

SANTA MARIA DEL FIORE: IMAGE OF THE PREGNANT MADONNA:
THE CHRISTOLOGY OF FLORENCE CATHEDRAL*

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My purpose in this paper is to bring together and relate to one another three among the many extraordinary aspects of the form and spiritual ideology of the Cathedral of Florence. The first of these anomalies is in the design of the building itself, which seems to take up and solve in an unprecedented way, one of the great, and perennial, problems of Christian architecture: that of reconciling in a single building the longitudinal basilica, adapted especially for the liturgical and pastoral needs of the congregation, and the centrally planned rotunda or polygon developed primarily for commemorative purposes. In Florence, I believe, there was a deliberate effort to meld the very prototypes of the dilemma, the church of the Nativity at Bethlehem, with its octagon, and the Holy Sepulcher at Jerusalem with its rotunda, both preceded by longitudinal basilical naves.¹ The matrix for the merger was provided by the cruciform basilica, the ecclesiastical type whose intersecting nave, transept and choir were taken as the figure of the cross of Golgotha. The merger is achieved in a way that is, to my knowledge, unique.² With the Baptistery as the point of departure, the new church is aligned on its axis; its octagon is repeated as the central crossing; its width is aligned with that of the nave; the length of its sides corresponds to the width of the central aisle; and its shape is repeated in the tribunes. This perfect geometrical configuration, in which the interior octagon is organically integrated in the building's outward form, embodies,

* This paper was first presented in Florence at a conference, "La cattedrale e la città," sponsored by the Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, in June 1997. I am grateful to the organizer, Prof. Mons. Timothy Verdon, for the stimulus and opportunity to formulate my thoughts about the Duomo on that occasion. Certain premises, illustrations and bibliography pertinent to this essay will be found in the author's complementary study "The Problem of the Choir of Florence Cathedral," Lavin 2001. For an updated version see Lavin 2016: https://publications.ias.edu/sites/default/files/Lavin_ProblemChoirFlorenceCath_2016

¹ On possible prototypes for the plan of the Duomo see Paatz 1952-5, III, 435 n. 42.

² Some of the themes involved here were discussed by Verdon 1996, 117-22.

literally as well as figuratively, what I hope to suggest is the Cathedral's most profound significance.

The second anomaly lies in the fabric of the building itself, that is, in the materials of which it is made. For while the exterior is sheathed with the rich polychrome marble encrustation that had been a veritable trademark of Tuscan late medieval architecture, the interior of plain walls and architectural membering of dull, unpolished macigno, one of the most common of the local building stones, announces the severity and restraint that became a hallmark of Florentine style in the Renaissance (Figs. 1, 2).³ The contrast could hardly be more complete with the lavishly polychrome exteriors and interiors of the cathedrals of Pisa and Siena, and the more notable because the documents make clear that the Florentines specifically intended their cathedral to surpass those of their Tuscan rivals (Figs. 3, 4, 5, 6). The very first reference to the architect Arnolfo di Cambio describes him as “more famous and more expert in the construction of churches than anyone in the vicinity,” and expresses the hope of the commune and people of Florence that their church would be more “beautiful and honorable than any in Tuscany.”⁴ I should emphasize that there is no record in the sources of any plan to decorate the cathedral's walls or vaults, which were evidently left in a rough state until they were covered with white plaster at the end of the sixteenth century (1565, 1581; in 1589 the chapels of the tribunes were actually painted to imitate stone)⁵—beginning, perhaps not incidentally, shortly before the cupola was painted (1571-9). The contrast between festively adorned exterior and austere somber interior is stunning and, since both faces of the building were constructed *pari passu*, the difference cannot be explained in chronological terms simply as a change in taste; it was surely deliberate.⁶ We are confronted at the

³ On Tuscan polychromy see Rupp 1912.

⁴ “... considerato quod ... ipse est famosior magister et magis expertus in hedificationibus ecclesiarum aliquo alio qui in vicinis partibus cognoscatur, et quod per ipsius industriam experientiam et ingenium comune et populus Florentie ex maginifico et visibili principio dicti operis ecclesie iamdicte inchoacti per ipsum magistrum Arnolphum habere sperat venustius et honorabilius templum aliquo alio quod sit in partibus Tuscie... .” Guasti 1887, 20.

⁵ From a document of 1376 recording the application of plaster to the visible face of the great transverse arch, and the whitening of the walls in the late sixteenth century, Guasti speculated that a fresco decoration may have been intended (Guasti 1887, CII-CIII; cf. Lapini 1900, 144, 214, 289f., Paatz 1952-5, III, 357, 482 n. 190). However, it is difficult to imagine that a project of such scope and importance would have left no other trace in the vast source material concerning the Duomo.

⁶ In his life of Arnolfo Vasari singles out for particular praise the size of the building and the contrast between exterior and interior: “per la grandezza di questa opera egli merita infinita lode e nome eterno, avendola massimamente fatta incrostare di fuori tutta di marmi di più colori e dentro di pietra forte, e fatte insino le minime cantonate di quella stessa pietra.” Vasari 1966ff., II Testo, 55.

end of the middle ages with an almost complete inversion of the principle that prevailed at their outset, when church buildings had simple brick exteriors and lavish interiors.

The third anomaly is perhaps the most astonishing, given the aegis under which the Florentines at the end of the thirteenth century took the momentous decision to create a new, collective spiritual and civic identity, that is, by replacing their ancient cathedral dedicated to the local patron saint, Reparata, with a vastly enlarged structure dedicated to the universal mother, the Virgin Mary. With the explosive increase in Mariological devotion throughout this period, new churches dedicated to the Virgin, including cathedrals heroic in scale, were legion. What is distinctive about Florence cathedral, apart from the patronymic (or should one say matronymic?) title, del Fiore, is the fact that in the course of the construction and decoration of the building over the next 150 years and more the role of the Madonna was seriously and conspicuously restricted. Mary figures overwhelmingly, of course, in what might be called the church's spatial "container": in the exterior sculptural decorations of the facade and lateral portals; interlinked with the life of Christ, in the stained glass windows of the facade, the nave, and the drum of Brunelleschi's cupola; and in the mosaic of the Coronation inside the facade. The remarkable fact, however, is that no important dedications to the Madonna were built into the inner recess of S. Maria del Fiore.⁷

Each of these points can be illustrated by contrast, as it were, in comparison with the arch-rival Cathedral dedicated to the Virgin, that of Siena, in direct competition with which Florence cathedral was conceived and carried out. With respect to the design of the building, the hexagonal cupola at Siena is not integrated into a rigorous, simple, mathematical system; rather, it seems suspended like a crown in a delicate, lace-like spatial and linear web. Colored marbles are used throughout, inside and out, so that the effect of unity is achieved in decorative, rather than geometric terms. And finally, Duccio's *Maestà*, which served as the high altarpiece of Siena cathedral for two hundred years, was literally surrounded by a series of major, free-standing altarpieces devoted to the liturgical feasts in honor of the Virgin.

During the construction of the new cathedral at Florence through the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, there was evidently a succession of two high altarpieces devoted to the Virgin, both of them placed provisionally in the nave as the old church of St. Reparata was replaced. The

⁷ The Marian iconography of the Duomo was surveyed by Fiorini 1987, who also noted (p. 52) the paucity of such imagery in the interior.

first, from the early years of the fourteenth century, was the Giottesque, two-sided pentiptych still in the Duomo (Fig. 7).⁸ The Virgin and Child appear as the centerpiece, backed by a depiction of the Annunciation, in allusion to the primary significance of the feast of the Incarnation as the beginning of the Florentine year (Fig. 8). A remarkable feature of the Annunciation that is relevant to my argument here, is that the Virgin, following the account of the event in the gospel of Luke, is shown recoiling in fright at the words of the angel, “Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee”—a passage that was taken as indicating the Virgin’s proleptic foreknowledge of the ultimate fate of the son now germinating within her. If it did in fact serve at the high altar—we actually know nothing of its history prior to the eighteenth century when Richa describes it in the crypt of the chapel of St. Zenobius—the pentiptych was superseded toward the mid-fourteenth century by the so-called San Pancrazio altarpiece by Bernardo Daddi, now in the Uffizi (Fig. 9). The dramatic history of this work has recently been recovered through a series of philological and archival contributions by Richard Offner, Miklos Boskowitz, Luisa Marcucci, Margaret Haines, Anna Padoa Rizzo, and finally Paula Spilner, who in an as yet unpublished paper which she kindly allowed me to read, puts the finishing touches on a signal achievement of modern art-historical recuperation.⁹ The altarpiece, which Spilner shows was commissioned and executed 1337-44 specifically for the high altar, represents the Madonna and Child in the center flanked by Reparata and Zenobius and other Florence-connected saints. The work was unusual in having had two superimposed predellas, one devoted to the legend of Santa Reparata, the other to the early life of the Virgin up to and including the Birth of Christ. The altarpiece seems specifically to embody the dual status of the building during the transition from one phase to the next. It is important to observe, however, that the central panel again seems to point in a Christo-centric direction (Fig. 10). The Christ child holds a goldfinch, well-established symbol of the passion; and he reaches to grasp the Virgin’s stalk of lilies, symbol of her purity, no doubt in allusion to the bold invention inspired by the most impassioned of all Mariologists, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, that the Church as an institution—*Mater Ecclesia*—was represented by the union of Christ and his mother. The paradoxical conjunction of an uncorrupted marriage made in heaven whose salvific consummation was achieved only through a sacrificial agony, is emblemized in the vase which, like Mary

⁸ *La cattedrale* 1994-5, II, 229f.

⁹ Spilner 1997, Padoa Rizzo 1993, with earlier bibliography.

herself, contains lilies and thorny white and red roses, is placed on the step in front of the couple's throne. Certain formulations of Ildephonsus of Toledo, for example, cited by Mary Bergstein in another context in her splendid study of the Marian politics of quattrocento Florence, express these themes: "radice flos ascendit Christus," where he identifies the rod of Isaiah 11.1, with Christ as the flower that will arise from the stem of Jesse; and "virgo inter filias, ac sit lili inter spinas," where the Virgin becomes the friend (lover) identified in the Song of Songs (Cant. 2:2) as the lily among the thorns.¹⁰ Needless to say, the action also suggests Christ's espousal of the city of Florence itself.

I am doubtful that either of these works was intended to be a permanent fixture of the high altar of the cathedral; I suspect instead that they were meant to express the new dedication temporarily, only until the final solution was reached when the building was finished. In any case, it is absolutely clear that the fate of the second altarpiece was sealed by the completion of Brunelleschi's dome and the opening of the choir, the high altar and the tribunes of the new cathedral. This emerges from an amazing document of August 25, 1442, published by Margaret Haines recording the decision to sell the painting and stating the reasons why: noting that the panel which formerly stood at the high altar is not congruous nor appropriate in the church since its former place has been destroyed, that it is unsuitable where the high altar must be, and that it is not adaptable for the chapels, the overseers of the cathedral determine to sell the work;¹¹ the purchaser, in turn, evidently transferred it to the church of San Pancrazio, where it remained until the eighteenth century.

Around 1400 two commemorations of the Madonna were added on the inside of the facade: to the south of the main portal an early fourteenth-century image of the Virgin and Child that had become the object of popular devotion (Fig. 11); and to the north a contemporary work attributed to Lorenzo Monaco showing the intercession of Mary and Christ with God the Father (Fig. 12).

¹⁰ Hildephonsus, Bishop of Toledo, Migne 1844-1902, XCVI, cols. 240, 246, 412; Bergstein 1991, 707. On roses and lilies for Mary, see Pozzi 1987.

¹¹ *Prefati operarii actendentes qualiter tabula que olim tenebatur ad altare maius dicte ecclesie non est congrua neque conveniens in dicta ecclesia quia ubi erat est destructum et ubi esse debet altare maius non est confaciens et in capellis non est acta et quod magis utile est ipsam finire pro maiori quod potest [!] et reperto quod Johannes Andree de Minerbettis ipsam desiderat habere quod in casu quo dederit et solverit de dicta tabula cum omnibus rebus dicte tabule pertinentibus lb. CC fp. solvendas hiis temporibus videlicet pro una medietate per totum mensem Octobris proxime futuri* (Poggi 1988, II, 141) As Spilner points out in her unpublished paper, another record on the same date describes the panel as having *predellas* (i.e., plural).

Placed over altars and set against the wall within elaborately decorated wooden tabernacles, the images—one a fragment of an early trecento fresco, the other painted on canvas like a processional standard—were clearly brought together as afterthought. Whatever the reasons for combining and introducing them, the monuments, which remained in place until the mid-nineteenth century, were obviously conceived as a complementary pair in specific coordination with the Marian ideology of the facade itself.¹²

As far as the inner sanctum of the church is concerned, Margaret Haines's document demonstrates that the altarpiece by Bernardo Daddi had obviously been rendered irredeemably obsolete by what had transpired at the crossing once the cupola was closed. *Mirabile dictu*, never again do we hear of an image of the Madonna at the high altar of S. Maria del Fiore! I want to emphasize what I hope really needs no emphasis, that nothing I have said is intended to suggest that the Florentines placed any limitation on the importance of the Virgin in the conception and decoration of their new cathedral; on the contrary, it seems clear that there was a conscious and collective, if paradoxical, thought to magnify her the more fruitfully precisely by circumscribing her role in what might be called the outer skin of the building, filling the church inwardly with another presence.

Before seeking a definition and explanation of this extraordinary idea, certain comments are in order about the final disposition of the crossing of the Duomo once the cupola was closed. The chapels of the tribunes received their dedications, and here a fundamental observation by Franklin Toker becomes relevant, especially in contrast with Siena. Poggi had noted the singular fact that the design of the cathedral envisaged altars only in the choir and the three tribunes. Toker observed that a coherent program is evident in the fact that the high altar was surrounded by chapels dedicated to the twelve apostles, the others to saints of local importance.¹³ (The theme was reinforced in the early sixteenth century when Michelangelo was commissioned to carve a series of apostles, later carried out by other sculptors, to replace those frescoed in the chapels by Bicci di Lorenzo.¹⁴) If one thinks of the high altar as the site of the sacrament, this unusual if not

¹² Paatz 1952-5, III, 401, dates their removal 1841ff.

¹³ Toker made this observation in the paper he presented at the 1997 conference at Harvard. Toker 2001, 235-237.

¹⁴ Another series of apostle frescoes, now lost, was painted specifically for the consecration of the church in 1436. See Amy 1998; Tolnay 1947-60, I, 168-71; Pope-Hennessy 1963, Catalogue, 11-13, 53.

unique arrangement makes particular sense, since it inevitably recalls—as it did also to Carol Krinsky, who first made the suggestion—the prototypical church of the Holy Apostles, that built by the Emperor Constantine in the imperial capital at Constantinople.¹⁵ If this reference seems far-fetched, it may have come to Florence from Milan, where St. Ambrose had founded another church of the Holy Apostles, in emulation of the Constantinian building.¹⁶ Florence, indeed, had many souvenirs of St. Ambrose, besides the church of San Lorenzo which he established during his stay there.¹⁷ The important consideration for us is that at Constantinople, according to Eusebius’s description, commemorations of the apostles surrounded the tomb of Constantine himself, in obvious conflation with the tomb of Christ—precisely the configuration created at Florence.¹⁸ It may be interesting from several points of view to recall in this context that the famous legend according to which the church of the apostles in Florence itself was founded by the Emperor Charlemagne when he re-established the city, seems to have emerged at precisely this period, that is, around 1300.¹⁹

The second point I want to make about the treatment of the crossing of Florence cathedral concerns the windows of the oculi in the drum of Brunelleschi’s cupola, where narratives of the lives of Mary and Christ are interspersed. The programmatic nature of the special relationship between center and circumference in the ideology of the Duomo is strikingly apparent from another anomaly that occurs here, namely, the conspicuous absence of the Crucifixion. Margaret Haines as well as Cristina Acidini Luchinat noticed this peculiarity and offered the illuminating, indeed absolutely inevitable suggestion that the Christological lacuna was filled by the Eucharistic sacrifice at the high altar.²⁰

¹⁵ In a comment on Toker’s paper mentioned in n. 13.

¹⁶ See Lewis 1969.

¹⁷ On Ambrose in Florence, see *La presenza* 1994.

¹⁸ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine the Great*, IV, 58-60 (Schaff and Wace, eds., 1952, 555).

¹⁹ Paatz 1952-5, III, 245f. n. 3. The Carolingian foundation of Ss. Apostoli was recounted in Villani’s history of Florence as part of the city’s tradition of “Romanitas,” and repeated by Antonio Manetti in his biography of Brunelleschi (Manetti 1970, 60-3). It is worth noting that the ideology of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople may again have played an important role in the early fifteenth century in the conception and design by Brunelleschi and Donatello of the Old Sacristy-Medici funerary chapel at San Lorenzo (Saalman 1993, 132-41).

²⁰ Haines 1983, 185, n. 23; Acidini Luchinat in *La cattedrale* 1994-5, II, 279; the windows of the Duomo were carried out ca. 1394-1444 (*ibid.*, 273). In this sense the situation anticipates the program of Donatello’s pulpits at San Lorenzo where the Last Supper is absent from the Passion cycle, which flanks the high altar (Lavin 1959, 23).

The third point is that in fact, once the dome was covered, the high altar of the Duomo of Florence was forever after devoted entirely and exclusively to Christ. There were many vicissitudes, down to the present day, which included the relic of the True Cross brought back from Constantinople in 1454, the Sacrament itself, and Benedetto da Maiano's great Crucifix that still hangs above the altar; indeed, the particular significance attached to the high altar of the Duomo, may help to explain Baccio Bandinelli's spectacular and unparalleled mid-sixteenth-century reworking of Brunelleschi's octagonal choir and the high altar itself into a kind of Holy Sepulcher, with the dead Christ placed directly on the altar table. Through all the changes, however, the sacrificial Christ remained always and exclusively the form and substance of the devotion at the high altar. This fact is reflected not only in the absence of the Crucifixion in the Christ-cycle of the windows of the cupola, but also, and on the contrary, in the repeated presence of the Resurrection and Ascension in the terracotta reliefs above the cantorie and in the stained-glass oculi of the drum (Figs. 13, 14, 15, 16), and ultimately, so I believe, in the proclamatory titulus, unique in the history of the subject, placed at the apex of Vasari's and Federico Zuccari's fresco of the Last Judgment in the cupola itself—ECCE HOMO (Fig. 17). The motto here seems to echo Vasari's formulation of the original intent of the Florentines, "to build a principle church for their city, and to make it so grand and magnificent that nothing larger or finer could be desired by the industry and power of man."²¹

As I have tried to suggest, this Christological focus was integral to the conception of S. Maria del Fiore from the beginning, and I suspect that in part it may reflect a desire to incorporate the memory of the dedication of the first cathedral of Florence to the Savior, which had been, as we shall see, recalled in the dedication of the new church as well.²² Certainly relevant, as well, was the general intensification during this entire period of devotion to the sacrament as the primary vehicle of faith, culminating in the famous decree of 1542 of Bishop Gibertus of Verona, requiring that the Sacrament be displayed on the high altar.²³

However, I believe that the basic features of the design and the decoration—or lack of it—of Florence cathedral sprang from another source of inspiration, a metaphorical understanding of

²¹ Vasari 1963, I, 36. “. . .di fare una chiesa principale nella loro città, e farla tale che per grandezza e magnificenza non si potesse desiderare né maggiore né più bella dall'industria e potere degl'uomini. . .” (Vasari 1966ff., II Testo, 54); on the significance of the Ecce Homo, see also Verdon, ed., 1994, 110.

²² See Lavin 2001, 397f.

²³ On Gibertus's decree and its importance see Caspary 1965, 118-20.

the church that indeed inspired much if not all of the ecclesiology of the late middle ages. The metaphor is based in the first instance on the identification of Mary as Mater Ecclesia, whom Christ takes as his bride to create his Church. In this context, that is, in the context of defining the spiritual nature of the institution, Christ's relationship with his mother was equated with his relationship with his church; Mary became both mother and bride, a concept beautifully encapsulated in such late medieval hymns as "Virgo et sponsa Dei / Dignaque mater ei"; and "Ave coelorum / domina virgo / mater et sponsa Dei / Maria." And by Hugo of St. Victor, who addresses Christ as follows, "We believe your beloved is your genetrix First your beloved, mother and virgin Mary, generated you; then from you was generated [like Eve from Adam's rib] your beloved, the mother and virgin church."²⁴

Mary is thus Christ's spouse and the Church is their off-spring. The construction of a church is in fact a materialization of this metaphor, which is, moreover, the core of the liturgy celebrating that event. The lesson of the votive mass for the dedication of a church is a magnificent, seminal passage from the twenty-first chapter of Book of Revelation, in which John describes his heavenly vision (Apoc. 21:2-5):

And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new.²⁵

²⁴ Genetricem ipsam credimus amicam tuam Prius te genuit amica tua, mater et virgo Maria. Postea de te genita est amica tua, mater et virgo ecclesia. (For all these references see Sauer 1964, 307f.)

²⁵ 21:2. Et ego Ioannes vidi sanctam civitatem, Ierusalem novam, descendentem de caelo a Deo, paratam sicut sponsam ornatam viro suo. 3. Et audivi vocem magnam de throno dicentem: Ecce tabernaculum Dei cum hominibus, et habitabit cum eis; et ipsi populus eius erunt, et ipse Deus cum eis erit eorum Deus; et abstegeret

From this text a rich literature of nuptial hymns in celebration of the dedication of a church developed, and it forms the basis of a seminal document in the history of Italian art, which the Florentines seem to have followed, literally as well as figuratively.²⁶ This is a famous letter of 1279 in which Pope Nicholas III enjoined the canons of St. Peter's in Rome to proceed with the redecoration of that centerpiece of all Christianity. Nicholas begins by quoting the same passage from Revelation: "The Church Militant [this is the key change from the wording of John] must appear as a new holy city Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband"²⁷ In their commentaries on the consecration ceremony Sicardus of Cremona and Durandus of Mende, the two chief exponents of ecclesiastical symbolism, elaborate this idea.²⁸ "The consecration of a church effects two things: it appropriates the material church to God, and it insinuates our espousal both of the church and of the faithful soul. For an unconsecrated house is as a maiden promised to a man, but without a dowry, and not joined to him in carnal union; but in the consecration it is endowed and becomes the proper spouse of Jesus Christ." Sicardus adds: "The consecration is the copulation of Christ and the Church and the soul."²⁹ In his great compendium on the liturgy, the "Gemma animae," Honorius of Autun devotes just three sentences to the dedication of a church, but they are of fundamental importance to an understanding of Florence cathedral, including its relation to the baptistery. The first two statements explain the sense of the building itself: "The dedication of a church is the marital

Deus omnem lacrimam ab oculis eorum, et mors ultra non erit, neque luctus neque clamor neque dolor erit ultra, quia prima abierunt. 5. Et dixit qui sedebat in throno: Ecce nova facio omnia.

²⁶ The hymns are admirably discussed by Schepers 1971, 778-87.

²⁷ Civitatem sanctam Jerusalem novam descendentem de celo a Deo paratam sicut sponsam ornatam viro suo militans figurare valet ecclesia. . . . (Gay 1898-1938, 197-213, No. 517) On the Jerusalemic symbolism at Florence, see Crociani, in Cardini, ed., 1996, 55.

²⁸ For what follows here I am indebted to Christine Smith and Joseph O'Connor, who are preparing an edition of Manetti's account of the dedication of Brunelleschi's dome.

²⁹ . . . quae quidem consecratio efficit duo: quoniam Deo ipsam Ecclesiam materiale[m] appropriat, et nostram tam Ecclesiae, quam fidelis animae desponsationem insinuat. Domus namque non consecrata est sicut puella viro alicui destinata, non tamen dotata, nec commercio in unionem carnis unita; sed consecratione dotatur, et transit in propriam Jesu Christi sponsam, quam sacrilegium est adulterio ulterius violari; desinit esse lupanar daemonum. Si quaeres exemplum, multa suppetunt, sed instar illius templi sufficiat, in quod Pantheon antea vocabatur, transit in Regis aeterni palatium, in quo per gratiam habitat. . . . Domus consecratio Christi est et Ecclesiae, vel animae copulatio (Migne 1884-1902, CCXIII, col. 28; Durandus 1568, 16, ed. Neale and Webb 1893, 93f.) Interesting in our context is the passage in which Sicardus and Durandus deride the sacrilege of "violating" a church that has been cleansed of demons, citing as an example the conversion of the Pantheon—centrally planned, universal dedication, and a model for Florence cathedral—"in Regis aeterni palatium."

copulation of Christ and the Church. The bishop who consecrates it is Christ who married the church.” The third sentence relates this concept to the universality of the church, as embodied in the baptism that takes place in the “atrium,” and in the physical and spiritual centrality of the font itself: “The Bishop blesses the font in the atrium, and asperges all round, because Christ consecrated the baptismal font in Judaea, and commanded all peoples in the whole world to be cleansed by him.”³⁰

Crucial to my argument is the distinction, inherent in John’s description of the heavenly tabernacle, between exterior and interior: the church is a bride dressed in her wedding gown, conceived as a tabernacle in which God dwells. Of course, the liturgy applies to every church, but I believe that this underlying matrimonial image, interpreted by the Florentines in a particular way, was the guiding spirit in the creation of their new cathedral. Their interpretation, I suspect, resulted from a particularly Florentine conflation of the matrimonial tradition with a particularly Florentine tradition concerning the nature of Mary’s motherhood, perceptible indirectly in the two early altarpieces for the cathedral. The basic idea here is that the Virgin in bearing Christ carried within her body both the beginning and the end of his mission on earth, that is, both his birth and his death. This profound, and profoundly paradoxical notion was based primarily on the analogy between the birth of Christ and his resurrection, both miracles in which Jesus passed through an enclosure without disturbing it, the virginal uterus in the first instance and in the second the stone that sealed his tomb, the stone on which he was anointed and the prototype of the altar table. The canonical formulation was given by Ephraim of Syria, “Thus didst Thou show, O Lord, by Thy resurrection from the grave, the miracle of Thy birth, for each was closed and each was sealed, both the grave and the womb. Thou wast pure in the womb and living in the grave, and Mary’s womb, like the grave, bore an unbroken seal.”³¹ The Virgin’s womb was equated with Christ’s tomb in an Ambrosian hymn, “Thou who wast before born of a virgin, art born now of the grave.”³²

³⁰ *Ecclesiae Dedicatio est Ecclesiae et Christi nuptialis copulatio. Episcopus qui eam consecrat est Christus, qui Ecclesiam desponsaverat. Episcopus fontem in atrio benedicit, et in circuitu aspergit, quia Christus fontem baptismatis in Judaea consecravit, et in circuitu mundi omnes gentes in eo ablui imperavit.* (Migne 1844-1902, CLXXII, col. 590)

³¹ Cited by Hirn 1912, 339.

³² *Qui natus olim ex virgine / Nunc e sepulcro nasceris.* (Hirn 1912, 337) The basic themes of the Church as Mother and Virgin, Christ’s power to pass miraculously through barriers, and Mary’s womb as the bridal chamber, were formulated by St. Augustine in his sermons on the Nativity. “And, despite the mass of His body, a body in the flower of manhood, He entered in where his disciples were behind locked doors. Why,

It is well known that the Divine Motherhood of the Virgin was illustrated as an independent concept in the Greek east by an iconic type known as the *Platytera* (Fig. 18), which showed the Christ child within the Virgin's body surrounded by a mandorla (from which shape the iconographic type derives its name). The *Platytera* had an important reflection in the west, especially in Venice and in Northern Europe, where it was given literal, plastic shape in the form in a type of sculptured shrine, the so-called Shrine Madonnas. In these images of the Madonna holding the Christ Child the body of the Virgin actually opened out on hinges to reveal the ultimate significance of the divine birth, that is, the crucifixion, or the Trinity itself (Fig. 19).³³ This tradition had an altogether distinctive development in Florence and Tuscany in the fourteenth century, when a new iconic type emerged that has come to be known as the *Madonna del Parto*. The most famous example, of course, is the culminating one by Piero della Francesca, but many earlier examples are known—most of them from the fourteenth century and all of them from Florence or Tuscany.³⁴

It should be emphasized that while the *Madonna del Parto* was, of course, primarily a Marian image, its underlying significance was in reference to the virgin birth of Christ, as is evident from cases in which Mary gestures toward the sash at her waist, symbol of her chastity (Fig. 20). The Marian aspect is evident in cases where reference is made to the Woman of the Apocalypse, universally taken as a figuration of the Church itself, Christ's bride: "a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: and she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered."³⁵ In a similar vein the *Madonna del Parto* was also assimilated to other types, notably the Queen of Heaven and the *Madonna della*

then, if in adult age He was able to enter through closed doors, should he not have been able as an infant to issue from His mother and leave her members unimpaired? ... His manifestation of His mature body to persons in a house with doors barred, as well as His appearance, as an Infant Spouse, from His bridal chamber, that is, from the womb of a virgin, without having impaired His mother's virginity. ... The Church, therefore, imitating the mother of her Master, though she could not be such in body, yet spiritually is both a mother and a virgin. And so, too, Christ, who established His Church as a virgin by redeeming her from the fornication of demons, in no wise deprived His mother of her virginity when He was born. ... It (the Truth) came out of Its bride chamber, that is, out of the Virgin's womb where the Word of God was united to human creation by a marriage which it is impossible to define.... (Sermons 9 and 10; Augustine 1952, 108, 109, 115)

³³ It should be borne in mind that, like the *Madonna del Parto* in Italy, the Shrine Madonna developed from around 1300 and was closely identified with the theme of the *Madonna della Misericordia*. See Radler 1990.

³⁴ After the pioneering essay by Feudale 1954-7, the theme of the *Madonna del Parto* has received a good deal of attention, especially in relation to the painting by Piero, including Lechner 1981, Pozzi 1989, Walter [1992], *Piero* 1993, Damisch 1997, Cesàreo 2000, *La madonna* 2000.

³⁵ Apoc. 12:1-2: 1. Et signum magnam apparuit in coelo: Mulier amicta sole, et luna sub pedibus ejus, et in capite ejus corona stellarum duodecim; 2. et in utero habens, clamabat parturiens, et cruciabatur, ut pariat.

Misericordia, in which Mary is conceived as the universal mother church, protecting her devotees from evil. All three aspects might be combined in a single image, as in a panel in the Museo Bandini attributed to the circle of Nardo di Cione (Fig. 21). The pregnant Virgin, shown against a gold ground in a white, star-studded gown, wearing a crown, and accompanied by the moon and stars, has a halo inscribed Regina Coeli and is surrounded by a titulus beginning Ave Regina Misericordia; a suppliant donor kneels at her feet.³⁶ Here we come very close to Florence cathedral, where from the time of the dedication onward the famous Confraternity of the Misericordia, with its radical program of universal charity under the aegis of the Madonna, was the primary force in the promotion of the new church.³⁷ The ultimate model of charity was, of course, Christ's death on the Cross, and the primacy and universality of this virtue, as well as its institutionalization in the Florentine Confraternity may explain another of the anomalous features of the Last Judgment fresco in the cupola, the central role, immediately beneath the judging Christ himself, given to the personification of Charity, toward whom Adam gestures as if in acknowledgment of the salvific nature of divine justice (see Fig. 17).

Why this distinctive Mariological devotional image and ideology should have developed precisely in Florence precisely when it did, is no doubt a difficult and complicated question. I cannot help thinking that the phenomenon was related to what might be called Florence's official response to the explosion of Marian devotion throughout Europe in the late middle ages, that is, the rededication of their cathedral to the Madonna, and specifically to the Madonna del Fiore. The new image, the new Confraternity, and the new building were born together, so to speak, alongside one another.³⁸ However, to grasp the significance of these developments for the planning and design of the Duomo, it is crucial to understand the underlying import of the new dedication itself. I call to witness here first a brilliant observation made by Acidini Luchinat in reference to the admixture of Marian and Christological scenes in the windows of the nave. She reiterated the rarely noted but perfectly obvious and critically important fact that the appellation Fiore---which obviously relates to the city's name and its emblematic flower, the lily, one of the oldest and most

³⁶ *Piero* 1993, 130; *Scudieri* 1993, 88f.

³⁷ On the Misericordia theme, *Belting-Ihm* 1976; on the Confraternity of the Misericordia and the Bigallo see *Verdon*, ed., 1992, 11ff.

³⁸ *Benvenuti and Cardini* (in *Cardini*, ed., 1996, 127, 203f.) relate the dedication to the Virgin to the Mariolatry of the mendicant orders, to the development of the confraternities, and to the proliferation of miraculous Madonna images.

venerated symbols of Mary's virginity—had another level of significance, as well. The flower also refers to the ultimate flower that sprang from the root and tree of Jesse, Christ himself.³⁹ Acidini Luchinat refers to another of St. Bernard's famous sermons, that on Advent, where, appropriately, he explains the virgin birth of Christ as the genealogical fulfillment of the Old Testament generations, and describes Mary's son as "Flos est filius Virginis," the flower is the son of the Virgin.⁴⁰ Acidini Luchinat makes this observation in discussing the basic theme she finds in the program of the stained glass windows of the Duomo, the continuity of the Old Testament in the New Testament through Christ. Nothing speaks more eloquently to the significance of this Christological aspect of the Marian dedication of S. Maria del Fiore than the tenor of the March 29, 1412, Provision of the overseers officially instituting the Annunciation as a special feast of the cathedral. Here the Annunciation itself, as the incarnation, is termed the "flower and beginning of our redemption."⁴¹

I believe, however, that this peculiarly Florentine relevance of Bernard's metaphor applies to the building as a whole, and helps to explain many of its distinctive features, including the typological conflation of the centrally planned types, the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, with the cruciform basilica. Indeed, it is tempting to think of the cathedral of Florence itself as a metaphor for the Incarnation, the feast on which it was dedicated and the beginning of the Florentine year, with the great, domed space of the crossing as the uterine container for Christ's sacrifice at the altar.⁴² The Duomo thus encapsulates the process of salvation in architectural form: the resplendent exterior devoted to the Virgin and dressed to celebrate the marriage of Christ and his Church, the somber interior holding Christ in his sacramental form. S. Maria del Fiore may be thought of as a colossal, living reliquary—the container, the virginal bride and mother of God; the content, the savior of mankind—created of Florentine devotion and civic

³⁹ The point was first made, as far as I know, by Fiorini 1987, 49; he goes too far, I think, in excluding any reference to the Florentine lily.

⁴⁰ *La cattedrale* 1994-5, II, 276

⁴¹ Cum maior ecclesia Florentina fuerit, ut asseritur, in suo initio fundata ad reverentiam et sub nomine beate et gloriose Marie Virginis matris domini nostri Ihesu Christi, et vulgariter debeat appellari Sancta Maria del Fiore; et flos ac initium nostre redemptionis fuit benigna humilis ac gratiosa Incarnatio dicti Filii Dei, que fuit per Angelum Nuntiata die vigesimo quinto mensis martii; et non fuerit adhuc singulariter dispositum vel provisum de honorantia et celebratione lauti festi in ecclesia supradicta, quod potest ad maximum negligentiam reputari; magnifici domini domini Priores artium et Vexillifer iustitie populi et comunis Florentie ... providerunt ordinaverunt et deliberaverunt ... celebretur dictum festum et honoretur et fiat in dicta ecclesia ad honorem et reverentiam beate Marie Virginis anno quolibet. (Guasti 1887, 310f., No. 464)

⁴² This idea was alluded to, in utero, as it were, by Verdon, ed., 1994, 11, 13, caption to fig. 3.

conscience. Filippo Brunelleschi himself may have had this theme in mind when, in presenting his plan for the cupola, he urged the construction of the outer shell so that, besides protecting the inner shell from moisture, it might “become more magnificent and swollen.”⁴³ Equally suggestive of Brunelleschi’s thought with respect to the meaning of his design is the story reported by Vasari and others and of the crucial episode, the famous “disputa dell’uovo,” in which Brunelleschi defeated his rivals for the prized commission by breaking an egg in half and setting it upright.

...the consuls, wardens and citizens met together, and the architects disputed on the matter. But they were all routed by Filippo, and it is said that the dispute of the egg arose during these discussions. They wanted Filippo to declare his plan in detail, and to show his model as they had shown theirs, but he refused, and proposed to the masters assembled that whoever should make an egg stand upright on a flat marble surface should make the cupola, as this would be a test of their ability. He produced an egg and all the masters endeavoured to make it stand, but no one succeeded. Then they passed it to Filippo, who lightly took it, broke the end with a blow on the marble and made it stand. All the artists cried out that they could have done as much themselves, but Filippo answered laughing that they would also know how to vault the cupola after they had seen his model and design. And so it was resolved that he should have the conduct of the work ...⁴⁴

⁴³ “Faciasj un altra cupola di fuorj sopra questa per conserualla dallo umido, e perche la tornj piu magnifica e gonfiata” (Manetti 1970, 71f.). Following the publication of the Italian version of this study (Lavin 1999), I learned from Prof. Vivian S. Ramalingam, who had been advised of my original presentation at the June 1997 Florence symposium mentioned above in the first note, that beginning in May 1996, she had delivered at several musicological symposia a paper, titled “Another View of *Nuper rosarum flores*, Marian Iconography, and the Cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore,” in which Brunelleschi’s description of his cupola as “swollen” evidently played an important role. I advised professor Ramalingam, and want to make it clear now, that I attended none of the events she mentioned, that I had myself organized a symposium at the Institute for Advanced Study entitled “Music and Art in the Renaissance” (March 1, 1996), devoted entirely to the Dufay motet and Florence Cathedral, and that I had never heard of Prof. Ramalingam or her work before she wrote to me. For a comment on the motet’s reference to the cathedral in the present context, see Lavin 2001, 405.

A further sense in which the shape and hollowness of the Duomo may be relevant to, and of, its meaning lies in the notion of the Virgin as the oven in which the bread of the Sacrament is baked, evidenced in the image of the Madonna del Parto including references to wheat (Marino and Gotti 2001).

⁴⁴ Vasari 1963, I, 280

Per la qual cosa inanimati, i Consoli e gli Operai e que' cittadini si ragunarono tutti insieme, e gli architetti disputarono di questa materia; ma furon con ragioni assai tutti abbattuti e vinti da

Alessandro Parronchi has argued that the trick was not only a demonstration of Brunelleschi's ingenuity and construction technique, but that the ovoid shape was itself an image of the form he envisaged for the dome.⁴⁵ Brunelleschi was surely aware and motivated, as well, by the egg as a common symbol of Mary's pregnancy and the virgin birth of Christ.⁴⁶

As a final point of reference I must confess that everything of substance I have had to say here was already said at the very time of the foundation of S. Maria del Fiore, in two very brief and completely explicit texts. Although the fact is generally overlooked or neglected, the new cathedral of Florence was not dedicated to the Virgin tout court. In the famous disposition of the authorities of September 11, 1294, the formulation is exactly the following: "for the honor and reverence of our lord Jesus Christ and the blessed Virgin Mary...."⁴⁷ The second text consists of three equally famous lines of the *Divina Commedia* that have been cited in reference to the Duomo, but to my mind never quite understood in the fullness of their meaning in this context; addressing the Virgin the poet says, "In thy womb was rekindled the Love under whose warmth this flower in the eternal peace has unfolded."⁴⁸ Indeed, as an active and influential political figure in the city precisely during the period when the Florentines determined to build their new cathedral, Dante

Filippo; dove si dice che nacque la disputa dell'uovo, in questa forma. Egli non arebbono voluto che Filippo avesse detto l'animo suo minutamente e mostro il suo modello, come avevano mostro essi il loro; il che non volle fare, ma propose questo a maestri e forestieri e terrazzani, che chi fermasse in sur un marmo piano un uovo ritto, quello facesse la cupola, ché quivi si vedrebbe l'ingegno loro. Tolto dunque un uovo, tutti que' maestri si provarono per farlo star ritto, ma nessuno trovò il modo. Onde, essendo detto a Filippo ch'e' lo fermasse, egli con grazia lo prese, e datoli un colpo del culo in sul piano del marmo lo fece star ritto. Romoreggiando gl'artefici che similmente arebbono saputo fare essi, rispose loro Filippo ridendo ch'egli arebbono ancora saputo voltare la cupola, vedendo il modello o il disegno. E così fu risoluto ch'egli avesse carico di condurre questa opera, Vasari 1966ff, III, 159f.

⁴⁵ Parronchi 1977. Parronchi also suggests that Michelangelo may have drawn on the same ideas for the cupola of St. Peter's. While he considers the anecdote apocryphal, King (2000, 41f.) nevertheless takes note that the fabulous stability of the domical structure of egg was already extolled by ancient writers, including Pliny the Elder.

⁴⁶ On this subject, see the classic essay by Meiss 1976, 105-29

⁴⁷ In subsidium et pro subsidio et opere ecclesie Sanctae Reparatae catedralis ecclesie civitatis Florentie, que reparatione et renovatione indiget, et iam incepta est reparari et renovari, pro honore et reverentia domini nostri Iesu Christi et beate Marie Virginis matris sue ac etiam sancte Reparate virginis, et ad honorem et decus civitatis et populi Florentini.... (Guasti 1887, 3).

⁴⁸ "Nel ventre tuo si raccese l'Amore, / per lo cui caldo ne l'eterna pace / così è germinato questo fiore." (*Paradiso* xxxiii, 9; Dante 1977, 370-1). Cf. Verdon, ed., 1992, 14.

may well have had a role in its conceptualization.⁴⁹ The specificity and vitality of the tradition we have been following may be gauged from the simple fact that the very same lines from Dante were quoted as the final text in the description of the Duomo published by the current Archbishop, Silvano Cardinal Piovanelli, as his pastoral letter of 1996, celebrating the seven-hundredth anniversary of the inauguration of the new cathedral—Andiamo alla casa del Signore!⁵⁰

⁴⁹ On Dante and Florentine politics at this period see G. Petrocchi in *Enciclopedia* 1970-8, vol. 6, Appendice, 16-29. Candini in Cardini, ed., 1996, 209, noted that Dante was a member of the Consiglio dei Cento when Arnolfo was involved.

⁵⁰ Piovanelli 1996, 71; the reference here is to Psalm 122:1, *Laetatus sum in his, quae dicta sunt mihi: In domum Domini ibimus.* (Cf. Verdon 1996, 122.)

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1 View of S. Maria del Fiore and Baptistery. Florence

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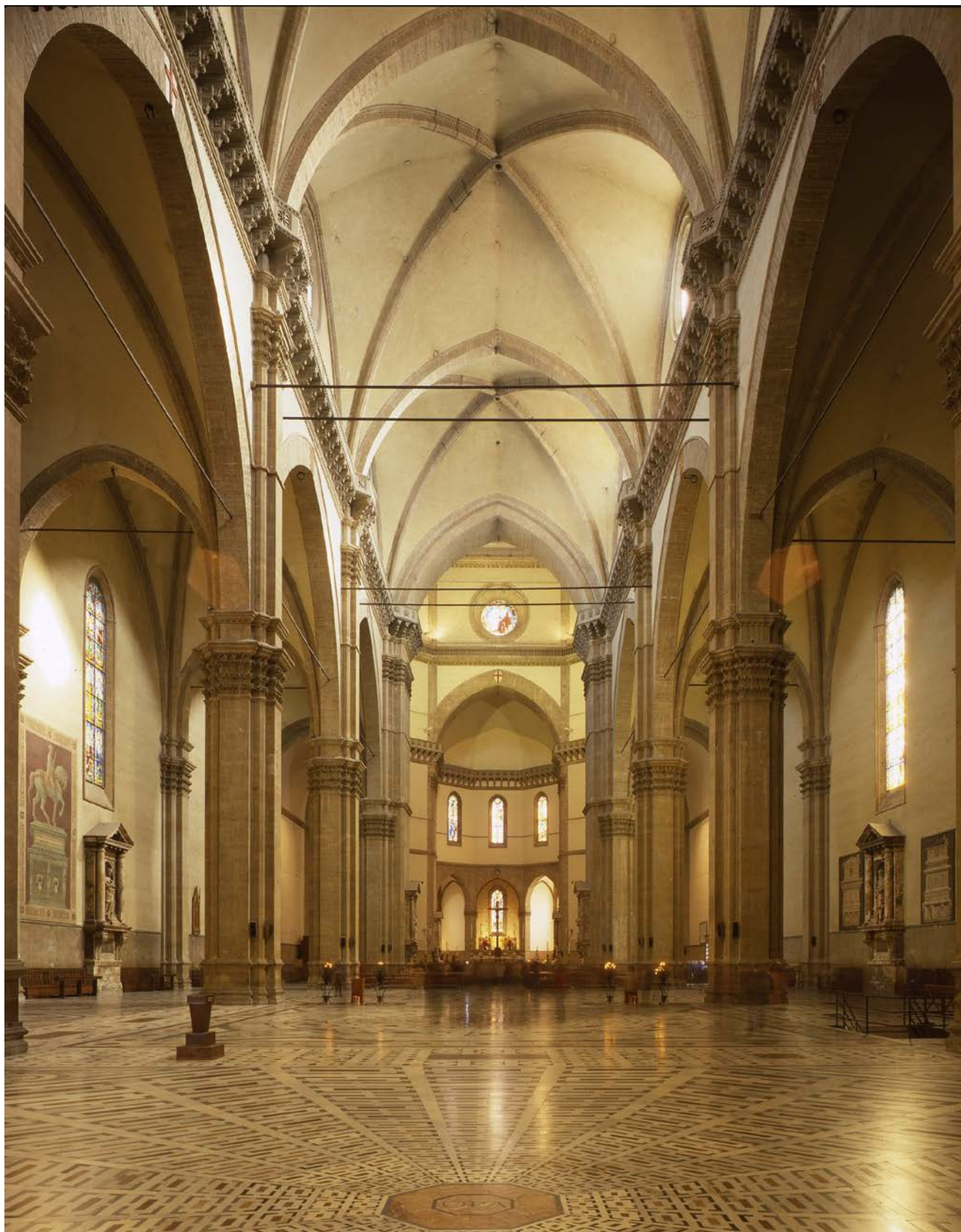


Fig. 2 Nave interior, S. Maria del Fiore. Florence

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Fig. 3 Exterior view, Cathedral. Pisa

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Fig. 4 Nave interior, Cathedral. Pisa

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Fig. 5 Exterior view, Cathedral. Siena

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Fig. 6 Nave interior, Cathedral. Siena

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Fig. 7 Pentiptych. Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence

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Fig. 8 Pentiptych, detail. Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence

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Fig. 9 Bernardo Daddi, San Pancrazio altar. Uffizi, Florence

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Fig.10 Bernardo Daddi, San Pancrazio altar, detail. Uffizi, Florence

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Fig. 11 Madonna and Child. S. Maria del Fiore, Florence

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Fig. 12 Lorenzo Monaco, attributed: Double Intercession (before 1402), New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Fig. 13 Luca della Robbia, Resurrection. S. Maria del Fiore, Florence



Fig. 14 Luca della Robbia, Ascension. S. Maria del Fiore, Florence

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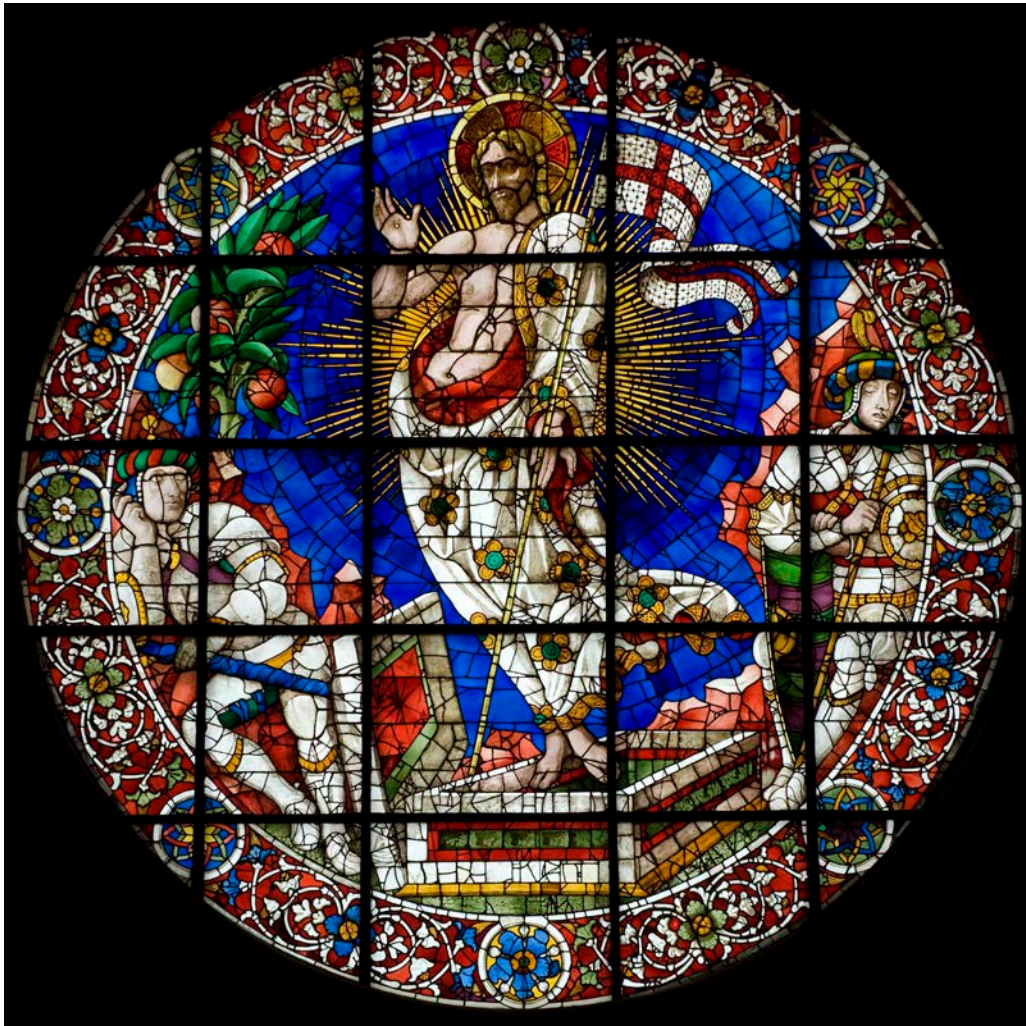


Fig. 15 Paolo Uccello, Resurrection. S. Maria del Fiore, Florence

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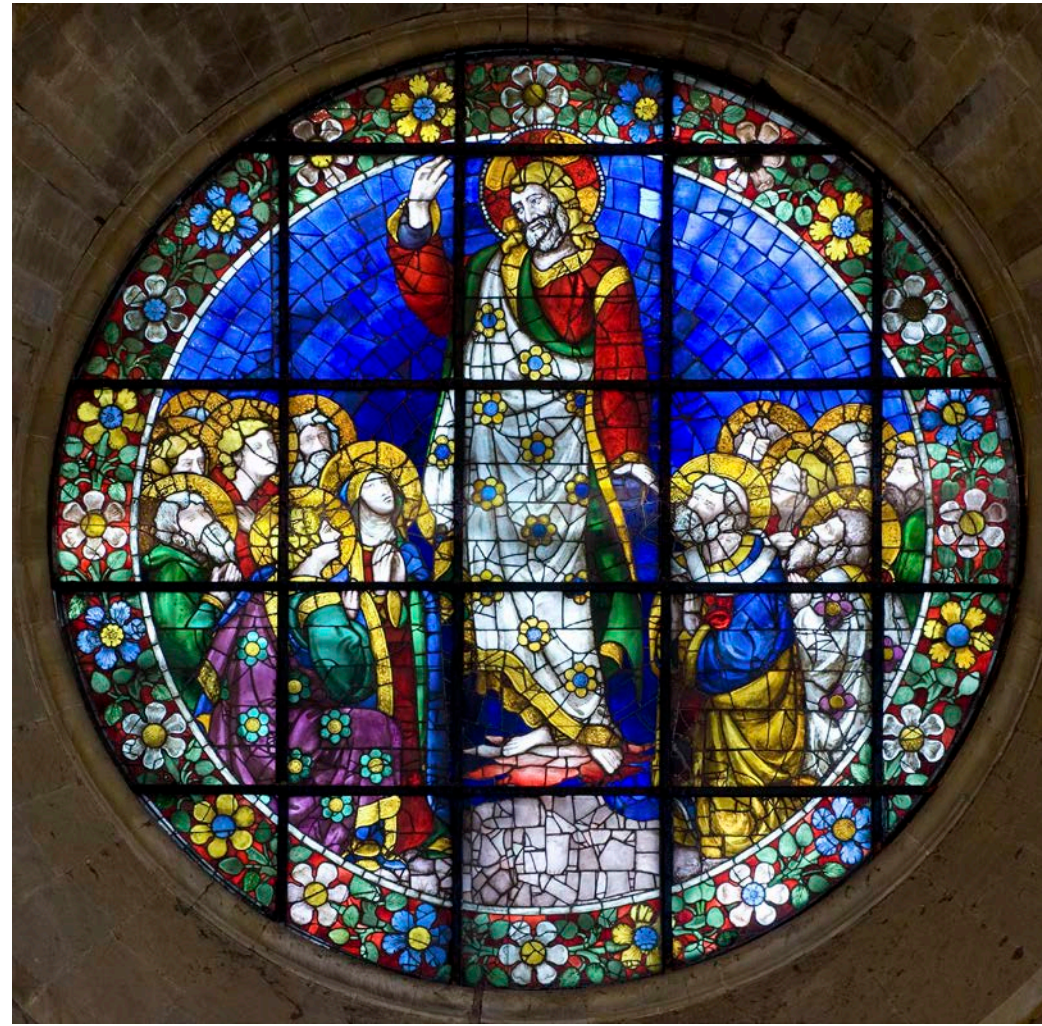


Fig. 16 Lorenzo Ghiberti, Ascension. S. Maria del Fiore, Florence

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Fig. 17 Federico Zuccari and Giorgio Vasari, Dome fresco, detail. S. Maria del Fiore, Florence

(click here to return to [p. 8](#), [p. 13](#))



Fig. 18 Madonna Platytera. Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista, Venice

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Fig. 19 Shrine Madonna. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg

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Fig. 20 Madonna del Parto. Palazzo Davanzati, Florence

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Fig. 21 Madonna del Parto-Woman of the Apocalypse-Regina Coeli. Museo Bandini, Florence

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