and from the base of the steps, some kneeling, with one small child beginning to follow the Virgin up the steps.

The *Marriage* is such a crowded scene that the haloes of the Virgin and Joseph are genuinely helpful in picking them out of the throng. The backdrop is a high wall with trees beyond it full of birds, probably a reference to the Virgin as the *hortus conclusus*. The crowd around the bride and groom includes the rejected suitors breaking their rods, musicians with trumpets and a portable organ, the bride and groom's respective attendants,⁸⁸⁷ children gathered at the front, and onlookers on the balcony above. Joseph's blossoming rod stands up above the line of the crowd (as do the musical instruments), with a white dove perched on its twigs, presumably symbolising the Holy Spirit, although depicted in profile, wings closed, rather than hovering in flight as is usual.

Ladis notes that

[de]spite inescapable proof of God's will – the verdant rod resting on Joseph's shoulder and surmounted by a dove – a still-resisting Joseph needs no less than *three* pushing and tugging hands to get to the ceremony

while “the Virgin looks down at Joseph with bemusement” and her “smiling companions exchange mordant looks that betray how amusingly unequal they find the match”.⁸⁸⁸ On this interpretation, the crowd and musicians belong to the

⁸⁸⁷ Ladis claims that there are three hands encouraging a reluctant Joseph and a wedding godfather who gives him a ritual slap. See Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. pp.27-28. The two figures immediately behind Joseph are in fact somewhat ambiguous: their expressions are hard to read, being as sober as the disappointed suitors.

⁸⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p.28.

contemporary custom of the *mattinata*.⁸⁸⁹ This was an assault of disagreeable noise, music, and insults inflicted on those about to make marriages which were perceived as ridiculous, especially where one partner was much older than the other. The racket would continue day and night until the bridegroom gave the perpetrators a ransom which would be used to pay for pleasant music and food to celebrate the wedding. Ladis writes that, “for the first time in Florentine art, the ritual of the shivaree intrudes on the ritual of the Virgin’s marriage”.⁸⁹⁰

12.3.5 Annunciation to the Virgin and Visitation

The lunette of the altar wall is partially divided by the stained glass window. On the left, the Virgin kneels on the floor of a loggia, one knee raised, her book resting in a small niche to her left, looking at the brightly illuminated and illuminating Angel Gabriel in the night sky above. Unusually, the Angel is to the right of Mary, presumably in order to accommodate the scene to the space available, including the curvature of the window. The Annunciation could have been portrayed on the right hand side of the lunette, allowing Gaddi to retain the usual positioning of the Angel on the left and the Virgin on the right but this would have spoiled the chronological sequence of the events of Christ’s Nativity, reading the scenes around the window from left to right and top to bottom.

On the right side of the lunette a city (presumably Jerusalem) atop the hill in the background creates a visual link with the *Meeting* on the left wall, although the cities themselves differ. It is illuminated from an unseen source and the darkness of the sky behind it joins the night sky in which Gabriel blazes above Mary’s loggia. Below, the Virgin, with an attendant behind her, greets Elizabeth, who kneels as she embraces the Virgin.

⁸⁸⁹ Ladis’ information about the *mattinata* (also known as the shivaree or *charivari*) is based on the work of Christiane Klapisch-Zuber. See Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “The ‘Mattinata’ in Medieval Italy,” in *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1985).

⁸⁹⁰ Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*. p.27.

12.3.6 Annunciation to the Shepherds and Nativity

Beneath the *Annunciation to the Virgin* is probably the most famous of the Baroncelli scenes, the *Annunciation to the Shepherds*, in which the Angel in white, surrounded by rich golden light, glows against a dark night sky. His light illuminates the cold, grey hillside and shines so brightly on the Shepherds that the left hand figure raises his right arm to shield his eyes, obscuring his face, while the other raises his left arm pointing at the Angel, and the sheep dog cowers slightly.

On the right of the window, beneath the *Visitation*, the *Nativity* shows another tall, slender architectural structure in the form of the stable – a simple roof on uprights – tacked onto the more solid stone building of the inn on one side, and sheltered by the hillside on another. The Virgin cradles the swaddled Christ Child with the ox, ass, and manger behind her in a cave in the hillside. Joseph sits on the ground outside and the first of the arriving Shepherds looks over the rocky side of the hill into the stable. In the night sky two angels represent the heavenly hosts.

12.3.7 The Christ Child Appearing to the Magi as a Star⁸⁹¹ and Adoration of the Magi

The third tier contains another annunciation scene on the left hand side of the window, as the Magi, also situated on a barren hillside like the Shepherds, see a vision of the Christ Child with cruciform halo in a star shaped burst of light that blazes down on them. The Baroncelli Chapel is considered to be the first instance of this rare motif of the Christ Child as a star.⁸⁹²

On the right, beneath the *Nativity*, the *Adoration of the Magi* replaces the stable of the previous scene with an elegant loggia with a balcony above. The Virgin sits

⁸⁹¹ Sometimes known as the *Annunciation to the Magi*. There is in fact no oral annunciation to the Magi and no angels appear to them, (although they are later “warned in a dream”), Matt. 2:1-12. However, in the context of the annunciations to the Virgin and the Shepherds the fresco is often referred to as another annunciation and functions as one.

⁸⁹² Poeschke. p.253.

between two of its slender columns as if on a throne, while Melchior kneels, hands on the ground, to kiss the feet of the infant Christ, who reaches toward him with his right hand and raises his left in blessing. Again the Christ Child as the star illuminates the dark sky and the scene of the Adoration below, though only his head is visible and he lacks the cruciform halo of the Annunciation scene.⁸⁹³

12.3.8 Viewing position

Julian Gardner has argued convincingly for a viewing position at the base of the steps from the transept pavement to the Chapel and suggests that the programme was designed to be seen from here. From this perspective, the base of the altarpiece predella and the top of the fictive basamento (i.e. the fictive marble panels) supporting the narrative frescoes line up horizontally, while the *Coronation of the Virgin* in the central panel lines up vertically with the central pilaster of the altar below and the central roundel at the top of the window. The Virgin's loggia in the *Annunciation* and Elizabeth's house in the *Visitation* are designed to be seen from below while the stable of the *Nativity* and the loggia in the *Adoration of the Magi* are accommodated to their lower position. Similarly the landscapes of the lower two left hand scenes recede more gently. The Temple in the *Expulsion* is "represented strongly dal sotto in su", being high up in the lunette, while the Temple in the *Presentation* is set obliquely, so that,

from the viewing point in the transept the spectator has the sensation of looking straight up the steps and into the building itself, conferring ... a more immediate impact than is experienced from within the chapel.

Gardner concludes that,

In conjunction with the design of the altar wall these scenes demonstrate conclusively that the position of the spectator is fixed with an accuracy and forethought adumbrated but never rivalled in earlier Trecento chapel decoration.⁸⁹⁴

⁸⁹³ It is possible that this is a cherub rather than the Christ Child as a Star, although this would diminish the connection between the Magus pointing at the star and the Christ Child in front of him.

⁸⁹⁴ Gardner. pp 89-91.

Gardner considers why this viewing position was chosen and suggests that it is a response to the practical fact that there would have been a gate or railing⁸⁹⁵ preventing the viewer from getting closer and that “with the chapel generally closed the normal viewing point was from outside the chapel.”⁸⁹⁶ This is true, but of course, the viewing position is not, in fact, fixed. The frescoes have indeed been designed so that perspective on the altar wall is unified, and Gaddi has proportioned the Temple to suit its two different scenes and locations, but from the transept one cannot see the left wall scenes properly unless one moves to the far right corner of the steps, close to the statue of the Virgin and the steps to the neighbouring Castellani Chapel. Anyone wanting to get a proper view would surely at least climb the steps. In any case, the most important viewing audience would be the Baroncelli family, and the celebrants, who would have access to the Chapel. As Gardner himself acknowledges, the vaults of the main bay of the Chapel cannot be seen unless “the observer stands beneath the intrados of the entrance arch of the chapel” and he recognises that the “double-bayed Baroncelli Chapel necessitated a more elaborate [viewing] scheme”,⁸⁹⁷ of which the point on the transept pavement is only a starting place.

⁸⁹⁵ Gardner describes an “iron railing” that would have been in front of the Chapel, while Lubbock believes that there would have been an iron grille barring the entry to the Chapel. See *ibid.* p.94. and Lubbock. p.144.

⁸⁹⁶ Gardner. p.94.

⁸⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p.94.

12.4 Baroncelli Chapel images⁸⁹⁸

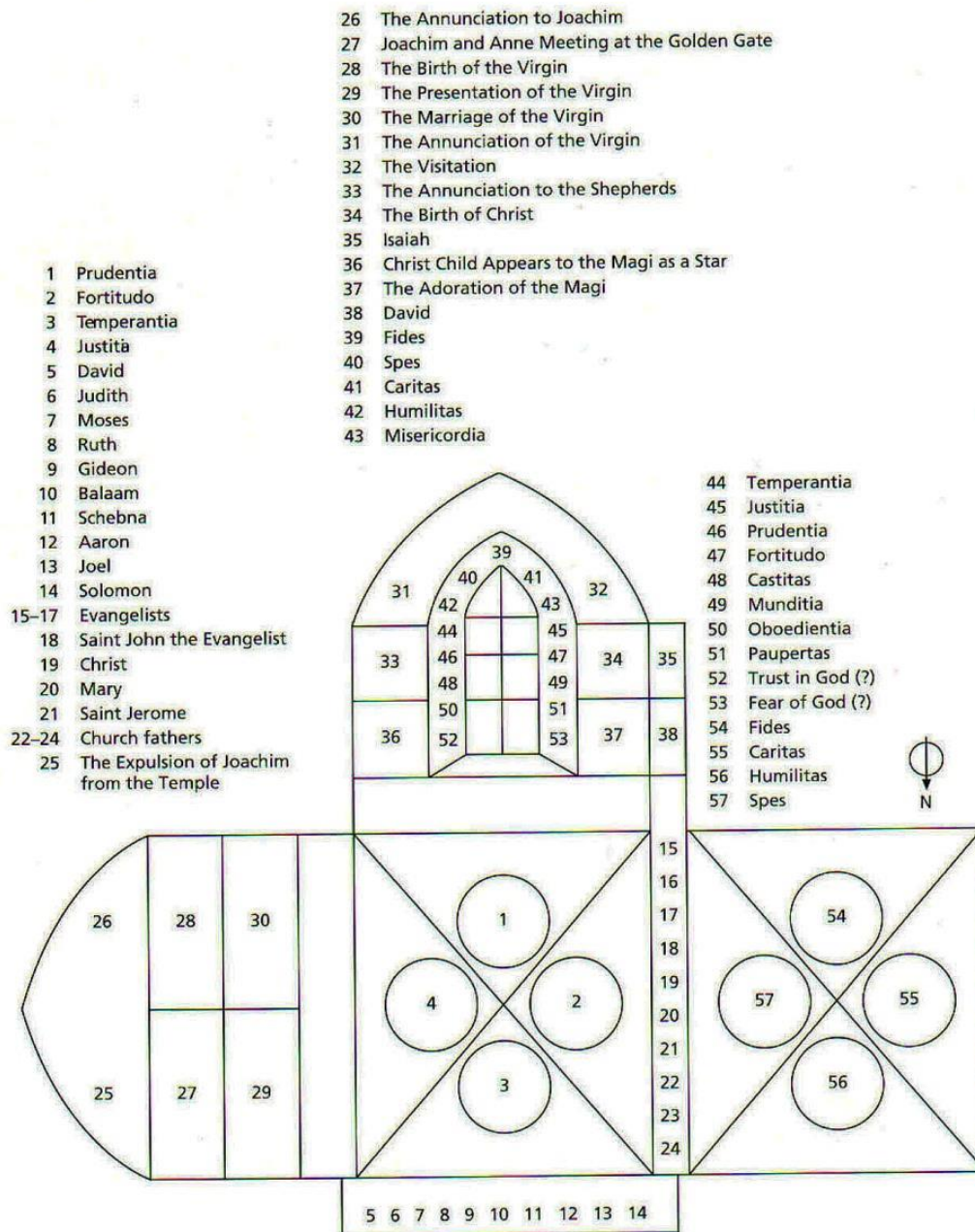


Figure 12 Baroncelli Chapel, Diagram

⁸⁹⁸ The majority of these images are taken from photographs published in Poeschke. Plates 148-156, pp. 254-262. Figure 23 is the author's own photograph. In Figure 12 I believe number 35 to be a misprint and should read 'Jesse', not 'Isaiah'.

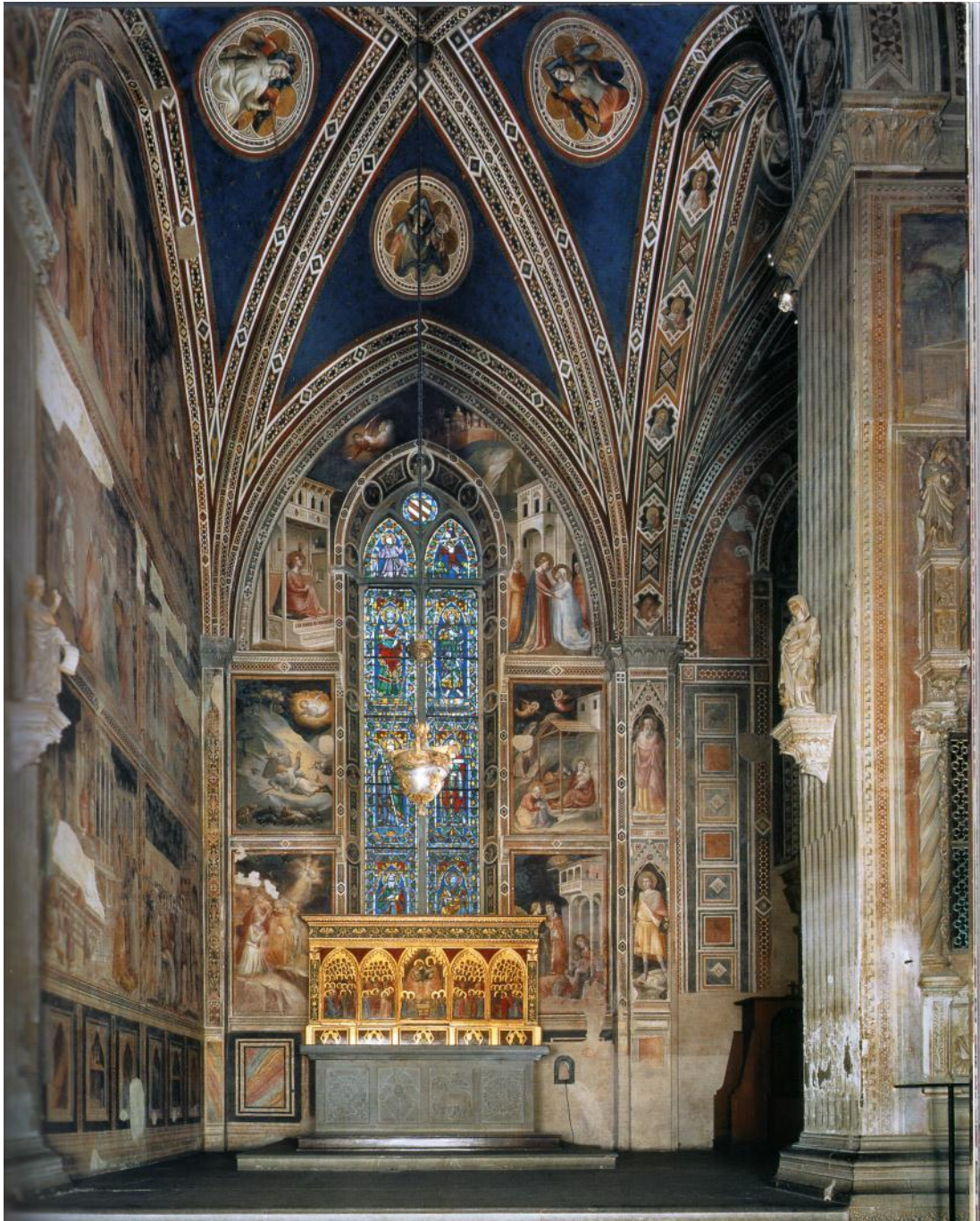


Figure 13 Baroncelli Chapel from the transept



Figure 14 Baroncelli Chapel, Left wall: *Expulsion of Joachim and Joachim's Dream; Meeting at the Golden Gate; Birth of the Virgin; Presentation of the Virgin; Marriage of the Virgin*



Figure 15 Baroncelli Chapel, *Expulsion of Joachim and Joachim's Dream*



Figure 16 Baroncelli Chapel, *Meeting at the Golden Gate*



Figure 17 Baroncelli Chapel, *Birth of the Virgin*



Figure 18 Baroncelli Chapel, *Presentation of the Virgin*



Figure 19 Baroncelli Chapel, *Marriage of the Virgin*

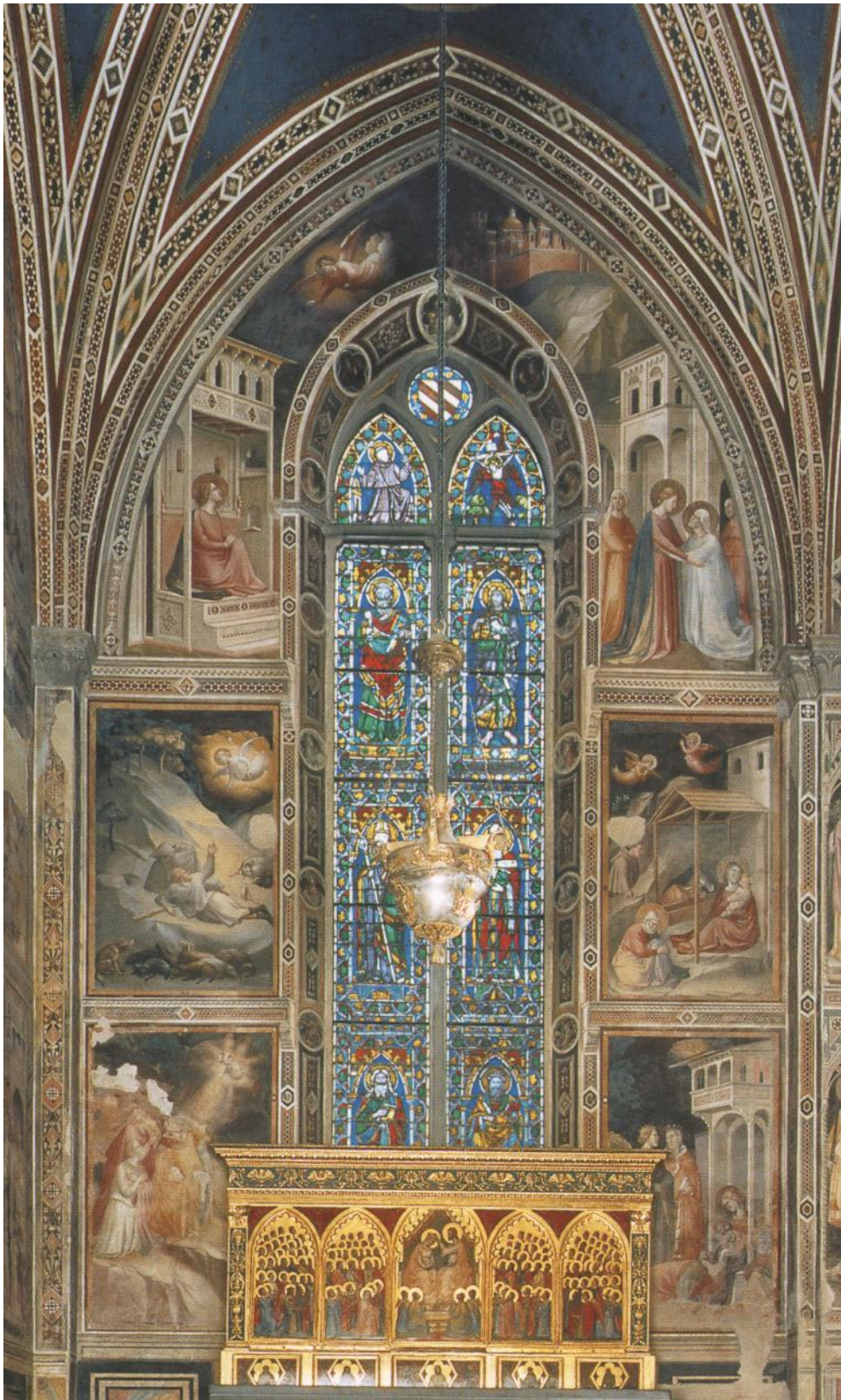


Figure 20 Baroncelli Chapel, Altar wall



Figure 21 Baroncelli Chapel, *Annunciation to the Virgin and Visitation*



Figure 22 Baroncelli Chapel, *Annunciation to the Shepherds*



Figure 23 Baroncelli Chapel, *Nativity*⁸⁹⁹

⁸⁹⁹ Image author's own.



Figure 24 Baroncelli Chapel, *The Christ Child Appearing to the Magi as a Star*⁹⁰⁰

⁹⁰⁰ Unfortunately it was not possible to obtain a better quality image of this fresco.



Figure 25 Baroncelli Chapel, *Adoration of the Magi*

13 Brancacci Chapel Appendix

13.1 The Chapel and its patrons

The Church of Santa Maria del Carmine in the predominantly working-class area of Oltrarno attracted support from the elite and lower orders alike. The Brancacci had probably been supportive of the Carmelites since the arrival of the Order in Florence in the 13th century, and had contributed to the creation of the piazza in front of their Church. Pietro di Piuvichese Brancacci established the family Chapel there in the early 1300s. His nephew, Felice di Michele Brancacci, who held the rights to the Chapel from 1422-1434 and was responsible for the fresco cycle, was a prominent cloth merchant, and held high office in the Florentine commune, travelling as a Florentine representative as well as a merchant.

The Carmelites had come to Europe from Palestine and proceeded to create an identity for themselves in an effort to match the status of the Franciscans and Dominicans. This consisted of a programme of self-historicising whereby they claimed to be the earliest of the orders of friars and to have witnessed Elijah's ascension (earlier Carmelite habits had black stripes on them symbolising the scorch marks of the fiery chariot as the ascending Elijah gave his robe to his disciple Elisha). The order had a community on Mount Carmel which they claimed dated back to this event, and another at the Golden Gate (the site of the meeting of Anne and Joachim and the conception of Mary) linking them to the Virgin. They also claimed an eye-witness relation to St Peter. The Florentine Carmelites were closely involved with their local community and a number of lay confraternities – especially of women – operated from their church.

13.2 The artists

The early life and training of Masolino da Panicale (c.1383/4 – c.1436)⁹⁰¹ is disputed, with suggestions that he may have served under Agnolo Gaddi, Ghiberti, and Starnina.⁹⁰² Vasari described him as having a different style from his predecessors, citing his majestic figures, soft, elegant draperies, and innovative treatment of faces, especially eyes. He admired his progress in shading, relief, foreshortening and perspective, but his chief praise was for Masolino's "beautiful and harmonious colouring".⁹⁰³ Masolino's fame was overtaken, however, by his younger collaborator, Tommaso di Ser Giovanni di Mone Cassai,⁹⁰⁴ known as Masaccio (1401-1427). Alberti mentions Masaccio as the equal of the great classical artists,⁹⁰⁵ Rinuccini admired his naturalism,⁹⁰⁶ and Landino similarly describes him as a

very good imitator of nature, with great and comprehensive *rilievo*, a good *compositore* and *puro*, without *ornato*, because he devoted himself to the imitation of the truth and to the *rilievo* of his figures. He was certainly as good and skilled in perspective as anyone else at that time, and of great *facilita* in working...⁹⁰⁷

Vasari wrote of Masaccio's 'modern' style, his introduction of nude figures to his compositions, and the skilful foreshortening in his works, and noted how his figures stand firmly on the ground rather than appearing to be on the "tips of their toes".⁹⁰⁸ His work at the Brancacci Chapel achieved such fame that "all the celebrated

⁹⁰¹ Regarding Masolino's dates and records related to his life, see Perri Lee Roberts, *Masolino Da Panicale* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).pp.2, 11. Cf. Paul Joannides, *Masolino and Masaccio a Complete Catalogue* (London: Phaidon, 1994). p.25 ff. A helpful summary of recent scholarship is provided by Diane Cole Ahl, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Masaccio* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁹⁰² Joannides. pp.25-35.

⁹⁰³ Vasari. Vol.1. p.256.

⁹⁰⁴ Cole Ahl, ed. p.4. He is sometimes referred to as Tommaso di ser Giovanni di Simone.

⁹⁰⁵ Alberti. Dedication to Filippo Brunelleschi.

⁹⁰⁶ See Cole Ahl, ed. p.205.

⁹⁰⁷ Translated and quoted in Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. p.118. Baxandall interprets 'imitator of nature' as implying "independence from pattern books and formulas, the stock figures and accepted arrangements" and studying from nature, using perspective and relief. pp. 119-121. '*Rilievo*' Baxandall interprets as the use of light and shade to signify form, based on a specific light source, while '*puro*' and without '*ornato*', imply a positive form of plainness suggesting clarity rather than bleakness. *Facilita* is a kind of fluency, suggesting quick work of a high quality, "something between our 'facility' and 'faculty'". p223.

⁹⁰⁸ Vasari. Vol.1. p.267.

painters and sculptors from that time...[became] excellent and distinguished by studying in that chapel”.⁹⁰⁹

No commissioning documents survive for the Brancacci Chapel, but Masolino had previously done some minor work at Santa Maria del Carmine and painted a fresco of St Peter for a private chapel there and he seems to have received the Brancacci commission and begun painting the lunettes in 1424. Masaccio was clearly involved from an early stage and took over completely when Masolino left to work in Hungary in September 1425. The artists had collaborated previously but their partnership in the Brancacci Chapel

has been the subject of more intense analysis and controversy than any other collaboration...obscuring what is really significant: that in this partnership the dominant force was the much younger man.⁹¹⁰

The frescoes were unfinished when Masaccio died and remained so until the 1480s when Filippino Lippi (c.1457-1504) completed the lowest tier. Lippi had trained with Botticelli and was a successful painter, but he seems to have followed Masaccio and Masolino’s lead in finishing the Brancacci cycle and although his hand is distinct from theirs the style and compositions are clearly intended to work in harmony with the earlier scenes.

Although much damaged by fire in 1771, years of candle smoke, and structural alterations, the frescoes have been continuously admired and studied, and the extensive cleaning and conservation carried out in the 1980s facilitated technical analysis and resolved many questions of attribution and technique.

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid. Vol.1. pp.268. See also Ladis, *The Brancacci Chapel, Florence*. p.20.

⁹¹⁰ Joannides. p.61.

13.3 The frescoes

13.3.1 The cycle

The fresco cycle is a life of St Peter based on the Gospels and Acts⁹¹¹ bracketed by the *Temptation* and *Expulsion* of Adam and Eve. Originally the vaults held the four Evangelists and two lunettes showed the *Calling of St Peter*⁹¹² and the *Naufragio*. These, along with two scenes on the altar wall of *St Peter Weeping* and *Feed my Sheep* have been lost. The remaining frescoes consist of the scenes as described below.⁹¹³

13.3.2 Temptation (Masolino)

The upper tier of the right hand pilaster shows Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Against a dark background their nude bodies look luminous. Eve has her left arm curved around the slender Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, around which the serpent is also coiled, forming a helix with her arm half way up the trunk. The serpent, with a female head and blonde hair, twists out from the tree and looks down on the figures. Eve holds the fruit in her right hand, lifting it towards her face. Adam holds his right hand to his breast, and his left open by his side. He looks at Eve, who in turn looks outwards. The scene is sometimes called the *Fall*⁹¹⁴ but is more properly called the *Temptation* as the fruit has not yet been eaten.

13.3.3 Expulsion (Masaccio)

Opposite the *Temptation* on the left hand pilaster is the *Expulsion*. Adam and Eve are driven out of the Garden of Eden (whose gate is visible on the left) and into a barren landscape by the Angel in red with a sword in his right hand. The gilding of

⁹¹¹ For source references see note 329 on page 120.

⁹¹² Or the *Calling of St Peter and St Andrew*.

⁹¹³ It is not clear whether there was originally a gate to the Chapel. As the Chapel is today, only a low marble rail and steps separate the Chapel from the rest of the Church, allowing visitors a clear view of the frescoes, even from some distance. Wrought iron gates were, however, commonly used and one such may have obscured the view for contemporary worshippers.

⁹¹⁴ E.g. Roettgen. p.98.

the original has been lost but would have lit up the scene with fiery rays from the left. Adam holds his hands over his eyes and face in a gesture of shame while Eve, her face contorted in pain, tries to cover her nakedness with her arms and hands. Adam bears some resemblance to the figure in previous scene but Eve is distorted almost beyond recognition.

13.3.4 Tribute Money (Masaccio)

The upper tier of the left hand wall depicts the *Tribute Money* in which the tax collector from Matthew's gospel asks Peter if his master does not pay the tax. Christ tells Peter that he will find a coin to pay the tax in the mouth of a fish. The scene is in three parts: in the centre the tax collector stands with his back to the viewer, in profile, talking to Christ who stands in the middle of a semi-circle of the apostles. Peter is to Christ's right and echoes his gesture as he points towards the sea where Peter will find the fish. On the left Peter crouches by the water to retrieve the fish and on the right the scene concludes with Peter paying the tax in front of a loggia and the steps into what is presumably the tax collector's home or collecting house. In the background is the sea, the shore – barren and with dead trees close to the sea itself and two in leaf behind Christ and the apostles – and blue-grey mountains reaching into the clouds.

13.3.5 St Peter Preaching (Masolino)

The upper tier on the left hand side of the altar wall shows Peter preaching to the crowds. Against a background of wooded hills, Peter stands to the left, his right hand raised in front of him, looking intently at the crowd forming a semi-circle in front of him. On the right are two Carmelite friars. Immediately in front of Peter are two kneeling figures strongly reminiscent of depictions of Mary and Joseph. She is listening intently while he appears to be contemplating deeply (or perhaps sleeping), as is another woman just behind them, with her head in her hand. Behind them ranks of listeners watch Peter closely.

13.3.6 Baptism of the Neophytes (Masaccio)

To the right of the altar Peter baptises those who have been converted by his preaching opposite. The background is similar and almost continuous between the two (although they are separated by the altar wall immediately behind the altar itself). Again Peter stands to the left and the crowd forms a semi-circle in front of him as he pours water from a bowl over the head of a neophyte kneeling in the shallow stream. Another neophyte stands shivering with cold as he waits his turn while yet another is removing his clothes.

13.3.7 Raising of Tabitha and Healing of a Cripple (Masolino)

The upper tier of the right hand wall is a double scene. On the left, St Peter heals a cripple who had begged him for alms by telling him that he has nothing but Christ to offer him and instructing him to walk. On the right, he resuscitates the devout Tabitha who is sitting up on her bed placed in a loggia. She is surrounded by two more devout ladies and three astonished men. Between the two Petrine miracles two fashionable young men in contemporary dress walk across the piazza which is the setting for the entire fresco. In the background are Florentine buildings and people carrying out their business and depicted with considerable detail: laundry is hung out to air, a bird cage hangs outside a window, and a monkey walks along a ledge.

13.3.8 St Paul Visiting St Peter in Prison and An Angel Leading St Peter out of Prison (Filippino Lippi)

On the lower tier, on the left hand pilaster, Paul visits Peter in prison and on the right Peter is led out of prison by the Angel while the guard sleeps.

13.3.9 The Raising of the Son of Theophilus and The Chairing at Antioch (Masaccio and Filippino Lippi)

The lower tier of the left hand wall depicts Peter resuscitating the son of Theophilus, the ruler of Antioch. Peter reaches out his hand to the nude boy kneeling on a piece

of shroud among a cluster of bones and skulls, with his arms raised in wonder. Paul kneels to Peter's left, hands in prayer, and the event is watched by group of onlookers in contemporary Florentine robes and headgear. Behind Peter sits Theophilus on a stone throne, set into the palace wall. He cannot yet see the boy and, indeed, is looking straight ahead, above the action. The palace wall continues round a corner to the left, where more onlookers seem to discuss the scene, and to the right where it forms a backdrop for the whole. This back section is inset with coloured marble panels and topped with three large earthenware pots. Tall trees are visible above the wall.

On the right hand side Peter is shown enthroned at Antioch. He sits outside against a cloth hanging under a tiled roof, the building behind him seemingly continuous with the palace wall. To his right are two standing Carmelites while another kneels in front of him, alongside a bareheaded Theophilus and another kneeling man. To the right are four standing men, including a self-portrait of Masaccio, a portrait of Masolino, and two other men who may be Alberti and Brunelleschi.⁹¹⁵

13.3.10 St Peter Healing with his Shadow and Distribution of Alms (Masaccio)

The lower tier on either side of the altar wall shows Peter healing cripples as his shadow passes over them and distributing alms to the poor. The healing scene takes place in a contemporary street in which three cripples in various stages of sickness and a man restored to health are ranged along the left hand side as Peter walks by, followed by John. His shadow has already passed the two standing men and is now passing the two who are kneeling. The setting remains Florentine (or at least Tuscan) in appearance in the *Distribution of Alms*. Peter and John are giving charity to a crowd, including a crippled man with a crutch on the left and a woman with a baby to whom Peter is handing coins. In front of them lies the corpse of a man named Ananias who, with his wife Sapphira, held back part of the proceeds of the sale of some land for their own use, instead of giving all of it to be distributed to the

⁹¹⁵ On portraiture in the Brancacci Chapel see Steffi Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes the Early Renaissance, 1400-1470*, trans., Russell Stockman (New York & London: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1996). p.94.

poor. Upon being accused of this by Peter, Ananias fell dead, his wife following suit shortly afterwards.

13.3.11 Disputation with Simon Magus and Crucifixion of Peter (Filippino Lippi)

The lower tier of the right hand wall shows Peter disputing with the magician Simon Magus in front of Nero on the right hand side. Nero reaches forward angrily from his throne as the two men argue, a broken idol at his feet. On the left, Peter is crucified upside down. Filippino Lippi's self-portrait looks out at the viewer from among the right hand group of figures at the crucifixion. Behind them the castellated city walls give onto a landscape, with a glimpse of further buildings to the left.



Figure 27 Brancacci Chapel from transept



Figure 28 Brancacci Chapel, *Temptation*

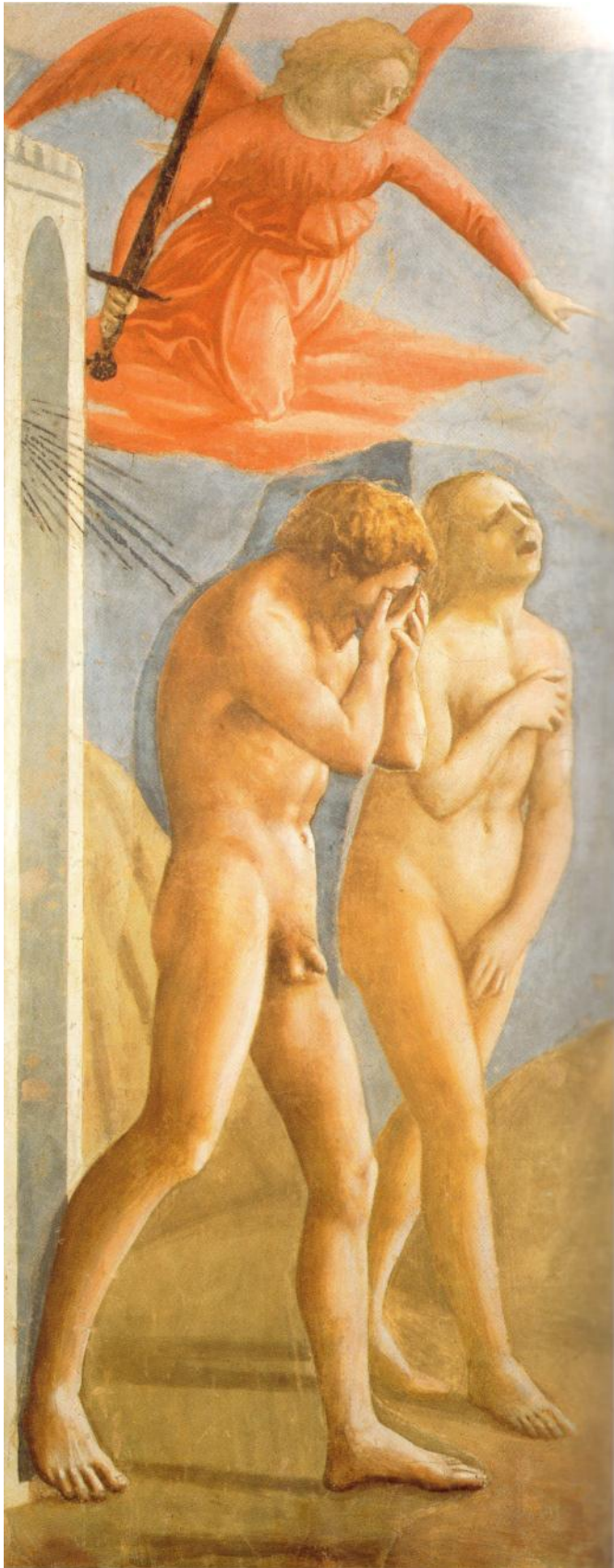


Figure 29 Brancacci Chapel, *Expulsion*



Figure 30 Brancacci Chapel, Left side: *Expulsion*; *Tribute Money*; *St Peter Preaching*; *St Paul Visiting St Peter in Prison*; *Raising of the Son of Theophilus*; *St Peter Healing with his Shadow*



Figure 31 Brancacci Chapel, *Tribute Money*



Figure 32 Brancacci Chapel, *Raising of the Son of Theophilus*

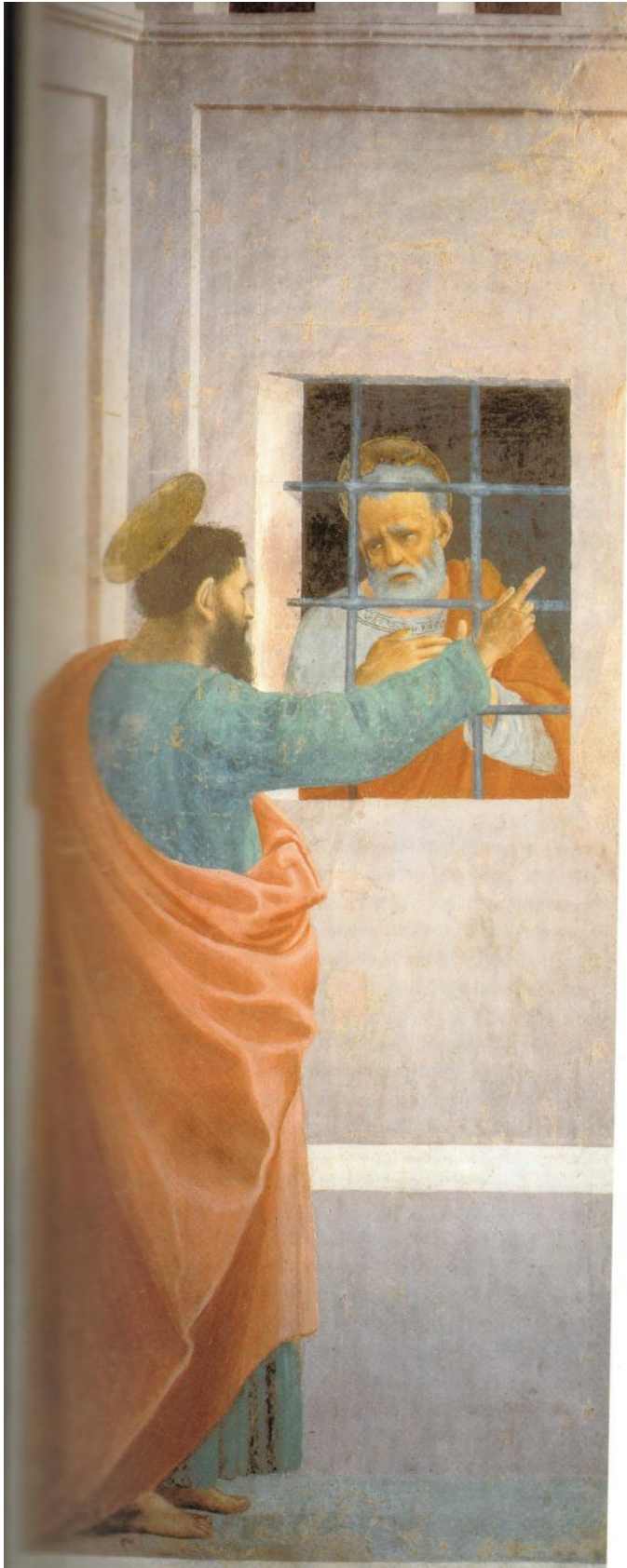


Figure 33 Brancacci Chapel, *St Paul Visiting St Peter in Prison*



Figure 34 Brancacci Chapel, *St Peter Preaching*



Figure 35 Brancacci Chapel, *Baptism of the Neophytes*



Figure 36 Brancacci Chapel, *St Peter Healing with his Shadow*



Figure 37 Brancacci Chapel, *Distribution of Alms*



Figure 38 Brancacci Chapel, Right side; *Baptism of the Neophytes; St Peter Healing a Cripple and the Raising of Tabitha; Distribution of Alms; An Angel Leading St Peter out of Prison; Disputation with Simon Magus and Crucifixion of St Peter*

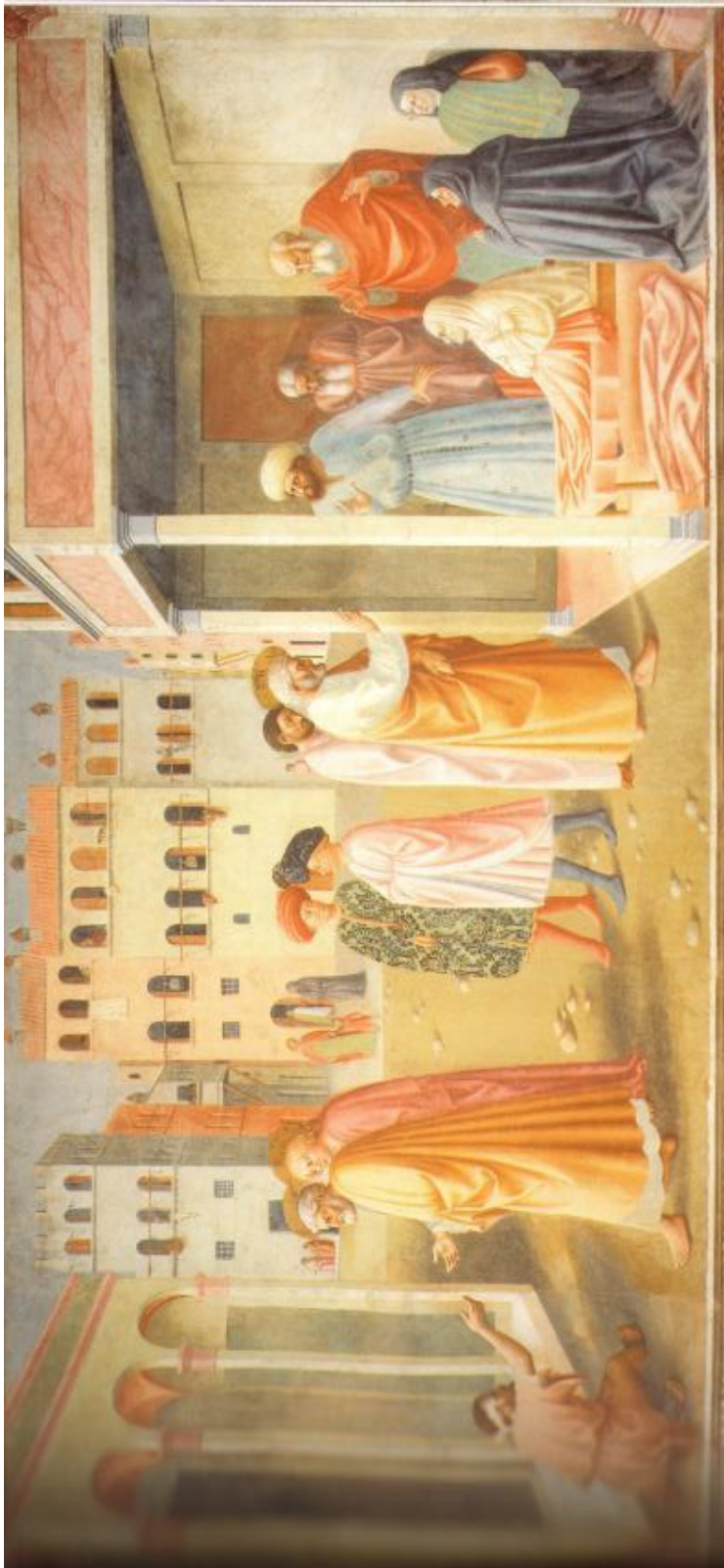


Figure 39 Brancacci Chapel, *Healing of a Cripple and Raising of Tabitha*⁹¹⁷

⁹¹⁷ Unfortunately it was not possible to obtain a clearer image of the *Healing of a Cripple*



Figure 40 Brancacci Chapel, *An Angel Leading St Peter out of Prison*



Figure 41 Brancacci Chapel, *Disputation with Simon Magus and Crucifixion of St Peter*⁹¹⁸

⁹¹⁸ Unfortunately it was not possible to obtain a clearer image of the left section of the *Crucifixion of Peter*

14 San Marco Appendix

14.1 The Convent, its patron, and its community of friars

The Convent of San Marco was founded as a Dominican Observant house in 1436, at the personal expense of Cosimo de' Medici. Indeed, the very presence of the friars in the building was due to Cosimo's influence with the Pope and he proceeded to remodel the buildings, decorate and furnish them, and maintain the friars who lived there. He also, uniquely, retained two cells next to the library and the lay brothers' dormitory on the upper floor for his personal use.⁹¹⁹ By 1443, when Pope Eugenius IV and the papal curia visited the Convent,⁹²⁰ it had been frescoed by the Dominican painter, Fra Angelico,⁹²¹ creating the largest and most unusual series of frescoes known in such a setting.⁹²²

The Dominicans usually decorated their chapterhouses and refectories, and the friars' cells contained images of the Virgin, Christ, and St Dominic.⁹²³ At San

⁹¹⁹ The Convent had been occupied by a Silvestrine community whose incompetence had aroused the opposition of the parish, and the friars at San Domenico in Fiesole had applied unsuccessfully to take it over. Cosimo de' Medici reopened the petition and, when the Pope originally offered an alternative lodging for the Dominicans, stepped in again to secure San Marco, situated fairly close to his own palazzo, for the new community. See Morachiello. pp.11-12. For a discussion of the remodelling of the Convent and of Cosimo de' Medici's reasons for patronising the Dominicans at San Marco see, for example, *ibid.* pp.11-29, Spike, *Fra Angelico*. pp. 43-52, and Ahl. Ch.5.

⁹²⁰ Pope Eugenius IV had been in residence at Santa Maria Novella for the Council of Ferrara-Florence. The transfer from Ferrara to Florence, although officially made on the grounds of plague in the former, was more probably due to the influence of the Medici, who offered to finance the Council's vast expenses. See, for example, Spike, *Fra Angelico*. p.48.

⁹²¹ For the purposes of this thesis I shall refer to all of the frescoes as being by Fra Angelico on the basis that he was almost certainly the principle inventor of the compositions and is the master hand throughout. Most of the frescoes have at least some input from assistants and the question of precisely what was painted by whom and in what order has been a topic of much debate which is not relevant here. See, for example, Ahl., Bonsanti., Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco.*, Spike, *Fra Angelico*.

⁹²² The precise dating is debated but the majority of the work must have been done by the time the Pope visited.

⁹²³ Humbert of Romans, chronicler of the Order, records that friars had images of Mary and Christ "in their cells, so that whether reading, or praying, or sleeping, they might cast loving glances upon them." Humbert of Romans *Vitae Fratrum*, transl. Conway O.P. Fr P. cited in Jarrett, ed. pp.134-135. The original Constitution banned painting and sculpture as superfluous and not consistent with poverty. However with "the experience of active apostolic ministry, the growing crowds of the faithful ...and the increasing development of the cult of the saints" the rule was relaxed and painting and sculptures were admitted as tools for assisting faith. In 1248 the Roman Province ordered priors to have an

Marco the frescoes are situated throughout the Convent, in the Cloister, Chapterhouse, Refectory,⁹²⁴ dormitory corridors, and cells, as well as in Cosimo de' Medici's private cells. Their range of subject matter is far more extensive than was usual, although it remains roughly within Dominican parameters.

Given the extent to which the San Marco frescoes were part of the daily lives of the friars there, it is more than usually important to understand the nature of the Order to which they belonged. This is in itself the subject of many book length studies⁹²⁵ and what follows is a brief overview.

Dominic (1170-1221) founded his Order of preaching friars in 1215, in response to a need to refute a growing heretical and anti-authoritarian movement (most notably the Cathars/Albigensians) which was troubling the established Church. The proponents of these movements were often educated and many had chosen deliberately poor and austere ways of life. Dominic's counter-attack appropriated their characteristics of learning and apostolic poverty as the backbone of the new Dominican Order. Dominican convents provided administrative centres for the Order and tended to be urban foundations, directed towards the largest and most responsive audiences and those with the prosperity necessary to fund their enterprise. More importantly they were places of study, meditation, and prayer, a base from which the preaching friars could prepare for their missionary outings and to which they could return to rest.

image of Dominic and the General Chapters of 1254 and 1256 required likenesses of both Dominic and Peter Martyr to be displayed. These subjects expanded: "Characteristics of the Order, such as its Christ-centredness, the love of the cross inspired by St Catherine, and the devotion to the Virgin, favoured the spread of representations of the Crucified Christ and the Virgin adored by Dominican saints. The Chapters increasingly gave painters and sculptors a free rein." Not far from San Marco, "the church and priory of Santa Maria Novella had been organized into complementary spaces and sequences, within and along which the viewer, attracted by the charm of forms and colours, and guided by the images, was led to meditate upon the spiritual and doctrinal foundations of the Order, upon its history intertwined with the history of the Church." Morachiello.p.31.

⁹²⁴ The fresco in the refectory at San Marco was painted in the 1480s by Domenico Ghirlandaio and is not considered here.

⁹²⁵ See, for example, Benedict M. Ashley, *The Dominicans* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1990). E. Borgman, *Dominican Spirituality* (London: Continuum, 1990). William A. Hinnebusch, *The Dominicans: A Short History* (Staten Island, N.Y: Alba House, 1975). Jarrett, ed; C.H. Lawrence, *The Friars* (London: Longman, 1994).

Dominic himself was remembered as a mild, cheerful, and energetic man, sure of purpose. Living in extreme austerity and often praying all night or sleeping on the church floor, he acted as the primary exemplar within the Order, although arguably the organisation was not as dependent on his personality as the Franciscans were on their iconic founder.⁹²⁶ The degree to which poverty was enforced within the Order varied historically and geographically, but a commitment to personal poverty by the friars was necessary in order to rival the apostolic poverty of the heretic preachers which contrasted so favourably with the wealth of the Church. Communally, however, the Order owned land and possessions, and received gifts and endowments, without which it could not have provided the educational facilities which were central to its mission.

Dominican evangelisation was founded on study, prayer, and meditation. Education rather than poverty was the radical characteristic of the Order. Good preaching required personal experience and understanding of its content and this necessitated immersion in the subject matter. A lector was considered as important as a prior for a new convent, no friar might preach publicly before he was 25 and had studied theology for four years, and preachers received special dispensations from duties that might interfere with their work.⁹²⁷ University men were deliberately recruited and novices were taught in convent schools with a syllabus covering the arts and natural philosophy as well as theology (especially Thomas Aquinas and Peter Lombard), textual criticism, and scholastic exegesis. Levels of education varied however and, perhaps due to a diminishing of the original enthusiasm for preaching and a slackening of discipline, by around 1300 the best minds of the Order were shifting their attention from the sphere of study to that of mysticism, with the notable figures of Meister Eckhart and, closer to Fra Angelico, Catherine of Sienna, at their forefront.⁹²⁸

⁹²⁶ Ralph F. Bennett, *The Early Dominicans* (Cambridge CUP, 1937). p30.

⁹²⁷ 'General Chapter Acts', 1228, cited in *ibid.* p53.

⁹²⁸ *Ibid.* p71.

Prayer was seen as a vital counterpart to education, humanising this intellectualism and avoiding detachment from the outside world. Reading was meant to be “the visible form of prayer par excellence”.⁹²⁹ The Dominicans sought to understand God through personal revelation in prayer⁹³⁰ which informed their preaching, as expressed in the motto on the Dominican coat of arms: ‘Laudare, Benedicere, Praedicare’ (To Praise, to Bless, to Preach).⁹³¹

Like many religious orders, the original intentions and practices were modified over time and the Dominican life became less austere. Internal and external criticism of this state of affairs prompted a period of reforming zeal aimed at returning to what was perceived as a ‘Golden Age’, not so long past, and a number of convents committed themselves to a greater degree of austerity than had become the norm.⁹³² The reform was headed by Fra Giovanni Dominici Banchini (1355/56 -1419) and Fra Antonino Pierozzi (1389-1459, later canonised) who set the tone for the Observant Friars, founding San Domenico in Fiesole and San Marco respectively, both daughter houses of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Dominici in particular was influenced by Catherine of Siena, a passionate mystic and anti-hierarchical reformer, known for her “affective spirituality of almost embarrassingly sensuous directness”, as was her spiritual advisor, Fra Raymond of Capua, an active reformer who became Master General of the Order in 1380.⁹³³

In the new Observance, study was advocated strictly for use in preaching, and not as education for its own sake, the liturgy became longer and offices formerly dispensed with were reinstated. Reformed austerities included sparser, plainer food, hard beds, self-flagellation before the community gathered in the chapterhouse, and stricter

⁹²⁹ Borgman. p65.

⁹³⁰ Jarrett, ed. p108.

⁹³¹ A white triangle with two black sections representing the habit and cloak of the Friars.

⁹³² The question of poverty is an interesting one in relation to San Marco. The new Observance had re-embraced the ideal of poverty wholeheartedly, surviving on alms and income from friars working as artisans and artists, but in the case of San Marco, the Convent was entirely supported at the personal expense of Cosimo de’ Medici and, although there is no reason to suppose that the friars lived in greater luxury than the Observant Rule allowed, Cosimo’s patronage must have provided a strong element of financial security which other houses might not have enjoyed.

⁹³³ Hood, Fra Angelico at San Marco. p.23.

silence. The intention was to live more like Dominic, the day and night being governed by the rhythms of prayer, and the effects of that prayer inspiring preaching, with Fra Giovanni in particular favouring preaching over study. The library at San Marco did not belong to the friars. It was left by the humanist Niccolò Niccoli as a public resource to be housed as his executors – including Cosimo de' Medici - saw fit, and Cosimo saw fit to house it at San Marco. It was not universally welcomed, containing for the most part humanist texts. According to Hood, there is no reason to think that the friars of San Marco, Angelico included, were educated beyond what was necessary for ordination, and it is quite likely that many of them had not read the Dominican classics.⁹³⁴ Nevertheless, Pierozzi was a theologian in his own right (though of the scholastic rather than the humanist model) and the first independently elected prior of San Marco, Fra Niccolo da Carmignano was a learned man, so the change of direction was not total and the friars there must have come into contact not only with the books in the library but with those who came to the Convent to consult them.

⁹³⁴ Ibid. p.24. The library was also open to visitors who may have been accommodated among the lay brothers on the north corridor of the dormitory. Spike, *Fra Angelico*. p.69.

14.2 The artist

Angelico⁹³⁵ trained as a miniaturist and manuscript illuminator. He was already a respected artist when he entered the Dominican Order at San Domenico in Fiesole, just outside Florence, circa 1420, and continued to work for both religious and secular patrons after joining.⁹³⁶ His art and his clerical devotion were in no way opposed: he was famous as both painter and preacher, and by 1450 he had painted for such important patrons as Palla Strozzi, Cosimo de' Medici and the future Pope Nicholas V, as well as many of the city's churches and religious foundations. He had also become Prior at San Domenico. The equal of the masters of his time and much in demand, Angelico's technique reveals the influences of his early training as a miniaturist, the innovations of Masaccio, and the Gothic and Siennese styles.⁹³⁷ His work remains, however, unique in the canon of great artists not only because, as a master, it is necessarily individual but also because art historians have struggled to know whether to categorise him as a 'precious relic' of medievalism who adopted some elements of contemporary style, or an innovative contributor to artistic developments. Vasari wrote that Angelico

never retouched or repaired the art works realised, always leaving them in the condition in which they were first seen, believing (so he said) that this was the will of God.⁹³⁸

The implication is that Angelico's interests lay purely in obeying his religious inspiration in his art, and that he saw the act of painting as in some way itself a form of prayer,⁹³⁹ and this view of him as a 'spiritual painter' has persisted. His spirituality seems indubitable: as an accomplished working artist before he became a Dominican, Angelico could have had no need to join the Order and one can only assume a genuine religious vocation on his part. Furthermore, his paintings display a religious sensitivity which suggests an acute theological awareness and as such he is

⁹³⁵ The artist was born Guido di Pietro. He was referred to as il Beato Angelico from the fifteenth century onwards and was formally beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1982.

⁹³⁶ For discussion of Fra Angelico's training and career see, for example, Ahl, Morachiello, and Spike.
⁹³⁷ "The genius of Angelico... is never passive; the undulation between religious idyll and sacred drama never creates dissonance." There are two major stylistic aspects to his work, "that which might be termed Gothic-decorative, of medieval ascendancy, and that of delicate but palpable research into formal truths consonant with the new figurative manner inaugurated by Masaccio". Sergio S. Ludovici, *Fra Angelico*, trans., P. Boomslietter (Florence: Giunti Gruppo Editoriale, 1998). p5.

⁹³⁸ Vasari. Vol.1. pp.342-3.

⁹³⁹ Ludovici. p8.

a religious painter in the multiple senses of being a painter of religious subject matter, a man of religious learning (although we cannot be sure of the level of Angelico's education, his compositions presuppose a strong knowledge of Dominican traditions and ideals) and a friar known for his deep personal devotion.

Angelico was much admired by his contemporaries⁹⁴⁰ and produced a large body of work for private patrons and religious foundations, working in prominent places and for powerful people. Documented interest in the San Marco frescoes as a group goes back to 1485, although their subject matter is not discussed.⁹⁴¹ Vasari praised Angelico as “no less excellent as a painter and illuminator than as a monk of the highest character” who never painted without praying first, but Vasari is more interested in the publicly visible works, and although aware of the San Marco frescoes he says little about them and either had not seen the dormitory cells or was not interested in them, mentioning only that they were painted with New Testament scenes.⁹⁴² His writing exemplifies (perhaps initiates) the tradition of Angelico as a saintly artist whose spirituality placed his work outside the normal sphere of art historical investigation and, as a result, situates him as a faithful reactionary against humanist developments in art,⁹⁴³ a precious relic, beautifully maintaining a late medieval gothicism.⁹⁴⁴

A monograph by the Jesuit, Stefan Beissell, in 1895 described the frescoes as thematically linked by the Triumph of the Cross, inspired by Catherine of Siena and indebted to Giovanni Dominici and Anotonino Pierozzi. Later writers likewise identified these influences often suggesting that Dominici and Pierozzi composed the scheme. Dominican commentary did much to explain the artist's relation to his community, particularly the work of Stefano Orlandi whose discussion of Angelico's

⁹⁴⁰ Spike, *Fra Angelico*. p.11.

⁹⁴¹ They were remarked at this time by Fra Giuliano Lapaccini, formerly Prior of San Marco . Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.xi. For a useful literature survey to 1990 see the Foreword, pp.xi, xii.

⁹⁴² Vasari. pp. 336-45.

⁹⁴³ See John Pope Hennessey, *Fra Angelico* (London: Phaidon 1974). Pope Hennessey claims that Fra Angelico's choice of technique “resulted not from failure to keep abreast of the developments of his own day, but from intentions which differed fundamentally from those of other artists” and goes so far as to call him a “Puritan faithful to his own intransigent ideal of reformed religious art”. p.40

⁹⁴⁴ See Spike, *Fra Angelico*. p.11. and Ahl. pp.8,11.

Dominican vocation remains standard.⁹⁴⁵ The artist's 500th anniversary inspired scholarly interest, although the focus was more on his panel paintings than his frescoes. Until the 1990's, 20th century art historical approaches tended towards connoisseurship as found in the work of John Pope-Hennessy⁹⁴⁶ and Mario Salmi,⁹⁴⁷ with a few exceptions such as an article interpreting the cell frescoes on a rosarian theme⁹⁴⁸ and a conference paper discussing them as an embodiment of the Observant life.⁹⁴⁹ Creighton Gilbert and Miklos Boskovits both interpreted the cell frescoes as a group, with Gilbert organising them according to their five rows on the basis of subject matter, but without any specific order and Boskovits arguing that they represent the "constant presence of Christ as teacher and companion of the friars"⁹⁵⁰

In the late 20th century, however, there was shift towards understanding Angelico's work more in terms of its historical context and contemporary audience. A number of art historians produced book length studies of the artist, some focussing exclusively on San Marco: Giorgio Bonsanti,⁹⁵¹ Georges Didi-Huberman,⁹⁵² and Ugo Procacci⁹⁵³ in 1990; William Hood⁹⁵⁴ in 1993; Paolo Morachiello⁹⁵⁵ and John T. Spike⁹⁵⁶ in 1996; Laurence Kanter and Pia Palladino⁹⁵⁷ together in 2006; and Diane

⁹⁴⁵ Stefano Orlandi, *Beato Angelico* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1964).

⁹⁴⁶ Pope Hennessey.

⁹⁴⁷ Mario Salmi, *Il Beato Angelico* (Rome: Edizioni Valori Plastici, 1958).

⁹⁴⁸ Susan Pinto Madigan, *A New Interpretation of the Iconography of Fra Angelico: Rosarian Organization in the Frescoed Cells of San Marco* (Hamline University Press, 1977). Unfortunately I have been unable to obtain this analysis.

⁹⁴⁹ G. Geiger and S. McGonigle, "Fra Angelico in San Marco " in *International Congress on Medieval Studies* (Kalamazoo, Michigan.: 1985). Unfortunately I have been unable to obtain this.

⁹⁵⁰ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.xxi. citing Boskovits, "La fase tarda del Beato Angelico", in *L'uomo di fronte all'arte. Valori estetici e valori etico-religiosi*, Atti del 55 corso di aggiornamento cultural dell'Università Cattolica, La Spezia, 8-13 settembre 1985, pp.17-20. *Vita e Pensiero*, 1986 and Creighton Gilbert, "Fra Angelico," *Theologische Realenzyklopadie* II, no. 5 (1978). pp.710-13.

⁹⁵¹ Bonsanti.

⁹⁵² Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*.

⁹⁵³ Ugo Procacci, *Il Beato Angelico Al Museo Di San Marco a Firenze* (Florence Ente Provinciale per il Turismo, 1990).

⁹⁵⁴ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*.

⁹⁵⁵ Morachiello. Morachiello's assessment of Fra Angelico's compositional choices with regard to perspective is nicely observed and supports a persuasive view of the painter positioned between the thought-worlds (and painting techniques) of two eras, during a period of transition. His analysis of the 'programme' of the cells is less successful and, while he highlights legitimate rosarian associations with events in the lives of the Virgin and Christ, his scheme is unconvincing.

⁹⁵⁶ Spike, *Fra Angelico*.

⁹⁵⁷ Laurence Kanter and Pia Palladino, eds., *Fra Angelico* (New Haven, London Metropolitan Museum of Art New York and Yale University Press, 2006).

Cole Ahl⁹⁵⁸ in 2008, to name some of the most influential. Among these are some of the most theologically suggestive explorations of Florentine art of this period. In particular the works by Didi-Huberman and Spike demonstrate a deep theological awareness.

⁹⁵⁸ Ahl.

14.3 Fresco locations

Cloister:

St Dominic with the Crucifix (north wall opposite entrance).

St Peter Martyr enjoining silence (west wall, lunette above entrance to San Marco church).

St Dominic with a scourge (north wall, lunette above entrance to Chapterhouse).⁹⁵⁹

Man of Sorrows (east wall, lunette above entrance to refectory).

Christ Pilgrim received by two Dominicans (south wall, lunette above east entrance to hospice).

St Thomas Aquinas (south wall, lunette above west entrance to hospice).

Crucifixion with Saints (north wall of Chapterhouse on north side of Cloister).

It is believed that there was originally a Crucifixion with the Virgin and St John the Evangelist in the Refectory which has since been lost.⁹⁶⁰ Ghirlandaio later painted a *Last Supper* in the Refectory, which is not considered here.

Dormitory corridors:

Annunciation (south wall of north corridor at top of stairs).

St Dominic with the Crucifix (north wall at east end of north corridor).

Madonna with eight saints or *The Madonna of the Shadows* (west wall of east corridor).

⁹⁵⁹ This severely damaged fresco has been moved inside the Chapterhouse. A vague trace of the sinopie remains on the outside wall. At the time of writing, other lunette frescoes had also been detached and taken inside for conservation.

⁹⁶⁰ See the Refectory entry in the catalogue in Spike, *Fra Angelico*. p.206.

Clerics' cells:

East side of east corridor

Cell 1: *Noli Me Tangere*

Cell 2: *Lamentation with St Dominic*

Cell 3: *Annunciation with St Peter Martyr*

Cell 4: *Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints John the Evangelist, Dominic, and Jerome*

Cell 5: *Nativity with Saints Catherine of Alexandria and Peter Martyr*

Cell 6: *Transfiguration with the Virgin and St Dominic*

Cell 7: *Mocking of Christ with the Virgin and St Dominic*

Cell 8: *Women at the Tomb with St Dominic*⁹⁶¹

Cell 9: *Coronation of the Virgin with saints*

Cell 10: *Presentation in the Temple with St Peter Martyr and Beata Villana de' Botti (or Anna)*

Cell 11: *Virgin and Child with Saints Thomas and Augustine*⁹⁶²

West side of east corridor

Cell 23: *Crucifixion with the Virgin, St Dominic, and Angels*

Cell 24: *Baptism of Christ with the Virgin and St Dominic*

Cell 25: *Crucifixion with the Virgin, St Dominic, and Mary Magdalene*

Cell 26: *Christ at the Column with the Virgin and St Dominic*

⁹⁶¹ See note 599 on page 197 and note 991 on page 389.

⁹⁶² Cells 12, 13, and 14 no longer have fresco decoration.

Cell 27: *Corpus Domini with the Symbols of the Passion, the Virgin, and St Thomas Aquinas*

Cell 28: *Christ Carrying the Cross with the Virgin and St Dominic*

Cell 29: *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St Peter Martyr*

Cell 30: *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St Dominic*

Novices' cells:

North side of south corridor

Cells 15-21: *St Dominic with the Crucifix*

Cell 22: *The Virgin with the Crucifix*

Lay Brothers' cells:

South side of north corridor

Cell 31: *Christ in Limbo*

Cell 32: *Sermon on the Mount*

Cell 32a: *Temptation of Christ*

Cell 33: *Betrayal of Christ*

Cell 33a: *Entry into Jerusalem*

Cell 34: *Agony in the Garden with Saints Mary and Martha*

Cell 35: *Institution of the Eucharist with the Virgin*

Cell 36: *Christ Nailed to the Cross with the Virgin and Mary Magdalene*

Cell 37: *Triple Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints John the Evangelist, Dominic and Thomas Aquinas*

North side of north corridor, Cosimo de Medici's private cells:

Cell 38: *Crucifixion with the Virgin, Saints John the Evangelist, Cosmas, and Peter Martyr*

Cell 39: *Adoration of the Magi and Man of Sorrows*

North side of north corridor, lay brothers' cells:

Cell 40: *Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints Mary Magdalene, John the Evangelist, and Dominic*

Cell 41: *Christ Crucified offered Vinegar with the Virgin, Mary Magdalene, and St Dominic*

Cell 42: *Christ Crucified with the Virgin and Saints Joseph of Arimathea, Longinus, Dominic, and Martha*

Cell 43: *Christ Crucified with the Virgin and Saints John the Evangelist, Mary Magdalene, and Dominic*

14.4 The frescoes

14.4.1 The scenes

Rather than reflecting the life of Dominic, as the Francis cycles of the Bardi and Sassetti chapels reflect their protagonist, the San Marco scenes are based on the Gospels and Dominic's modes of prayer, as described in *De Modo Orandi*.⁹⁶³

14.4.2 Cloister frescoes

Situated opposite the entrance the iconic image of Dominic is the first to greet the visitor and would have been passed by the friars many times each day. The barren landscape in which Dominic kneels, grasping the base of the Cross, is indicative rather than representative and situates the 'event' in the mind of the Saint as he prays. Dominic and Christ are painted with a high degree of naturalism and considerable detail in the depiction of hair, veins, muscles etc. Dominic kneeling in prayer is presented as a real person, the source of a living tradition. The frame is a 17th century addition and may have reduced the size of the original image, possibly removing flanking figures of the Virgin and John the Evangelist. The original frame consisted of bands of ochre and red earth and was arched at the top.

The lunettes place their (mostly solitary) figures against plain dark backgrounds which highlight the figures themselves. Each is specifically related to the function of the room whose entrance it surmounts and acts as an instruction to the viewer. Thus the lunette above the entrance to the choir shows Peter Martyr enjoining silence; the entrance to the guest quarters depicts the welcome of Dominican hospitality; the entrance to what may have originally been intended as the library depicts Thomas Aquinas holding an open book; and the entrance to the refectory shows the Man of

⁹⁶³ *Bav, Ms Lat. Rossianus 3: De Modo Orandi*. See also Hood, "Saint Dominic's Manners of Praying: Gestures in Fra Angelico's Cell Frescoes at S. Marco." Vast amounts have been written about these frescoes, although the focus is on the larger scenes and the cells of the clerics and Cosimo de' Medici. Rather than a detailed description, a brief resume of the most important aspects of each image is provided here for easy reference. A helpful bibliography for each image is provided in the catalogue of Spike, *Fra Angelico*. pp.203-16.

Sorrows, a reminder of the Passion, relating the friars' meals to the Eucharist. The damaged lunette of Dominic with a scourge which was originally above the Chapterhouse entrance reminds the friars that the self-administration of discipline was an important aspect of early and reformed Dominican life.⁹⁶⁴ The lunette of Peter Martyr is unusual in having a perspectival frame and a halo which overlaps this, projecting the saint into the Cloister space.

The Chapterhouse *Crucifixion* fills the entire north wall of the room and presents Christ with the good and bad thieves and a number of attendant saints, being a hybrid of the 'populous' and 'mendicant' types of Crucifixion. A 'Calvary group' between the Good Thief to the left and Christ in the centre consists of John the Evangelist, the Virgin, Mary Magdalene and another woman sometimes identified as Mary Clopas.⁹⁶⁵ Mary Magdalene, in red, has her back to the viewer as she holds up the swooning Virgin whose arms are supported by John and Mary Clopas (in green). Standing beside the cross of the Good Thief, John the Baptist points towards Christ on the Cross, while looking out at the viewer. Next to him the Evangelist Mark, patron of the Convent, kneels pointing at his open gospel. Further left stand Saints Cosmas, Damian, and Lawrence. On the right side of the Cross, Dominic kneels with his arms raised in prayer, evidently contemplating the Crucifixion although he is not actually looking at Christ but into the distance. Behind Dominic stand (from left to right) Saints Augustine (whose rule the Dominicans followed), Ambrose, Benedict, and Romauld (founder of the Camaldolese monastic order under the Benedictine rule). Kneeling in front of these are Saints Jerome, Francis, Bernard of Clairvaux (Cistercian reformer), and Giovanni Gualberto (founder of the Vallombrosan order of Benedictines). In the far right hand corner Thomas Aquinas stands behind a kneeling Peter Martyr.⁹⁶⁶

⁹⁶⁴ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. pp.158,9.

⁹⁶⁵ The presence of John the Evangelist who is often identified with the disciple whom Jesus loved (Jn 19:26) suggests that this is Mary Clopas rather than one of the other women mentioned in the gospels as she appears only in this context.

⁹⁶⁶ This identification follows Spike and Cole Ahl. Spike, *Fra Angelico*. p.133. Ahl. p.137. Hood identifies the first two standing figures as Augustine and Anthony Abbot. Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.186. This seems unlikely as the second figure has a bishop's mitre and crosier.

Around the scene an arched frame of foliate red and green bands is punctured by hexagonal medallions with prophets leaning out of them as if out of windows, holding scrolls. From the bottom left hand corner ascending these are: an unidentified figure⁹⁶⁷ with a scroll reading *Deus nature patitur*; Daniel with the text, *Post edomades vii et LXXII occidet (vr) Chr(istu)s*; Zachariah with *His plagatus sum*; Jacob with *Ad praedam descendisti fili mi dormiens accubuisti vt leo*; and David with *In siti mea potaverunt me aceto*. In the central medallion at the peak of the arch is a pelican with *Similis factus sum pellicano solitudinis*. Continuing down the right hand side are: Isaiah with *Vere langores nostros ipse tulit et Dolores meos*; Jeremiah with *O vos omnes qui transite per viam attendite et videte si est dolor sicut dolor meus*; Ezekiel with *Exaltavi lignum h(um)ile*; Job with *Quis det de carnibus eius ut saturemur*; and the Erythraean Sibyl with *Morte morietur tribus diebus somno suscepto et tunc ab inferis regressus ad lucem veniet primus*.⁹⁶⁸ The texts on the prophets' scrolls may have been chosen by a "humanist planner", possibly Giuliano Lappacini⁹⁶⁹ and link the particularity of individual saints and orders to the eternal realities of the history of salvation.⁹⁷⁰

Along the base are sixteen medallions with portraits of important Dominicans forming a 'Dominican Tree' whose two branches are held by Dominic in an additional central medallion.⁹⁷¹ Alongside the famous Dominicans one might expect are portraits of friars from Santa Maria Novella, rather than friars from the Observant community at San Domenico in Fiesole, that is, politically important figures rather than friars who were "exemplary of the moral or spiritual aims of the Dominican Observance". No friars from San Marco are depicted because the tradition required

⁹⁶⁷ Hood believes this to be Pseudo-Dionysius although he was unable to locate the inscription in Pseudo-Dionysius' works. Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.188 and n.69. p.317. Spike argues that it is not Pseudo-Dionysius since the inscription is not in his works and does not represent his opinions. Spike, *Fra Angelico*. pp. 58.

⁹⁶⁸ Inscriptions published in John Pope Hennessey, *Fra Angelico* (Florence: Scala, 1981). p.205.

⁹⁶⁹ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.188-189.

⁹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p.188.

⁹⁷¹ For a discussion of the identities of the Dominicans depicted in the medallions of the 'tree' see *ibid.* p.88 and nn.66-8 p317.

that exemplars be “both famous and dead” and San Marco was too new an institution to have members of its own community who could fulfil both requirements.⁹⁷²

14.4.3 Dormitory corridors

The dormitory corridors contain three large frescoes - the *Annunciation*, *St Dominic with the Crucifix*, and the *Madonna of the Shadows* – which repeat, elaborate, and relate the themes of Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection which recur throughout the Convent.

The *Annunciation* at the top of the stairs was originally lit from the left by an unseen light source. It marks the point between the public and private (*in clausura*) spaces of the Convent and requires a genuflection and a Hail Mary of the passer by. The loggia in which the Virgin sits reflects the Convent’s own architecture, particularly the library with its ionic columns, in itself significant because the Virgin was likened to a library, keeping the Angel’s words in her heart and containing the Word, and thus the Scriptures. The perspective and the architectural construction initially appear accurate but on closer inspection the orthogonals do not join as they should and the building would not, in reality, stand up, the whole acting as a structural metaphor for the Incarnation with its mysterious incongruity between expectations and appearances, and the mysterious and incomprehensible reality.⁹⁷³ The image is replete with Marian and incarnational symbolism: the arches of the vaults create an M shape for Mary; the small window at what would be a vanishing point on the back wall of the Virgin’s chamber blocks the view of the far distance, suggesting the mystery which the viewer cannot fully perceive, while the glass is a symbol for the virginal conception because light passes through glass, leaving it intact; the enclosed garden symbolises the Mary’s virginity and is a word play on ‘Nazareth’ which means flower, as well as being a reminder of the Garden of Eden and thus of the original sin of Eve and Adam which begins the history of salvation, and hence of Mary’s role as a new Eve giving birth to a new Adam who will atone for that sin and restore men to Paradise. The Virgin wears a white robe and dark cloak echoing the

⁹⁷² The friars of San Domenico in Fiesole were generally lower class and less educated. San Marco eventually split from San Domenico, allying itself with more powerful institutions. Ibid. p.188.

⁹⁷³ See note 570 on page 188.

Dominican colours⁹⁷⁴ and sits on a low stool with her arms crossed over her front, both attitudes of humility. She is on a far larger scale than her surroundings and Gabriel (although he is also outsized) entering on bended knee from the left, his colourful wings shimmering with silica mixed into the pigments. Above the Virgin in the vault there is a damaged patch of fresco on which the faint remains of the dove of the Holy Spirit (with a golden halo) are still visible.⁹⁷⁵ The significance of the column between Gabriel and the Virgin is discussed by Didi-Huberman⁹⁷⁶ along with other symbolic (figurative) aspects of the image such as the flowers and colouring.⁹⁷⁷ The inscriptions read *Virginis inactae cum veneris ante figuram pretereundo cave ne sileatur ave* and, above this, *Salve Mater pietatis et totius trinitatis nobile triclinium*.⁹⁷⁸ A delicately painted golden rose trails beside the inscriptions, the rose being symbolic of the Virgin.

The image of *St Dominic with the Crucifix* at the head of the east corridor is close enough to the *Annunciation* to make a connection with it but follows the basic format established in its full dignity in the Cloister and continued in a simpler and reduced format in the novices' cells. The inscription reads *Salve mundi salutare, salve salve iesu chare. Cruci tuae me aptare. Vellem verre tu scis quare. Presta mihi copiam*.⁹⁷⁹

⁹⁷⁴ Or, rather, the reverse, as the Virgin supposedly revealed the Dominican garb to Reginald, Master of the Order, during a vision in 1218. See, for example, Emmanuel-Ceslas Bayonne, *Life of Blessed Reginald of St Giles O.P. Translated by a Dominican Nun* (Westchester, N.Y.: The Boys' Protectory West Chester, 1877). p.53.

⁹⁷⁵ This is rarely remarked on (see Ahl. p.137) and is almost impossible to see in reproduction. Traces of two concentric circles above the indentation between the two arches invite reflection on whether there was originally a hand of God here, although this does not appear to have been discussed in the literature. See 7.6.1.

⁹⁷⁶ Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*. pp.144-9.

⁹⁷⁷ See 7.2.3

⁹⁷⁸ Inscriptions published in, among others, Pope Hennessey, *Fra Angelico*. p.206. 'When you come before the figure of the Virgin untouched, as you pass, take heed that the Ave does not remain unspoken', and 'Greetings, dutiful mother, the noble triple-couch of the whole Trinity.' See note 481 on page 169.

⁹⁷⁹ The quotation is published in, Pope Hennessey among others. Ibid. p.206, citing Migne (*Patr. Lat.*, clxxxiv, 1319). It comes from a medieval poem or prayer addressed to the members of Jesus' body, which was later adopted as the hymn, *Membra Jesu Nostri Patientis Sanctissima* and translates as, 'Hail, salvation of the world, Hail, hail, dear Jesus. On your cross would I hang Truly, you know why. Give me your strength.' This section comes from the part of the prayer addressed to Jesus' feet which are, of course, very close to Dominic in the fresco and bleeding because of the nails.

On the west side of the east corridor the *Madonna of the Shadows* presents the Virgin and Child seated on a dais in front of a gilded classical apse set into a high wall punctuated by Corinthian pilasters. Instead of a high-backed throne the Virgin sits on a low, wide seat covered with a red cloth embroidered in gold. Dressed in dark blue bordered with gold, with a flash of a red under-dress showing through, she looks down at Christ who is dressed in white with a cruciform halo and sits upright holding an orb and raising his right hand in blessing. To the left are Saints Dominic, Cosmas and Damian, and Mark, holding his gospel with the first verses legible. Dominic also holds a book recording his dying words, an admonishment to the friars to maintain charity, poverty and humility and a malediction on those who own possessions. To the right are Saints John the Evangelist, Thomas Aquinas, Lawrence, and Peter Martyr.

The colouring and gilding is noticeably richer than elsewhere in the Convent (much of it executed in tempera applied *a secco*) and the image looks like an altarpiece and indeed has the same company of saints as in the San Marco altarpiece next door. The fresco is famous for the long shadows on the wall created by the pilasters. The shadows echo the natural light source from the south end of the corridor but have been interpreted symbolically as connected with the Song of Songs in which the 'beloved' (with whom the Virgin is associated) sits 'under the shadow' of her lover,⁹⁸⁰ and with the shadow of God covering the Virgin at the Incarnation. Shadows may also suggest the different realities of heaven and earth, which is but its shadow.⁹⁸¹ Platonic concepts of ideal and shadowy levels of reality may apply here, as mediated by Pseudo-Dionysius' concept of dissemblance discussed at length in Didi-Huberman's analysis of the San Marco images and of the fictive marble panels below the *Madonna of the Shadows*. These add to the effect of an altarpiece but may have more complex associations.⁹⁸²

⁹⁸⁰ Song of Songs 2:3.

⁹⁸¹ Hebrews 8:1-5

⁹⁸² See 7.2.3

14.4.4 Novices' cells

Cells 15 – 21 show Dominic adoring the Crucified Christ in attitudes based on the descriptions in *De modo orandi*.⁹⁸³ The images, vertical rectangles framed by blocks of red and green, are almost identical with the exception of changes to the Saint's posture and expression (and facial hair, with some showing him clean shaven and others bearded). In each, the Crucifix rises from a small mound in a pale, barren, purely indicative landscape. The figure of Christ Crucified remains the same, with his haloed head leaning slightly to his right in the Man of Sorrows form, loincloth fluttering to his left, and blood spurting from the wound in his side, dripping from his hands, and running in rivulets from his feet down the base of the Cross. The space within the picture is minimal, "a flat *intonaco* ground with only the barest shelf of landscape stretching across the bottom edge."⁹⁸⁴ The images are distinguished by the differing gestures and expressions of the kneeling Dominic, in attitudes reflecting ecstasy (Cell 15), meditation (Cell 17), humility (Cell 18), prayerful study (Cell 19), self-discipline (Cell 20), imploring (Cell 21) and a more general image of prayer (Cell 16). Modes of prayer which involved 'holy conversation' or gestures incompatible with kneeling before the Crucifix are omitted or adapted.⁹⁸⁵ Cell 22, whose image has the same format as the novices' cells but with the Virgin instead of Dominic at the base of the Cross, was probably the Novice Master's cell.

14.4.5 Clerics' cells

The images in the clerics' cells are identical in shape, being essentially squares with arched tops echoing the shape of the Convent's many arches. Various suggestions have been made regarding the rationale behind their subject matter,⁹⁸⁶ among which, Hood suggests that they represent the major feasts of the liturgical calendar,⁹⁸⁷

⁹⁸³ See Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. pp.205-7 and Hood, "Saint Dominic's Manners of Praying: Gestures in Fra Angelico's Cell Frescoes at S. Marco." See also 7.3, 7.3.1.

⁹⁸⁴ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.203. *Intonaco* is the thin, flat, smooth, final layer of plaster applied when making a fresco.

⁹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 205-7.

⁹⁸⁶ See 7.2, 7.3, 7.4, 7.5, pages 154ff.

⁹⁸⁷ There are no apocryphal stories or scenes from the life of the Virgin or Dominic. Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.210. N.B. Hood's understanding of 'liturgy' extends beyond the "cycle of church ceremonies that the Dominicans shared with all other religious orders" to include the

specifically the *temporale*.⁹⁸⁸ On this basis, the feasts represented would be the *Annunciation* (Cell 3), *Nativity* (Cell 5), *Presentation* (Cell 10), and *Baptism of Christ* (Cell 24), while the *Crucifixion* scenes (Cells 23, 25, 28, 29, and 30), *Lamentation* (Cell 2), and *Women at the Tomb* (Cell 8) belong to the Easter feasts. The *Mocking of Christ* (Cell 7) refers to the feast of the Holy Crown, the *Man of Sorrows* (Cell 27) refers to the feast of Corpus Christi, and the *Coronation of the Virgin* (Cell 9) represents both the Assumption and All Saints. The *Transfiguration* has no obvious correlative feast.⁹⁸⁹ The text is used for the second Sunday of Lent and Hood tenuously suggests that it could be intended to underline a penitential theme.⁹⁹⁰ The subject matter could equally well have been chosen from the important moments in Christ's life on which these feasts are based and in practice the distinction may be an artificial one since either aspect brings the other to mind.

The *Noli me tangere* of Cell 1 evokes the Nativity and Passion in its Resurrection appearance. It depicts a lush green meadow garden with red and white flowers in the grass and trees in the background, both in the garden and beyond a fence which establishes this as a *hortus conclusus*. To the left a tomb is cut into a large grey rock highlighted in white. The shape of the doorway suggests an upended sarcophagus and the darkness inside is total. The associations between the tomb and the womb reinforce those of the paradisiacal enclosed garden and the figure of Christ as the new Adam. Kneeling on the grass with her back to the tomb and her pink cloak trailing on the grass, Mary Magdalene reaches out her arms to Christ, standing to the right. He is dressed in a white tunic and toga-like robe which goes over his left arm and flutters out behind his right shoulder, a reminder of the fluttering loincloths on the Crucifixion scenes and of the winding sheet. He has a cruciform halo and carries a hoe, barely balanced on his left shoulder. His legs and feet (with clearly visible

customary actions "binding the friars of San Marco to the larger Dominican family" historically and geographically: actions such as study, discipline, and offering hospitality. He writes, "the two major functions of the liturgy of the Dominican Constitutions were to unite the present with the past along an unbroken continuum and to infuse even the most mundane matters of day-to-day business with their deeper and one may say numinous significance." Ibid. p.214.

⁹⁸⁸ The *sanctorale* set out the feasts of the Virgin and lesser saints. As part of the reform, the Observant Dominicans emphasised the *temporale* over the *sanctorale*, returning to the early practices of the Order and away from the multitude of feasts which had threatened to overshadow the centrality of feasts connected directly with Christ. Ibid. 220-1.

⁹⁸⁹ The Transfiguration became a feast in 1467. Ibid. p.221.

⁹⁹⁰ Ibid. p.221.

wounds) are crossed as he steps forward on his right foot and he seems to be standing on tip-toe. His right hand, palm downwards, indicates to Mary not to touch him but his body inclines slightly towards her and his entire posture suggests a dancing movement.

Cell 2 contains a *Lamentation*. Another womb-like rock-cut tomb dominates the right hand background while the left is filled with trees and flowering bushes so that the scene continues much of the imagery of the *Noli me tangere* without copying it. A large sarcophagus waits in the tomb and in front of this Joseph of Arimathea, the Virgin, Mary Magdalene, and another woman⁹⁹¹ support the body of Christ on their knees in an extended *Pietà*. The crown of thorns has been removed leaving traces of blood. To the left Dominic, holding a lily (associated with the Virgin and the Annunciation) observes the scene.

The *Annunciation* in Cell 3 is one of San Marco's most famous images and rightly so. It is unusually sparse, being set in a vaulted loggia in which the only furniture is a low stool on which the Virgin kneels, her hands crossed at her breast still holding her book. Her body inclines forwards, following the curve of the vaults above her and her head is slightly bowed. Her upturned eyes do not seem to see the Angel in front of her but beyond, pondering the Angel's words in her heart. Gabriel stands, emphasizing the humility of the kneeling Mary (it is unusual to see the Virgin placed lower than the Angel to whom, from the moment of the Incarnation, she is superior) his hands also crossed in front and his large, colourful wings echoing the shape of the arches above and behind him so that the two figures form an arch of their own, mirroring the shape of the loggia and of San Marco's own architecture, on which the

⁹⁹¹ Identifying the women at the tomb can be difficult if it is not clear which gospel the scene is based on since there is some variation in the women named. Matt. 27:56 records many women at the Crucifixion including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee who is often identified with the Salome mentioned in Mk 16:1. Mk 28:1 mentions Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary' at the empty tomb, presumably meaning Mary the mother of James and Joses whom he has referred to earlier. Mk 15:40 and 16:1 places Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome, at the Crucifixion and at the empty tomb. Lk. 23:27 describes women being present at the Crucifixion but does not name them, although he records Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women at the empty tomb 24: 10. Jn 19:25 and 20 records Mary Magdalene and the Virgin's sister Mary Clopas at the Crucifixion and Mary Magdalene alone at the empty tomb. See note 599 on page 197.

structure is based. Beyond the Angel, to the left, a plain strip of green indicates in the simplest manner a garden, in which Peter Martyr stands, looking in, hands together in prayer. Between the Angel and the Virgin is an empty space. The light enters from the left casting a shadow behind the Virgin and although Gabriel is often shown without a shadow to indicate his angelic status, here his shadow falls between them, emphasising the light which streams in behind him and strikes the Virgin's forehead and breast.

Cell 4 depicts the *Crucified Christ with the Virgin Mary and Saints John the Evangelist, Dominic and Jerome*. John and the Virgin are to the left and Dominic and Jerome to the right. The Cross is raised on a rocky mound between two larger rocky hills to either side, set against a dark V shape of night sky. The blood flows freely from Christ's wounds and spurts from his side, while a gossamer-thin loin cloth flutters to his left. His head rests on his right shoulder in the style of the Man of Sorrows. He wears the cruciform halo and the T shaped Cross is surmounted by a large board marked INRI (as are the other Crucifixes in San Marco). The landscape is entirely barren and the scene is presented more as a vision or contemplation than a historical event.

The *Nativity* in Cell 5 places the naked infant Christ with cruciform halo on a meagre bed of hay in the central foreground. He looks at the Virgin kneeling in adoration to the left and raises both his hands to her. Behind the Virgin kneels Catherine of Alexandria, while on the right Joseph and Peter Martyr also kneel. In the background a wooden stable is built out from a cave reminiscent of the tombs in Cells 1 and 2, while the wooden manger over which the heads of the ox and ass almost meet resembles the stone sarcophagus. Above the stable four singing angels hover, hands in prayer.

In Cell 6 Christ again occupies an empty central space but this time the space is a glowing white mandorla and Christ stands transfigured on a rocky mound, arms outstretched as if on the Cross, an impression emphasised by the strong red of the

cross on his otherwise whitened halo. Around the white of the mandorla a golden ochre colour fills what should be the sky and the haloed heads of Moses and Elijah appear, disembodied, to the left and right respectively. Beneath Moses, the Virgin stands, hands crossed at her breast, while opposite her, beneath Elijah, stands Dominic with his hands together in prayer. Along the front Saints Peter, James, and John kneel in attitudes of astonishment. Peter faces the viewer, arms raised in wonder, looking away from Christ but clearly able to see the Transfiguration nonetheless, thereby emphasising the supernatural nature of the event. Again the landscape is a barely indicated and the presence of the Virgin and Dominic renders this more a mystical contemplation than a depiction of the 'event'.

Cell 7 contains an extraordinarily modern and abstract depiction of the *Mocking of Christ* in vivid colours of the theological virtues - red, white and green – which contrast with the generally muted tones seen elsewhere. Christ is – unusually - dressed in white robes (as opposed to the normal red or purple of this event) highlighting his innocence, and holds a wooden stick like a sceptre, and an orb. He wears the crown of the thorns and is blindfolded, although the material is so transparent that his closed eyes are visible through it. The space in which the mocking takes place is almost surreal in its abstraction, consisting of a series of coloured blocks. Christ is raised on a square, white dais which rests on a buff coloured floor, itself raised in comparison to the foreground, and sits on a square red block. Behind him a square of green, like a solidified cloth of honour, is marked out against a greyish wall. Above and beyond this wall is darkness. Against the green background are four disembodied hands, one of them holding a stick which strikes Christ's head, and a head wearing a hat which it lifts ironically with a further disembodied hand while spitting at Christ, who remains entirely impassive. In front of the white dais, and sitting on the raised buff floor, are the Virgin and Dominic in contemplative attitudes, Dominic reading a book, while the Virgin simply looks down at the floor. Liturgically this image may refer to the Dominican feast of the Holy Crown.

Cell 8 – which shows the *Women at the Tomb* - returns to the tomb and the empty sarcophagus, although this time the viewer is almost inside the tomb rather than looking in from outside. An angel in white sits on the left hand end of the sarcophagus pointing downwards into its emptiness and upwards at the risen Christ, depicted holding the flag of the resurrection and a martyr's palm in a white mandorla. To the right, the Virgin and three other women⁹⁹² enter with jars of spices. The identification of the women other than the Virgin (central in the group and wearing a dark cloak) is complicated by their similar garb but it seems probable that the woman leaning over the empty sarcophagus and looking into its emptiness, unaware of the resurrected Christ above her, is Mary Magdalene since she plays a more prominent role in the Passion and Resurrection events.⁹⁹³ To the left Dominic kneels in prayer.

The *Coronation of the Virgin* in Cell 9 portrays the Virgin and Christ in a series of concentric circles, the outermost of which is pale green and the innermost – an orb in the distance beyond them – a luminous white. The Virgin kneels forward as Christ crowns her with a pointed crown, both of them dressed in white and apparently seated on clouds with which their robes almost mingle. In a curved arrangement, following the outer circle around the protagonists, kneel (from left to right) Saints Thomas Aquinas, Benedict, Dominic, Francis, Peter Martyr, and Mark. Their hands are raised in wonder as they contemplate the heavenly scene witnessed in their minds' eyes (their gaze being directed not at the Virgin and Christ as the viewer sees them, but simply upwards in whatever direction they are facing). Since Christ's own gaze is on Mary, who in turn looks downwards in humility, all eyes are effectively on the Virgin, the Dominican foundress and exemplar, closest to the Son and worthy of his honouring. The solid, though ecstatic, realm occupied by the saints balances the ethereality of the heavenly scene in a perfect control of space and form. Like the *Transfiguration*, the scene is confessional since it presents a moment when Christ is correctly recognised as divine.

⁹⁹² Mary Magdalene and two out of Mary Clopas, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee/Salome. See note 991 on page 389.

⁹⁹³ Alternatively, Mary Magdalene may be the woman to the Virgin's left who is, like the Virgin, carrying the jar of ointment. If this is so then the jar would make a visual reference to her earlier anointing of Christ. Mk 14:8.

Cells 10 and 11 almost certainly housed the Prior and contain the *Presentation in the Temple* and the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas*. In the *Presentation*, Simeon and the Virgin stand on a dais before an altar in a shell shaped apse. A small purificatory fire burns on the altar. Simeon holds the swaddled Christ, gazing with great penetration at the child, who looks at the Virgin. The golden green of Simeon's robe is lit up on the side of the Christ Child (and the natural light) and illuminates the faces of his parents. The Virgin holds out her hands as if reluctant to let her baby go, while behind her Joseph carries a basket with the offering of doves. Peter Martyr kneels on the left and a woman in a black cloak stands on the right. She is sometimes identified as Beata Villana de' Botti (a Florentine Dominican tertiary), or as the prophetess Anna.⁹⁹⁴ Since she is aligned spatially and in colouring with Peter Martyr, the former seems more likely as Villana would be a Dominican exemplar as he is. Peter Martyr's attitude may be related to the fourth mode of prayer described in *De modo orandi*, which Dominic used when praying for the novices and friars, making it particularly appropriate for the Prior's cell. For the Dominicans, the event of the Presentation of Christ would have resonated with the dedication of young friars and was liturgically expressed in the Feast of the Purification. A youth confraternity dedicated to the Purification was based at San Marco and Angelico himself painted their processional banner. In the liturgical calendar the Feast of the Purification ended the Nativity cycle and, although the Observants focussed primarily on the feasts of the *temporale* (the feasts of Christ) rather than the *sanctorale* (the feasts of the Virgin and saints), they made an exception for major feasts of the Virgin.

The *Madonna and Child Enthroned* is a greatly simplified echo of the *Madonna of the Shadows*, presenting Mary in reddish colours against a red cloth of honour, holding the Christ Child who raises his right hand in blessing and holds the orb in his left. Instead of the pilastered wall of the corridor scene, the back wall is hung with a fairly simple green and gold cloth, picking up the green of the child's robe. The white in a trinity of red, white and green (the colours of the cardinal virtues) is supplied by the child's undershirt, the band around the Virgin's forehead, and the

⁹⁹⁴ See Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.218.

bright whiteness of the stone dais supporting the throne. To the left and right Augustine and Dominic hold open books whose inscriptions are no longer visible but which may be identified as the Augustinian Rule and the Dominican Constitutions, these fundamental documents being naturally appropriate to the Prior's cell.

Cells 23 (*Crucifixion with the Virgin, St Dominic, and Angels*), 25 (*Crucifixion with the Virgin, St Dominic, and Mary Magdalene*), 29 (*Crucifixion with the Virgin and St Peter Martyr*) and 30 (*Crucifixion with the Virgin and St Dominic*) follow a similar format, based on that of Cell 4, with variations in the identity and attitudes of the 'witnesses' but little else. Cell 23 is distinguished by four angels, some of them engaged in hammering in Christ's nails, perhaps to indicate that the Crucifixion is divinely ordained.

Cell 24 has the *Baptism of Christ*. The landscape is as barren as the Crucifixion scenes but its bleakness is mitigated by the dove of the Holy Spirit appearing out of concentric circles of clouds in the distance, like those in the Coronation in Cell 9, suggesting an ineffable divine presence of blinding brightness. The dove in the corridor Annunciation also seems to have been surrounded by a circle, within which a golden halo formed another concentric ring.⁹⁹⁵ Christ and the Baptist occupy the centre foreground and the Baptist half climbs on a rock to pour the water over Christ's head, raising himself temporarily above Christ but also bending his knee towards him in a movement which combines authority and humility. To the left two angels hold Christ's clothes and to the right the Virgin and Dominic look on.

The Crucifixion with the Virgin, Mary Magdalene, and St Dominic in Cell 25 shows the Magdalene holding the foot of the Cross, in the position often occupied by Dominic. Although the Virgin was the nominal abbess of the Dominican Order and the inspiration for its foundation, the Magdalene was increasingly venerated and gradually became a patroness of the Order because of her connection to preaching

⁹⁹⁵ Cf. *The Annunciation*, Filippo Lippi, National Gallery London. See Drury. pp.48-54.

(as the first to hear the news of the Resurrection and carry it to the apostles) and as a converted sinner.

Cell 26 is known as the *Corpus Domini* or *Corpus Christi* (a specifically Dominican feast) and shows Christ standing in the sarcophagus with the Cross behind him and the (expanded) instruments of the Passion, including hands exchanging coins, Judas kissing Christ, a flaming torch, Peter's denial, the nails, column, sponge, spear, a blindfolded Christ being slapped and hands with sticks, and a man spitting at Christ. Behind Christ, the Cross still has the nails and blood visible. These elements are abstracted and appear starkly against the black sky behind. His head still leans to the right and his arms stretch out and downwards showing his wounded hands. In front of the sarcophagus the Virgin sits on the ground, a Madonna of Humility, and Thomas Aquinas kneels holding a book and quill.

Christ at the Column with the Virgin and St Dominic in Cell 27 continues the Passion imagery and has some of the abstraction of the *Mocking of Christ* in Cell 7, although not to the same degree. Christ stands on a broad block of stone in an empty but nevertheless claustrophobically cramped room which he dominates in height, his head reaching the top of the pilasters in spite of the curved angle of his body. The column itself is not really part of the building's structure, although it reaches the wooden roof. He is alone and the marks of his flagellation are revived by Dominic who is kneeling on the right and flagellating himself as he contemplates Christ. The Virgin, seated on the left, looks downwards and holds her hands out in an attitude identified from the *De modo orandi* as prayerful imploring.

In Cell 28 the Virgin and St Dominic are again the witnesses as Christ carries the Cross through a bare, rocky landscape like those of the Baptism and Crucifixion scenes. The Virgin appears to follow him on foot (rather than sitting or standing at the side) while Dominic kneels in his path, his book beside him, making a connection as direct as that in the flagellation scene.

The Crucifixion with the Virgin and St Peter Martyr in Cell 29 shows the Virgin sitting on the ground in humility, with her hands under her robe, and Peter Martyr kneeling with his hands outstretched. Cell 30 has a similar composition although it is Dominic rather than Peter Martyr who kneels in prayer and the Virgin has her hands clasped.

14.4.6 Lay brothers' cells

There is some debate as to whether all of the cells (with the exception of Cosimo de' Medici's) on the north corridor were for the lay brothers or whether some were intended for guests (as Spike suggests).⁹⁹⁶

Cell 31 depicts *Christ in Limbo* with Christ entering the underworld through a doorway to the right, dressed in white and holding the flag of the resurrection in his left hand while reaching out with his right to a throng of figures emerging from a dark, rocky tunnel reminiscent of the backgrounds to the Crucifixion scenes. Devils cower in the corners on the left hand side while the door to hell lies broken on the floor to the right, crushing a devil beneath it. The brightness of the light entering with Christ is remarkable and Christ's arm reaching out and grasped by (presumably) an aged Adam at the head of the crowd, carries the force of the resurrection light with it into the darkness beyond. The figures pouring out are not easy to identify. The second figure resembles the Baptist with long hair and a hairy robe but the third also has a hairy robe and blood on his head possibly suggesting Cain and Abel. Another has horns on his head which might indicate Moses but appears relatively young, suggesting otherwise. There are no Dominican witnesses/exemplars in the scene.

The *Sermon on the Mount* in Cell 32 has prompted the suggestion that the cell may have been used as a school room,⁹⁹⁷ although there is no firm evidence for this.

⁹⁹⁶ Spike, *Fra Angelico*. p.62ff.

⁹⁹⁷ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. p.242.

Christ sits on a rocky hill, facing the viewer, in front of a semi-circle of the apostles, among whom Judas has a black 'anti-halo'. Again the bare landscape is indicative rather than representative and the space before Christ is brightly lit, suggesting the illuminating nature of his words. An adjoining room (Cell 32a) contains a large fragment of the *Temptation of Christ* in which the devil leads Christ to the high mountain while another figure of Christ, seated on a throne-like rock is tempted by bread and wine proffered by angels. This is the only scene in which Christ (or any other figure) appears twice and is arguably the most 'narrative' in style.⁹⁹⁸

Cell 33 depicts the *Betrayal by Judas*, again notable for the absence of Dominican witnesses. Against a night sky, the hillside of the Garden of Olives is brightly lit and the soldiers surround Christ as Judas kisses him. To the right Peter attacks the High Priest's servant with his cleaver-like sword, clutching at his hair as he slices off his ear. Like the *Temptation* in Cell 32 the scene has an unusually (for San Marco) narrative feel. A fragment of an *Entry into Jerusalem* survives in an adjoining room (Cell 33a) showing the rear leg of the ass and a procession of apostles carrying palms walking along a palm strewn path.⁹⁹⁹

In Cell 34, the *Agony in the Garden* is depicted on the left hand side, with Peter, James, and John sleeping in the middle ground and Christ kneeling alone in the far left with an angel holding a chalice before him. The fresco is divided almost down the middle and the right hand side is occupied by the house of Mary and Martha, its wall bisecting the image as if built at the bottom of the garden. The two women sit on the floor of a bare room, much like those of San Marco, Mary reading and Martha with her hands together in prayer. They cannot physically see the garden to the left but are evidently meditating upon it and a high window suggests a link between the scenes.

⁹⁹⁸ The cells were restructured during changes to the building to create the large window which now faces the entrance to the library. In the process Cells 32 and 33 acquired secondary rooms in each of which a fresco fragment remains. It is not known whether these fragments were originally joined in some way or represent two separate frescoes.

⁹⁹⁹ This cell is not normally accessible to the public today.

Cell 35 also borrows from the architecture of San Marco, locating the *Institution of the Eucharist* in a room off a courtyard whose roofs and well can be seen through the windows and door. The view through the picture's window is almost exactly that seen through the cell window. An L-shaped table runs along the two visible walls of the room with eight seated disciples on its far side. Christ stands on the near side offering the bread to a disciple (presumably John since he seems to be sitting next to Christ's own vacant place, on the other side of which is Peter). Kneeling to the right are a further four disciples whose empty stools remain beside the table. In the left hand corner kneels the Virgin, a reminder of the Incarnation in which the infusion of the divine into the material prefigures the transubstantiation of the Eucharist. Judas is kneeling on the right with a dark 'anti-halo', a swarthy complexion and dark hair.

Cells 36, 37, 40, 41, 42 and 43 are Crucifixion scenes set in the bare landscapes found in the novices' cells and 37-43 include Dominic in attitudes from the *De modo orandi* but, unlike the novices' scenes, these depict particular moments in the Passion narrative. In Cell 36 Christ, his feet still supported on a ladder, is nailed to the Cross by two men standing on two further ladders, watched by a Roman soldier and two other men on the right, while the Magdalene looks up at him from the left as she supports the sorrowful Virgin. From Christ's mouth issue the words *Pr dimicte illis quia nes (ciunt quid faciunt)*.¹⁰⁰⁰

Cell 37, which is generally identified as a meeting room for the lay brothers, contains a *Triple Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints John the Evangelist, Dominic and Thomas Aquinas* echoing that of the Chapterhouse downstairs, though on a considerably smaller and less populous scale. An inscription imperfectly records Christ's words to the Good Thief ("Today you will be with me in Paradise"), written upside down and back to front from the viewer's point of view, but as if coming from Christ's mouth.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Father forgive them (they know not what they do) Lk. 23:34.

Cell 40 has a greater number of witnesses/exemplars, with the Virgin supported by Mary Magdalene and another woman¹⁰⁰¹ on the left, Dominic prostrate before the Cross, and two kneeling soldiers behind him (the one on the left may be Longinus). In Cell 41 a Roman soldier offers Christ the sponge soaked in vinegar witnessed by the Virgin, Mary Magdalene, and Dominic on the right, while in Cell 42 Longinus pierces Christ's side with his spear, watched by an elderly man (probably Joseph of Arimathea). The Virgin and Martha (her name is inscribed on her halo) turn away, and Dominic adores the Crucifix. Finally, in Cell 43, the Virgin and Mary Magdalene kneel on the left beside the Cross, with John the Evangelist standing behind them and Dominic kneeling on the right, covering his eyes.

14.4.7 Cosimo de' Medici's private cells:

Cells 38 and 39 were reserved for Cosimo de' Medici's private use. They have undergone considerable architectural changes and would certainly have had windows, and may originally have opened onto a small terrace overlooking the second cloister. In the first cell is a *Crucifixion with the Virgin, Saints John the Evangelist, Cosmas, and Peter Martyr*. It includes Christ's words to the Virgin in which he tells her that John is now her son.¹⁰⁰² It follows the basic San Marco Crucifixion format but includes Cosimo's onomastic saint among the worshippers. In the second room, which was clearly used as a private chapel, is an *Adoration of the Magi* with a *Pieta* inset in a tabernacle niche. Here Christ is shown scourged and bleeding, standing in the sarcophagus with the horizontal beam of the Cross behind him, the column to the left and the sponge and spear on the right. A compartment for the reserved sacrament indicates that the room originally contained an altar and functioned as his private chapel.¹⁰⁰³

¹⁰⁰¹ See note 991 on page 389.

¹⁰⁰² Jn 19:26

¹⁰⁰³ Although a highly unusual arrangement, Cosimo had already acquired permission to have an altar in his private Chapel at the Palazzo Medici and the Observant Dominicans had been granted the right in 1425 to set up altars as they saw fit.

The Medici-Magi connection¹⁰⁰⁴ makes the *Adoration* an obvious choice for Cosimo's cell and, as John Spike notes, the

thematic connection with the Council of the Union, which had declared the union of the Greek and Latin churches in 1439, and was still in session, could not have been more perfect.¹⁰⁰⁵

The Holy Family and the Magi are grouped on the left with the aged Melchior prostrating himself as he offers his gold to the Christ Child. The cleanly squared off stone block behind the Virgin and Child, which contrasts with the more natural rocky formations of the rest of the scene, may suggest the 'cornerstone' which is a symbol of Christ¹⁰⁰⁶ as well as the thrones and cloths of honour which feature in other images of the Virgin and Child. Spread out towards the right, the procession of the Magi progresses from a jumble of figures on the far right into a tidy line joining the Magi themselves, perhaps reflecting their progressive illumination as they approach Christ.¹⁰⁰⁷ Two horsemen at the back are still looking up at the star. The armillary sphere held by the dark-skinned man in the very centre of the procession, above the tabernacle, would have been a valuable gift, recognised in the early Renaissance as revealing the secrets of the universe by showing the heavenly spheres and also as derived from the astronomy and cosmology of the Greek philosopher Pythagoras who had supposedly acquired some of his knowledge from the Magi themselves.¹⁰⁰⁸

¹⁰⁰⁴ See, for example, Cristina Acidini Luchinat, ed. *The Chapel of the Magi: Benozzo Gozzoli's Frescoes in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, Florence* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994). p.13, 43. Rab Hatfield, "The Compagnia Dei Magi," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XXXIII. Diane Cole Ahl, *Benozzo Gozzoli: Tradition and Innovation in Renaissance Painting* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1996). p.86, 112.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Spike, *Fra Angelico*. p.160.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Acts 4:11. See *ibid.* p.160 citing T.S. Centi. Eph. 2:16-21 mentions the foreigners reconciled to God by Christ's sacrifice.

¹⁰⁰⁷ *Ibid.* p.160.

¹⁰⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p.161.

14.5 San Marco images¹⁰⁰⁹

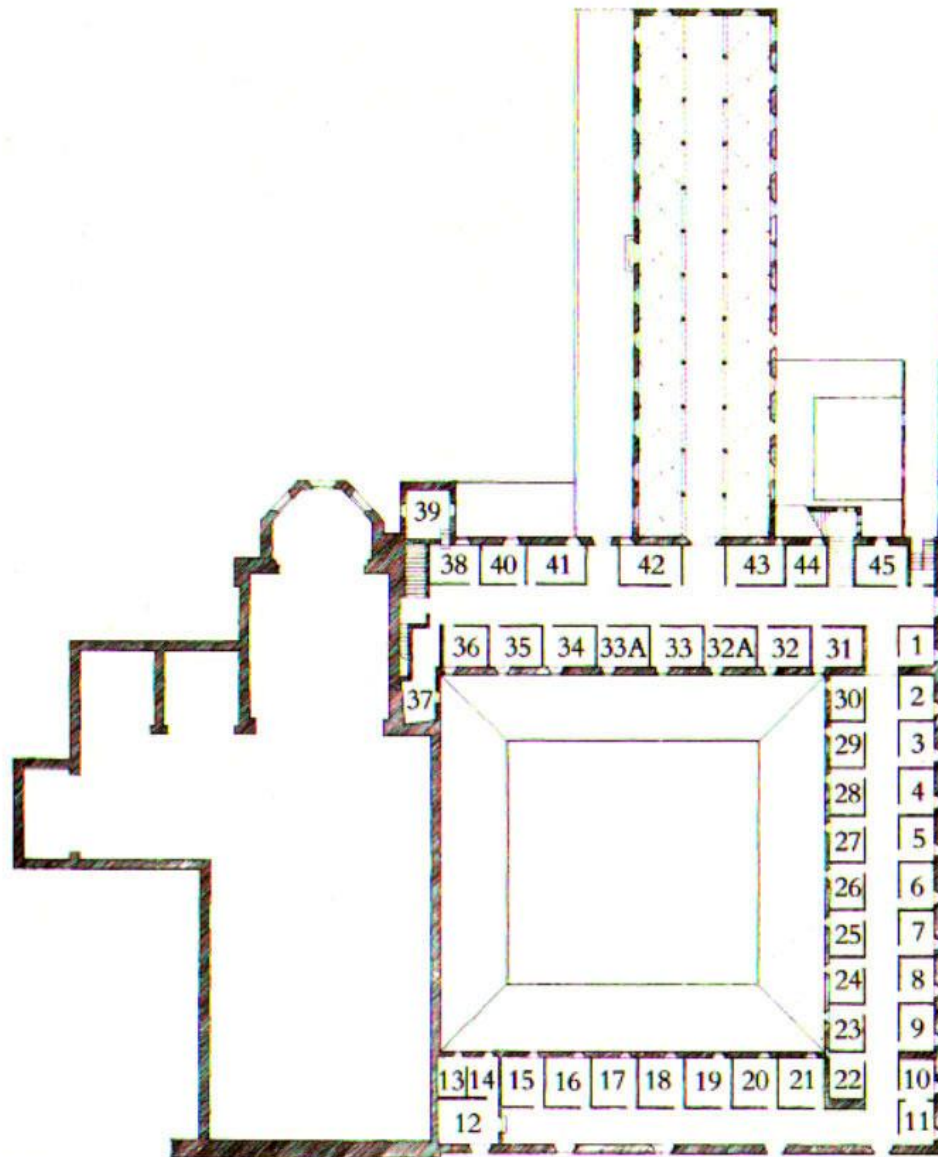


Figure 42 San Marco Plan of Dormitories

¹⁰⁰⁹ Figure 48, Figure 49, Figure 51, Figure 54, Figure 59, Figure 60, Figure 61, Figure 62, Figure 63, Figure 66, Figure 69, Figure 73, Figure 78, Figure 79, Figure 80, Figure 81, and Figure 82 are taken from photographs published in Ahl. Plates 88-92, 94, 95, 97, 101-111, pp. 127-155. Figure 52 and Figure 53 are taken from photographs published in Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*. Plates 3, 6, 7, pp.30, 34-35. Figure 42, Figure 43, Figure 44, Figure 45, Figure 46, Figure 47, Figure 50, Figure 56, and Figure 67 are taken from photographs published in Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*. Plates 139, 140, 151-154, 187, 194, 205, 209, 211. Pp. 146-163, 194, 199, 202, 205. Figure 55, Figure 57, Figure 64, Figure 65, Figure 68, Figure 70, Figure 74, Figure 76, Figure 83 and Figure 84 are taken from photographs published in Enrica.C. Pescio, *Le Musee De San Marco*, trans., L. Meijer (Florence BET, 1998). pp.42-63. Figure 75 is the author's own photograph.

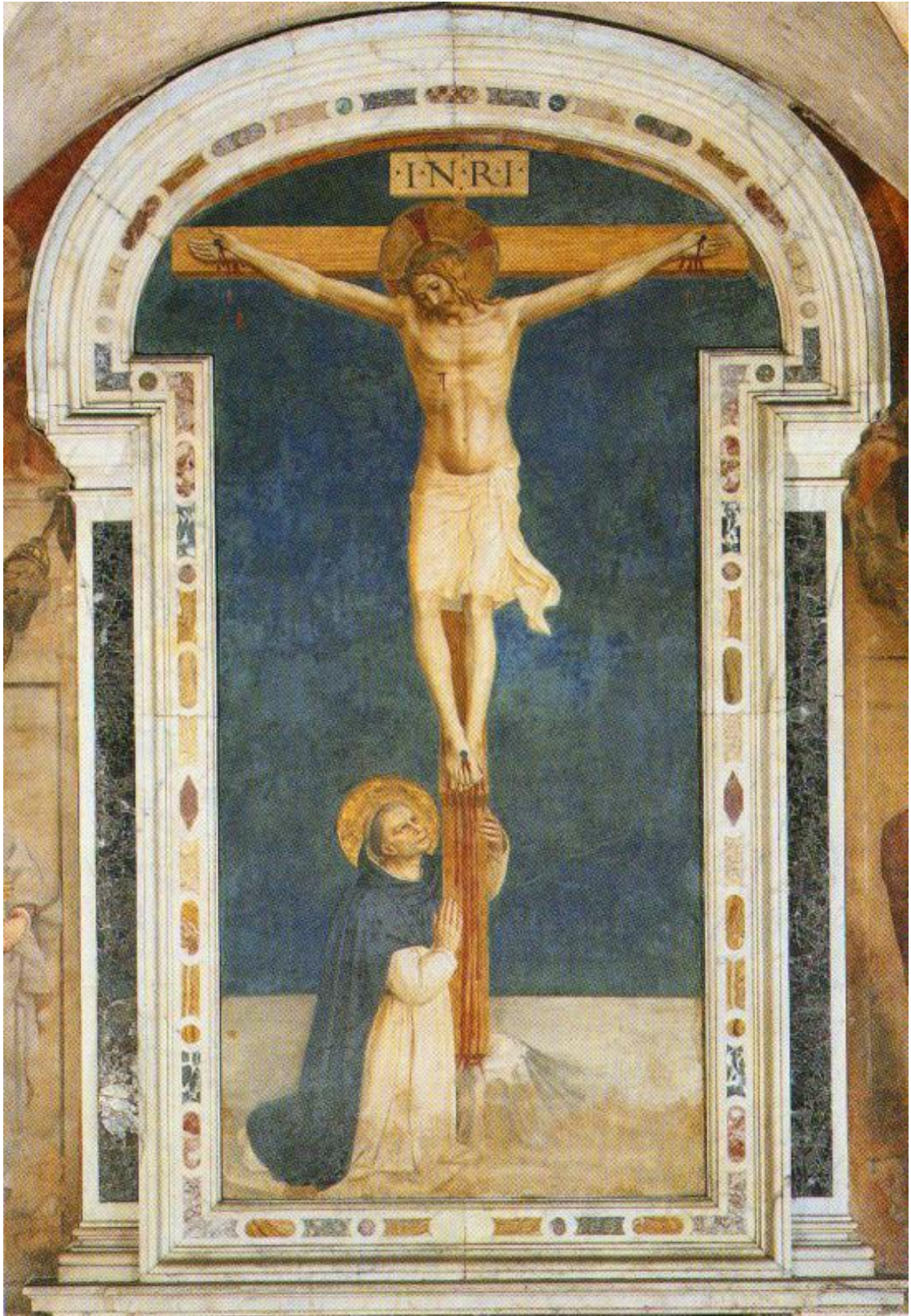


Figure 43 San Marco, Cloister, *St Dominic with the Crucifix*



Figure 44 San Marco, Cloister, *St Peter Martyr Enjoining Silence*



Figure 45 San Marco, Cloister, *Man of Sorrows*



Figure 46 San Marco, Cloister, *Christ Pilgrim Received by two Dominicans*



Figure 47 San Marco, Cloister, *St Thomas with a Book*

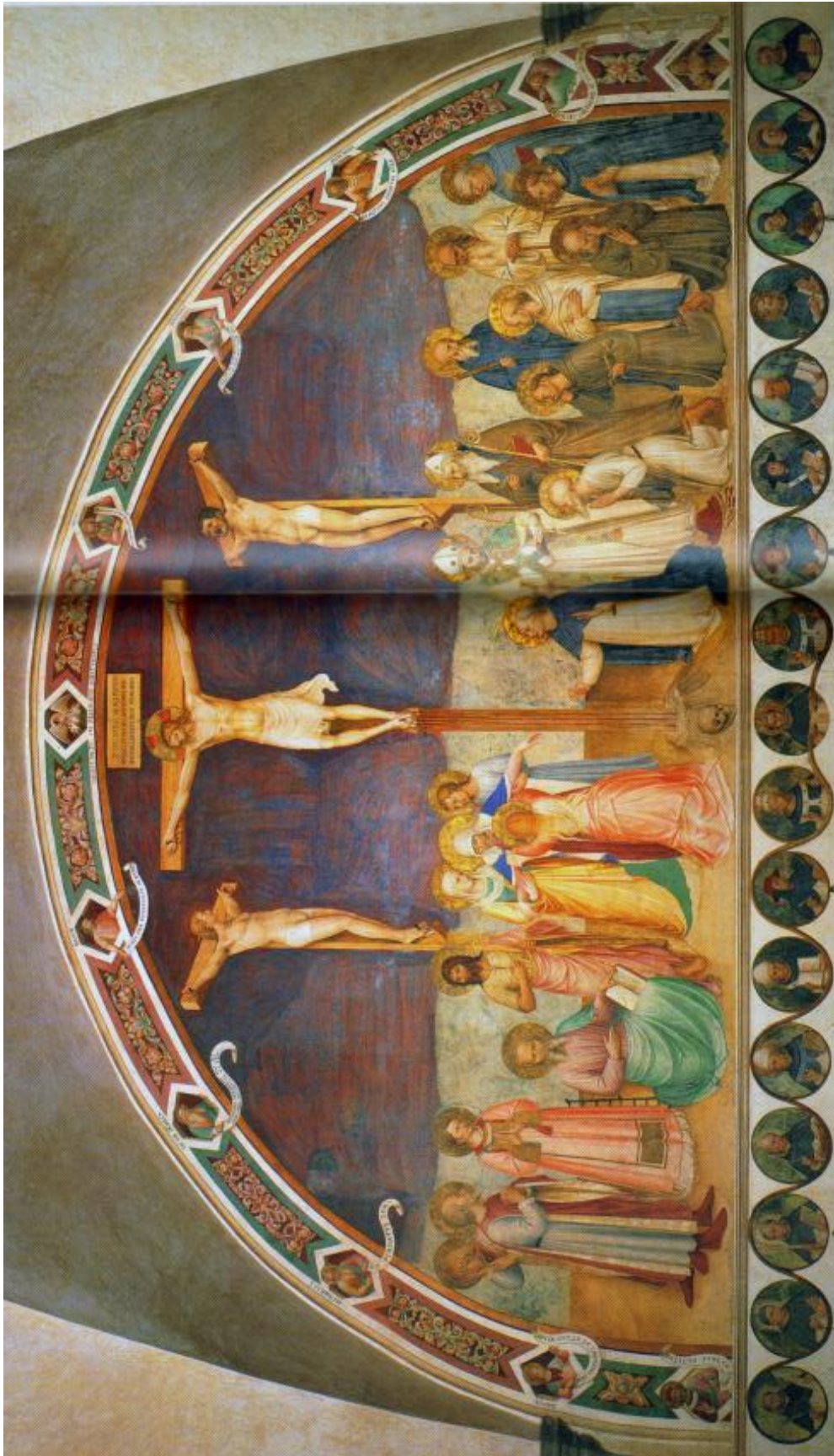


Figure 48 San Marco, Chapterhouse, *Crucifixion with Saints*



Figure 49 San Marco, Dormitory Corridor, *Annunciation*

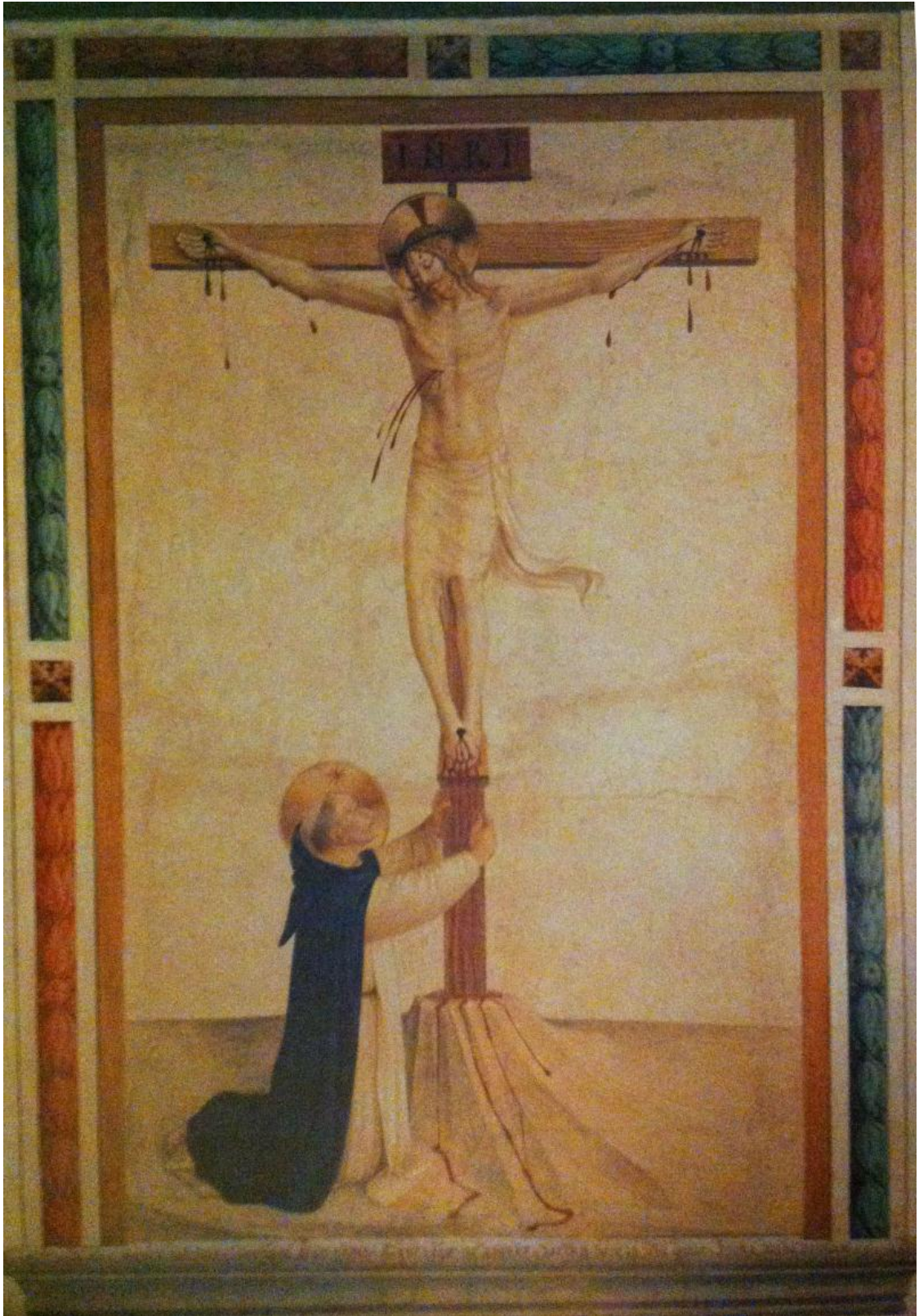


Figure 50 San Marco, Dormitory Corridor, *St Dominic with the Crucifix*



Figure 51 San Marco, Dormitory Corridor, *Madonna and Child with Eight Saints - Madonna of the Shadows*



Figure 52 San Marco, Dormitory Corridor, *Madonna and Child with Eight Saints - Madonna of the Shadows*, showing position of fictive marble panels

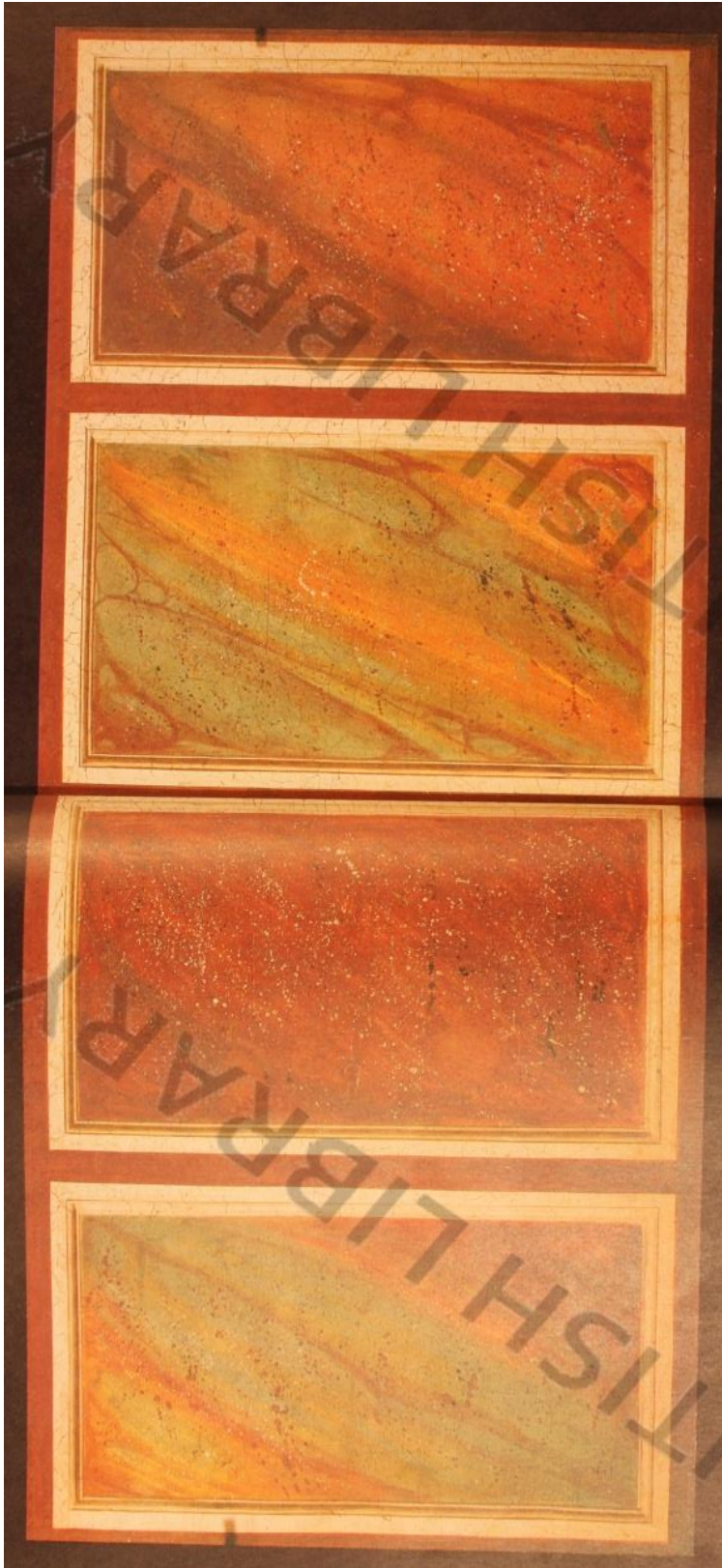


Figure 53 San Marco, Dormitory Corridor, *Madonna and Child with Eight Saints - Madonna of the Shadows*, detail of fictive marble panels



Figure 54 San Marco, Cell 1, *Noli me tangere*



Figure 55 San Marco, Cell 2, *Lamentation with St Dominic*



Figure 56 San Marco, Cell 3, *Annunciation with St Peter Martyr*

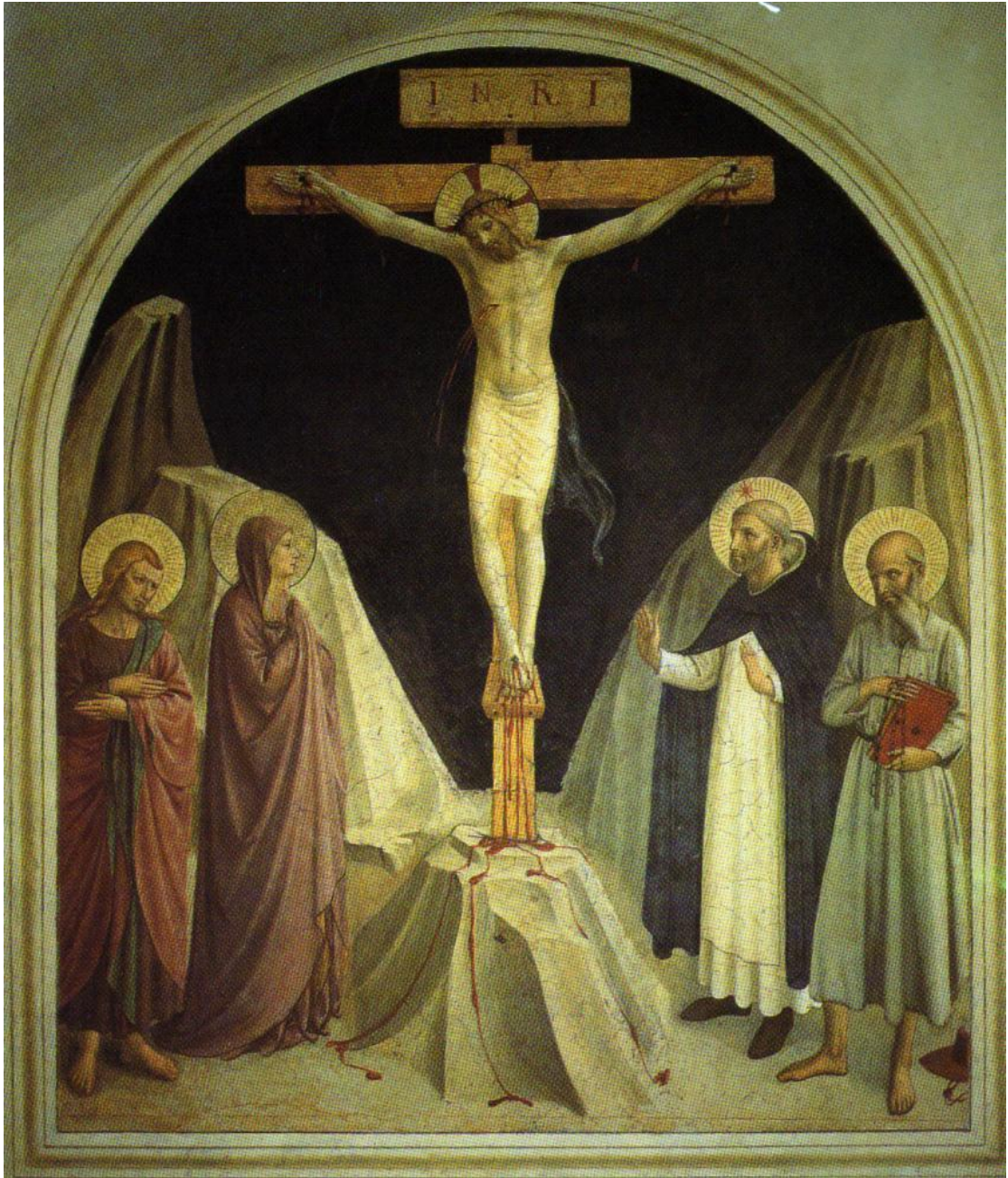


Figure 57 San Marco, Cell 4, *Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints John the Evangelist, Dominic, and Jerome*



Figure 58 San Marco, Cell 5, *Nativity with Saints Peter Martyr and Catherine of Alexandria*



Figure 59 San Marco, Cell 6, *Transfiguration with the Virgin and St Dominic*



Figure 60 San Marco, Cell 7, *Mocking of Christ with the Virgin and St Dominic*

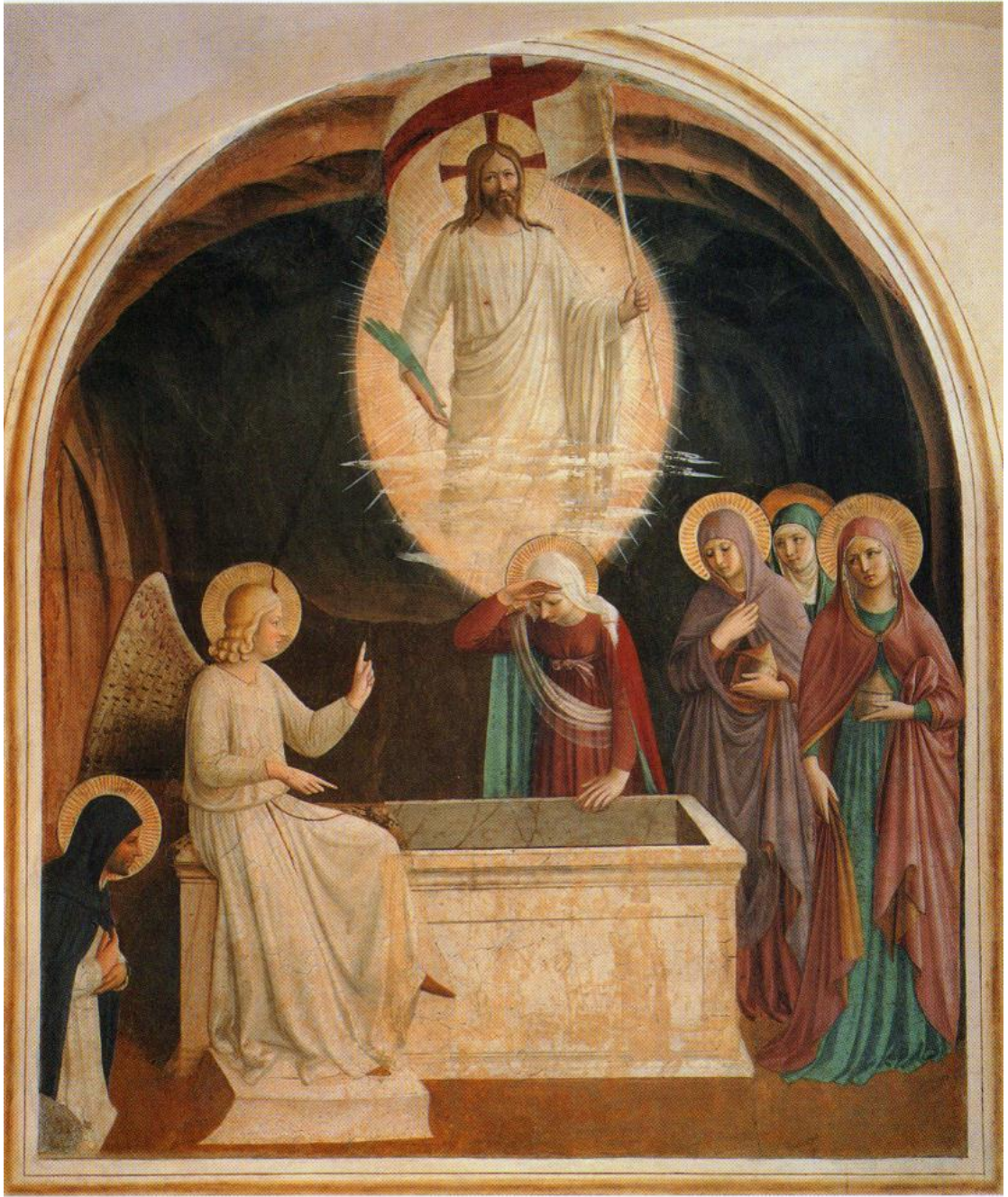


Figure 61 San Marco, Cell 8, *Women at the Tomb with St Dominic*



Figure 62 San Marco, Cell 9, *Coronation of the Virgin with Saints*



Figure 63 San Marco, Cell 10, *Presentation of Christ in the Temple with St Peter Martyr and Beata Villana de' Botti (or Anna)*



Figure 64 San Marco, Cell 11, *Virgin and Child with Saints Thomas and Augustine*

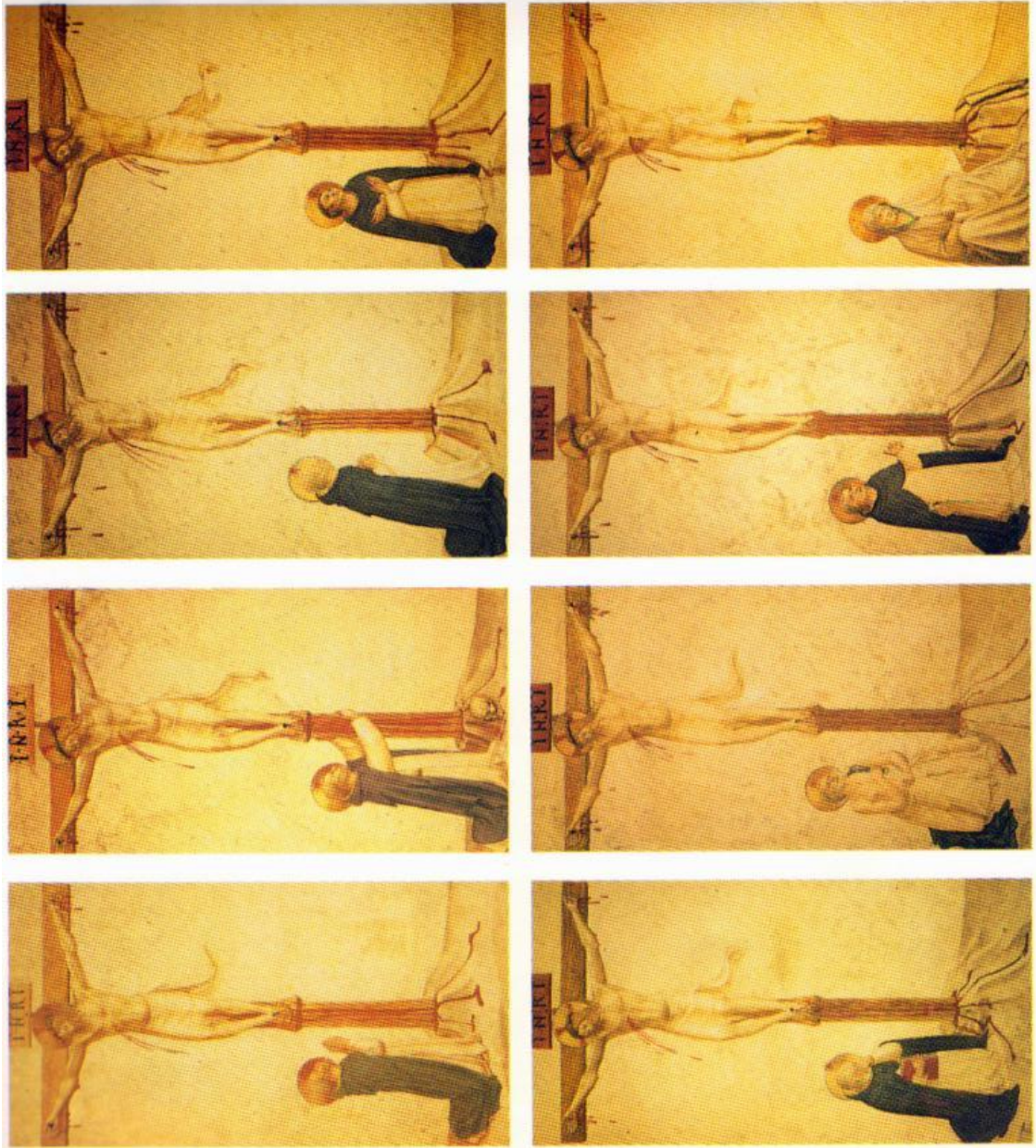


Figure 65 San Marco, Cells 15-21, *St Dominic with the Crucifix*. Cell 22, *The Virgin with the Crucifix*

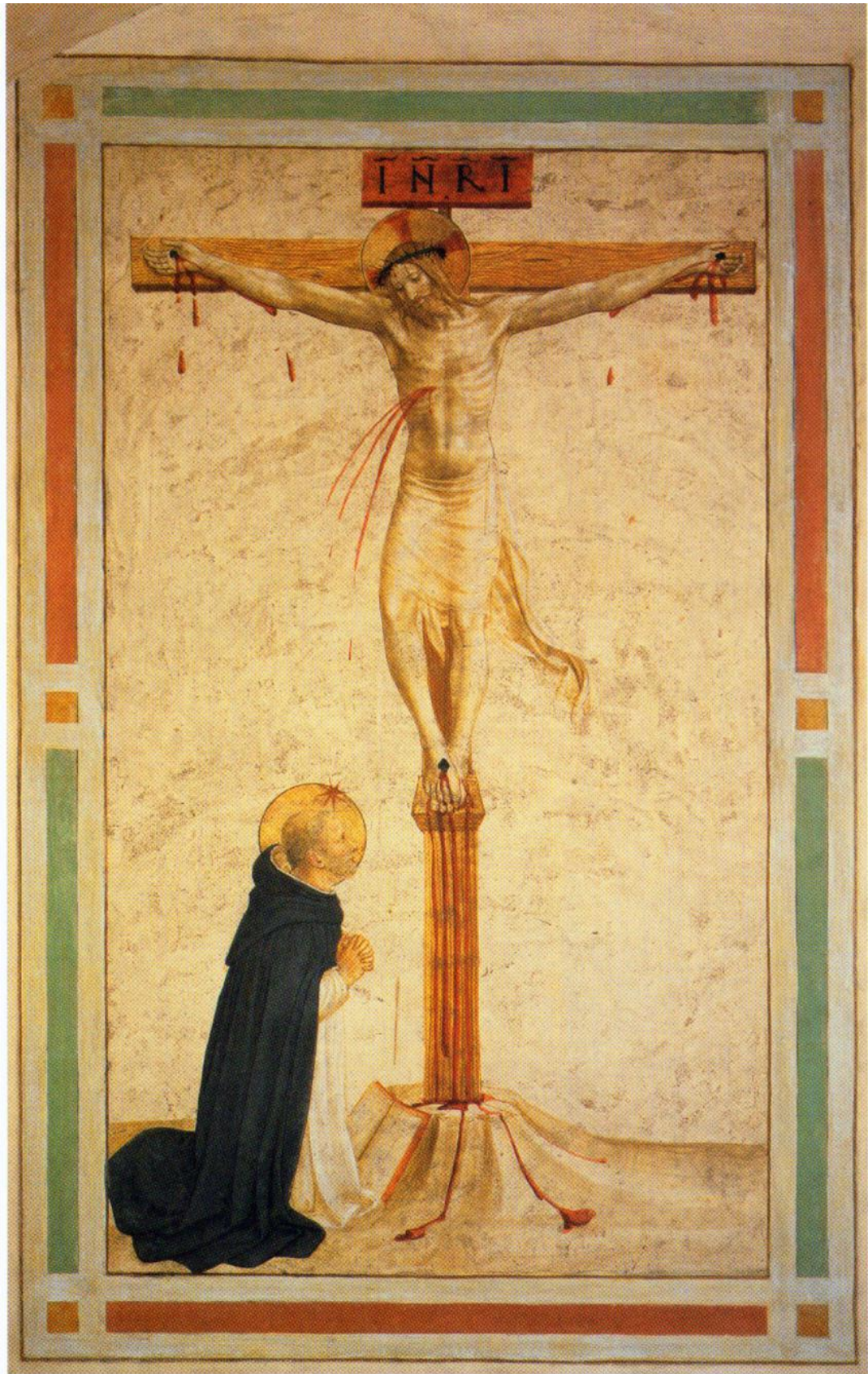


Figure 66 San Marco, Cell 17, *St Dominic with the Crucifix*



Figure 67 San Marco, Cell 21, *St Dominic with the Crucifix*



Figure 68 San Marco, Cell 23, *Crucifixion with the Virgin, St Dominic, and angels*. Cell 24, *Baptism of Christ with the Virgin and St Dominic*



Figure 69 San Marco, Cell 25, *Crucifixion with the Virgin, Mary Magdalene and St Dominic*

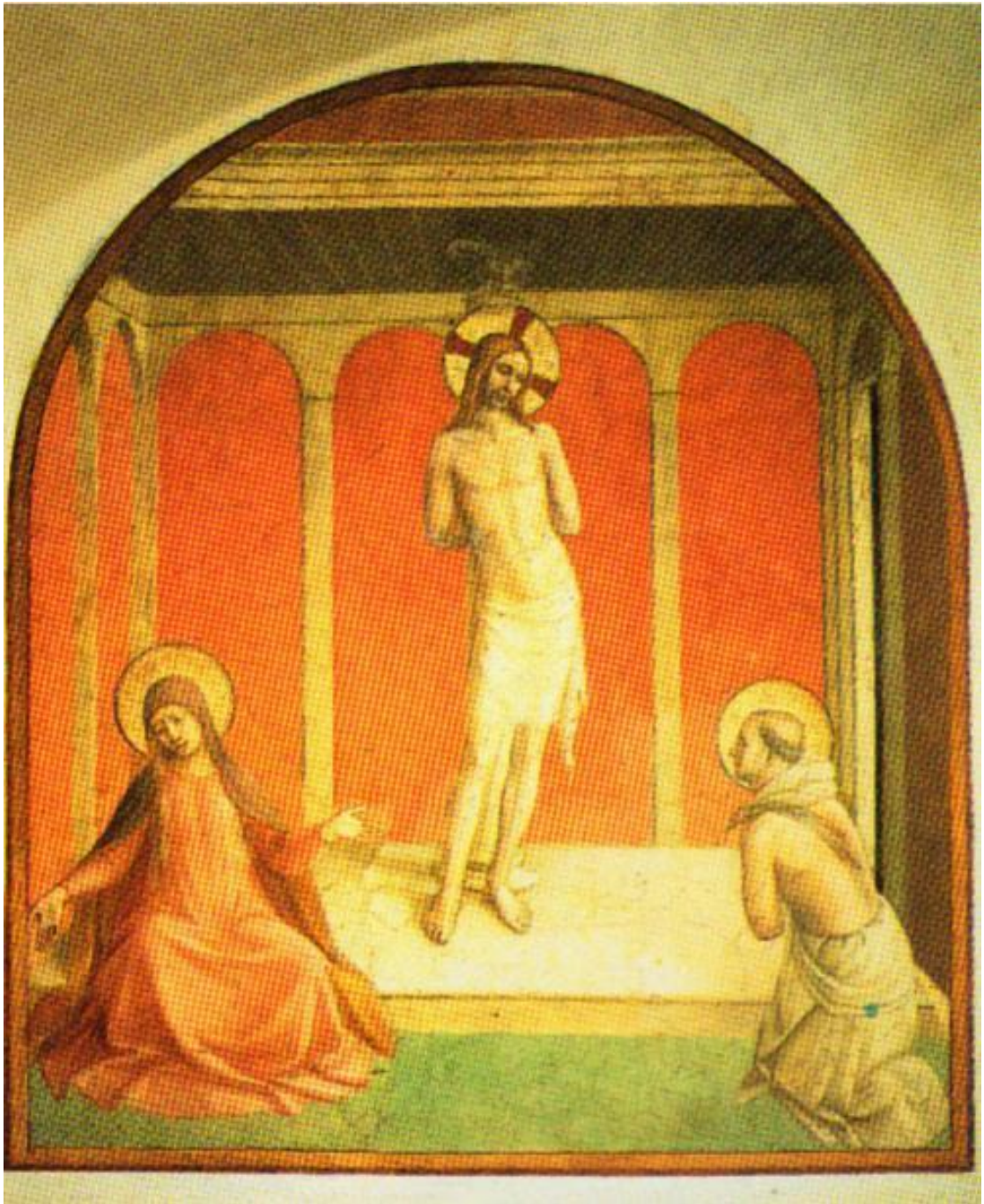


Figure 70 San Marco, Cell 26, *Christ at the Column with the Virgin and St Dominic*

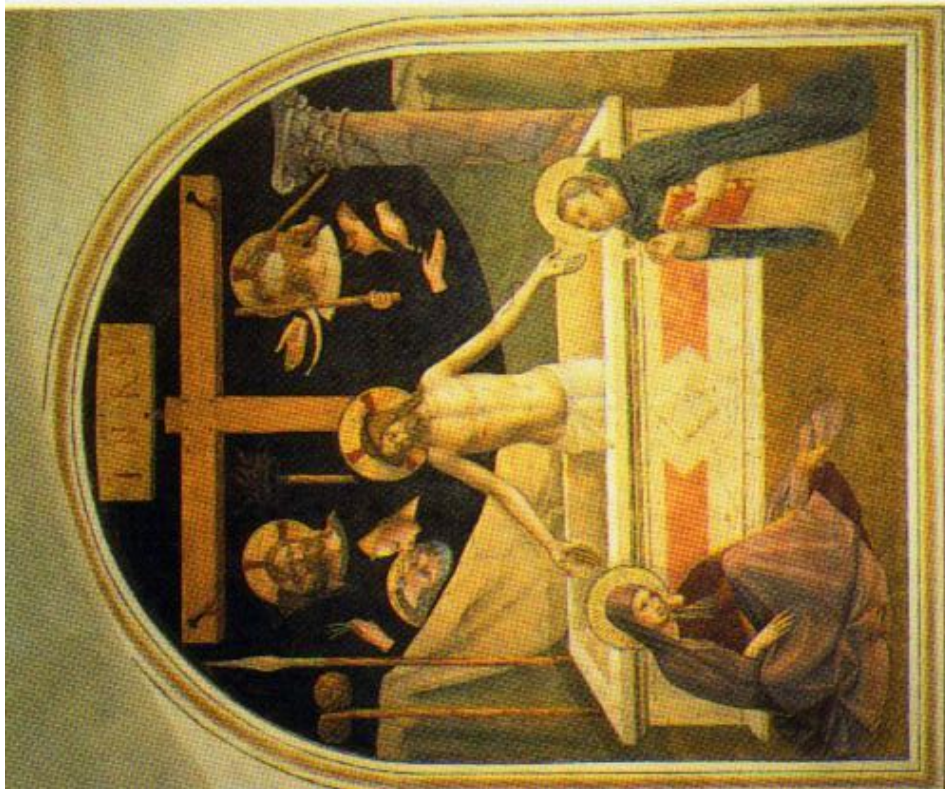


Figure 71 San Marco, Cell 27, *Corpus Domini with the Symbols of the Passion, the Virgin, and St Thomas.* Cell 28, *Christ Carrying the Cross with the Virgin and St Dominic*



Figure 72 San Marco, Cell 29, *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St Peter Martyr.*
Cell 30 *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St Dominic*



Figure 73 San Marco, Cell 31, *Christ in Limbo*

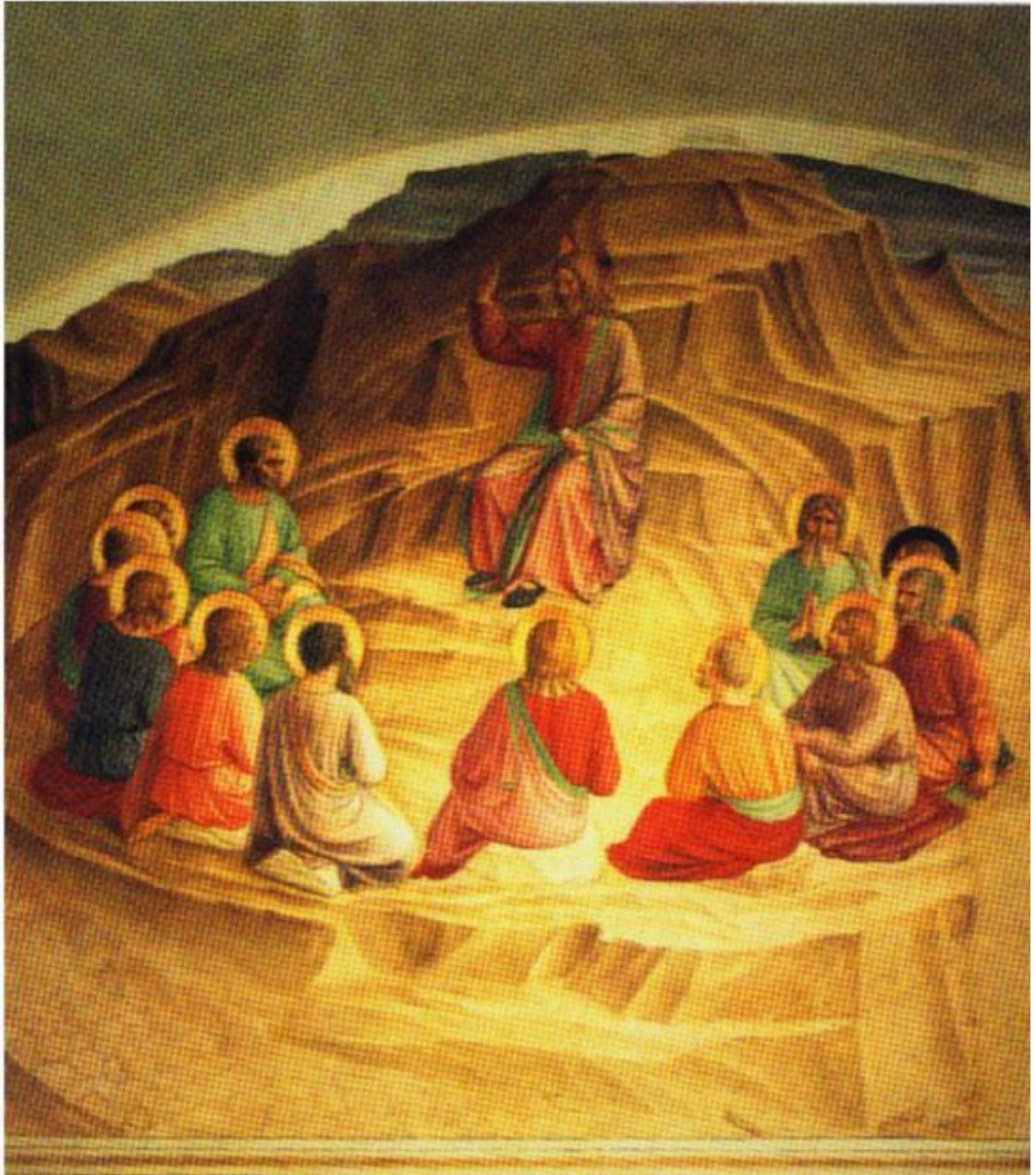


Figure 74 San Marco, Cell 32, *Sermon on the Mount*



Figure 75 San Marco, Cell 32a, *Temptations of Christ*¹⁰¹⁰

¹⁰¹⁰ Author's own photograph.

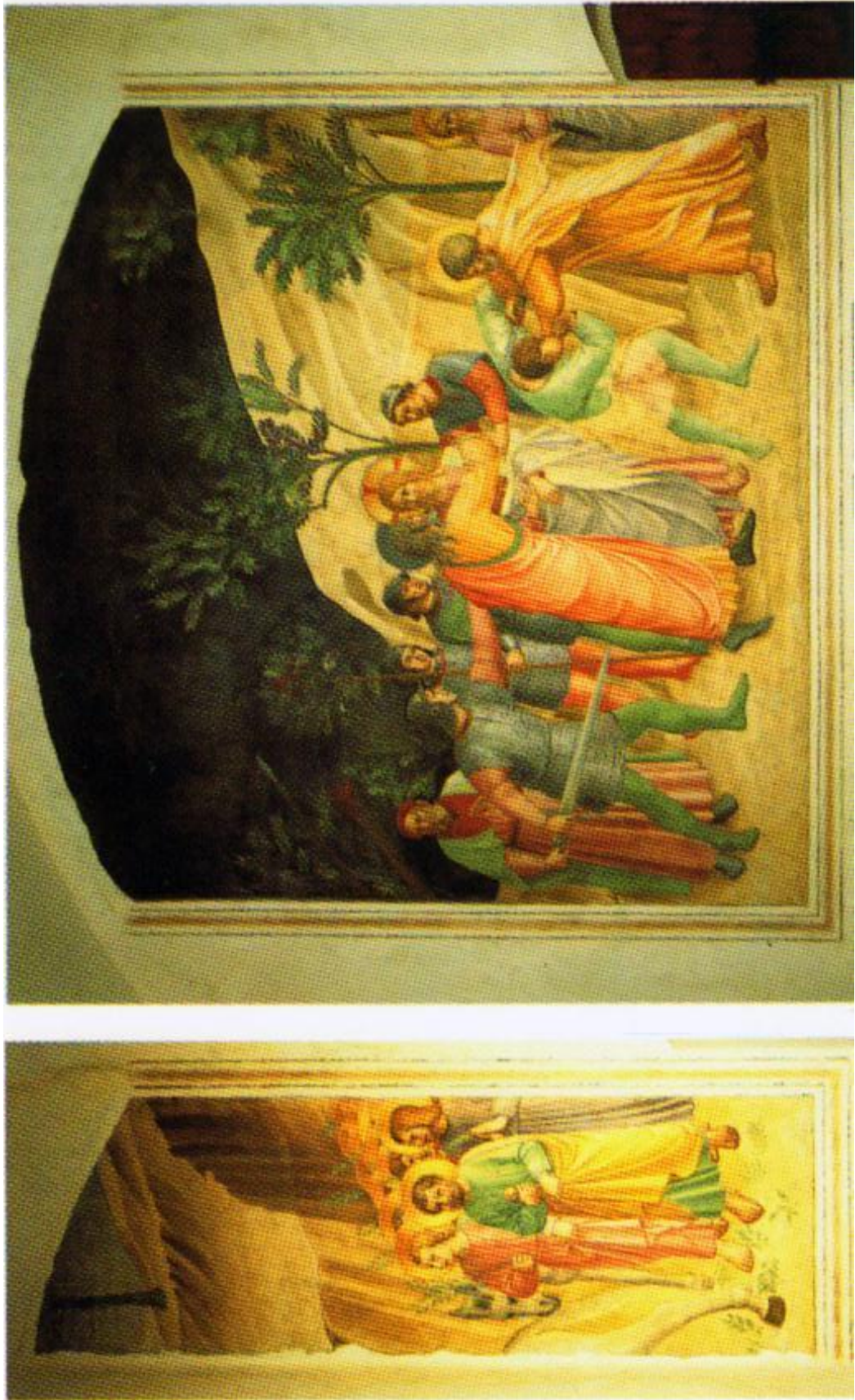


Figure 76 San Marco, Cell 33a, *Entry into Jerusalem* and Cell 33, *Betrayal of Christ*



Figure 77 San Marco, Cell 34, *Agony in the Garden with Saints Mary and Martha*



Figure 78 San Marco, Cell 35, *Institution of the Eucharist with the Virgin*

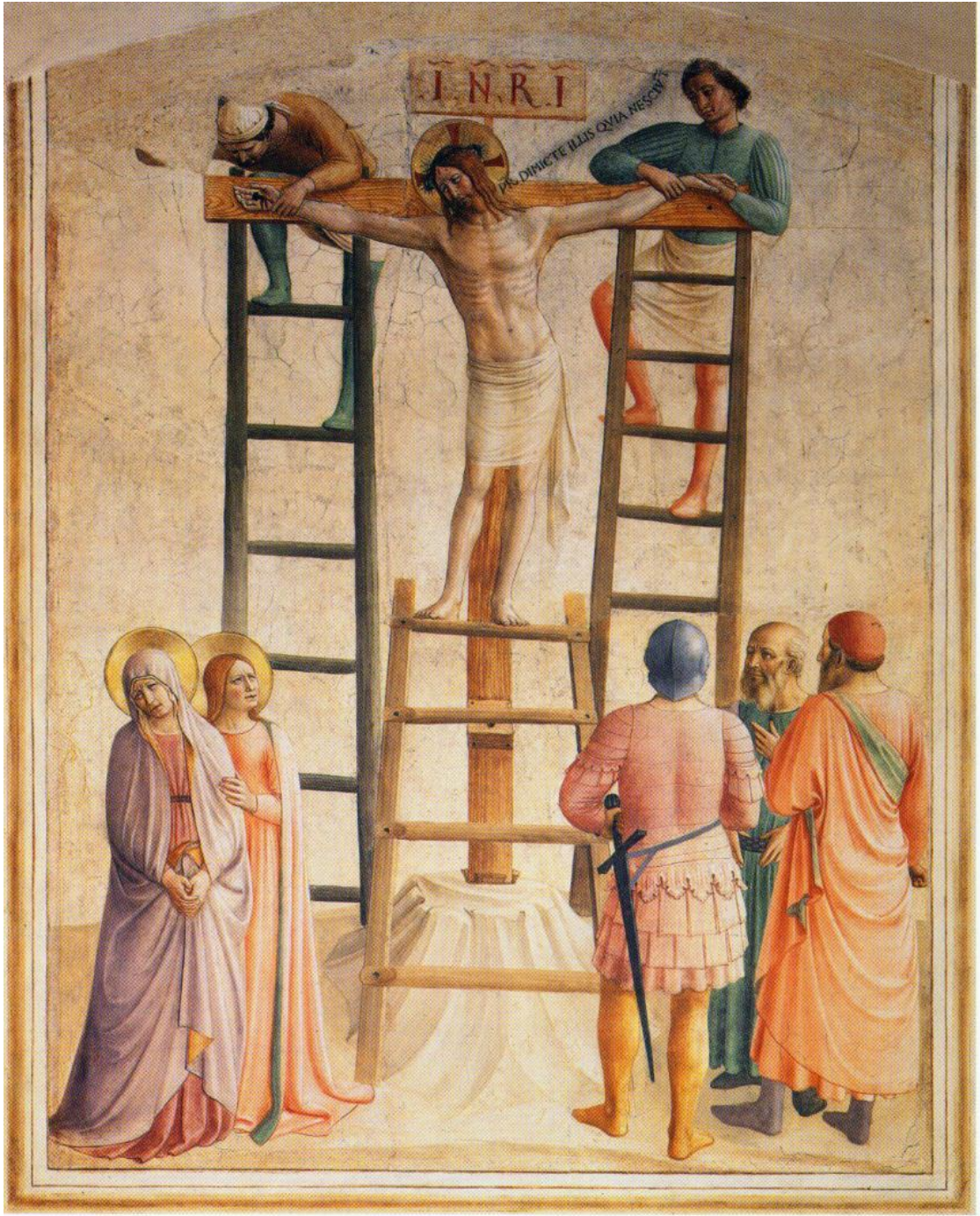


Figure 79 San Marco, Cell 36, *Christ Nailed to the Cross with the Virgin and Mary Magdalene*

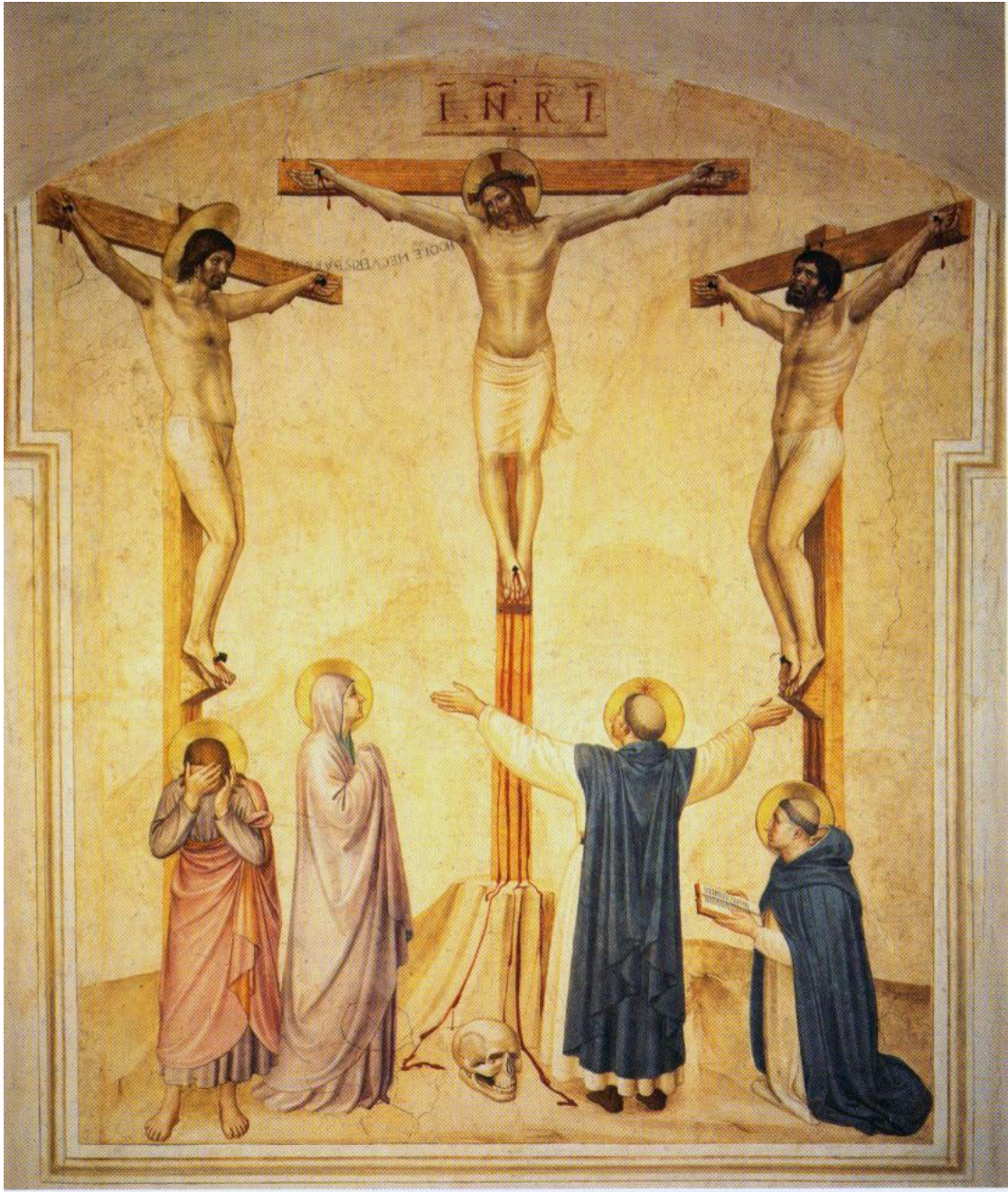


Figure 80 San Marco, Cell 37, *Triple Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints John the Evangelist, Dominic, and Thomas Aquinas*

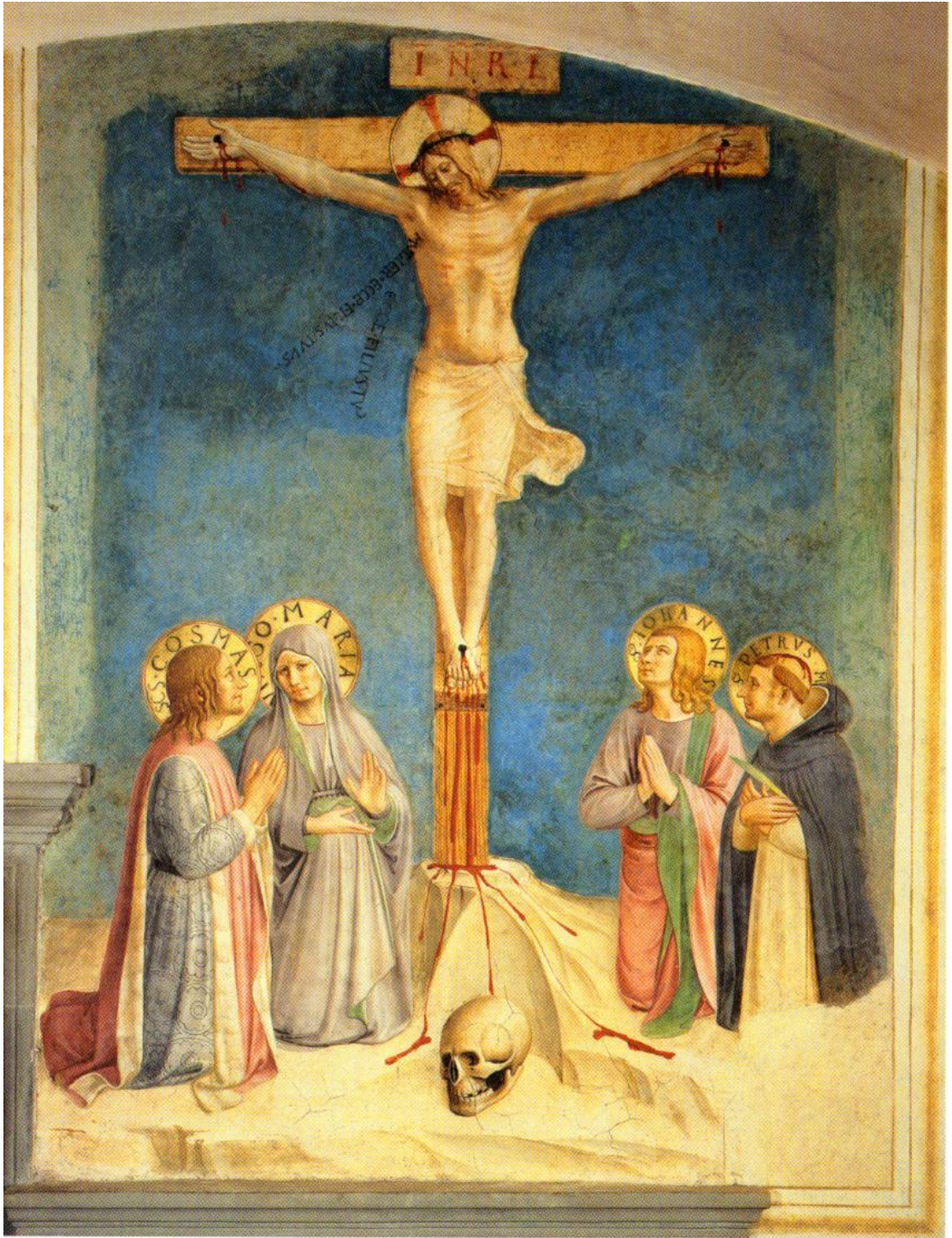


Figure 81 San Marco, Cell 38, *Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints John the Evangelist, Cosmas, and Peter Martyr*



Figure 82 San Marco, Cell 39, *Adoration of the Magi and Man of Sorrows*

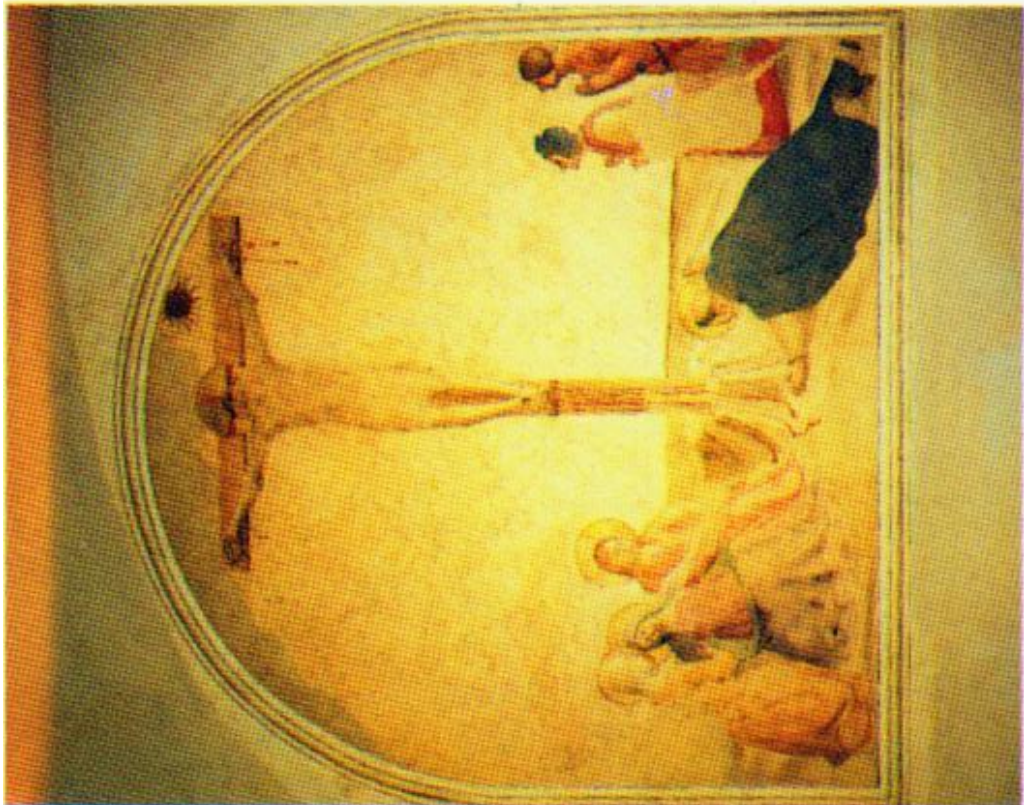
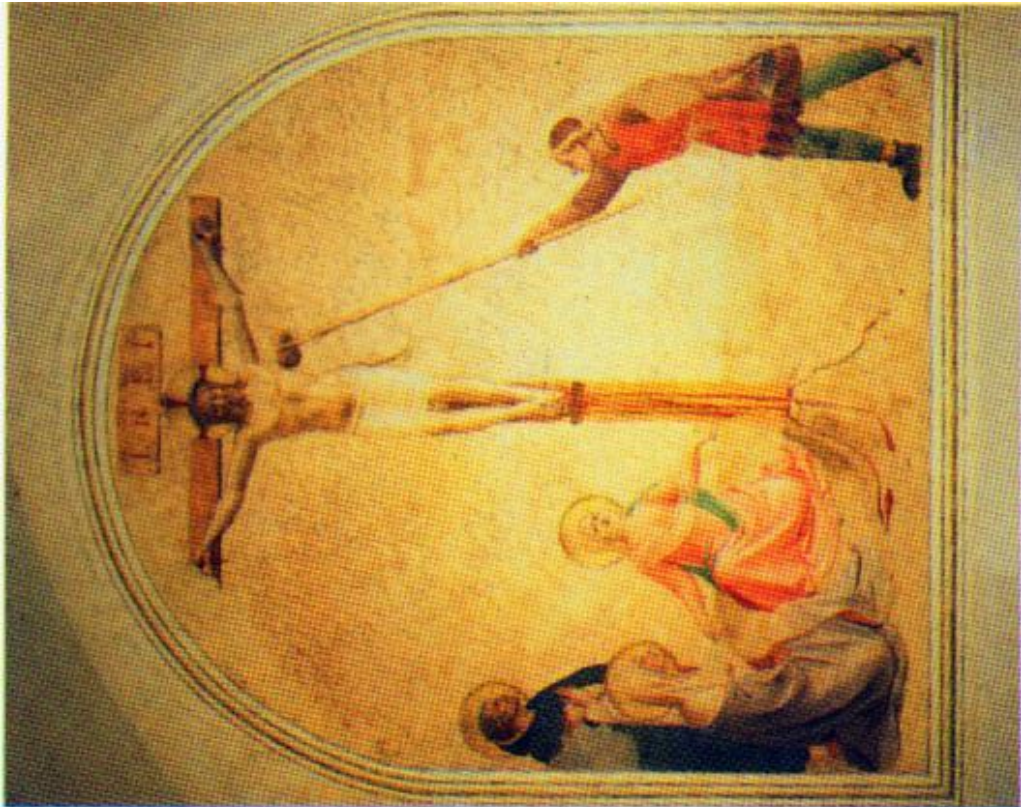


Figure 83 San Marco, Cell 40, *Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints Mary Magdalene, John the Evangelist, and Dominic*. Cell 41, *Christ Crucified Offered Vinegar, with the Virgin, Mary Magdalene and St Dominic*

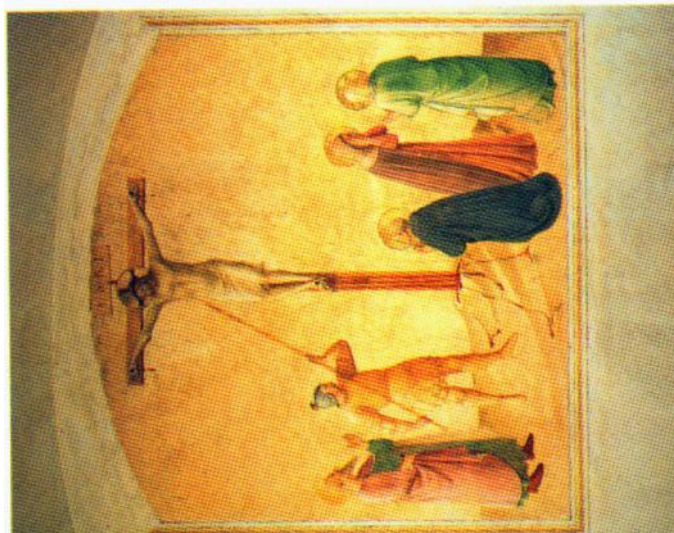
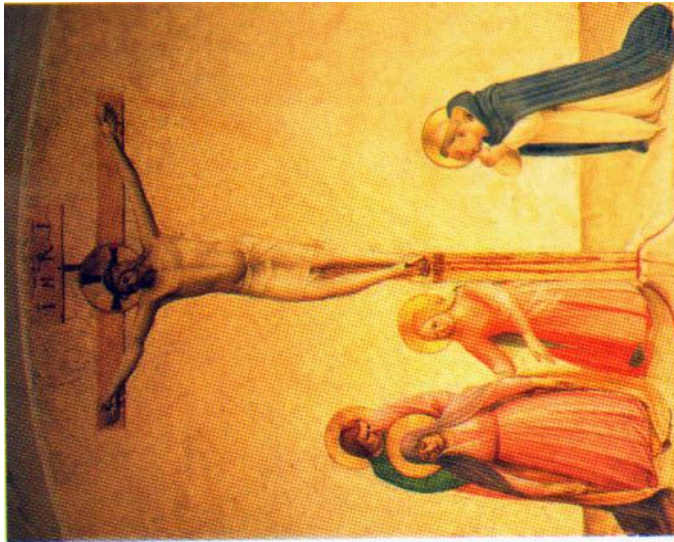


Figure 84 San Marco, Cell 42, *Christ Crucified with the Virgin and Saints Joseph of Arimathea, Longinus, Dominic, and Martha.* Cell 43, *Christ Crucified with the Virgin and Saints John the Evangelist, Mary Magdalene, and Dominic*

15 Sassetti Chapel Appendix

15.1 The Chapel and its patrons

Francesco Sassetti was born in 1421 and joined the Medici bank at a young age. He began his career in the Avignon branch before going to Geneva where made his fortune investing, and apparently moved between Geneva and Florence for some time, returning to Florence in 1458 and becoming general manager of the bank in 1469. Sassetti was a prominent citizen, holding the office of prior of the *Signoria* in 1468, and serving as governor of the studios of Florence and Pisa. He was a learned man, a humanist with a large library of classical texts (from which even Lorenzo de' Medici borrowed) and a collection of Roman coins. His marriage to Nera Corsi in 1459 allied him with a family which claimed noble Roman and Etruscan antecedents, and produced ten children. During the Pazzi conspiracy,¹⁰¹¹ Sassetti was loyal to the Medici but some of his Corsi in-laws were exiled for their role in the affair. Towards the end of his life, Sassetti's position in the Medici bank came under threat due to the failure of a number of branches and accusations of incompetence, and there was considerable rivalry between Sassetti and another Medici employee, Giovanni Tornabuoni, who was also Lorenzo de' Medici's uncle. Sassetti managed to retain his position due to Lorenzo's public support¹⁰¹² but eventually resigned in

¹⁰¹¹ The Pazzi family were bankers who funded the purchase by Pope Sixtus IV of land that Lorenzo de' Medici had wanted to acquire for Florence. The Pazzi were rewarded with a monopoly on a mordant used in the Florentine textile trade and additional papal banking affairs. Tensions ran high between the Medici and Pazzi, who colluded with the Salviati (also Papal bankers) to assassinate Lorenzo and his brother, Giuliano. They were attacked on the 26th of April 1478 during High Mass at the Duomo. Giuliano died, while Lorenzo escaped with injuries and was protected by Poliziano who locked him in the sacristy. The plot to take the Signoria and Gonfaloniere failed and the Florentines exacted summary vengeance on the conspirators before confiscating their possessions. Lorenzo appealed for clemency from the crowds and managed to save some of those associated with the plot, including members who were innocently involved. The Pazzi only returned to Florence after Lorenzo's son, Piero de' Medici, had been ousted. Pope Sixtus IV forbade the celebration of Mass in Florence as punishment for the execution of the Archbishop of Pisa, Francesco Salviati, and requested that Ferdinand I of Naples attack Florence. Without the support of traditional allies in Bologna and Milan, Lorenzo went in person to Naples where he successfully won the king over and obtained his support in negotiating peace with the pope. Peace was eventually confirmed in 1480.

¹⁰¹²For background information about Francesco Sassetti see Borsook and Offerhaus, eds.

1484, although he seems to have continued to have some involvement in the bank as late as 1488.¹⁰¹³

The Sassetti had a number of burial plots at Santa Maria Novella, including one in a crypt near a room used by the Compagnia della Pellegrino beneath the main chapel, and they had patronage rights to the main altarpiece, although not to the Chancel Chapel itself. In 1430 a promise had been made by the Sassetti to provide a new altarpiece, but this had not materialised and the family patronage had lapsed. In 1470, the Dominicans allowed Sassetti to resume patronage and approved his scheme for an altarpiece and vestments. For reasons which are unclear, Sassetti quarrelled with the Dominicans¹⁰¹⁴ and by 1478 was trying to acquire the rights to a chapel in the Vallombrosan¹⁰¹⁵ abbey church of Santa Trinita, an important foundation not far away, in an area where the Sassetti owned property.¹⁰¹⁶ The Vallombrosans had a special veneration for St Francis and it has been suggested¹⁰¹⁷ that they may also have been glad of the support of a respected and wealthy patron at a time when their Conventual abbey of Santa Trinita was under threat from the Observant faction of the order.¹⁰¹⁸

¹⁰¹³ According to Roettgen, in 1488 Sassetti liquidated his assets in the bank but went to Lyons to handle a management crisis in the Medici branch there. Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.138.

¹⁰¹⁴ According to Bosook and Offerhaus, the suggestion that Sassetti wanted to paint a fresco cycle of the life of St Francis on the chancel walls first appears in the 16th century and is unlikely since he could hardly have expected the Dominicans to allow their rival wall-space. Bosook and Offerhaus, eds. p.13.

¹⁰¹⁵ A Benedictine congregation of monks rather than a fully independent order, the Vallombrosans were founded in the early 11th century and originally wore grey habits.

¹⁰¹⁶ Santa Trinita was patronised by leading families and was a well-respected foundation. Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.137.

¹⁰¹⁷ Bosook and Offerhaus, eds. p.18.

¹⁰¹⁸ Although as Gombrich points out, Lorenzo de' Medici's relations with the Vallombrosans were decidedly tense, and his own close relation to Sassetti could have been awkward for the friars. Lorenzo was keen to obtain benefices for his son, Giulio, the future Pope Clement VII, and went to extreme and sometimes violent lengths to get them, as well as applying considerable psychological pressure as de facto ruler of Florence. See Ernst Gombrich, "The Sassetti Chapel Revisited: Santa Trinita and Lorenzo De' Medici " *I Tatti Studies, Essays in the Renaissance* 7, (1997).

A papal breve was required to transfer the rights to the Santa Trinita chapel from another family¹⁰¹⁹ who owned them at the time, to Sassetti, who was presumably waiting for this when the Pazzi conspiracy caused war between Florence and the Papacy, delaying the decoration of the Chapel. Painting began in 1479, nearly ten years after Sassetti had started his patronal plans at Santa Maria Novella, and was finished by 1485, so that when Sassetti died in 1490 he was buried in the completed Chapel. Unusually, the tombs of Sassetti and Nera are inside the Chapel, occupying the lowest tier on the side walls.¹⁰²⁰ It was recorded by chroniclers that Sassetti's donation to the Chapel was in fulfilment of a vow, although what that vow was is not known.¹⁰²¹ The Chapel's dual dedication to Francis and the Nativity is reflected in the frescoes and altarpiece respectively.¹⁰²²

¹⁰¹⁹ According to Borsook and Offerhaus it was the Gaddi family. Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.14. Roettgen, however, cites the Fastelli and Petribuoni families. Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.137.

¹⁰²⁰ Patronal rights did not usually include burial rights and laymen, other than royalty, were usually buried outside the church in cloisters and courtyards, or in *avelli* (arched tomb niches) on its outside walls. Patronage was often rewarded with burial inside the church, but rarely within a chapel and more normally under the pavement in front of it. To be buried in the chapel proper was an exceptional privilege. See Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. pp.16-17.

¹⁰²¹ *Ibid.* p.19, n.56.

¹⁰²² A chronicle of 1740 records the Chapel as dedicated to Francis since its building, with Sassetti providing for the saying of Mass in Francis' honour on major feasts. Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.137. According to Borsook and Offerhaus it was dedicated to Francis and the Nativity. Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.19, n56.

15.2 The artist

Domenico¹⁰²³ Ghirlandaio's work has had a chequered reception. He was highly fashionable among contemporary patrons,¹⁰²⁴ and praised by Vasari,¹⁰²⁵ who approved of his technique, draughtsmanship, portraiture, narrative skill, and nude figures. Vasari was perhaps predisposed to approve of Ghirlandaio since his narrative cycles conformed to Alberti's ideals for the representation of *historia*.

In the 19th century, Crowe and Cavalcaselle described Ghirlandaio as demanding the viewer's attention with his "grand and decorous" compositions which demonstrate a "science of distribution and of form" resulting in perfect unity such as Ghirlandaio had observed in Giotto, and Jacob Burckhardt, praised the Santa Maria Novella frescoes as dignified, lofty, and graceful, glorifying the life of Florence, and capable of elevating the viewer. At the turn of the century, however, Heinrich Wölfflin described him as an average painter using established techniques for monumental ends with occasional success (he cites the group of five women in the *Birth of the Virgin* in Santa Maria Novella) but without true artistic greatness.¹⁰²⁶ By the early twentieth century, Bernard Berenson had categorised Ghirlandaio, along with Benozzo Gozzoli, as a mediocrity working in the sphere of genre illustration whose own failings were aggravated by his patrons' pompous desire to immortalise themselves and their friends in portraits.¹⁰²⁷

¹⁰²³ His brother David Ghirlandaio was also an artist, as was his brother in law, Sebastiano Mainardi.

¹⁰²⁴ The *Libro di Antonio Billi* mentions Ghirlandaio twice, describing his "many good figures" as "very beautiful". In a letter to the Duke of Milan from his agent in Florence around 1490 the agent describes Ghirlandaio as skilled in fresco and a man who completes a good deal of work, a remark which should probably be read not as a slight but a compliment, implying ability and skill. The contract for the frescoes at Santa Maria Novella specifies not only technique and materials but the inclusion of people, architectural and landscape elements, clothing, and birds and animals, suggesting that Ghirlandaio's mimetic skills were desirable to contemporary patrons. Cadogan.p.2.

¹⁰²⁵ Vasari situates Ghirlandaio in his second age of art which comes under the aegis of Masaccio (the first being led by Giotto) and sees increased mimesis in painting. Vasari. Vol.2. pp.68-79. Cadogan.pp.4-14.

¹⁰²⁶ J.A. and Cavalcaselle Crowe, G.B., *A History of Painting in Italy* (London: 1911). Jacob Burckhardt, *The Cicerone: An Art Guide to Painting in Italy*, trans., Mrs A.H. Clough (New York: Scribners, 1908). Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans., S.G.C. Middlemore (New York: Modern Library, 1954). Bernard Berenson, *Drawings of the Florentine Painters*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938). Heinrich Wölfflin, *Classic Art*, trans., Peter Murray and Linda Murray (London: 1952). See the helpful literature survey in Cadogan. p.7.

¹⁰²⁷ Berenson, *Drawings of the Florentine Painters*. Vol.1, p.133. Cadogan.p.1.

Aby Warburg revived interest in the Santa Trinita frescoes with his analysis of Renaissance portraiture, seeing Ghirlandaio's work as a way of understanding Renaissance psychology, and trying to discern the involvement of patron, programme advisor, and artist. In contrast to Berenson, Warburg found a genuine religious devotion motivating the frescoes and, at Santa Trinita, a harmonised combination of religious beliefs and contemporary humanist ideals. The contrasting analyses of these two art historians are possible because of the combination in Ghirlandaio's work of religious content and contemporary setting, presented in a strikingly mimetic style. Whether the two aspects can be harmonised, or whether one or other is dominant has been much debated.¹⁰²⁸

Clearly the criteria by which artists and their works were judged had changed considerably between the 19th and 20th centuries (as is hardly surprising given the changes in contemporary art in that time), but the interest of art historians in Ghirlandaio's work remained. His Santa Maria Novella frescoes continue to be much studied (and visited as one of the great tourist attractions of Florence) and the remarkably intact Sassetti Chapel at Santa Trinita is often cited and has received regular attention throughout the 20th century.

One thing that does seem clear is Ghirlandaio's own religious devotion. He and his (male) family were members of the Compagnia di San Paolo, a *disciplinati* (penitential) company which met on Saturday nights for confession and penitence, including self-flagellation. Lorenzo de' Medici was a member of the same company, where hooded gowns created a kind of anonymity and equality between members from varied social backgrounds: artisans, merchants and aristocrats prayed alongside each other and, inevitably, developed contacts and allegiances. While such organisations were popular, membership of the Compagnia di San Paolo was a demanding commitment involving night-long attendance and physical hardship. Ghirlandaio's membership thus expresses both participation in the community and

¹⁰²⁸ See note 627 on page 216, note 647 on page 220, note 650 on page 220, and note 736 on page 257.

genuine devotion. He could presumably have joined a less onerous *laudesi* company if he had wished.

It seems that Ghirlandaio worked with assistants on the cycle, probably including his brother Davide and brother in law Mainardi. Questions of attribution are not relevant to this thesis and, for the sake of simplicity, all work is referred to as being by Ghirlandaio since he was the leading master.

15.2.1 The influence of Giotto and Masaccio

Ghirlandaio was clearly familiar with Giotto's treatment of the Francis cycle in the Bardi Chapel at Santa Croce, and his work draws on Giotto's decorative scheme and the composition of certain scenes (the figure of Francis in the *Stigmatization*, the central scene in the *Confirmation of the Rule*, the *Trial before the Sultan*, and the *Funeral of St Francis and Verification of the Stigmata*). Cadogan believes that Ghirlandaio may have seen in Giotto's compositions the qualities of simplified narrative and monumental design that he sought in his own work and thus followed his lead,¹⁰²⁹ although any Florentine tackling this subject matter would inevitably have had Giotto's famous cycle in mind. This said, Ghirlandaio's work is by no means a wholesale copy of Giotto. While the subjects for all but one of Ghirlandaio's scenes (the *Raising of the Roman Notary's Son*) feature in Santa Croce, his contemporary portraits and recognisable local settings give the frescoes a contemporaneity that was popular in the 15th century but alien to Giotto's time.¹⁰³⁰ Nevertheless, Cadogan's assessment of Ghirlandaio's skill goes too far in presenting him as Giotto reborn for the 15th century.

Ghirlandaio's dependence on Masaccio is also considerable (as Cadogan acknowledges). From Masaccio's Brancacci Chapel frescoes Ghirlandaio borrowed particular figures (the nearly naked Saint in the *Renunciation of Worldly Goods* is a

¹⁰²⁹ Cadogan. p.94.

¹⁰³⁰ Ibid. p.100.

copy of the Son of Theophilus from the *Raising of the Son of Theophilus* and the man in yellow in the *Trial before the Sultan* is based on the tax collector in the *Tribute Money*). More importantly, Ghirlandaio learned from Masaccio techniques for “marshalling large groups of figures in open spaces”, “devices such as the diagonal staggering of figures and reversals of direction to break and vary the rhythm of the group” and the use of “recognizable settings and contemporary portraits”.¹⁰³¹

In spite of kinder assessments of Ghirlandaio, his artistic stature is not equal to that of either Masaccio or Giotto. He does, however, have the skill to make use of elements of their technique in the potentially daunting task of handling, legibly and coherently, a great many pictorial and thematic elements in one small Chapel, which is remarkable for the density of references and meaning packed onto its walls.

¹⁰³¹ Ibid. p.101.

15.3 The frescoes

15.3.1 The cycle

With the exception of the entrance lunette, the Chapel scenes depict episodes in the life of Francis, matching the subject choices of the Bardi Chapel, with the exception of the *Raising of the Roman Notary's Son* which appears in the Sassetti but not the Bardi cycle.¹⁰³²

15.3.2 Vision of Augustus on the Capitoline Hill

The legend of this scene is told in various forms in many chronicles and was a popular story known to date to at least the sixth century, although its depiction here is an unusual choice. The legend tells that the senators wished to worship Augustus as a god but Augustus was reluctant and consulted the Tiburtine sibyl for advice. She told him that an eternal king would come from heaven to judge the world. The heavens opened and Augustus saw a vision of the Virgin and Child in a ring of bright light and heard a voice saying that this was the son of God. Augustus then established an altar at the place where he had seen the vision, supposedly on the site on which Santa Maria in Aracoeli was later built.¹⁰³³

Ghirlandaio¹⁰³⁴ depicts the sibyl opposite Augustus, pointing up at the vision itself which is represented, not as the Virgin and Child, but as San Bernardino's IHS¹⁰³⁵ trigram in a sunburst. Augustus shields his eyes from the bright light while four male companions behind him, and four female companions behind the sibyl, discuss the event. In the background, at the bottom of the hill is Rome. The cityscape is damaged but the Pantheon and Trajan's Column (before the statue of St Peter was added in 1587) are visible. The IHS symbol had been placed on the façade of Santa

¹⁰³² For source references see note 136 on page 58 and note 624 on page 215.

¹⁰³³ Paul F. Burke, "Augustus and Christianity in Myth and Legend" *New England Classical Journal* 32.3, (2005).

¹⁰³⁴ Borsook believes that Ghirlandaio's scene may have been based on an account by Suetonius which Sassetti had in his library. Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.30.

¹⁰³⁵ From Iesus Hominem Salvator, or the first three letters of the Greek IHSOUS (ΙΗΣΟΥΣ).

Trinita to commemorate a peace in 1257 and was connected with the Host, which is itself an emblem of peace.¹⁰³⁶ In the Medici palace chapel, Benozzo Gozzoli had used the symbol to represent the star of Bethlehem, but Ghirlandaio's example is unique in using it in place of the Augustus' vision. By the 15th century, however, the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli was the headquarters of the observant Franciscans, San Bernardino's order, and Ghirlandaio himself was said to have had a devotion to San Bernardino so there was a connection of sorts between the location of Augustus' vision and the trigram.¹⁰³⁷

15.3.3 David

To the left of the *Vision of Augustus* is a figure of David depicted as a statue standing on a pillar with Goliath's head at his feet. An inscription translates roughly as 'To the safety of the fatherland and Christian glory',¹⁰³⁸ while a now lost verse below the figure once read "Give to this glorious youth, O Lord, arms and a fatherland."¹⁰³⁹

David was a prophet of Christ's birth (figures of David and Augustus were paraded in processions for the Epiphany and John the Baptist's feast day), and of Judgement Day, and was associated with the Tree of Jesse and the birth of Rome. He was a popular character in Florence where he was seen as the defender of civic liberty and appeared in public statues by Donatello and Verrocchio. Here Ghirlandaio has given him the Sassetti arms on his shield and he holds the stone (*sasso*) and sling which brought him victory.¹⁰⁴⁰

¹⁰³⁶ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.31.

¹⁰³⁷ Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.146.

¹⁰³⁸ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.32. Or "At the behest of the senate and the people for the salvation of the father-land and to the glory of Christendom." Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.458.

¹⁰³⁹ Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.458.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. pp.32-33.

15.3.4 Vaults

In the vaults are four sibyls seated on clouds with a sunburst behind each one.¹⁰⁴¹ The Eritraean, Agrippan, and Cumaean sibyls have been identified. The fourth might be the Cimmerian Sibyl. The Eritraean Sibyl prophesied that Christ would return in the last days¹⁰⁴² and is situated above the altar, while the Cumaean Sibyl above the entrance refers to Virgil's prediction of a Golden Age that would be inaugurated by the birth of a child.¹⁰⁴³ The Agrippan Sibyl's inscription reads, "The invisible truth will laboriously unfold, will sprout".¹⁰⁴⁴ Sibyls were fashionable in Tuscany at the time due to the popularity of a treatise about them by the Dominican preacher Filippo Barbier, which was published with illustrations in the early 1480s.¹⁰⁴⁵ Ghirlandaio seems to have known the work since the inscriptions on the scrolls relate appropriately to the Nativity and Last Judgement.

15.3.5 Renunciation of Worldly Goods

On the upper tier of the left wall, Francis renounces his worldly goods, returning his clothing to his father, Bernardone, and joins the Church under the protection of the Bishop who covers him with his cloak while his father looks on. The background is of a port city on a broad estuary, rather than Assisi where the event took place. It has been identified by some scholars as Geneva,¹⁰⁴⁶ where Sassetti made the fortune that enabled him to pay for the Chapel.¹⁰⁴⁷

Ghirlandaio's treatment of the scene differs from Giotto's rendering at Santa Croce¹⁰⁴⁸ in using a semi-circular arrangement for the figures, apparently inspired by Masaccio's *Raising of the Son of Theophilus* in the Brancacci Chapel across the river

¹⁰⁴¹ They are an early example of their kind and may be the first instance of sibyls being placed in the vaults of a chapel instead of the Evangelists. Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.146.

¹⁰⁴² The inscription is translated by Roettgen as "in the ultimate age." Ibid. p.458.

¹⁰⁴³ The inscription is translated by Roettgen as "With this as witness of the great Virgil." Ibid. p.458.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Ibid. p.458.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.30.

¹⁰⁴⁶ E.g. Borsook and Offerhaus, and Rubin.

¹⁰⁴⁷ This is contested by Amanda Lillie on the grounds that it looks less like Geneva than "like the stereotype landscapes produced by the Ghirlandaio workshop. Lillie.p.294.

¹⁰⁴⁸ See 4.3.1

at Santa Maria del Carmine, where the resuscitated boy kneels before Peter, surrounded by a semi-circle of onlookers, in a very similar composition.¹⁰⁴⁹ The figure of Francis is a copy of the boy in reverse.

Ghirlandaio places Francis in the centre of the semi-circle of onlookers, all but one of whom (the Bishop) are laymen, well-dressed citizens watching rather passively, with the exception of the two figures in the central distance and the figure of Bernardone. His movement is directed towards Francis but he is restrained (gently) by a friend and his expression is one of sorrow rather than fury (as in Giotto's fresco of the same subject in the Bardi Chapel). He holds a belt or strap with which he had perhaps intended to beat Francis, but which now hangs slack in his hand, and Francis' abandoned cloak is slung over his left arm.

15.3.6 Stigmatization

On the lower tier of the left wall, above Nera's tomb, the *Stigmatization* is depicted against a panoramic landscape with a recognisable view of the historical site of the miracle - La Verna - in the background, and a river winding under a bridge and past a view of Pisa(?) on the right. It is suggested that Pisa may have been chosen because it is situated at the end of the Arno which has its source near La Verna.¹⁰⁵⁰

Francis appears in the centre foreground, kneeling, his hands raised in wonder, the reverse¹⁰⁵¹ of Giotto's figure at Santa Croce from which it is clearly borrowed. He looks up to the left where the Christ-seraph blazes red and gold, surrounded by red seraphim in a mandorla shape. Beneath the vision, and looking upwards and to the right, Brother Leo also kneels, his right hand resting on the ground, his left shielding his eyes as from a bright light. In the background are two more friars, one of whom looks upwards, shielding his eyes, while the other points towards the vision and

¹⁰⁴⁹ Whether Ghirlandaio knew the finished version, completed by Filippino Lippi, or only the under-drawing by Masaccio is not clear, but the influence of Masaccio is evident. Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.140.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.28.

¹⁰⁵¹ Francis is facing left rather than right, as in the Giotto version.

reaches out to his fellow brother. On the right hand side, three horsemen stop as they ford the river and look upwards, one of them raising his right hand to his eyes in a gesture that echoes the anonymous friar and Brother Leo. In the centre, above Francis, a falcon attacks a duck on the wing while to Francis' right, are two deer, one of whom rests on the ground while the other, standing, looks towards Francis.

15.3.7 Confirmation of the Rule

The lunette of the altar wall contains a striking treatment of the *Confirmation*. In the middle ground, Francis, followed by his brothers, kneels on the steps before the Pope's throne. The Pope sits on the right hand edge of the picture under a canopy, and on either side of the brothers are two rows of clergy, one row on a bench with their backs to the viewer, the other facing the viewer with a hanging behind them, separating them from the background where three great arches, possibly based on the Temple of Peace in Rome,¹⁰⁵² lead out into the Florentine Piazza della Signoria. The Palazzo Vecchio is visible on the left, with the Loggia dei Lanzi (or Signori) directly ahead, its arches echoing those borrowed from the Temple of Peace.

In the foreground, a stairway leads up from an underground area, and three men and three boys ascend the stairs to ground level. These have been identified¹⁰⁵³ as Poliziano, tutor to the Medici boys (and saviour of their father during the Pazzi assault) accompanied by the youngest, Giuliano, and followed by Piero and Giovanni. Behind the children are two more tutors, possibly Luigi Pulci and Matteo Franco. At the top of the stairs, on the right hand side, are Lorenzo de' Medici, with Antonio Pucci¹⁰⁵⁴ to his right, and Sassetti and his son Federigo to his left.¹⁰⁵⁵

¹⁰⁵² Now known as the Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine, but believed in Sassetti's day to have been begun by Vespasian after the conquest of Jerusalem. Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.37.

¹⁰⁵³ The identification of the portraits is somewhat debated and it is not necessary to go into the details in this paper. See *ibid.* pp.35-4; cf. Gombrich, "The Sassetti Chapel Revisited: Santa Trinita and Lorenzo De' Medici ". pp.14-16; and Lillie. p.294.

¹⁰⁵⁴ A Medici supporter, former *gonfaloniere di giustizia*, and later military hero who recovered lands for Florence. Pucci's son married a Sassetti daughter.

¹⁰⁵⁵ According to Borsook and Offerhaus Federigo Sassetti was twelve at the time of the picture and destined for the clergy with Sassetti already hoping he would become Abbot of Santa Trinita. Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.37. They also note, however, that Sassetti and the Vallombrosans at Santa Trinita supported Lorenzo de' Medici in seeking benefices for Lorenzo's son, Giovanni, and

Opposite them, on the other side of the staircase, behind a banister, may be Sassetti's sons, Galeazzo and Cosimo. The third figure here is possibly a posthumous portrait of Teodoro Sassetti.¹⁰⁵⁶ One of the clergy seated with their backs to the staircase turns round to look at the new arrivals, linking the two scenes.

It is now known that the design for the scene changed considerably. Originally the whole picture plane was occupied with the *Confirmation of the Rule* and there were clerics climbing the stairs, rather than the Medici boys and their tutors, while the complex architecture in the drawing for the scene did not give onto a Florentine background. The changes appear to have been made while it was being painted, with the foreground reworked, which may explain why the portrait figures are not responding to the *Confirmation* in the middle ground.

15.3.8 Raising of the Roman Notary's Son

Below the *Confirmation of the Rule*, on the altar wall, is this unusual scene of a posthumous miracle of Francis. It seems that Ghirlandaio merged two miracle stories to create the narrative which, in brief, tells how the seven year old son of a Roman notary fell out of a window to his death, but was miraculously resuscitated after a Franciscan friar named Rhabanus invoked Francis (who appears in a sunburst in the fresco).¹⁰⁵⁷

Like the *Confirmation* above it, the raising scene takes place outside, and in a Florentine setting rather than the expected Roman one. Instead of the Piazza San Marco in Rome, we see the piazza outside Santa Trinita itself, with the Romanesque façade of the church on the right, the bridge across the Arno in the background, and the Palazzo Spini on the left. For a long time the scene was not recognised and was

Gombrich argues for Lorenzo's hopes of obtaining Santa Trinita for Giovanni and notes the lengths to which he had been prepared to go in other instances, making it unlikely that the Vallombrosans (or Sassetti for that matter) would oppose him. Gombrich, "The Sassetti Chapel Revisited: Santa Trinita and Lorenzo De' Medici ". pp.17-26.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. pp. 36-37.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.141.

known as the *Miracle of the Spini Boy* because of the figure of the child falling from a window of the Spini Palace. The background includes many small figures, including a man running to catch the falling child, two men using a double handled saw, and a horseman coming over the bridge.

In the central foreground the boy sits up on a richly covered bier, facing right and looking directly ahead of him with his little hands together in prayer. His mother looks on from the left end of the bier, her arms outstretched, while two women in white head coverings kneel on either side of the bier, the one on the far side¹⁰⁵⁸ looking at the mother, while the one closest to the viewers has her head turned in profile to the left, looking at a group of onlookers.¹⁰⁵⁹ On the right of the bier are two kneeling Franciscans with their hands in prayer, one of them presumably Rhabanus. Above the child, slightly right of centre, Francis appears on a cloud, surrounded by a sunburst, blessing the child with his right hand. Behind the bier to the right, three men look on, while the funeral procession begins to emerge from Santa Trinita.

On each side of the bier a group of onlookers stands, choric, framing the scene. The young ladies and gentlemen on the left are probably Sassetti's daughters and their husbands,¹⁰⁶⁰ while the bald man on the right with his back turned to the viewer is

¹⁰⁵⁸ Identified by Davies as perhaps a sister of the boy, although there is no conclusive evidence for this. Davies, *Ghirlandaio*. p.75.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Roettgen claims that this is a male figure in a shroud, possibly a reference to Lazarus who was also resuscitated, and wonders if there is a link with the first, deceased, Sassetti son named Teodorus. He also questions the relation of this figure to the blond woman kneeling with her hands in prayer behind the mother. Roettgen describes both figures as being like *pleurants*, which they are, but admits that they are "extremely puzzling". Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.142. The figure is, in fact, a woman as is clear from the absence of any of the male features Ghirlandaio customarily employs, including stubble or the shadow of such. (Teodorus would certainly have been old enough to have facial hair). Amanda Lillie sensibly suggests that the blond girl with her reddish dress and flowing hair (whom she identifies with Maddalena Sassetti) is intended as a visual reference to the Magdalene. Lillie. p.294. In this case a Lazarus type figure would be appropriate but since the figure is not a man there can be no such direct connection.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Lillie suggests that Sassetti's youngest daughter "...Maddalena...acts out her Christian name in the fresco. Her long, loose hair, her red dress, her kneeling pose, clasped hands and intensely pleading gaze link her to the Magdalene type..." Lillie. p.294.

thought to be a posthumous portrait of Neri di Gino Capponi.¹⁰⁶¹ The group on the right is all male, with Ghirlandaio himself at the back with his brother in law, Sebastiano Mainardi, looking out at the viewer, one hand on hip, as if to claim ownership of the scene.

Borsook and Offerhaus argue¹⁰⁶² that the cycle was changed to include this scene (rather than the *Apparition at Arles* which was originally planned) following the death of Teodoro Sassetti, the eldest son, and the birth of another son named Teodoro II, as a thanksgiving and a statement of faith in the resurrection of the dead.¹⁰⁶³ Gombrich disagrees with this view on the grounds that early death was a very common occurrence and unlikely to be memorialised in this way.¹⁰⁶⁴ However, he offers no convincing explanation for the change of scene and besides, the elder Teodoro was hardly a babe in arms but nineteen years old,¹⁰⁶⁵ and there is evidence that families did mourn the premature death of children.¹⁰⁶⁶

15.3.9 Trial before the Sultan

The right lunette shows St Francis before the Sultan,¹⁰⁶⁷ with the Sultan enthroned in an apse in the centre rear of the scene, on a carpeted dais, under a canopy hung with Florentine style damask. In front of him a very tidy fire burns brightly on the

¹⁰⁶¹ A military hero whose palace was on the other side of the Santa Trinita bridge and is just visible, and whose grandson married a Sassetti daughter. Borsook and Offerhaus, eds.p.39. He has also been identified as Neri's son, Gino di Neri Capponi, by Rab Hatfield. See discussion in Didi-Huberman, "The Portrait, the Individual and the Singular: Remarks on the Legacy of Aby Warburg." p. 168.

¹⁰⁶² Based on the claim by Artur Rosenauer that a drawing of Francis appearing at Arles was intended for this space but rejected in favour of the *Raising*. Rosenauer's argument was in turn partly based on Warburg's claim that there was a connection between the *Raising* and the death and birth of the Teodoros. Roettgen agrees that the drawing was destined for the Sassetti Chapel, but believes that it fits not the space on the altar wall but a compartment on a side wall, claiming that the shape of the tomb niche below is visible. This would imply that the programme of the cycle had been changed, but not that the miracle of the *Raising* was substituted for the miracle of the apparition. This said, the niche shape which Roettgen identifies, is only visible on the recto of the drawing and not in the verso (although this differs in many other respects too) and is much smaller than the actual tomb. See Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. pp.142-143.

¹⁰⁶³ They suggest further that the vow which Sassetti was fulfilling through his donation to the Chapel may have had something to do with this death and birth. Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.18.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Gombrich, "The Sassetti Chapel Revisited: Santa Trinita and Lorenzo De' Medici ". p.16.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.138. See also Coonin. n.23. p.70.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Coonin. pp.65 -66.

¹⁰⁶⁷ See note 199 on page 69.

polychrome marble floor. Francis stands to the right of the fire, ready to enter it, one sandaled foot visible as he lifts the hem of his habit, his right hand raised to his forehead, pointing to himself as if to indicate his readiness to enter the fire.¹⁰⁶⁸ Behind him two friars kneel in prayer and set behind them are two onlookers discussing the scene, while a white-bearded man with a book sits on the edge of Sultan's dais looking pensively at Francis, presumably a palace advisor. On the left, a man in yellow with his back to us points towards the fire with his right hand, left hand on hip, looking at the Sultan's priests who are turning away from the fire, hands raised in deprecating protest, preparing to leave. Beyond the minimal architectural structure within which this occurs – indicated by no more than the marble floor, dais, throne, and four slim unornamented pillars – is a Tuscan landscape with a broad river, a small town, and other occasional buildings.¹⁰⁶⁹ The lunette arch itself provides as much of the sense of architectural space in the scene as the slender pillars.

15.3.10 Funeral of St Francis and Verification of the Stigmata

On the lower tier of the right wall, above the tomb of Francesco Sassetti, is the *Funeral of St Francis and Verification of the Stigmata*. The mourners are arranged in a semi-circle around the bier as Jerome examines the wound in Francis' side. One friar kneels on the 'viewer's side' of the bier, two more kiss Francis's feet and other hand, while a fourth bends over at his head, looking intently at Francis' face. The laymen – Jerome and Brother Elias in the garb of a notary – are surrounded by three more friars: the one on the right prays, the one on the left watches as Jerome looks at the wound, and the third stands behind the notary while the notary's raised hand almost touching the friar's seems to be telling him to be patient while the sceptic makes his inspection.¹⁰⁷⁰ To the left of the central group stand the bishop, wearing glasses to read, and his two attendants holding a censer and an aspergillum, with two laymen behind (the one on the left has been identified as Poliziano¹⁰⁷¹), while to the

¹⁰⁶⁸ Cadogan writes that Francis is shielding himself from the flames, but his gesture is not at all protective, but rather an assertive one. The contrast with the shrinking priests with their tentative, repelling hands, is very clear. See Cadogan. p.93.

¹⁰⁶⁹ The landscape has not been identified. Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.28.

¹⁰⁷⁰ See note 706 on page 242.

¹⁰⁷¹ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.42.

right are three pall bearers and two more laymen with a child. The setting is a church, with Corinthian columns with gilded tops supporting an elegantly decorated ceiling. In the centre of the background is an altar in a polychrome marble clad apse, with a Crucifix and two candlesticks on the altar. Beyond the far columns the scene opens out onto a landscape.¹⁰⁷²

15.3.11 Altarpiece

The altarpiece of the Nativity, also by Ghirlandaio, depicts the Virgin adoring the Christ Child¹⁰⁷³ with three Shepherds on the right and a great procession of the Magi approaching on the left through a triumphal arch. The Christ Child is lying on Mary's cloak, spread in front of her on the ground, beside a sarcophagus which serves as a manger, with the ox and ass leaning over it. Joseph looks out to the left towards the procession, beyond which the Annunciation to the Shepherds can be seen, although the whole scene is in daylight. All this is set within a detailed landscape with towns and a river. The stable itself has a rickety wooden roof supported on two antique capitals, one of which is inscribed with the date, 1485. On the sarcophagus is inscribed, "Fulvius, Pompey's augur, falling to the sword before Jerusalem, proclaims: 'My tomb will produce a new deity'." The sarcophagus inscription may be read as both the triumph of Christianity over paganism, and a reference to the resurrection.¹⁰⁷⁴

15.3.12 Donor Portraits and Tomb Monuments

Francesco and Nera Sassetti are portrayed kneeling, either side of the altar, soberly dressed and convincingly realistic figures against fictive marble backgrounds. Their tombs are set into the side walls next to their portraits. The tomb inscriptions refer to the couple's happy marriage, as do some of the carved reliefs. These include allegories and portraits of Francesco and Nera. Above Nera's tomb she is allegorised as a sea nymph (a play on Nera/nereid) riding a sea monster with a male

¹⁰⁷² The landscape is non-specific.

¹⁰⁷³ The frame is inscribed "Maria prayed to the one whom she had borne." Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.147.

¹⁰⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p.147.

torso, a fish's tail, and horse's forelegs, the latter being a marine version of Francesco's emblem of a centaur.¹⁰⁷⁵ The frieze below Francesco's tomb includes a portrait of Sassetti as a Roman citizen. On the left side, a cherub weeps beside an urn supported on a tripod in a scene known as the *Sacrifice of Eros*, which may allude to the death of Francesco's son, Teodoro Sassetti, while many other cherubs play with slings and stones (a reference to the Sassetti emblem of little stones¹⁰⁷⁶). An association between cherubs on tombs and early death may have been intended. On the right, a group of mourners surround a bier; on the left is a couple holding hands with a third figure behind them with his arms around their shoulders, representing an allegory of faith expressed through the image of a faithful marriage. Borsook and Offerhaus suggest that in the Sassetti context this group "can be understood as a couple united in faith despite the vicissitudes of human grief and affliction."¹⁰⁷⁷

¹⁰⁷⁵ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds.p.21.

¹⁰⁷⁶ A literal translation of the name, *sasso* being a stone and *sassetti* the diminutive.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Borsook and Offerhaus, eds. p.26.

15.4 Sassetti Chapel images¹⁰⁷⁸

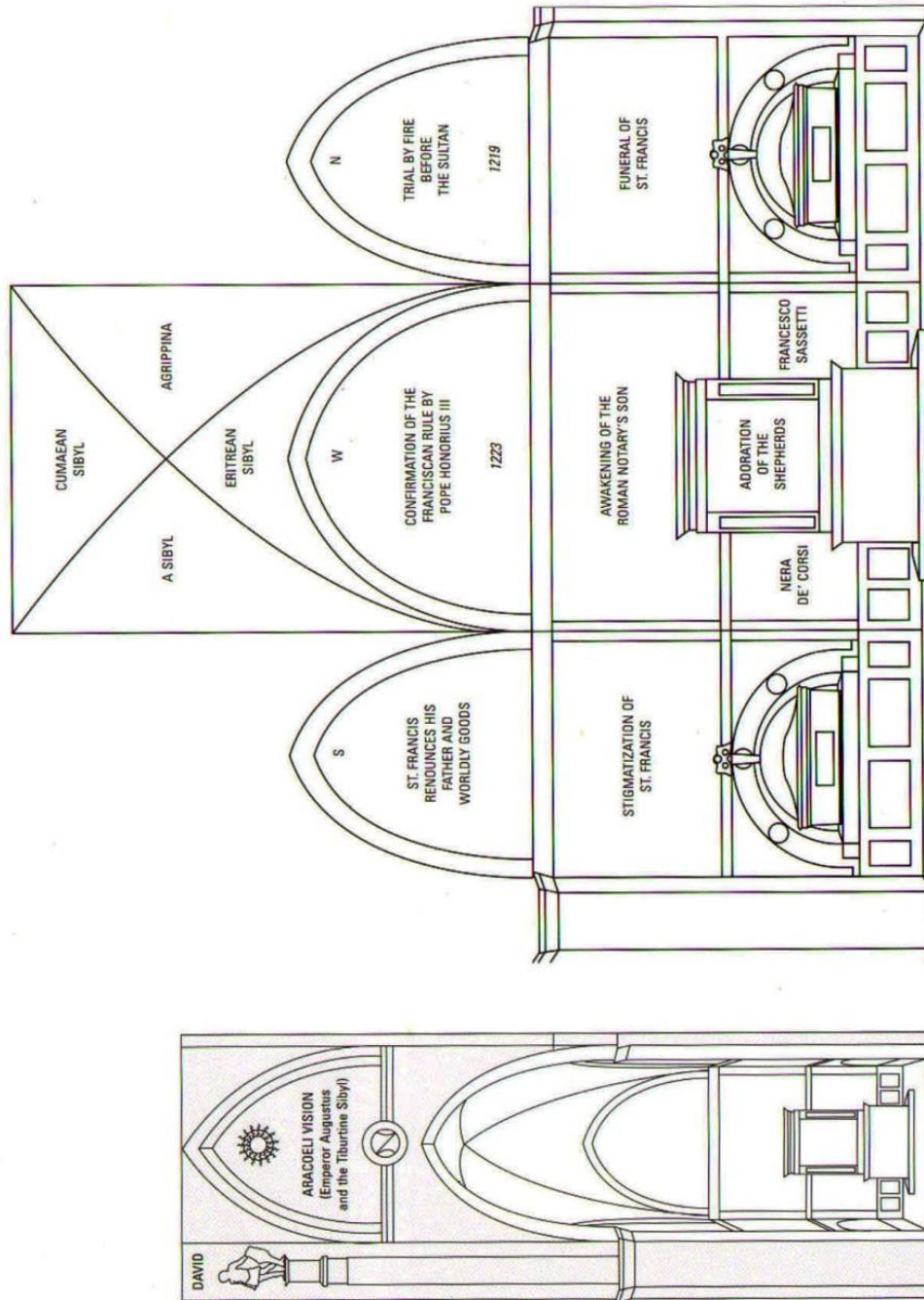


Figure 85 Sassetti Chapel Diagram

¹⁰⁷⁸ These images are taken from photographs published in Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. Plates 63-66, 70, 74-75. pp. 148-161.



Figure 86 Sassetti Chapel from the transept



Figure 87 Sassetti Chapel from transept (close up)



Figure 88 Sassetti Chapel, *Vision of Augustus*



Figure 89 Sassetti Chapel Vaults, *Sibyls*

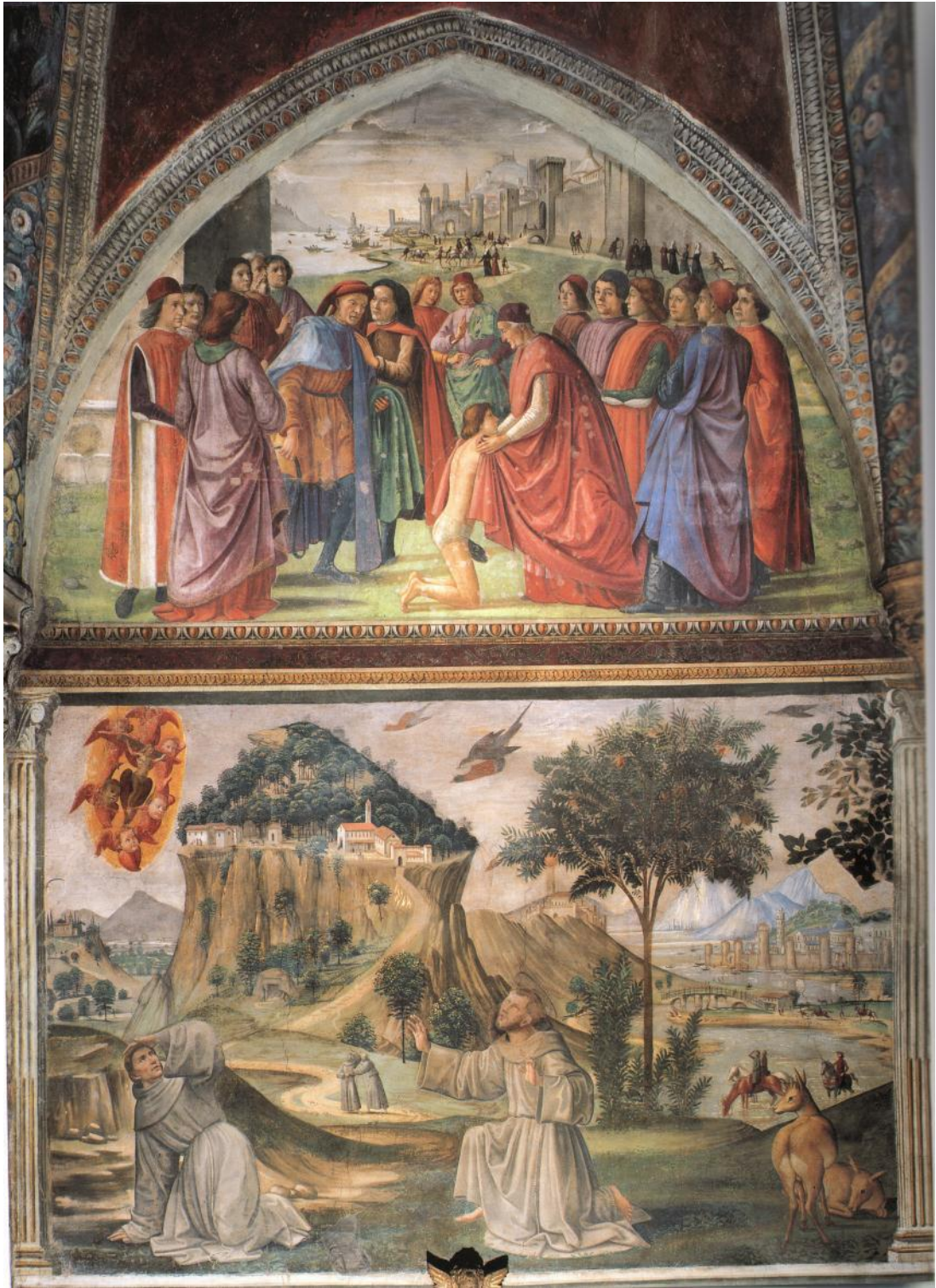


Figure 90 Sassetti Chapel, Left wall: *Renunciation of Worldly Goods*;
Stigmatization of St Francis

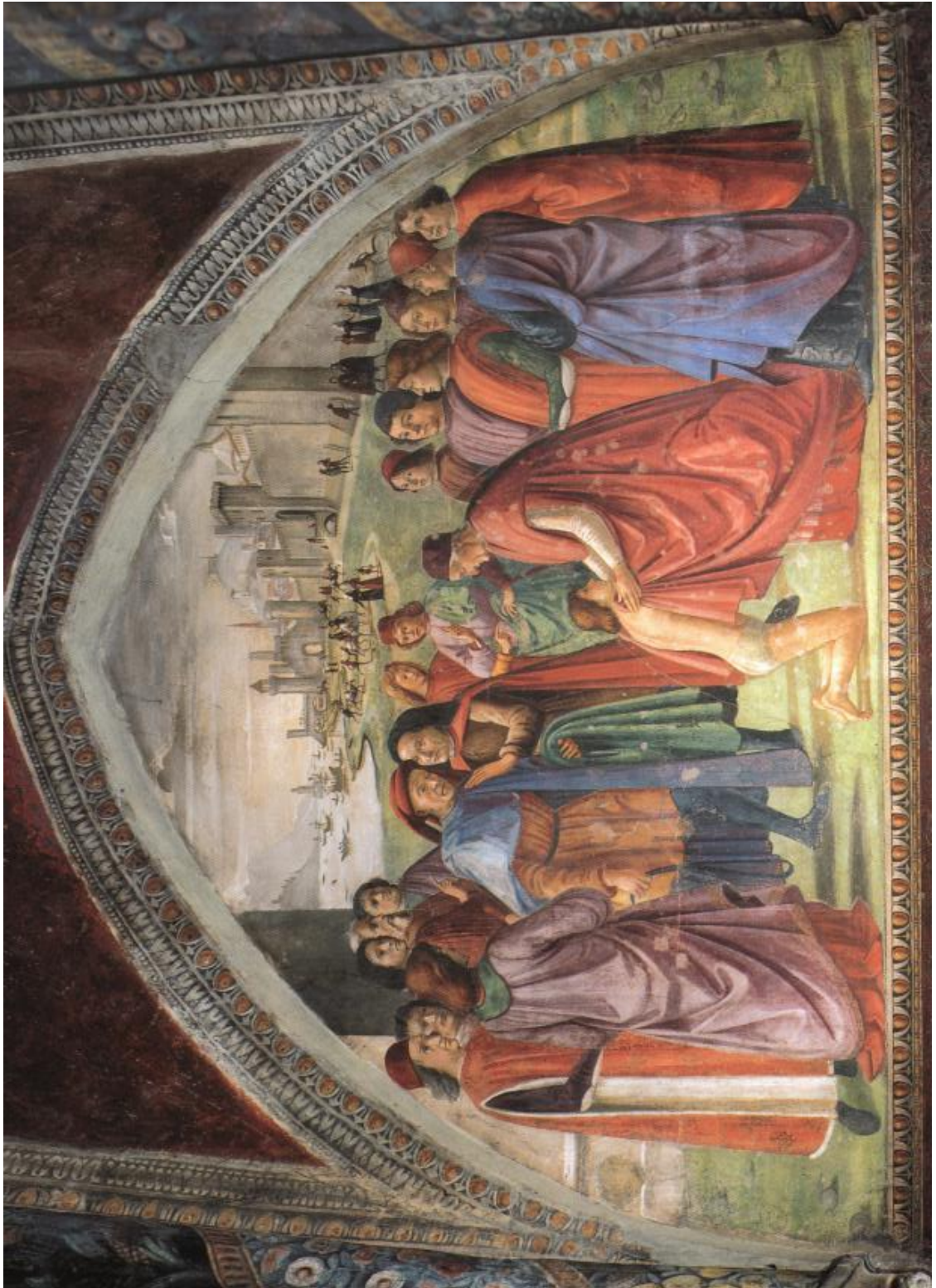


Figure 91 Sassetti Chapel, *Renunciation of Worldly Goods*



Figure 92 Sassetti Chapel, *Stigmatization of St Francis*

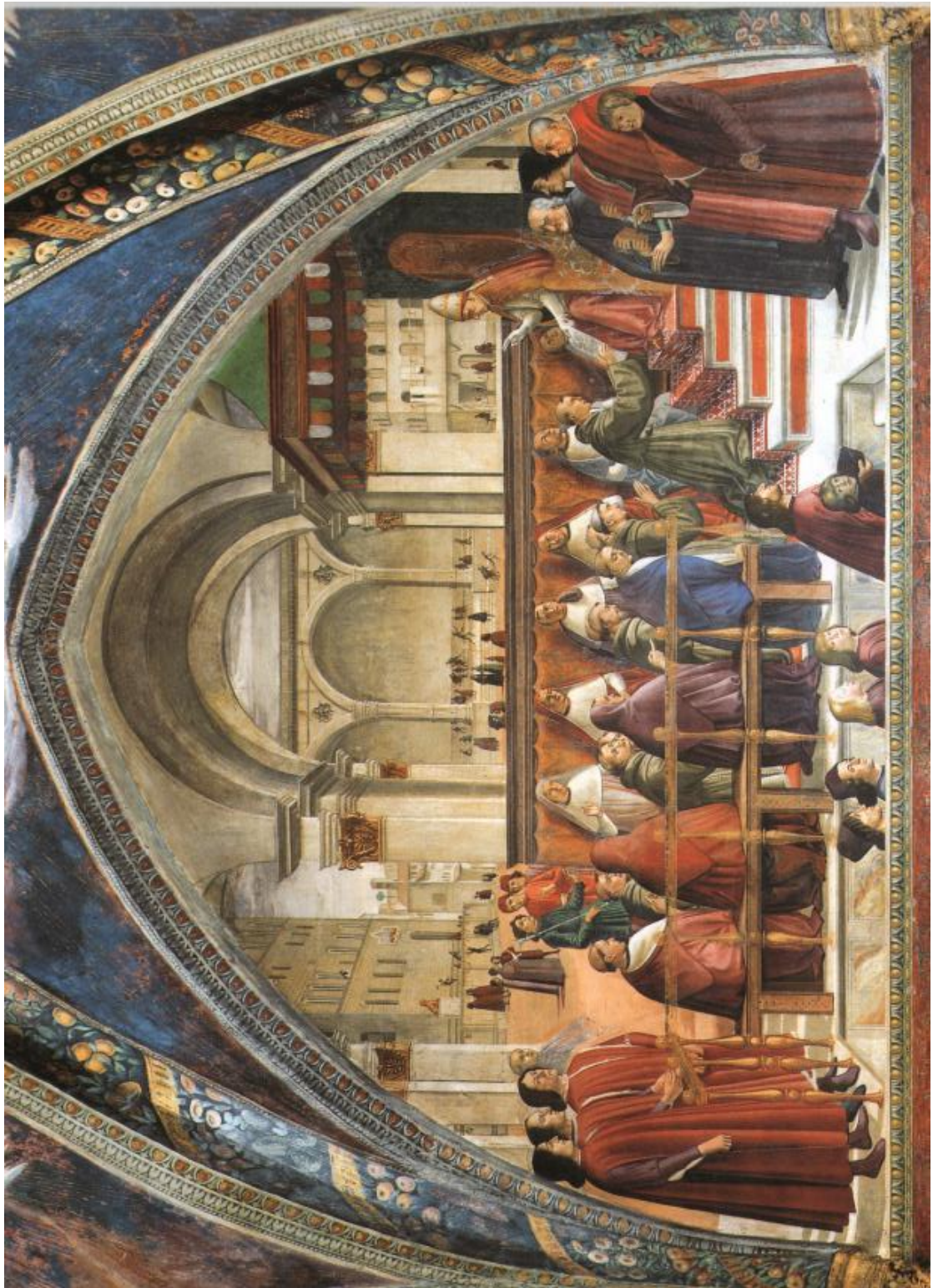


Figure 93 Sassetti Chapel, *Confirmation of the Rule*



Figure 94 Sassetti Chapel, Altar wall detail: *Raising of the Roman Notary's Son*; Donor portraits of Nera Corsi and Francesco Sassetti



Figure 95 Sassetti Chapel, *Raising of the Roman Notary's Son*



Figure 96 Sassetti Chapel, *Nativity* altarpiece; Donor portraits of Nera Corsi and Francesco Sassetti



Figure 97 Sassetti Chapel, Right wall: *Trial before Sultan; Funeral of St Francis and Verification of the Stigmata*

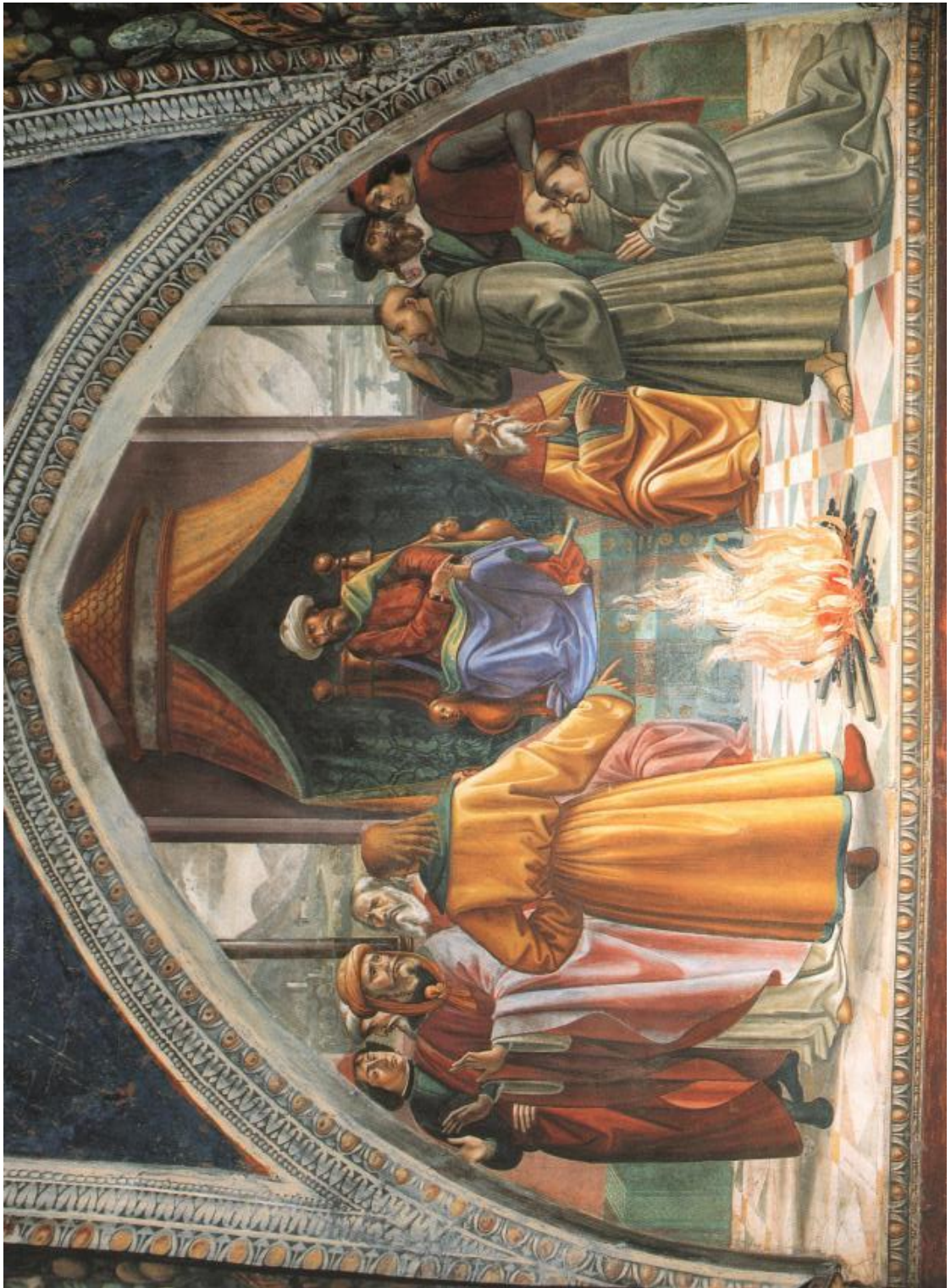


Figure 98 Sassetti Chapel, *Trial before Sultan*



Figure 99 Sassetti Chapel, *Funeral of St Francis and Verification of the Stigmata*

16 Tornabuoni Chapel Appendix

16.1 The Chapel and its patrons

Tornaquinci/Tornabuoni¹⁰⁷⁹ patronage of Santa Maria Novella, and of the Chancel Chapel had strong historical precedent, beginning with the donation by one Jacopo Tornaquinci of a small church on the site of Santa Maria Novella as a gift to the Dominicans on their arrival in Florence in 1221. If the details of this donation had been buried in the corporate memory of the Church, it was recorded in the family papers and still alive in family memory. In 1348 the Tornaquinci had also donated the original fresco cycle of the Virgin by Andrea Orcagna and his brother Nardo de Cione, making a cash payment to the Prior, Fra Jacopo Passavanti, who was himself a relation. Although Vasari and others later attributed this patronage to the Ricci family, a tradition which went unquestioned for many centuries, the Tornaquinci presumably remembered this donation and their links to Passavanti whose sermons were famous in his day. The Tornaquinci believed themselves to be the original patrons of the Dominicans at Santa Maria Novella and particularly allied to them.

Acting on a sincere belief which required proclamation and assertion, the family more than once resorted to visual propaganda, containing *arme* and portraits, to stake its claim both to the chapel and to the honour owed to its magnificence.¹⁰⁸⁰

Nevertheless, patronage rights to the Chapel were complex and involved three prominent Florentine families: the house of Tornaquinci - particularly the branch of

¹⁰⁷⁹ The Chapel is usually known as the Tornabuoni Chapel because the principal donor was Giovanni Tornabuoni. Simons, however, makes a strong case for calling the Chapel after Giovanni Tornabuoni's wider family group (*consorteria*), the Tornaquinci, since a number of its branches are represented in the Chapel and the patronage of the family as a whole had historical precedent. Nevertheless, it is more generally known as the Tornabuoni Chapel and will be referred to as such here.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Simons. p.224.

this called the Tornabuoni - as well as the Sassetti, and the Ricci families.¹⁰⁸¹ It was only after many generous gifts and expressions of patronal interest that the Dominicans accorded Giovanni Tornabuoni the patronal rights to the Chapel in 1486.¹⁰⁸² Rights to the altar followed in 1490 and plans proceeded for a new altarpiece by Ghirlandaio.¹⁰⁸³ At this time Giovanni Tornabuoni also acquired the rights to the four tombs above the steps into the Chapel which were used for Giovanni's father and his wife, Giovanni's own wife Francesca, and finally Giovanni himself, who was buried there in 1497. In addition to the frescoes (which replaced the originals from the 1340s) and the altarpiece, Giovanni Tornabuoni paid for the stained glass window (probably designed by Ghirlandaio's workshop¹⁰⁸⁴), an inlaid *spalliera*¹⁰⁸⁵ at the base of the frescoes, liturgical items for the altar, vestments, candles, and, of course, masses.

As principal patron, Giovanni Tornabuoni represented the Tornaquinci lineage, or *consorteria*, more widely and its various branches were referred to on the Chapel walls in portraits and coats of arms. Nevertheless, the Tornaquinci at large do not appear to have been consulted in the matter and the display of family solidarity may say more about Giovanni Tornabuoni's aspirations in presenting a united dynasty of influential citizens with a strong patronal claim to the Chapel than about an actual state of affairs.¹⁰⁸⁶

Giovanni Tornabuoni was a wealthy banker, working for the Medici. He acted as papal treasurer in Rome and was instrumental in the reconciliation between Pope Sixtus IV and Lorenzo de Medici in 1480. In Florence he held the offices of prior

¹⁰⁸¹ The six Medici *palle* on the entrance arch now visible belong to the Medici-Tornaquinci and were probably erected in a restoration in 1858, replacing the arms of the Tornaquinci and the Tornabuoni which Vasari records as being on the pillars. See Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.165.

¹⁰⁸² Francesco Sassetti seems to have retained some claim to the altar initially but this was finally laid to rest with his death in 1490. See 15.1.

¹⁰⁸³ This was unfinished on Ghirlandaio's death in 1493 and was completed by his brothers Davide and Benedetto. It was sold in 1804. Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.451.

¹⁰⁸⁴ And made after 1491 by Alessandro di Giovanni d'Andrea Agolati. Ibid. p.165.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Wooden boards, often painted, usually the back of a bench or chest, or the foot/headboard of a bed. In this case the *spalliere* were used as panelling for the lowest register of the wall.

¹⁰⁸⁶ See Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.175

and *gonfaloniere di giustizia*, and at Santa Maria Novella he was a member of the confraternity of St Peter Martyr known as *dei Laudesi*, and its captain on a number of occasions. He was familiar with the process of commissioning artists and knew exactly what he wanted when he employed Ghirlandaio at Santa Maria Novella, having employed him on previous occasions.¹⁰⁸⁷

In addition to portraits of many notable contemporary Florentines, the frescoes include family portraits. The woman in gold brocade is the wife of Lorenzo Tornabuoni (Giovanni's son), Giovanna degli Albizzi, who died giving birth to their son, named Giovanni for his grandfather.¹⁰⁸⁸ The woman behind Giovanna in the *Visitation* is Nanna di Niccolo Tornabuoni, a niece of Giovanni's,¹⁰⁸⁹ while a third woman, standing in the centre of the *Birth of the Baptist* has not been conclusively identified. The four men in the right hand foreground of the *Expulsion*, dressed in blue and red robes, have been identified by various sources, including Vasari, as Davide Ghirlandaio (Domenico's brother), Alesso Baldovinetti (Ghirlandaio's teacher), Domenico Ghirlandaio himself, and his brother in law Sebastiano Mainardi, also known as Bastiano da San Gimignano.¹⁰⁹⁰ Ghirlandaio stands in a similar posture to his portrait counterpart in the Sassetti Chapel,¹⁰⁹¹ left hand on hip, right hand to his chest, looking out at the viewer and inviting them into the scene. On the left hand side, a group of four younger men, dressed in long tunics and skull caps, also observe the action. The foremost, identified as Lorenzo di Giovanni Tornabuoni (Giovanni Tornabuoni's only son) mirrors Ghirlandaio's posture, hand on hip looking at the viewer.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Including a tomb chapel for his wife, Francesca Tornabuoni, also decorated with scenes from the life of the Virgin and John the Baptist, at the Dominican church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.176. The *Naming of the Baptist* was added to the programme after the initial contract, probably to commemorate the birth of this grandson.

¹⁰⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p.176.

¹⁰⁹⁰ See Cadogan. p.13.

¹⁰⁹¹ In the *Raising of the Roman Notary's Son* on the altar wall. Here Ghirlandaio has his right hand on his hip although he does not have his left hand on his chest as in the Tornabuoni Chapel. See 8.3.4.

16.2 The artist

Ghirlandaio's artistic merits and their reception have already been discussed in relation to the Sassetti Chapel at Santa Trinita,¹⁰⁹² but it is worth noting here that the Santa Maria Novella project was highly prestigious in its location and patrons, and was the largest commission in Florence for a century. Ghirlandaio produced a cycle which would be compared with the work of great masters and which set new standards artistically and technically. Ghirlandaio was assisted by a large workshop and the painting is by many hands, including his brothers, although the preparatory drawings were by the master himself.¹⁰⁹³ For the sake of simplicity the frescoes are referred to here as Ghirlandaio's work.

The contract is one of the most revealing survivals of the period and sets out the timetable for the work, the programme (and, unusually, how it is to be laid out¹⁰⁹⁴) as well as a detailed list of elements to be included, such as castles, buildings, cities, villas, hills, plains, rocks, water, birds, animals, and clothing. It is clear from the changes made to the programme between the contract and the finished works that Giovanni Tornabuoni remained closely involved in the design beyond the contract stage. The Dominicans at Santa Maria Novella would also have been involved in approving the programme and it is likely that their requests, or simply the nature of

¹⁰⁹² See 8.2.1. Vasari praised the Santa Maria Novella frescoes and Ghirlandaio's excellence as a master, but whether he looked at them very carefully is questionable. See note 818 on page 285. According to Vasari, Ghirlandaio forwent a bonus payment for the work on the grounds that he was happy simply to have satisfied Giovanni Tornabuoni, who later sent him 100 ducats as a friendship gift. This modesty and dedication to his work was evidently a character trait that Vasari approved. That said, Ghirlandaio's depiction of himself in the frescoes at Santa Maria Novella and Santa Trinita may suggest a less modest and more dynastically inclined character than Vasari supposed. Vasari. Vol 2. pp.68-79. Cadogan. pp.4-14.

¹⁰⁹³ Davide and Benedetto Ghirlandaio were also involved in the project, and Domenico's brother in law, Sebastiano Mainardi may have worked with them. Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. pp.166-167. Cf. Cadogan who argues otherwise. Cadogan. p.14. According to Vasari, Michelangelo was part of the Ghirlandaio workshop, acting as an errand boy, and may have produced some drawings of the work in progress and learned from the experience. Ghirlandaio was credited with 'discovering' him. Vasari. Vol.4 pp.108-111.

¹⁰⁹⁴ According to Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, the contract is "unique in referring to even one element of disposition" of the scenes. Lavin, *The Place of Narrative: Mural Decoration in Italian Churches 431-1600*. p.207.

the setting in a Dominican church, influenced in particular the choice of scenes that were visible from the nave.¹⁰⁹⁵

¹⁰⁹⁵ The current altar is some 11ft further west than the original altar and raised higher. Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.451. The altar wall scenes may thus have been more visible until the late 16th century when these changes were made.

16.3 The frescoes

16.3.1 Arrangement of the scenes

The Chapel contains two cycles consisting of scenes from the life of the Virgin and the life of John the Baptist. The left and right hand walls are divided into a lunette containing a single scene, and three lower tiers each divided into two, giving seven scenes on each wall. The altar wall has the same structure but is pierced by a triple window leaving a small section of the lower three tiers on either side of the window available for painting, and cutting into the large lunette at the top.

The cycles of the Virgin and the Baptist can thus be read chronologically starting from the nave side and working towards the altar, beginning on the lowest tier and moving upwards. In the middle tier the lives intersect with the altar wall (with the *Annunciation* and the *Young St John Departing for the Wilderness*) and both cycles end in the *Coronation of the Virgin* in the altar wall lunette, where John is among the saints on the left hand side.

The central part of the stained glass window shows (from bottom to top) the *Miracle of the Snow*¹⁰⁹⁶, the *Purification of the Virgin*,¹⁰⁹⁷ and *The Virgin giving her Girdle to St Thomas*. The life of the Virgin is thus continued in the window and the most physically enduring of the events (the giving of the girdle, which leaves a secondary relic¹⁰⁹⁸) is the one closest to the viewer and the ground, while the miracle performed after her assumption is closest to her Coronation above. The left hand window contains (from bottom to top) Saints Dominic, John the Baptist, and Peter, and the

¹⁰⁹⁶ The miracle of the *Madonna of the Snow* took place in Rome in the 350s when the Virgin appeared to Pope Liberius and the patrician Giovanni Patrizio and instructed them to build a church at the top of the Esquiline Hill. The place was marked by miraculous snowfall that night, and the church of Santa Maria Maggiore built on the site. The miracle is celebrated on the 4th of August.

¹⁰⁹⁷ This scene is sometimes described as the Presentation in the Temple, e.g. Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.178. The inclusion of Joseph holding a basket containing at least one dove suggests that it is in fact the Purification.

¹⁰⁹⁸ There are no primary relics of the Virgin as her body was assumed into heaven, but relics of her clothes and milk were highly venerated across Europe.

right hand window Thomas Aquinas, Lawrence, and Paul. The Dominican saints are closest to the viewer, suggesting the Dominican presence among the congregation. The Baptist's image continues his fresco cycle, which ended on the right wall with his head presented to Herod, by showing him as a saint. Looking upwards from the window the viewer sees him in heaven with the Virgin. The top tier of the window is occupied, appropriately, by the most senior apostles, leading the eye naturally on to the *Coronation* above. In the vaults are the four Evangelists sitting on clouds against large golden aureoles in a blue sky.

16.3.2 Changes to the original programme

The original scheme as laid out in the contract was changed during the preparatory stages. The *Young St John Departing for the Wilderness* was moved from the right wall to the altar wall to make room for the *Naming of the Baptist*, possibly introduced to commemorate the birth of Giovanni Tornabuoni's grandson, also named Giovanni. The *Purification of the Virgin* and *Christ among the Doctors*, which were originally included on the left hand wall were dropped and replaced by the *Presentation of the Virgin* and the *Massacre of the Innocents*. The *Purification* scene was relocated to the middle tier of the central stained glass window. In the process the Dominican Saints Catherine of Siena, Vincent Ferrer, and Antoninus, originally intended for the altar wall, were removed.

Roettgen thinks that the changes favour the scenes of the Virgin above those of Christ although the distinction seems minimal in what is very definitely a cycle of the Virgin in either case. He also believes that the changes reduced the already slight parallels between the Marian and Johannine scenes which, he says, represents a break with traditional attempts to create symmetry of content and composition, suggesting that Tornabuoni's "desire for maximum variety", stated in the contract, as well as the large scale of the Chapel, may have been a factor in this.¹⁰⁹⁹ Lavin, in contrast, claims that the cycle is unprecedented in its harmony and symmetry,

¹⁰⁹⁹ Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.169.

although her comments relate more to the division of the picture fields and the framing devices than to correlation of content.¹¹⁰⁰

The lack of parallels in content may, of course, be due to simply to the nature of the scenes chosen which do not generally have an obvious symmetry if placed in chronological order as they are here. There are two exceptions to this: the *Expulsion of Joachim* and the *Annunciation to Zachariah* both take place in the Temple and mark the start of the birth stories of the Virgin and Baptist respectively, while the lunettes both refer to the deaths of their protagonists. Why the specific scenes which we now see were chosen is not generally clear¹¹⁰¹ although most of them are standard choices for such cycles.

16.3.3 Life of the Virgin

16.3.3.1 Expulsion of Joachim

The Temple of the *Expulsion* scene is a classically inspired Renaissance construction of colonnades and loggias in a Greek Cross plan, opening onto a piazza. The structure in the background may refer to the Loggia di San Paolo which was being built opposite the Santa Maria Novella,¹¹⁰² and which is similar in style to the Spedale degli Innocenti not far away, while the polychrome marble floor (whose colours match those of the figures' garments) and classical columns reflect the fashions of the time. The altar is positioned in the central background and is shaped as half an octagon (resembling a font or pulpit) raised on two steps, with the High Priest behind it receiving the acceptable sacrifice of a lamb from a figure on the left. Entering from the left another man carries a further sacrifice and from the right two women approach with a lamb and two doves in a basket. The front of the altar is

¹¹⁰⁰ “The almost geometric matching of scene placement has its counterpart in the internal organization of the scenes themselves. Each rectangular tier is divided into two fields by a central flat pilaster painted with classical grotesques. The same motif frames the scenes on the lateral limits.” Lavin, *The Place of Narrative: Mural Decoration in Italian Churches 431-1600*. p.210.

¹¹⁰¹ The *Naming of the Baptist* may indeed be related to the birth of Giovanni Tornabuoni's grandson and namesake.

¹¹⁰² Simons. p.244.

decorated with four Old Testament reliefs. These are barely visible now but have been identified as Judith and Holofernes, a sacrifice, David praying, and David and Goliath. As Simons notes, “the two central reliefs aptly represent supplication and sacrifice while those on each flank celebrate victory.”¹¹⁰³

In the foreground a priest ushers Joachim, holding his lamb, out of the Temple, moving diagonally right and away from the altar, towards a group of four onlookers.¹¹⁰⁴ The foremost of these (thought to be Davide Ghirlandaio) has his back to the viewer and his face in profile, turned towards Joachim. He stands, legs akimbo, left hand raised, apparently responding to the expulsion and the approaching Joachim. His expression and posture seem defensive, and Cadogan describes him as alarmed.¹¹⁰⁵ Behind him a figure (probably Domenico Ghirlandaio himself) looks at the viewer. On the left another group of four, younger, men also look on. They are probably portraits of Tornaquinci men, and the one at the front may be Giovanni Tornabuoni’s son, Lorenzo. His posture echoes that of the figure of Ghirlandaio opposite.

16.3.3.2 Birth of the Virgin

The *Birth of the Virgin* is set in a domestic interior in keeping with traditional representations of the scene, with Anne propped up in bed watching as two nursemaids attend to the baby Mary, while a servant pours water into a bowl. The room is decorated in grand Renaissance style with carved wooden panelling, a classical frieze of putti with musical instruments, an ornate ceiling, and classically decorated Corinthian columns. The nursemaids are sitting on a low chest which runs alongside the bed and has its key dangling from it. On the left is a hallway leading into a corridor, and a staircase, at the top of which is a doorway. Joachim and Anne embrace beside this door, the scene within a scene acting as an abridged visual reference for the Meeting at the Golden Gate. Between the two sections of the

¹¹⁰³ Ibid. p.243.

¹¹⁰⁴ Identified as Davide Ghirlandaio (Domenico’s brother), Alesso Baldovinetti (Ghirlandaio’s teacher), Domenico Ghirlandaio himself, and his brother in law Sebastiano Mainardi, also known as Bastiano da San Gimignano. Cadogan. p.13.

¹¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p.13

picture field (the birthing room and the staircase and hallway) five women approach the bed, as if paying a visit to the new mother and her baby. They are led by a particularly finely dressed young woman in a gold brocade gown, with an exquisite profile and hair flowing down her back whom Vasari names as Ginevra de' Benci but who has since been identified as Giovanna degli Albizzi, the wife of Lorenzo Tornabuoni and mother of the young Giovanni.¹¹⁰⁶ Her hands rest lightly on her belly in a gesture of modesty which also points to her own child-bearing capacity, although in a tragic and memorialising fashion, since she died giving birth to her son. An inscription on the frieze reads "Your birth, O Virgin Mother of God, brought joy to the entire world." and the panelling is signed with the names Bighordi and Grillandai, naming the Ghirlandaio workshop as the frescoes' creators.¹¹⁰⁷

16.3.3.3 Presentation of the Virgin

Above the *Expulsion of Joachim*, another Temple scene shows the young Virgin¹¹⁰⁸ climbing the steps to where the High Priest awaits her with outstretched arms and three Temple virgins rush out to meet her. The Temple structure does not match that of the *Expulsion* but is similar in style, with classical colonnades and archways, and views onto a Florentine looking piazza and streets beyond. The Virgin climbs the Temple steps confidently, turning to look out at the viewer. She is watched by her parents, with Joachim looking at Anne and pointing at their daughter, remarking on her precocity.

To the left, a group of women watch in amazement from the colonnade while two children occupy the central foreground. Next to them two elders seem to discuss the matter, one looking across at the Virgin and holding up his hand as if to interrupt his companion in the middle of some other conversation to comment upon the event. In the right hand corner a nearly nude male figure sitting on the side steps of the

¹¹⁰⁶ Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.176.

¹¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p.458. Bighordi was the family name and Grillandai a contemporary spelling of Ghirlandaio, a nickname given to the artist, according to Vasari, because of his fame as a goldsmith in fashioning golden garlands for decorating women's hair.

¹¹⁰⁸ Mary was three years old when she was taken to the Temple although she looks much older in this fresco.

Temple cups his chin in his hand and looks into the distance. His role is not clear and it is possible that his inclusion is to satisfy an Albertian desire for a figure in each scene which draws the viewer's eye and attracts their attention, although he is not looking at the viewer. Whatever his purpose, his thoughtful posture suits the seriousness of the scene and suggests that further meditation upon it is appropriate.

16.3.3.4 Marriage of the Virgin

The *Marriage* scene is set in a Temple constructed on similar lines and in a similar Renaissance style to that in the *Expulsion* scene, giving the same impression of a Greek Cross plan surrounded by further courtyards, although it is not a copy. The crowd, loosely separated into men on the right and women on the left, gathers around the couple and the High Priest, with three children rushing in from each side, suggesting an excitement which is less evident among the adult figures. The men on the right include the frustrated suitors breaking their rods, two musicians with a drum and pipe, and four men who cluster around Joseph, one of whom seems by the movement of his robes to have rushed forward and is raising his fist above Joseph's head. Whether he is a frustrated suitor threatening his successful rival or is about to deliver the traditional godfather's slap¹¹⁰⁹ is not clear. The men beside him are smiling, perhaps suggesting the latter. The group of women on the left is more sedate, pointing and commenting on the marriage. Anne stands behind the Virgin and the High Priest, supporting her daughter. Joachim is not obviously visible.

16.3.3.5 Annunciation

The *Annunciation* is depicted in the middle register of the altar wall, on the left, next to the *Marriage of the Virgin*, and connects the life of the Virgin with the altar wall. A golden robed Angel with a crown of flowers kneels before Mary, holding a lily and raising his right hand in a gesture of greeting and blessing. The Virgin, holding her book in her left hand and raising her right hand in response to the Angel looks down, inclining her body towards him in a graceful curve, without the two figures

¹¹⁰⁹ See the discussion of the ritual of the *mattinata* and the Marriage of the Virgin in 12.3.4.

touching. Her bed is behind her, raised on a plinth like the beds of Elizabeth and Anne¹¹¹⁰ and a window behind the Angel looks out across a landscape with hills and a broad river or lake. A curtain in the top right hand corner is drawn back against a coffered ceiling, perhaps a reference to the revelation (the unveiling) that will be Christ, and the rending of the Temple curtain at his death. The room belongs in the domestic world and style of Elizabeth and Anne's birth rooms, although it differs in having a window whose aspect draws the eye on, beyond the *Annunciation* scene itself, whereas the windows in the other rooms are too high to afford a view.¹¹¹¹

16.3.3.6 Massacre of the Innocents

The *Massacre of the Innocents* replaced the scene of the young Jesus among the rabbis and is unusual among the fresco scenes for its violence, movement, and drama.¹¹¹² Against a backdrop of a Renaissance piazza with a triumphal archway, leading out into a garden and further classical structures, soldiers in Roman armour brandish swords on foot and on horseback while desperate mothers try to shield their babies or resist the soldiers. Although no murder is specifically shown, the ground is littered with the heads, limbs and bloodied bodies of the Innocents, both swaddled and nude. One mother pushes a soldier's sword arm away, while another yanks a soldier's head backwards by the hair. The scene is observed from the top of the arches behind and windows on the right hand side of the piazza, while women on the right hand archway dash about in distress.

¹¹¹⁰ The dais on which Anne's bed is raised serves as a chest on at least one side.

¹¹¹¹ For a discussion of perspectival backgrounds to depictions of the Annunciation see Daniel Arasse, *L'annonciation Italienne: Une Histoire De Perspective* (Paris Hazan, 1999). Hanneke Grootenboer, "Reading the Annunciation " *Art History* 30, (2007). Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1991). Ghirlandaio's landscape background here does not really exploit the sort of symbolism discussed in these works.

¹¹¹² N.B. "The *Golden Legend* considers the slaughtered children to have been believers, though unbaptized, and proto-martyrs who by their suffering helped to cleanse mankind from original sin." Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.173. de Voragine, *The Golden Legend, Readings on the Saints*. Vol.1, pp.56-59.

16.3.3.7 Adoration of the Magi

The *Adoration* has been largely ignored by scholars, probably because it is very damaged, particularly in the central area where little remains of the figures of the Virgin and Child from the waist up. They are seated in front of the ruins of a triumphal arch in a valley with a view across the countryside to a distant town with a campanile. On either side processions of men, horses, and even a giraffe,¹¹¹³ snake downhill to join the crowd around the Holy Family. The Magi kneel on the left with their horses and grooms behind them, and further members of their retinue kneel and look on from the right.

16.3.3.8 Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin

The *Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin* is set in a similar landscape to the *Adoration*, with a cloudy sky and dim, blue hills in the background, small towns and castles, and paths winding through the landscape. In the centre the Virgin is laid out on a bier, surrounded by the apostles, four of whom kneel to kiss her hands and feet, while others pray around her. One of the apostles holds a book and may be saying the office of the dead, while another holds a censer. Small angels flank the bed, and a number of other figures are grouped to the left and right. Directly above the bier, heading into the point of the lunette and the blue and gold 'sky' of the vaults, the Virgin is assumed into heaven, supported by angels and cherubs and received by Christ with open arms.

¹¹¹³ It seems that there was a giraffe in Florence at the time. Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*, p.169.

16.3.4 Life of John the Baptist

16.3.4.1 Annunciation to Zaccharias

This Temple scene is one of the few which parallels its opposite in the life of the Virgin being, like the *Expulsion of Joachim*, the initiation of the narrative which follows. Zachariah and the Angel meet at the Temple altar while members of the Tornaquinci and notable contemporaries flank the scene in choric groups, an “extended patron portrait.”¹¹¹⁴

The Temple is more elaborately decorated than in the *Expulsion* and the altar, carved with curlicues, foliage, fruit, and a large scallop shell, sits in an apse set into a triumphal arch, on either side of which friezes depict military events with knights riding into battle, pennants flying, and generals addressing their men. Simons believes that,

Ghirlandaio innovatively includes a central apse reminiscent of the architecture of contemporary chapels, hence transforming the Arch of Constantine into the flanking arms of a Greek Cross church

with the Tornaquinci standing on the fourth side, as if in a family chapel.¹¹¹⁵

Zachariah stands to the right of the altar, censing it, and looking back and left towards Gabriel (dressed as in the *Annunciation to the Virgin*, with the exception of the garland of flowers) who moves in from the archway beside the altar, behind the first group of portrait figures. His right arm is raised in greeting. Between them is the altar and in front of it the steps and pavement leading up to the altar are empty. On either side, ranks of onlookers dressed in reds and purples stand in a Masacciesque arc. In the bottom right hand corner one man has a green tunic which

¹¹¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of the identity of the portraits see Simons. pp.237-240. An annotated diagram naming the figures is available in Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.458.

¹¹¹⁵ Simons. p.240. Cf. 9.4.5.

picks up the green on the Angel's wing and the green dress of a lady in a group of four in the right hand background under the archway leading outside to other buildings.

The inscription on the archway on the right hand side is attributed to Poliziano and reads, "In the year 1490, in which this most beautiful of cities, famed for its deeds, its victories, its arts, and its buildings, enjoyed wealth, prosperity and peace."¹¹¹⁶ A second inscription, taken from Psalms and used in the offertory rite, reads "[Let] my prayer [be counted] as incense before thee."¹¹¹⁷ A third is from Isaiah and was part of the liturgy for the feast of John the Baptist's Nativity. It reads "The Lord called me from the womb"¹¹¹⁸.

16.3.4.2 Visitation

Against a background of a Renaissance town, a broad river, and mountains beyond, Elizabeth and the Virgin reach out in greeting, grasping each other's forearms. To the right is the side of a fortress-like palazzo which is approached from the left, up a series of step steps rising from an archway lower down the hill. Three men lean over a parapet looking across the town, their backs to the viewer. Three women on the left and two on the right – presumably Mary and Elizabeth's attendants - observe the meeting, while another three women standing further back on the right are dressed in contemporary clothing and the two younger women have been identified. The first is believed to be Giovanna degli Albizzi, the wife of Lorenzo Tornabuoni, Giovanni Tornabuoni's only son, who died in 1488 giving birth to the grandson, Giovanni, for whom the *Naming of the Baptist* scene may have been included. Behind Giovanna is Nanna di Niccolo Tornabuoni, a niece of Giovanni Tornabuoni's.¹¹¹⁹

¹¹¹⁶ Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.458.

¹¹¹⁷ Psalms 141.2 translated in Simons. p.240. An alternative translation reads "Let my prayer be like incense duly set before thee." Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.458.

¹¹¹⁸ Isaiah 49:1. An alternative translation reads "From birth the Lord called me, he named me from my mother's womb." Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.458.

¹¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.176.

16.3.4.3 Birth of John

The servant girl entering with a basket of fruit on her head and a flagon of wine has received more attention than any other aspect of the *Birth* scene. Vasari noted her beauty and described her as bringing fruit and wine to the new mother, as was common custom,¹¹²⁰ but for Warburg she was an enigmatic figure, unexpectedly dynamic in a relatively static scene and wearing classical garments at odds with the Renaissance palazzo she enters. Warburg saw her as a descendent of the classical maenads, intended to convey more than “a reminder of the pagan, bacchantic vitality of antiquity”.¹¹²¹ Contemporary comparison of the nympha, of which there are numerous instances, indicates that

She is a motif inserted deliberately to create an appearance of immediacy and action, to simulate a sequence in time that carries over to the grouping of women in the center.

The nympha/servant makes a “dramatic contrast to the rest of the composition” introducing energy and the eye catching piece of the laden fruit basket.¹¹²²

The room is similar to Anne’s birth room on the opposite wall and the composition is almost a mirror image. Again two nursemaids attend to the child who is already suckling one of them, while the other reaches out towards him, perhaps to bathe him using the bowl next to her. In the centre, another Tornaquinci woman stands, like Giovanna degli Albizzi, hands modestly in front of her, but looking out at the viewer, with two older women behind her. Perhaps the servant girl has come with them and the Tornaquinci are the ones giving the gift of fruit and wine from their country villa.

¹¹²⁰ Vasari. Vol.2, p.74 describes the woman bringing fruit and wine ‘from the city’, whereas Roettgen describes the produce as coming from the family’s country villa. See below. Also note 812 on page 281.

¹¹²¹ Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.173.

¹¹²² *Ibid.* p.173.

16.3.4.4 Naming of John

The *Naming* scene was inserted after the original programme had been laid out, probably to commemorate the birth of Giovanni Tornabuoni's grandson and namesake. Zachariah sits in the centre of the scene, surrounded by friends and family, writing John's name on a tablet, while a nurse¹¹²³ kneels, holding the swaddled child. In the background a classical colonnade opens onto a landscape with a river and a town. As in most of the scenes there is a classical figure which engages the eye and/or imparts movement and here it is a woman in yellow and green who is rushing forwards¹¹²⁴ towards the knot of figures around Zachariah, and is restrained by another lady in red, perhaps as a way of indicating the solemnity of the occasion.

16.3.4.5 Young St John Departing for the Wilderness

In the middle register on the right hand side of the altar wall, next to the *Naming*, the young John departs for the wilderness, a sturdy child already dressed in camel hair with the addition of a red cloak, and holding a staff (but not yet the slender cross of later scenes). He looks backwards towards home but strides forwards on his journey. Behind him another landscape depicts an estuary with mountainous cliffs, and a port town. The scene bridges his infancy and adulthood, and connects the Johannine cycle with the altar wall, where he is again depicted among the saints in the *Coronation*.

16.3.4.6 Baptist Preaching

John stands on a rock in the centre of the picture plane, dressed in an adult's version of his childhood clothes, his child's staff replaced with a slender cross, preaching to the crowd sitting and standing in a circle around him. In the top left hand corner, standing further uphill than the others, Jesus listens to John with his head bowed and his eyes downcast. The naked baby reaching for its mother beside the rock on which

¹¹²³ The figure is probably not Elizabeth but a nursemaid because of her youthful looks and uncovered head.

¹¹²⁴ Another instance of the 'nympha' type.

John is standing, is a visual link with the birth scenes of John and the Virgin, as well as the *Massacre of the Innocents*, and a reminder that salvation came to earth as Christ in the form of an innocent baby.

16.3.4.7 Baptism of Christ

Next to the *Preaching* scene and in a very similar landscape, John baptises Jesus in a shallow stream. Above him God the Father, surrounded by angels, raises his hand in blessing, while the Holy Spirit symbolised by the dove hovers in front of the Father, emitting golden rays which rain down on Jesus. Two angels kneel by the river, holding his clothes, and two other men prepare for baptism, one standing in his underclothes, the other removing his shoes, while four older men comment on the scene. The nudes are realistically rendered, demonstrating Ghirlandaio's talent in this respect, down to the detail of Jesus' feet submerged in the clear water.

16.3.4.8 Feast of Herod

The lunette is the culmination of the Johannine cycle and depicts the Feast of Herod at which Salome dances, and the presentation to Herod of the Baptist's head on a platter. In a grand palace setting, the high table at which Herod sits runs horizontally across the back of the picture plane, in front of an archway and balustrade opening onto a landscape. To the left and right two further tables run downstage towards the viewer. The guests are eating cherries while musicians on the left hand side play wind instruments. A dwarf jester stands off centre in front of Herod's table, while Salome dances in from the right, cutting across the picture space without reaching the centre so that our view of Herod is unimpaired as he looks with a sorrowful expression at the Baptist's head which is presented by a kneeling soldier. Ghirlandaio displays skilful foreshortening to create the depth of the scene, and allow it to be seen from below.

16.3.5 Altar wall

16.3.5.1 Donor portraits

On either side of the stained glass window kneel Giovanni and Francesca Tornabuoni in three quarter profile, he with his arms crossed on his breast, she with her hands in prayer. Behind them are archways opening onto stone paved paths flanked by columns extending into landscapes with roads winding into the distance. They are traditional donor portraits and express the pious hope of their subjects for salvation.

16.3.5.2 Saint Thomas Aquinas Burning Heretical Writings and the Martyrdom of St Peter Martyr

The Dominican saints, Thomas Aquinas and Peter Martyr, are shown on the third register of the altar wall, above the *Annunciation* and the *Young St John Departing for the Wilderness*. Aquinas was, of course, a great Dominican theologian and teaching authority, and he is shown here consigning heretical works to the flames. As a preaching order founded to counter heresy, and the original officers of the inquisition, the Dominicans laid a strong claim to orthodoxy and this image is a public statement of their role in distinguishing right from wrong and stamping out the latter. Peter Martyr was assassinated by heretic Cathars while travelling and was supposed to have written his profession of faith – *Credo in Unum Deum*¹¹²⁵ – on the ground in his own blood before dying. The fresco shows the kneeling saint with a gash across his head from the assassin's blow, writing the first letters of *Credo* on the ground while his companion looks back at the assassin as he tries to flee. The correct profession of faith is thus illustrated in this scene as well in the image of Aquinas, as is the Dominican's willingness to die for their faith.

¹¹²⁵ "I believe in one God." Many Cathars were dualists.

16.3.5.3 Coronation of the Virgin

In the altar wall lunette, the *Coronation* scene is, unusually, divided horizontally into three registers.¹¹²⁶ In the apex, the Virgin is crowned by Christ against a golden disc surrounded by cherubs, with musician angels on either side and fanning out and descending to the second register where eight patriarchs are seated. Below them, on either side of the central lancet window, are saints, including the Baptist.

¹¹²⁶ There is, apparently, no precedent for this arrangement. Roettgen, *Italian Frescoes, the Flowering of the Renaissance 1470-1510*. p.170.

16.4 Tornabuoni Chapel images¹¹²⁷

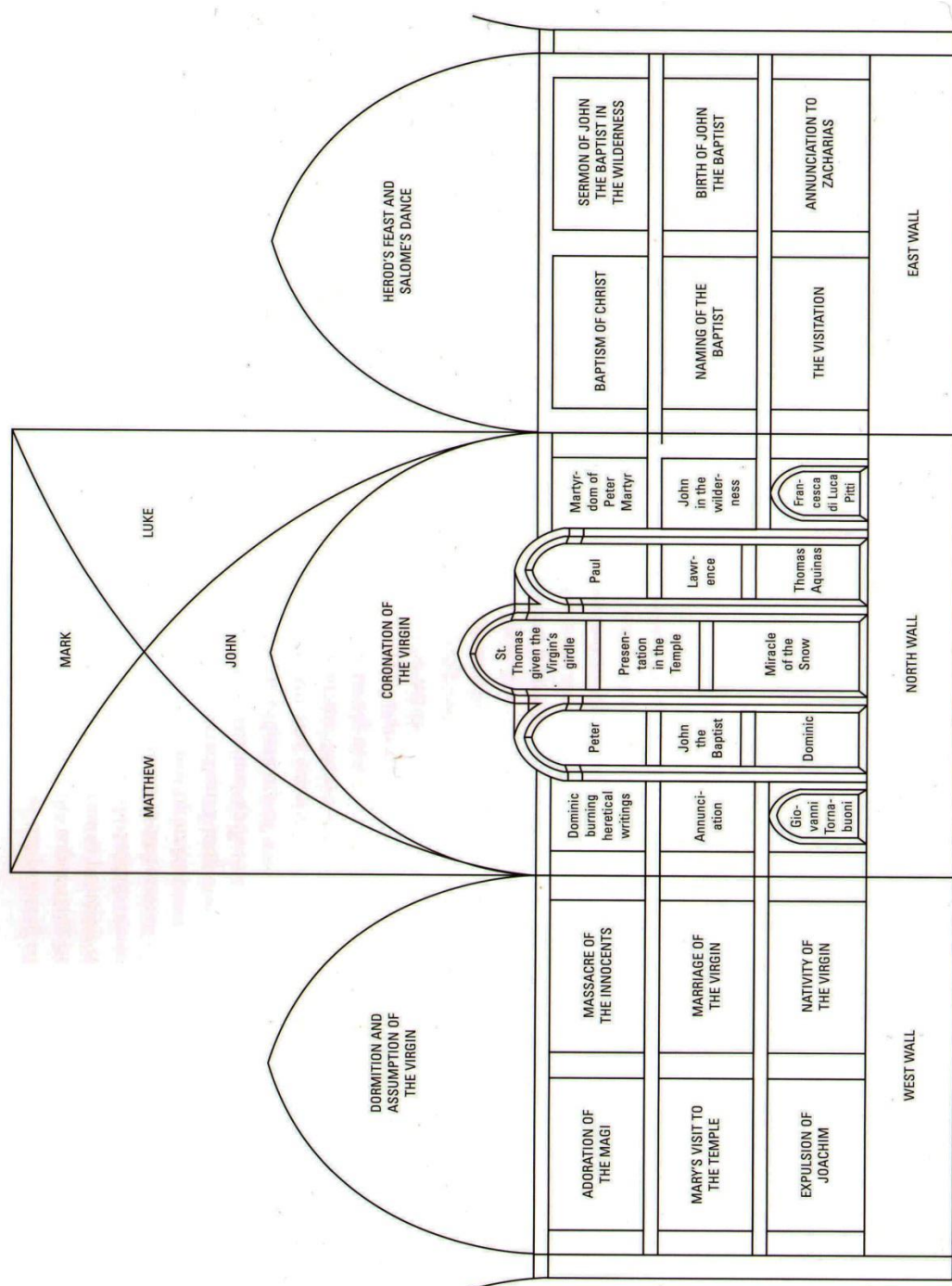


Figure 100 Tornabuoni Chapel Diagram

¹¹²⁷ These images are taken from photographs published in Roettgen. Ibid. Plates 78-83, 85-86, 89-92, 97-100. pp.178-201.

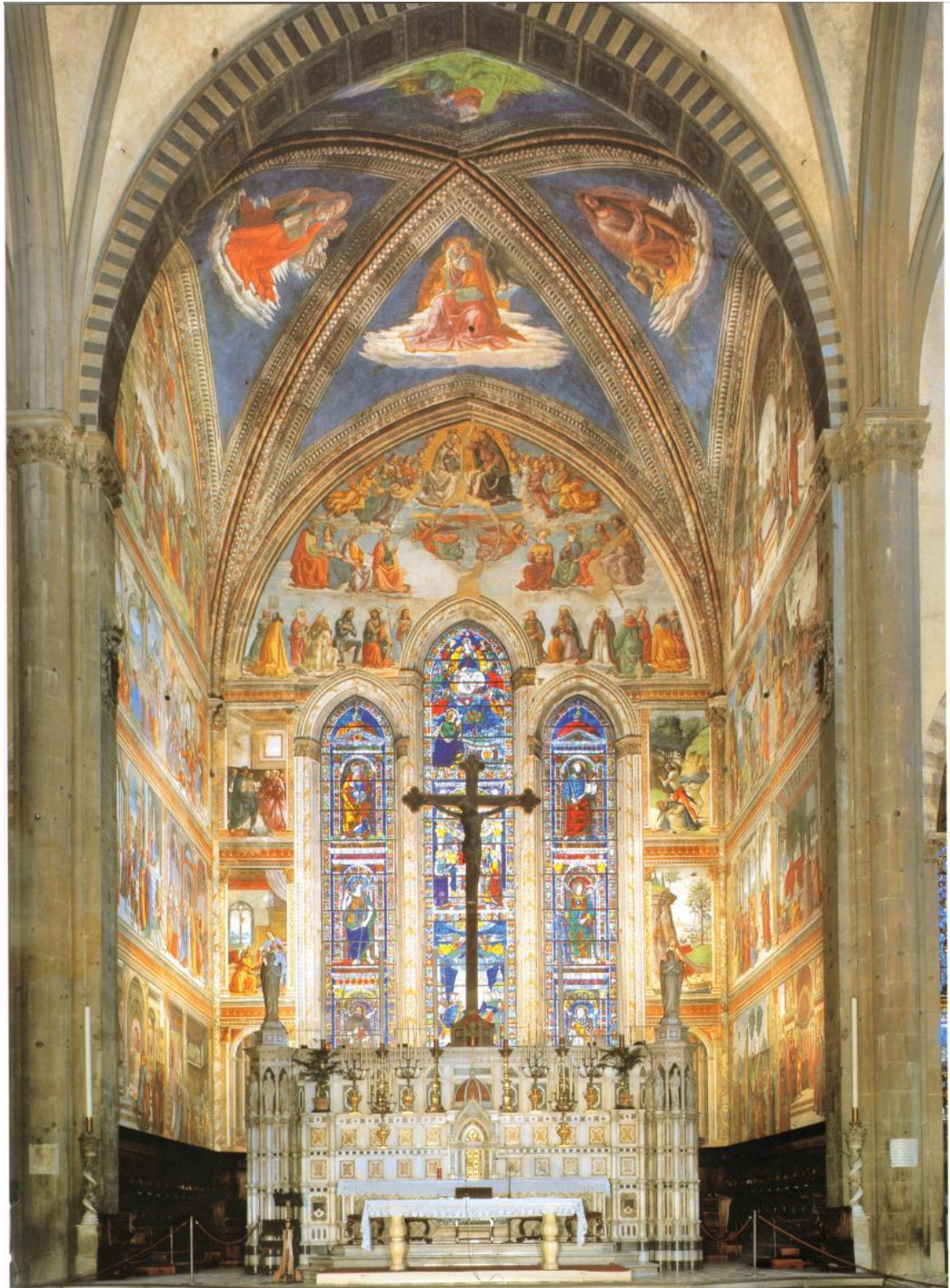


Figure 101 Tornabuoni Chapel from nave

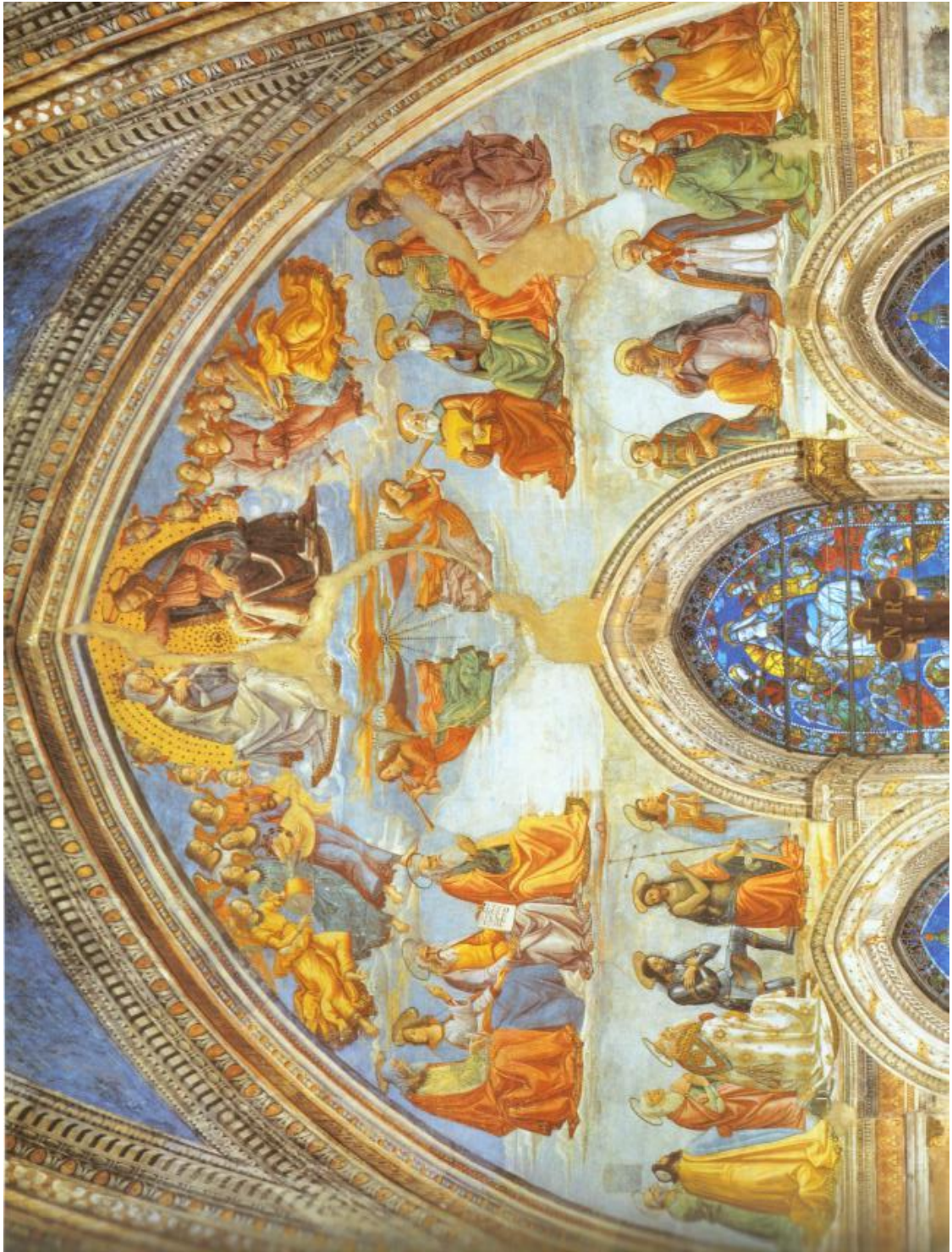


Figure 102 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Coronation of the Virgin*



Figure 103 Tornabuoni Chapel, *St Thomas Burning Heretical Books*



Figure 104 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Martyrdom of St Peter Martyr*



Figure 105 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Annunciation to the Virgin; The young St John Departing for the Wilderness*



Figure 106 Tornabuoni Chapel, donor portrait of Francesca Tornabuoni



Figure 107 Tornabuoni Chapel, donor portrait of Giovanni Tornabuoni



Figure 108 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Expulsion of Joachim*

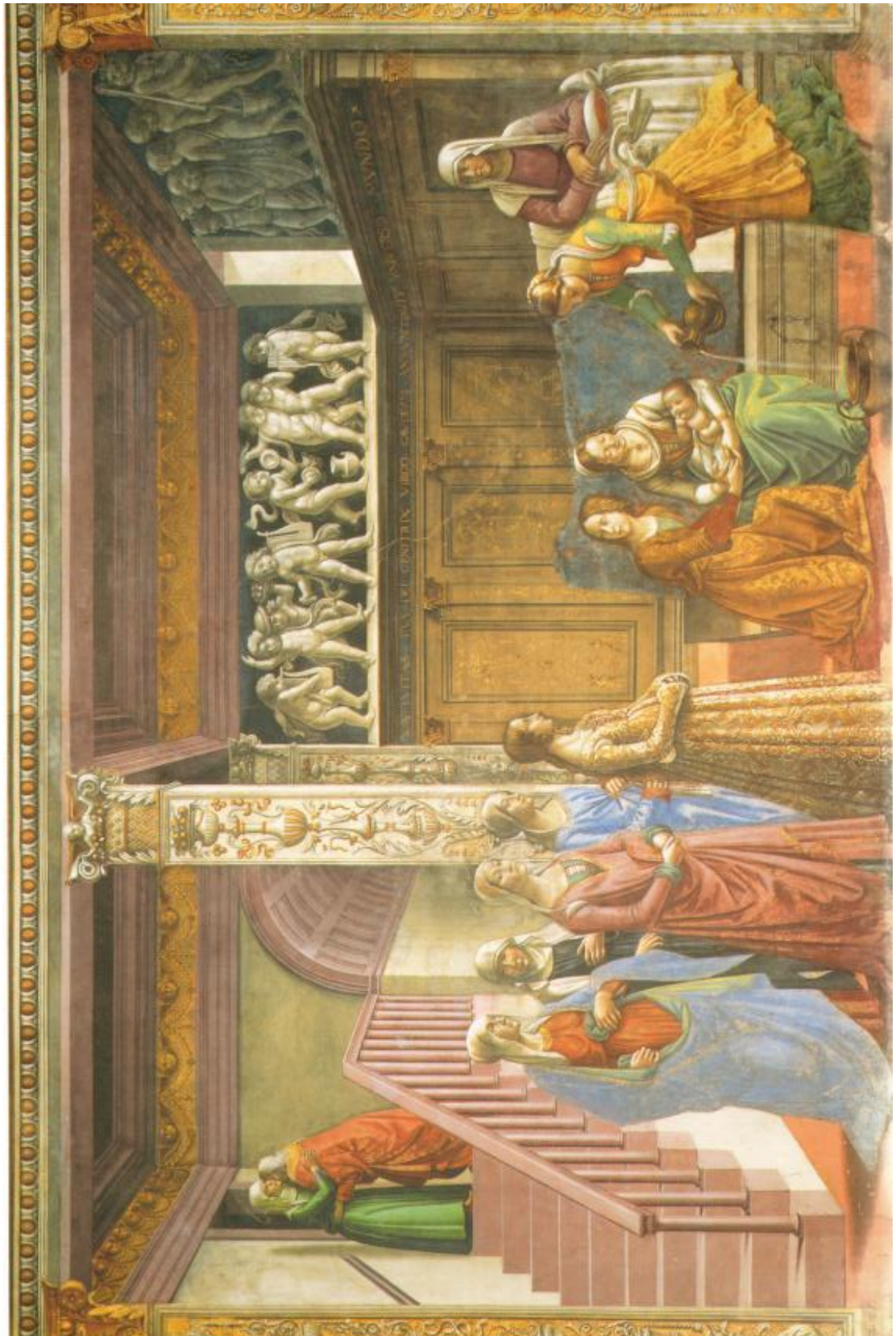


Figure 109 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Birth of the Virgin*



Figure 110 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Presentation of the Virgin*

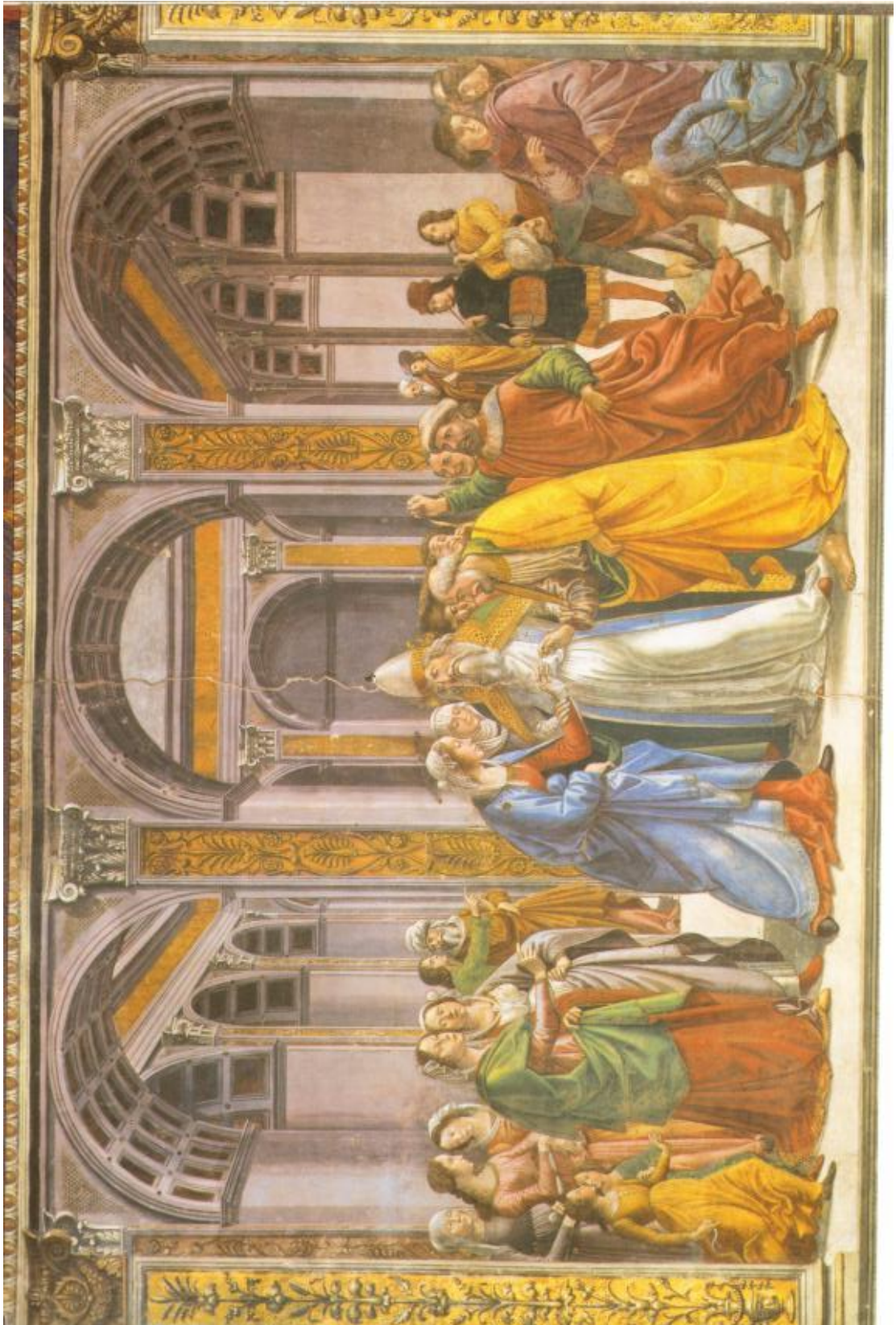


Figure 111 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Marriage of the Virgin*



Figure 112 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Adoration of the Magi*



Figure 113 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Massacre of the Innocents*

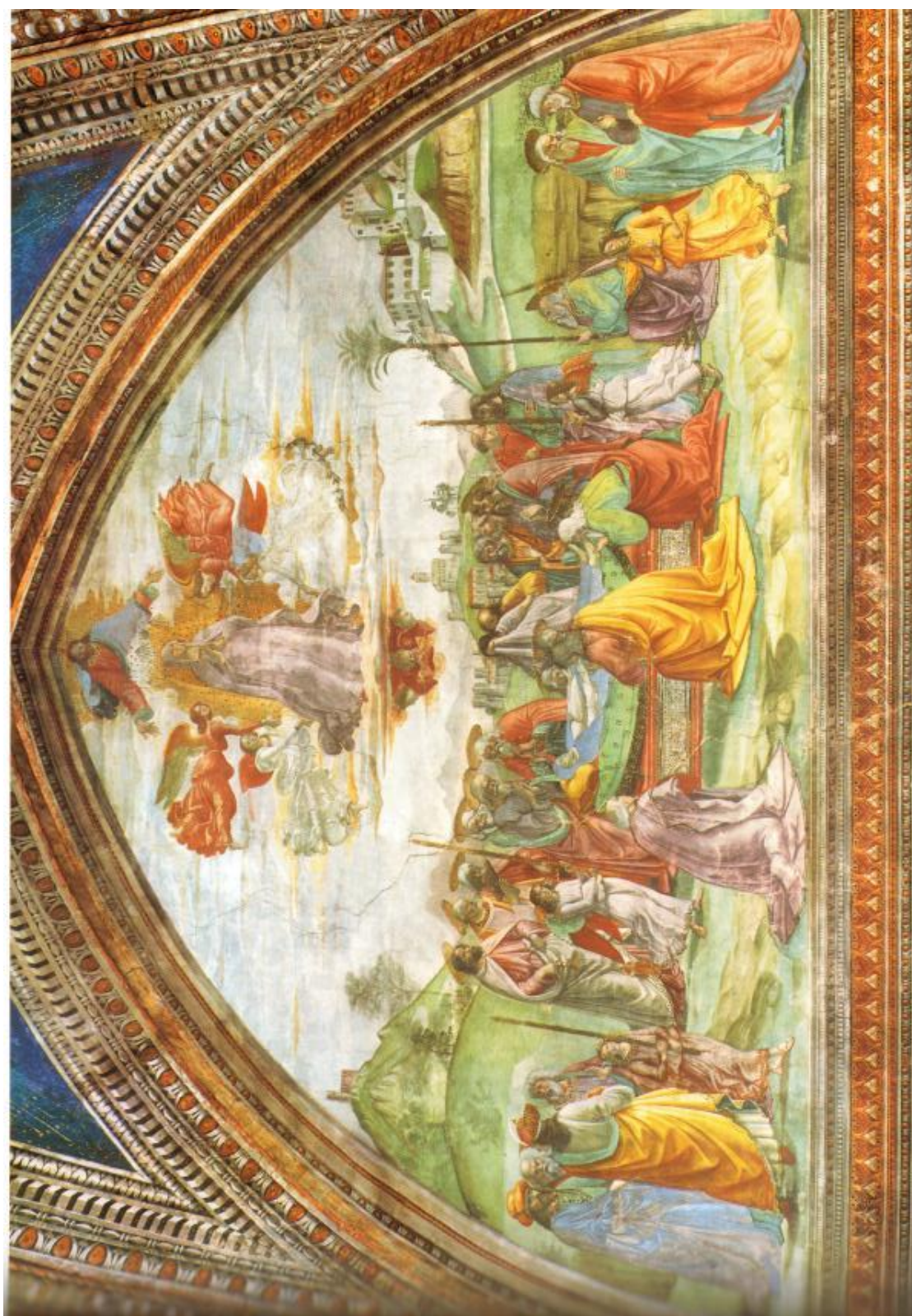


Figure 114 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin*



Figure 115 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Annunciation to Zachariah*



Figure 116 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Visitation*

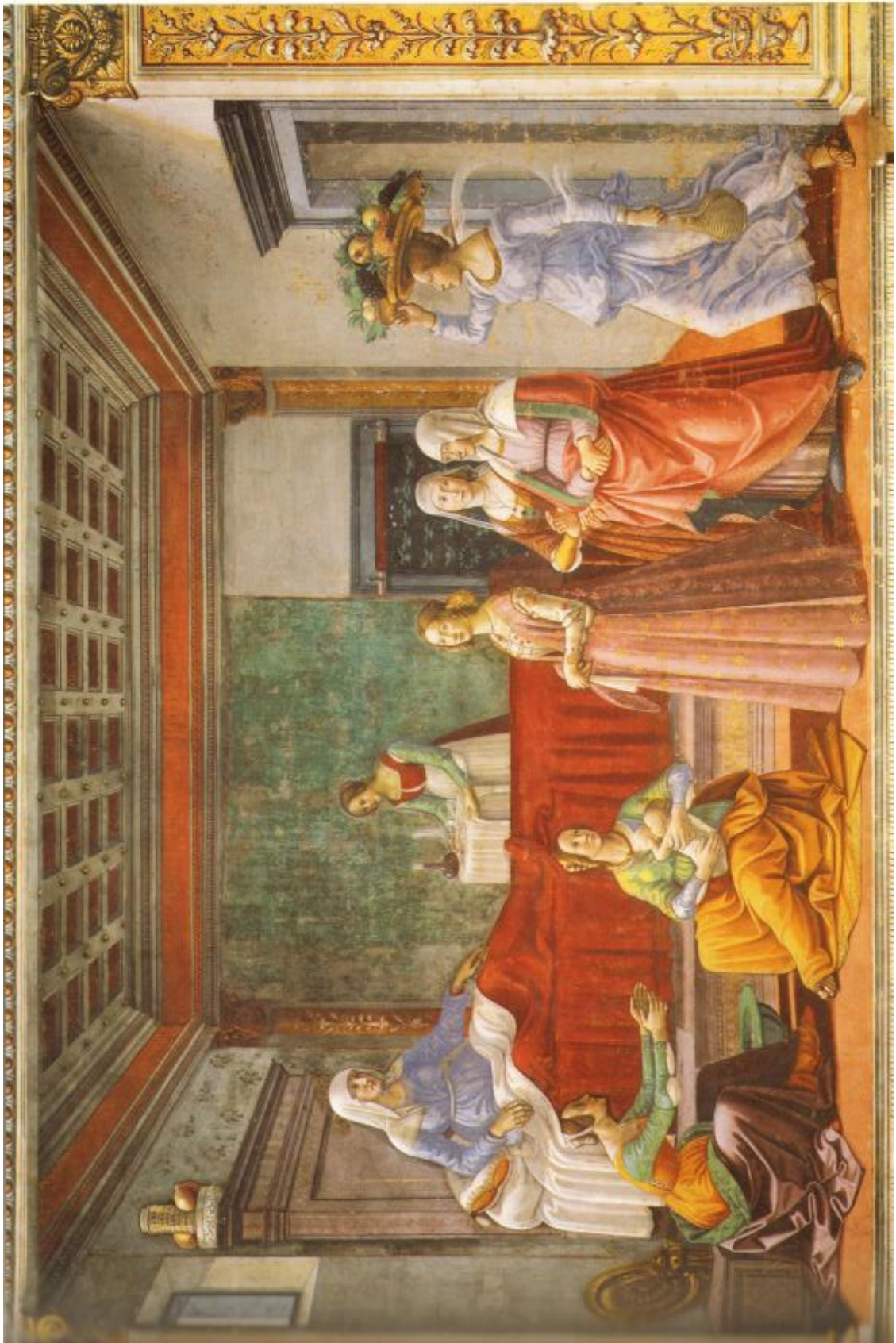


Figure 117 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Birth of the Baptist*



Figure 118 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Naming of the Baptist*



Figure 119 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Baptist Preaching*



Figure 120 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Baptism of Christ*



Figure 121 Tornabuoni Chapel, *Feast of Herod*

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