

THE ORNAMENTATION OF BRUNELLESCHI'S OLD SACRISTY OF SAN LORENZO
IN FLORENCE

A Thesis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: THE ORIGIN OF ORNAMENTATION AND ITS USE IN EARLY RENAISSANCE FLORENCE.....	7
Function and Reason for Ornament.....	7
Early Renaissance Views on Ornament.....	13
Summary.....	20
CHAPTER 3: THE OLD SACRISTY: ARCHITECTURE OF FILIPPO BRUNELLESCHI..	21
Introduction to the Patronage.....	21
Competitors of the Medici.....	23
Architecture of the Old Sacristy.....	25
Influence of Medieval Architecture.....	26
Division of Space in the Old Sacristy.....	28
Walls.....	30
Large Umbrella Dome.....	32
Choir Area.....	33
Summary.....	34
CHAPTER 4: THE OLD SACRISTY REVISITED: THE IMPACT OF DONATELLO AND COSIMO DE' MEDICI.....	36
Small Dome.....	36
Tomb.....	38
Altar in the Choir.....	40
Introduction to Donatello and His Relationship with Brunelleschi.....	41
Donatello's Work as a Sculptor.....	43
Donatello's Involvement in the Old Sacristy.....	45
Donatello's Tondi and Frieze.....	46
Donatello's Doors.....	50
Summary.....	55
CHAPTER 5: THE CONTRASTING VIEWS OF ORNAMENT: EXPLANATION OF THE CHANGES IN THE OLD SACRISTY.....	57
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	63
VITA.....	66

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. A. Egyptian lotus flower capitals.....	10
Fig. B. Lorenzo Ghiberti, <i>North Doors</i> , Florence Baptistery, 1404-1424.....	16
Fig. C. Filippo Brunelleschi, <i>Sacrifice of Isaac</i> , Lorenzo Ghiberti, <i>Sacrifice of Isaac</i> , created for the door competition of the Florentine Baptistery.....	17
Fig. D. Roman sarcophagus, third century, marble.....	19
Fig. E. Filippo Brunelleschi, <i>Barbadori Chapel</i> , Santa Felicità, Florence, 1419.....	23
Fig. F. Brunelleschi (?), <i>Pazzi Chapel</i> , Santa Croce, Florence, 1441-1460.....	24
Fig. G. <i>Paduan Baptistery</i> , 11 th century.....	27
Fig. H. The interior of the Old Sacristy	29
Fig. I. The large and small domes of the Old Sacristy.....	32
Fig. J. Painted dome in the choir of the Old Sacristy.....	37
Fig. K. Buggiano, <i>Tomb of Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici</i> , Old Sacristy.....	39
Fig. L. Donatello's pendentive tondi, Old Sacristy, <i>Raising of Drusiana</i> , <i>Martyrdom of St. John</i> , <i>St. John on Patmos</i> , <i>Ascension of St. John</i>	47
Fig. M-1. Donatello's lunette tondi, Old Sacristy, <i>Evangelist Matthew</i> , <i>Evangelist Luke</i>	48
Fig. M-2. Donatello's lunette tondi, Old Sacristy, <i>Evangelist John</i> , <i>Evangelist Mark</i>	49
Fig. N. Donatello, <i>Seraphim and Cherubim</i> , frieze, Old Sacristy.....	50
Fig. O. Donatello, <i>Door of the Martyrs</i> , <i>Door of the Apostles</i> , Old Sacristy.....	51
Fig. P. Donatello, <i>St. Stephen and St. Lawrence</i> , and <i>St. Cosmas and St. Damian</i> , located above the bronze doors, Old Sacristy.....	55
Fig. Q. Filippo Brunelleschi, <i>Hospital of the Innocents</i>	58

ABSTRACT

The Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo in Florence, Italy, was constructed during the years 1419-1428 and is considered one of the most influential buildings of the early Italian Renaissance. Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy, in its original design, was pristine and void of the architectural ornamentation that had come to characterize so many buildings that preceded it and which would come to be associated with the sacristy itself on account of later alterations. Indeed, the original sacristy was characterized by a purely articulated space free of additional ornamentation to the architecture. However, shortly after the termination of construction, the Old Sacristy became a battleground for new and evolving notions concerning the ornamentation of sacred spaces. A veritable who's who of early Quattrocento Florence including the architect Filippo Brunelleschi, the sculptor Donatello, and the wealthy and increasingly powerful Medici family took a stand. Although, the initial lack of ornamentation has been researched, scholarship thus far neglected to fully explain the decision to profoundly alter the ornamentation of the original space. This thesis interprets and evaluates the research that has been done on the Old Sacristy and, in turn, offers an explanation for the current arrangement of architectural ornamentation in light of both aesthetic considerations and patronage.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo in Florence was constructed during the years 1419-1428 and is considered one of the most influential buildings of the early Italian Renaissance. Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy, in its original design, was pristine and void of the architectural ornamentation that had come to characterize so many buildings that preceded it and which would come to be associated with the sacristy itself on account of later alterations. Indeed, the original sacristy was characterized by a purely articulated space free of additional ornamentation to the architecture. However, shortly after the termination of construction, the Old Sacristy became a battleground for new and evolving notions concerning the ornamentation of sacred spaces. A veritable who's who of early Quattrocento Florence including the architect Filippo Brunelleschi, the sculptor, Donatello and the wealthy and increasingly powerful Medici family took a stand. Although research has been devoted to the initial lack of ornamentation, it has yet to explain the decision to alter the ornamentation of the original space. This thesis interprets and evaluates the research that has been done on the Old Sacristy and, in turn, offers an explanation for the current arrangement of architectural ornamentation in light of both aesthetic considerations and patronage.

The original reason for my interest in the Old Sacristy was the amount of Italian Renaissance talent associated with it: this single building brings together Filippo Brunelleschi and Donatello, as well as other pivotal figures of the artistic flowering of Florence. Once I began to study the building, I came to realize its importance and relevance to the study of architectural ornamentation. Unlike many of the more ornate buildings constructed around the same time

period, the Old Sacristy provides a unique opportunity to study a revolutionary approach to architectural ornamentation.

During the time of its construction, there existed two distinct notions regarding the way sacred buildings should be ornamented. One comprised the Gothic tradition, a highly ornamented architectural style which had been popular in Italy around Brunelleschi's time. The other was a simpler classical architectural style that did not display the richness associated with Gothic architecture and ornament. These two opposing viewpoints on architectural ornamentation came to light when the patronage of the sacristy shifted from Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici to his sons Cosimo and Lorenzo: at this point the building departed radically from Brunelleschi's original conception and acquired a more ornamented appearance. Using the Old Sacristy as my case study, I will explore the differing attitudes toward architectural ornament that were present in Florence during the early Renaissance. At first, I will focus my attention on the architect, Brunelleschi, and his purist views of architecture supported by the patronage of Giovanni di Bicci. Then, I turn my analysis to the later, more architecturally ornamented approach expounded by Giovanni's sons and realized by the sculptor Donatello.

The Old Sacristy was interesting in its own right before it became a battleground for the role of ornamentation in architecture. Not only was it to function as the working sacristy of the church of San Lorenzo in Florence, but it was also to serve as the final resting place of its primary patron, Giovanni di Bicci. The Sacristy displayed the Medici's religious convictions as well as their abundant wealth, thereby enhancing the family's political favor within the church and city. In sum, the sacristy was a vital stepping stone in the Medici's rise to power and, as I will demonstrate, the nature of the architectural ornamentation employed in the family mausoleum played an important political and social role.

This thesis will begin with “The Origin of Ornamentation and Its Use in Early Renaissance Florence.” In this chapter, I will discuss both historical precedents for architectural ornamentation and those popular among Brunelleschi’s contemporaries. Additionally, I will explain the reasons for opposing views on architectural ornamentation in sacred spaces. The historical context will offer a better understanding of why certain views on ornament existed, and why it was during this time period, specifically, that the revolutionary style of Brunelleschi captured the attention of other Renaissance architects, whether they were to utilize his style in their own architectural work or rebel against it.

Chapter three, “The Old Sacristy: Architecture of Filippo Brunelleschi,” provides detailed accounts of the architectural organization and appearance of the Old Sacristy and explains the reasons that were most likely behind Brunelleschi’s decision to maintain architectural integrity without ornament. This was a radical stance. I will introduce the major players who dealt with the construction of the sacristy. The emphasis here will not only be on the architect, Filippo Brunelleschi, but also on the patrons, the Medici, as well as their contemporaries, for it is important to include the contemporaries of the Medici and to discuss comparable philanthropic efforts toward Florentine churches. By understanding the circumstances surrounding the construction of the Old Sacristy, one will be more likely to comprehend the problems encountered during later phases of alteration, specifically in terms of the differing views on the ornamentation.

In chapter four, “The Old Sacristy Revisited: The Impact of Donatello and Cosimo de’ Medici,” I will describe the additions made by Donatello and commissioned by Cosimo de’ Medici. These alterations sparked an unfavorable reaction from Brunelleschi. I will also discuss

Cosimo's approach to ornament and how this helps explain the additional sculpture of the Old Sacristy.

I discuss "The Contrasting Views of Ornament: Explanation of the Changes in the Old Sacristy" in chapter five. Here, I will delve into greater detail about differing attitudes to ornamentation in architecture during this period, particularly those by the patrons of the Old Sacristy. I explain the decisions of Cosimo de' Medici to make changes to the Old Sacristy after the death of Giovanni di Bicci by breaking down the motives behind these choices with respect to the period's cultural context.

A great deal of research went into compiling the information upon which I base my argument. My understanding of the broad field of architectural ornamentation benefitted from the work of Kent Bloomer, Professor of Architecture at Yale University. Because he discusses both sculpture and architecture, his book *The Nature of Ornament: Rhythm and Metamorphosis in Architecture* provided key information on how ornament has been used over time. For Bloomer, ornament is not only a form of artistic expression by sculptors, it is a window through which to engage architecture and convey the architect's intentions for the space.

Heinrich Klotz and Richard Krautheimer offer a keen examination of the architecture of Brunelleschi and Lorenzo Ghiberti, respectively. These authors provided me with an understanding of both sides of the argument, for and against the addition of ornament during the early Renaissance. By using Brunelleschi and Ghiberti as models, I will be able to compare the two artists' styles as they worked and competed against one another for popularity and acceptance by their city as well as their patrons. Such a comparison will illustrate the two

prevailing attitudes toward architectural ornamentation, the more Gothic and the more Renaissance.

Howard Saalman, who wrote the introduction to the biography of Filippo Brunelleschi by Antonio di Tuccio Manetti, was also a principal source of knowledge on Brunelleschi and his works. While Manetti's biography is a primary source that is extremely useful and quoted in nearly every study devoted to Brunelleschi, it was Howard Saalman's book *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings* that provided me with a comprehensive understanding of Brunelleschi as an architect as well as his influences. Saalman's goal was to interpret Brunelleschi's oeuvre through his knowledge and seminal historical studies on the republican institutions of Florence. He tackled Brunelleschi from both a historical perspective and an art historical perspective, thereby offering insight into the time period as well as the art historical background to the construction of Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy.

The work of John Paoletti gives a comprehensive look at the trends of this time period as well as the social and economic conditions under which they were created. His valuable insights allowed me to develop a thesis that would not only encompass ornament and architecture, but also explain each according to the broader cultural milieu in which they were created.

While comprehending the socio-economic climate of the Quattrocento in Florence is important, equally so is understanding the patronage of the Old Sacristy. Dale Kent provides a great deal of information regarding not only the Medici family, but their rivals, as well as other information on patronage during the Florentine Renaissance. Her book *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance* allowed me to compare the patronage of the Medici to that of their

adversaries. This valuable information gave me a better understanding of the factors that contributed to the building and subsequent ornamentation of the Old Sacristy.

The above-mentioned authors are not the only ones whose work contributed to the creation of my thesis. Both these and other authors allowed me to assess ornamentation during the Renaissance from a variety of vantage points. This thesis interprets scholarship and extrapolates from it a conclusion regarding the important changes to the architectural ornamentation of the Old Sacristy. The transition from Gothic to Renaissance architecture was one that progressed during a relatively short period in history. Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy helped pioneer the new Renaissance style, and his philosophies on ornamentation would rattle the very foundation of architecture during the Quattrocento.

CHAPTER 2

THE ORIGIN OF ORNAMENTATION AND ITS USE IN EARLY RENAISSANCE FLORENCE

FUNCTION AND REASON FOR ORNAMENT

Because this thesis deals specifically with the ornamentation of the Old Sacristy, it is important to clarify the historical influences that led Brunelleschi to choose a distinct lack of ornamental elements. This contrasted dramatically with the late Gothic tendency, prevalent at the time, to stress architectural ornamentation. To better understand the development of ornament we must trace it back to its origins—I will look specifically at Egypt and Greece—and discover the context for which it was created. Certain questions arise: Why would architects use these elements on their buildings? Why use natural ornamentation such as foliage, as we see so frequently in the work of Brunelleschi's contemporaries, in particular Lorenzo Ghiberti? How does architectural ornament provide order to structures or enhance the richness of symbolism, often times of a religious nature?

Kent Bloomer, in his book *The Nature of Ornament: Rhythm and Metamorphosis in Architecture*, divides ornament into two levels of meaning. “The most basic level is the form of the utility inherent to the object of ornamentation, while the other level brings actions, meaning, and figures that adhere to the expressions of utility. This other level implicates life that originates in the world at large.”¹ This definition is all encompassing in the fact that it covers both the function, of and reason for, ornament. It is Bloomer's sense that over the millennia ornament has achieved in itself the virile and lifelike quality of being able to project energy and explore the boundaries of architecture while simultaneously reaching out into the world beyond

¹ Bloomer, 85.

the confines of the building on which it is placed.² This animated quality of ornament is one that can be exploited by natural elements. Visualize an ivy plant naturally growing on a building. It is exploring the details of the structure naturally, and it is in this very way that natural ornament explores architecture. Natural ornament, such as seen during the Italian Renaissance, is very organic in its placement on walls, corners, cornices, and other architectural elements, as if it were supposed to be growing there while still being artificial in medium.

James Trilling, author of *Ornament: A Modern Perspective*, believes that it is extremely hard to determine the meaning of ornament, even given its historical context. His argument is that our reliance on documentary evidence could be misplaced.³ Could it just be that the artist or architect was giving the patron what he wanted, instead of being influenced by some vague notion of historical context? Could it be that the patron just liked or disliked floral arrangements and other foliage? According to Trilling, “Ornament is almost never ‘original’; the skill lies in turning a recognized form into something different— familiar but also unique. To create an ornamental style one must have models, familiar forms passed down from generation to generation, or borrowed from an earlier time or a foreign culture.”⁴ I believe change and adaptation over generations and cultures is what Bloomer meant by “metamorphosis” as mentioned in the title of his book. The changing and transforming of purely architectural and conversely ornamental elements over time can not only come from the realization of a new and innovative way to construct buildings and sculpture but also by the adaptation of previous architectural and ornamental ideas. The two authors share the idea that the knowledge of this transformation is key to understanding architecture and ornament over history.

² Bloomer, 207.

³ Trilling, 73.

⁴ Trilling, XIV.

A humanistic approach to the construction of architecture and the layout of ornament took hold during Brunelleschi's time. Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt stated in her essay "The Relation of Sculpture and Architecture during the Renaissance" that Vitruvius traced the invention of architecture to the imitation of nature.

Seeking shelter from the elements, our earliest ancestors had learned lessons from the skill with which swallows and bees built their habitations. Then, humans had themselves learned to construct dwellings from the materials of nature and, when they intended the classical orders: the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian; their shapes were based on the forms and proportions of nature's greatest architecture, the human body.⁵

Many elements of ornament during this period can be explained by examining this humanistic approach to their design. Vitruvius was a Roman architect, engineer and writer, renowned for his ten-book architectural treatise, *On Architecture (De architectura)*. This treatise is the only text on architectural theory and practice to have survived from Classical antiquity, making it an essential reference for architects wishing to incorporate Classical elements into their architecture. Brandt said, "Throughout the Renaissance, fidelity to Vitruvius could imply that the proportional rule and the pure vocabulary of the classical architectural orders constituted a self-sufficient formal and symbolic discourse to which sculpture was essentially unnecessary or indeed a contaminant."⁶ This humanistic way of interpreting and understanding ornament was practiced during Brunelleschi's time and was even utilized in the architecture of the Old Sacristy, as I will discuss later.

I turn now to a historical analysis of natural ornament. By tracing the origins of architectural ornamentation as far back as the ancient Egyptians, I will identify some of the timeless features common to ornamentation. Learning about the history of ornamentation is

⁵ Brandt, 75.

⁶ Brandt, 77.

essential to understanding how and why it was utilized during the Early Renaissance and why Brunelleschi chose to eliminate a great deal of it from his architecture. A paradigmatic early example is the lotus flower, which is a natural element often seen in hieroglyphics. In Egyptian mythology the lotus flower was a symbol referencing the sun, creation, life and death.⁷



Fig. A, Egyptian lotus flower capitals

Naturally, the lotus flower, which is a water plant, rises from the water and flourishes in the morning with the upcoming sun, and closes and sinks back to its watery home upon nightfall. It is easy for us to see the analogy which the ancient Egyptians were celebrating. The sun rises and sets daily, and we are born into this world, flourish for a time, and are placed back into the ground upon death. More broadly, it is important to note the religious symbolism that ornament held for the Egyptians. The over-arching idea of using ornament to convey religious principles is

⁷ Bloomer, 68.

still prevalent in the Quattrocento and could very well have influenced Cosimo de' Medici's decision to add additional ornamentation to the Old Sacristy after his father's death.

Trilling presents two opposing religious attitudes toward ornament: one is that in the Old Testament (Psalm 26: 6-8) it states "Lord, I love the beauty of thy house," which expresses the joy in God at the heart of all ritual. It was argued by the early Christians that because Christianity had superseded Judaism, the Jewish standard of lavish decoration was no longer needed. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), founder of the Cistercian order, who would have agreed with that early Christian view, wrote that "Bishops have a duty towards both wise and foolish. They have to rouse the devotion of the carnal people with material ornament, since they are incapable of spiritual things."⁸ St. Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian order are known for sparseness in decorative and ornamental elements in their holy spaces. This quote points to the fact that St. Bernard believed that bishops, who he felt needed to cater to the illiterate, must use ornament in order to make a sacred space more holy to those who could not comprehend spirituality without material additions. St. Bernard and his fellow Cistercians believed their duty was to the intellectual and spiritually wise patrons of the church, which is an underlying reason for the lack of ornament in their churches. The view of excessive ornament was widespread during the Gothic period as we can clearly see by the ornamentation of holy spaces, with the exception of those that followed the Cistercian order. Because literacy was only prevalent among those who needed it for their profession, sculpture could tell biblical stories through images without the viewer needing to be literate to comprehend. Also, ornament was a display of power for the Church. Indeed, uneducated would not be drawn to a religious space that was

⁸ Trilling, 81-82.

not elaborately decorated or did not display the amount of prestige they felt was owed to such a holy place.

Like the Egyptians before them, the Greeks also used natural ornament to express their religion or mythology. Bloomer explains that “vegetal ornament” and the foliated scroll originated with the Egyptians, then spread eastward, culminating during the sixth century BCE in Greek architecture.⁹ The purpose of their ornament, according to Bloomer, stems from the original interpretation of the Greek word “Kosmos,” which he says “meant something like ‘universe,’ ‘order’ and ‘ornament.’” Bloomer goes on to explain: “In such a Greek translation ornament is implicated with concepts so vast that at first it may seem impossible to disentangle it from an inventory of all things.”¹⁰ Kosmos was the antithesis of Chaos. The myth was as follows: Eros, the Greek god of love, unified the earth, sky, weather, and the elements within chaos. These were to be understood as cycles, as in life and death as well as the seasons. Kosmos, or ornament as it is to be understood, manifested this unity in visual form creating something ordered by rhythm.¹¹ Not incidentally, this rhythm or cyclic motion of worldly phenomena was also associated with the Egyptian notion of ornament as seen in the lotus flower discussed earlier.

According to the Greeks, ornament was an ordering device that reconciled elements that were constantly in combat with each other for precedence. Imagine a structure that has many chaotic and sharp edges and no defining ornament or linear molding. The viewer’s eyes would be confused as to where they should focus. Architectural ornament was seen as a solution to that very problem in the Renaissance.

⁹ Bloomer, 68.

¹⁰ Bloomer, 15.

¹¹ Bloomer, 16.

Views on how ornament has been used have changed a great deal over time. In *The Birth and Development of Ornament*, originally published in the late 19th century, F. Edward Hulme explained that Egyptian, Greek, Byzantine, Romanesque and Gothic architectural ornamentation was largely based on symbolism, while during the Renaissance architectural ornamentation existed to display beauty.¹² Hulme's book displays a particularly antiquated attitude toward ornament. The assumed purpose of the Renaissance period was to reinvigorate the ideals of classicism and antiquity. However, what was accomplished was something entirely new and different from antiquity in many aspects. I would not agree with Hulme's notion that Renaissance ornament did not express symbolism and was merely there for aesthetic purposes, because many Renaissance architects accomplished the display of power through the ornamentation of their spaces.

EARLY RENAISSANCE VIEWS ON ORNAMENT

Humanist and architect Leon Battista Alberti devoted four of his ten books on architecture to ornament, specifically books VI-IX, which deal with visual beauty in architecture. Classicism was a major influence on Alberti's architecture, and he specifically utilized many principles found in Vitruvius' treatise. According to Bloomer, "For Alberti the term beauty indicated a reflection of the wondrous works of nature. Beneath beauty in architecture there was mere utility, which he regarded as something we only recognize, whereas beauty is inherent to the architect's ordering of utility."¹³ On this basis, we can apply the Early Renaissance use of architectural ornamentation by artists such as Ghiberti and Donatello in that beneath the ornamentation they utilized was the underlying functionality of the building, which is something

¹² Hulme, 214-215.

¹³ Bloomer, 19.

we see but do not necessarily attribute to beauty. Brunelleschi, however, did see an inherent beauty in the architecture he was creating for the Old Sacristy.

Alberti wrote in his treatise on architecture that he was “completely convinced that the Heavens find greatest pleasure in purity and simplicity both in color and life.”¹⁴ He also cited Cicero and Plato in noting that “people should be exhorted by law to reject all frivolous decoration in the temples and allow above all for pure whiteness.”¹⁵ However, Alberti was not against decoration and ornamentation, as proven by his statement that “He shall earn praise who attempts to decorate the walls, ceiling and floor as artfully and splendidly as possible.”¹⁶ This contrast is important in the Old Sacristy. As I will explain, Brunelleschi was completely against adding frivolous ornament and would have preferred the pure whiteness of the walls, while Cosimo de’ Medici, who had a political agenda, wanted to receive praise for his commissions at the Old Sacristy. Alberti’s statement may be read as if the patrons were trying to ornament the Old Sacristy because they themselves did not equate a space lacking in expensive ornamentation with a holy space. Also, the idea that simply trying to make a space more grandiose while displaying the wealth of the patron also qualifies Alberti’s statement. For people like the Cosimo de’ Medici, as I will soon explain, social acceptance and praise were major parts of their political strategy. With patronizing a place such as the Old Sacristy and ornamenting it with expensive wares, the Medici family was bound to receive praise. Many patrons and architects of the late Trecento and early Quattrocento utilized the popular notion of adding ornament to the architecture of their buildings.

¹⁴ Alberti, X, 381.

¹⁵ Alberti, X, 381.

¹⁶ Alberti, X, 381.

In addition to those fundamentals, Alberti understood ornament as a form of “heavenly light and complement to beauty.”¹⁷ He thought that ornament, rather than being essential, is used as an addendum to the utilitarian and inherent beauty of architecture. In his treatise, Alberti wrote,

I believe, that beauty is some inherent property to be found suffused all through the body of that which may be called beautiful; whereas ornament, rather than being inherent, has the character of something attached or additional.¹⁸

However, this act of attachment did not set ornament apart from architecture per se. Rather, ornament served to make the basically beautiful architectural order more visible.¹⁹ This is an understandable concept given the time period. When competing with the more ornate Gothic aesthetic for attention, the sparseness of a space such as the Old Sacristy would likely not demand attention unless the message conveyed in the architecture could be understood. Namely, the uneducated would find more appeal in the ornate structure simply because it would ignite their senses, evoking passions, and would aid in the understanding of religious ideals conveyed by the building.

Now that I have presented the more theoretical aspect of architectural ornamentation in the Renaissance through the figure of Alberti, I shall continue setting the stage for a discussion of architectural ornamentation in the Old Sacristy by turning to the use of ornament by Early Renaissance sculptors. This will establish the precedent for the time period, will establish just how unusual the original Old Sacristy was in terms of ornamentation, and will convey how Brunelleschi’s decision to omit significant amounts of ornament was radical given the artistic atmosphere of his time.

¹⁷ Alberti, VI, 2, 156.

¹⁸ Alberti, VI, 2, 156.

¹⁹ Bloomer, 19-20.

Natural ornamentation was prevalent during the late Gothic period in Florence.

According to A. D. F. Hamlin, author of *A History of Ornament: Renaissance and Modern*,

One element of Italian ornament in which it surpassed its antique prototypes is its recourse to Nature, which afforded a new inspiration to its designers and imparted a delicacy of detail, a freshness and charm to their work, deserving of more notice than it has generally received. While there was not much of out-and-out-naturalistic representation of plant-forms, these, even when conventionalized, are always handled in a manner indicating a keen appreciation of the laws and forms of plant growth.²⁰

Italian Renaissance sculptors were quite effective in adapting natural elements to create ornament. The “delicacy of detail” was an attitude most evidently displayed in the work of Ghiberti. His impressive foliage and natural elements on the North Doors of the Florentine Baptistery surely turned heads and impressed patrons with his skill and attention to detail. As we will see, natural ornament is an essential attribute of Ghiberti’s work, and his view on architectural ornamentation was one about which he and Brunelleschi vehemently disagreed.

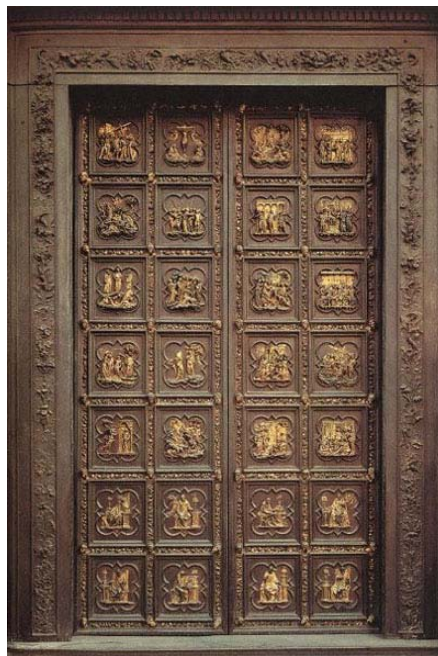


Fig. B, Lorenzo Ghiberti, *North Doors*, Florence Baptistery, 1404-1424

²⁰ Hamlin, 22-23.

Lorenzo Ghiberti's North Doors of the Florentine Baptistery (1404-1424), seen in figure B, are outstanding in the way they incorporate natural elements into the outer framing on the doors. Ghiberti cast his natural elements from life and nature itself. As Richard Krautheimer notes in his study of Ghiberti, "Such use of flora and fauna was altogether new to Tuscan decoration, which during the fourteenth century almost never deviated from the customary diamond studs and rosettes on altar and door frames and jambs and the equally customary acanthus friezes."²¹ In the 1320's in France small animals and creatures began to appear along with foliated elements in the decorative margins of illuminated manuscripts, such as those by Pucelle. In Italy only Lombard book illustrations show comparable decorative bordering. For this reason, Krautheimer refers to Ghiberti's framework as "frenchified."²² As one can ascertain from Krautheimer's explanations, changes were being realized early in the Florentine Renaissance. As I will describe in chapter 3, the International Gothic style of architecture was invading Italy as political seats were put in the hands of foreigners specifically from Germany and France. These changes, in my opinion, allowed for a new way of looking at architecture and ornament. Either way, the importance of these artistic endeavors would change the way Italy viewed art in architecture.



Fig. C, (left) Filippo Brunelleschi, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, (right) Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, created for the door competition of the Florence Baptistery.

²¹ Krautheimer, 60.

²² Krautheimer, 61.

It is important to note here the competition between Brunelleschi and Ghiberti, among others, for the commission of the Baptistery doors in 1401. The subject of the competition panels was the Sacrifice of Isaac. Manetti wrote of this competition in his biography of Brunelleschi explaining the circumstances surrounding the North Doors:

...both models were very beautiful and for their part, taking everything into consideration, they were unable to put one ahead of the other, and since it was a big undertaking requiring much time and expense they should commission it to both equally and they should be partners. When Filippo and Lorenzo were summoned and informed of the decision Lorenzo remained silent while Filippo was unwilling to consent unless he was given entire charge of the work. On this point he was unyielding...Filippo, like one who unknowingly had been destined for some greater tasks by God, refused to budge. The officials threatened to assign it to Lorenzo if he did not change his mind: he answered that he wanted no part of it if he did not have complete control, and if they were unwilling to grant it they could give it to Lorenzo as far as he was concerned. With that they made their decision. Public opinion in the city was completely divided as a result.²³

It is important to see that even though the more familiar Gothic style of Ghiberti, was ultimately chosen for the doors, the newer style of Brunelleschi was also well received. Later, I will explain how Donatello's approach to sculpture is more similar to that of Ghiberti than to that of Brunelleschi, causing problems between Donatello and Brunelleschi over the ornamentation of the Old Sacristy.

After winning the competition for the North Doors, Ghiberti went on to sculpt the later addition to the Florentine Baptistery: the East Doors (1425-1452). Also known as the "The Gates of Paradise," a term coined by Michelangelo, these doors are a prime example of the sculptural ideals that develop later in the Renaissance. By the time Ghiberti began the Gates of Paradise, he had changed his style of sculpting relief. As Hamlin described, "his second pair of doors for the Florentine baptistery...exhibited the influence of the new taste in a complete

²³ Manetti, 50.

change of style from that of his earlier pair of northern doors of the same building.”²⁴ He employed the new, lower relief style of the time, which did not allow him to utilize nature in the round; therefore he was unable to cast natural elements to complete his sculptural work. It is noteworthy that Ghiberti was beginning to render the natural elements in a more stylized manner instead of making them exact replicas of the nature they were intended to represent.



Fig. D, Roman Sarcophagus, third century, marble

Donatello, another prominent Renaissance sculptor, also used natural elements in his architectural sculpture, although Donatello's naturalism was more dependent on classical models than Ghiberti's. This is apparent in the niche of St. Louis at Or San Michele. Here Donatello included classicizing garlands in the frieze beneath the pediment of the type employed on Roman sarcophagi to make permanent the ephemeral elements of nature that were used in celebration or remembrance of the deceased. Today, it is customary to send flowers or other plants to a funeral of a friend or loved one. Roman families permanently added garlands to their loved ones' tombs by having them sculpted, as seen, for example, on the third-century sarcophagus illustrated in

²⁴ Hamlin, 29.

figure D. Another naturalistic element of the niche at Or San Michele is the stylized scallop shell that frames the head of St. Louis—a quintessential feature of Italian Renaissance design, likewise deriving from classical sources, that we will encounter again in the choir of the Old Sacristy.

SUMMARY

Through examples and various explanations on the nature of ornament itself, I have laid a foundation for a more in-depth look at Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy and its treatment of architectural ornament. In this chapter I have discussed the historical applications of ornament, specifically in Egypt and Greece, and how religious and aesthetic principles can be conveyed through ornament. I also explained Vitruvius's and Alberti's views of architectural ornament, which will aid in the understanding of the humanistic values of Cosimo de' Medici utilized in the Old Sacristy.

CHAPTER 3

THE OLD SACRISTY: ARCHITECTURE OF FILIPPO BRUNELLESCHI

This chapter will explain the architecture of the Old Sacristy as it existed during the life of Giovanni di Bicci, when Brunelleschi had a great deal of control over aesthetics. I will describe the circumstances under which the sacristy was built as well as provide a clear image of what the sacristy would have looked like before the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici.

INTRODUCTION TO PATRONAGE

The Old Sacristy was commissioned by Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici (1360-1429), one of the most prominent and influential family member of the growing Medici bank in Florence. The family was not of the nobility, but of the patrician class; however, because of their great wealth accumulated through banking and commerce they gained a great deal of political influence. Giovanni, who became gonfaloniere of Florence in 1421, was successful in making the Medici the wealthiest family in Italy, and one of the wealthiest in Europe. Gonfaloniere was a political office that served a ceremonial purpose but which was not particularly influential. Because of the growing political and financial power of the Medici family, it was good for the family to patronize religious venues and activities. The Old Sacristy was paid for by the Medici family and was intended both to serve as the resting place of Giovanni di Bicci and to function as a sacristy, as its name suggests.

Spearheaded by a group of citizens that wanted to renovate the church of San Lorenzo around 1418, the Prior of the church of San Lorenzo, Padre Dolfini, planned an enlargement of the old foundation on the model of the great monastic churches. This design was profoundly transformed. The purpose of the Medici's commissions at San Lorenzo was to permanently weave themselves into the religious and political fabric of the city of Florence and to honor the

family name throughout time. According to John Paoletti and Gary Radke, co-authors of *Art in Renaissance Italy*, “Giovanni agreed to build the sacristy of the new building as a family burial site and also to build an adjacent double chapel at the end of the transept. This gave the Medici patronage rights over a traditionally important part of the building—the sacristy—and also more than twice as much space as any other family participating in the project.”²⁵ Obviously, dominant patronage rights in the church of San Lorenzo were quite important to the Medici. The reason is most likely because San Lorenzo was a historically important Christian location in Florence.²⁶ Because of its obvious importance to the Christian fabric of the city of Florence, it is not surprising that Giovanni, aspiring to power, would want to support it so passionately.

Patronage of the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo was begun by Giovanni di Bicci and, upon his death, was passed down to his sons Cosimo and Lorenzo, though Lorenzo’s control and influence was to a much lesser extent. Cosimo (1389-1464), or Cosimo il Vecchio (Cosimo the Elder), was the first true political powerhouse of the Medici family. Cosimo was well known for his humanist interests, charitable acts, and was a great supporter of the arts and literature. He was greatly intrigued by Greek culture and the works of Plato, founded the Platonic Academy, and eventually amassed the largest library in Europe, which included many Greek sources from Constantinople. It was during his reign, and that of his son and grandson, that Florence became the cultural center of Europe and a center of humanist thought.²⁷ Lorenzo de’ Medici (1395-1440) followed Cosimo throughout his reign. Most of his life’s work revolved around the

²⁵ Paoletti and Radke, 187-188.

²⁶ Paoletti and Radke, 187-188: “The building already at the site was an eleventh-century Romanesque church, itself a replacement of an Early Christian basilica dedicated in 393 by no less a person than St. Ambrose, who had also consecrated Florence’s first bishop.” The entirety of Christian history in Florence surrounded this church, making it one of the most prestigious places to patronize.

²⁷ Rice University, <<http://galileo.rice.edu/gal/medici.html>>

Medici Bank instead of political affairs like that of his brother. At the age of 40, five years before his death, he moved to Rome and became the overseer of the Medici Bank at the Papal Court. His work with the Old Sacristy was therefore limited, because of his heavy involvement with business affairs, leaving the Old Sacristy to be influenced by Cosimo, and his heavily humanist ideology.

COMPETITORS OF THE MEDICI

The Strozzi, Barbadori, and Pazzi, also wealthy Florentine families, were in constant competition among themselves and the Medici in order to display their worth and piety to the Florentine populace. The Strozzi commissioned a famous altarpiece in 1354, to the renowned artist Orcagna. This work now resides in the Strozzi Chapel in Santa Maria Novella, along with a cycle of frescos by Orcagna's brother, Nardo di Cione. The Barbadori Chapel in Santa Felicita was constructed by Brunelleschi between 1419 and 1423 and is the burial place of Bartolomeo Barbadori.²⁸



Fig. E, Brunelleschi, *Barbadori Chapel*, Santa Felicita, Florence, 1419.

²⁸ Saalman, 90. It should be noted that in this chapel, famous for its altarpiece by Pontoromo (1525-1528), was ceded to the Paghanelli family in 1487 and thence to the Capponi in 1525.

Here, Brunelleschi employed four roundels in the pendentive spaces in the corners of the chapel, similar to those I will describe in the Old Sacristy. These chapels were constructed as memorial chapels, much like the Old Sacristy, in order to display members of the families prominently, even after their deaths. The Pazzi financed the chapel that bears their name to serve as the chapter room for the Franciscans of Santa Croce around 1441-1460. Although constructed after the Old Sacristy, it is strikingly similar in design; widely thought to have been designed by Brunelleschi himself, at least in part, it was likely constructed by Michelozzo.²⁹



Fig. F, Brunelleschi (?), *Pazzi Chapel*, Santa Croce, Florence, 1441-1460.

These chapels, one built prior to the Old Sacristy, one contemporary with it, and one built shortly later, take ideas from one another and try to improve upon them. The Medici used the idea of having a space in the church dedicated to their family and used as a mausoleum, but decided to make the space the sacristy instead of a chapel, and had it designed by Brunelleschi,

²⁹ Trachtenberg, 58-77.

one of the most highly sought after architects of the time, who had only recently completed the Barbadori chapel for their rivals. The Pazzi, upon seeing the Old Sacristy, obviously wanted the same basic design which was seen in the sacristy and had Brunelleschi fit it into the pre-existing space that was provided to the family by the church of Santa Croce.

Not only do these examples aid in defining the purpose of the Old Sacristy on a religious basis, as it is used as a mausoleum and a holy space, but it also explains why the Medici were so willing to support this project, given that it would help their public reputation as donors to the church. Patronage like that of the Old Sacristy was common and expected of powerful families at the time.

ARCHITECTURE OF THE OLD SACRISTY

The Old Sacristy (1419-1428) is located off the left transept of the church of San Lorenzo. This structure changed the way the world looked at architecture and the way architects during the Renaissance and thereafter would design their buildings. Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy utilized proportions, the unity of familiar architectural elements that could be seen around Florence, and the adaptation of the classical orders. It wasn't until Michelangelo constructed its counterpart, another sacristy directly opposite Brunelleschi's beginning in 1520, that the space became known as "the Old Sacristy."

Before I describe the physical details of the building, I would like to review the circumstances under which it was built. The church of San Lorenzo was undergoing a reconstruction lead by the "*popolani* [the people] of the parish with the prior of the chapter, Don Matteo di Bartolommeo Dolfini, as *capomaestro* [master builder]."³⁰ Saalman says that even though the aging prior Dolfini could have completed the project by his own original design,

³⁰ Saalman, 112.

without Giovanni di Bicci bringing in Brunelleschi, the new style Brunelleschi created complemented the changing political and economic powers of Florence for which the Medici had become responsible.³¹

Brunelleschi's involvement at this church began through his work with the Old Sacristy and the Medici family, which had also obtained patronage rights over the adjoining chapel at the south end of the transept.³² Having almost completed the Barbadori Chapel (1419-1423) and still engaged in building the dome of the Florentine Duomo, his talent was being proven to the public as well as to the Medici, who were hoping to gain power based on Brunelleschi's ability to dazzle people with his ingenuity and problem-solving abilities. The Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo would be the ultimate proof of his architectural talents and a way to showcase the power of the Medici family.

INFLUENCE OF MEDIEVAL ARCHITECTURE

The baptistery in Padua, seen in figure G, is one of the favored models that scholars cite for the Old Sacristy.³³ Architecturally speaking, the appearance is very similar, but there are some major differences that set Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy apart from the Paduan Baptistery. Upon looking at the interior of the Baptistery, it is obvious what the first difference would be: the walls of that space are covered with colorful frescos. Upon getting past the images on the wall, it becomes clear in the arches, pendentives, and dome, why scholars cite this place as inspiration for the Old Sacristy. Though hardly identical, this space does seem to be the model for the space I will describe as the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo.

³¹ Saalman, 116.

³² Saalman, 113.

³³ Among the scholars are Klotz, Saalman and Paoletti, all of which are referenced in this chapter.



Fig. G, *Paduan Baptistery*, 11th century.

When studying the design for Brunelleschi's sacristy, it is obvious that he had visited the baptistery in Padua or was at least aware of its layout prior to the Old Sacristy's construction. Could it be that Brunelleschi was so inspired by the building that he designed the Old Sacristy to be a critique of the baptistery in Padua in terms of its ornamentation? The frescos that adorn the walls of the Paduan baptistery were created by Giusto de' Menabuoi between 1376 and 1378. The Old Sacristy, begun nearly 40 years later, was, in its original design by Brunelleschi, to have very little in terms of ornamentation, be it sculpture or fresco. I believe that upon seeing the Paduan Baptistery, Brunelleschi was enamored with the architecture but distracted from its inherent beauty because of the frescos. The features such as the pendentives, dome, and arches had such a classical beauty that Brunelleschi felt they could stand alone without the interruption of additional elements of ornament or frescos and decided to incorporate those elements into the Old Sacristy. Each structure also utilizes the massing of volumes in similar ways, vertically—geometric entity upon geometric entity—creating another visual parallel between the two spaces.

DIVISION OF SPACE IN THE OLD SACRISTY

Brunelleschi is considered the pioneer in the field of linear perspective. Around 1417, Brunelleschi devised a mathematical system for displaying the illusion of space and distance on a flat surface. The first known paintings in geometric optical linear perspective were made by Brunelleschi around 1425.³⁴ Antonio di Tuccio Manetti described the use of linear perspective in two paintings in his biography on Brunelleschi. Manetti claimed Brunelleschi painted both the Florentine Baptistery as viewed frontally from the western portal of the unfinished cathedral as well as the Palazzo Vecchio as seen from its northwest corner. He had effectively painted what the eyes can see while mathematically rendering to perfection a three-dimensional space in two dimensions.³⁵

This early discovery by Brunelleschi points out his attention to space and mathematics, a key element in understanding Brunelleschi's approach to architecture. In the Old Sacristy, Brunelleschi effectively utilized the Vitruvian method of placing a circle inside of a square, or more correctly a sphere inside of a cube, and in using this humanistic ideal, managed to incorporate geometry and mathematics to create this space. The human form was inherent in architectural designs based on humanistic principles, just as the name would have you believe.³⁶

³⁴ For a good introductory survey of the topic, see Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr., *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

³⁵ Manetti, 42.

³⁶ Vitruvius, book III.i.3: "For if a man lies on his back with his arms and legs splayed out and the point of a compass is placed on the navel and a circle is drawn, the tips of the fingers of both hands and the tips of the toes would touch the circle. Likewise the shape of a square can be found in the body: for if you measure from the soles of the feet to the crown of the head and apply this measure to the horizontally outstretched arms, you will obtain the same breadth and height, just as on surfaces that are laid out as squares using mathematical instruments."

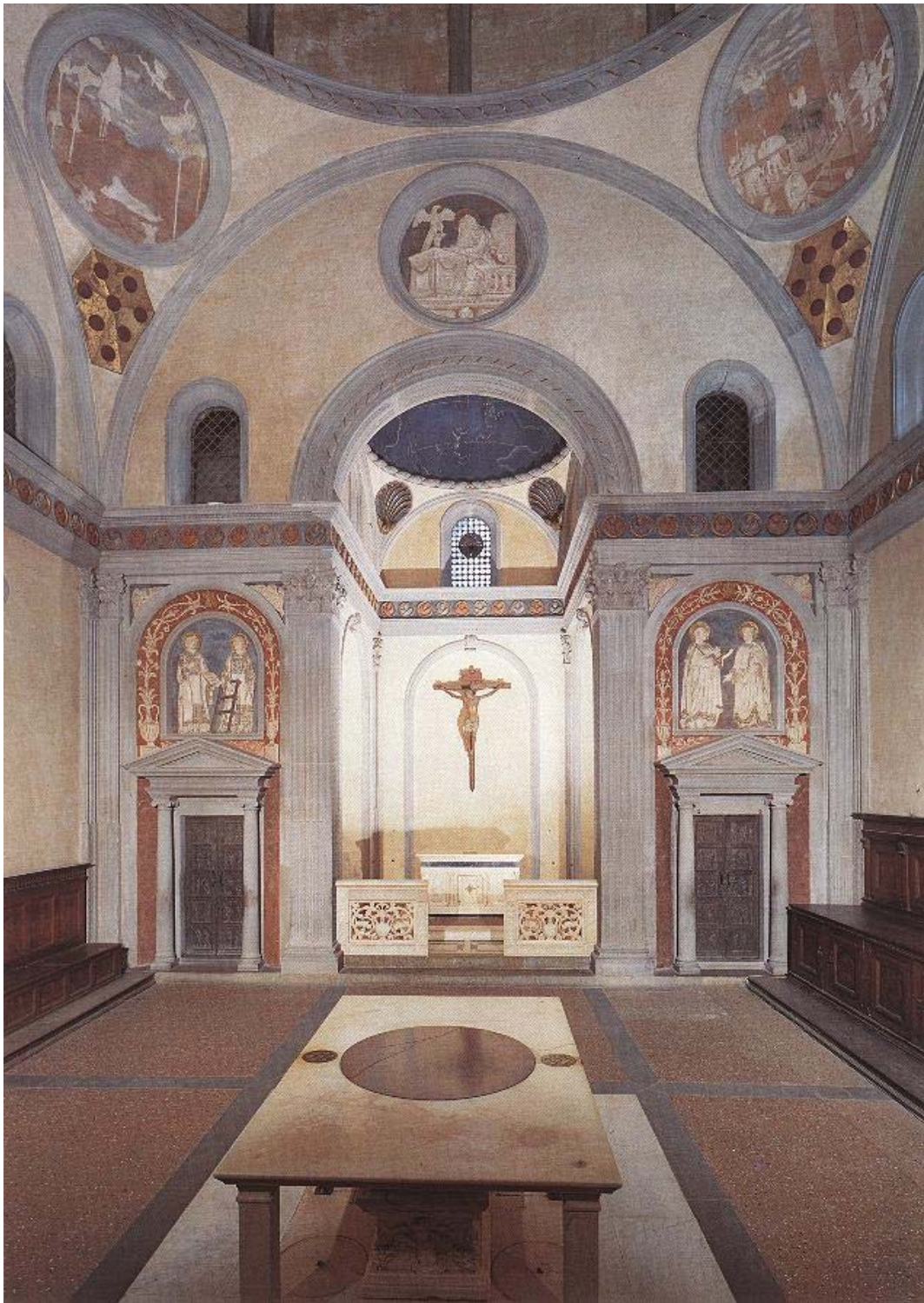


Fig. H, The interior of the Old Sacristy

It is important to understand the layout of the space in order to understand the role ornament currently plays. As seen in fig. H, the lower wall has corner pilasters, the semicircular areas above the entablature have interpolated pendentives, and the dome has clearly defined ribs ascending to a full semi-circle. The semi-circular arches climb above the four wall areas and above these sits the hemispherical dome, its shape echoed by the tondi below, the ring of oculi running around its base, and, at the top, the circle of the lantern. It all makes for a proportioned composition of basic geometric forms which support and complement each other and create an impression of both stability and, at the same time, movement.³⁷

WALLS

The articulation in the Old Sacristy was achieved by Brunelleschi's use of pietra serena, a gray stone. It is used to outline, in effect, the arches, pendentives, friezes, and sections of the dome on the interior of the Old Sacristy. The treatment of the walls of the Old Sacristy can be traced back to an earlier Gothic tradition. Klotz discussed the examples of Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce, where the mendicant orders used plain, undecorated stone to its full potential. The Dominicans and the Franciscans utilized this plain stone detailing in both buildings to provide "an expression of the monastic ideal of poverty."³⁸ According to Klotz, the omission of marble from the walls, instead having crudely cut stone or undecorated blocks, enhanced the monumental experience conveyed by the space it decorated.³⁹ Brunelleschi was, in fact, using the same Tuscan Gothic principles that were utilized in a great number of buildings that surrounded him in Florence. The difference in his architecture was the incorporation of classical elements, which I will describe in detail later.

³⁷ Klotz, 133.

³⁸ Klotz, 36.

³⁹ Klotz, 36.

The use of the slightly off-white color on the walls was Brunelleschi's way of incorporating his idea of classicism into the architecture. Other architects of this time had other ideas about the use of whitened walls. Lorenzo Ghiberti saw bareness and whiteness of the walls of some of his contemporaries, such as Brunelleschi, in a negative way. Klotz argued that "Ghiberti saw in the whiteness of the temples nothing but a sterility imposed by the barbaric asceticism of the early Christians."⁴⁰ Obviously, given the abundance of ornament during the Gothic period, this attitude was no longer one that dominated the Christian church and the patronage it provided. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Leon Battista Alberti acknowledged that Brunelleschi's idea of the bare walls was the most proper and correct, as I discussed in chapter 2.

Alberti understood architecture as a humanist. He referred to exposed structural elements as the "bones" and the walls as "skin," effectively utilizing Vitruvius' idea of the human body in architecture. As stated earlier, it is important to know that Alberti was not altogether against decoration and ornamentation. Confusing as it may seem through his contemporaries' feelings, we can deduce that Brunelleschi was a true "classicist" when it came to architectural clarity in the purity of what he was trying to achieve with the rather unornamented architecture of the Old Sacristy. Based on the fusion of classical features with his largely Tuscan Gothic architectural structure, we can conclude that Brunelleschi wanted to venture away from the architectural standards that surrounded him and experiment with a new more classicized form of architecture.

The typical building material used in classical antiquity was marble-covered brick. Brunelleschi, however, used no marble at all on his buildings with the exception of certain features of Florence's cathedral dome. The use of marble in those locations was predetermined

⁴⁰ Klotz, 49.

by architecture that was completed much earlier. But all other works built solely by Brunelleschi are constructed of sandstone such as pietra serena. Heinrich Klotz found it odd that Brunelleschi was the person many critics credited with the rebirth of classical architecture, yet he was not using the essential element to classical architecture: marble.⁴¹ As it relates to my thesis, this fact points to Brunelleschi's opposition to expensive marble or excessive ornament and conveys that he wished to create a space that showed both power and humility through architecture.

LARGE UMBRELLA DOME



Fig. I, The large and small domes of the Old Sacristy

The format used by Brunelleschi in creating the large 12-sided central umbrella dome had several of the influences that may have contributed to its design. A Roman influence can be

⁴¹ Klotz, 35.

found in the dome's form, where the influence of the Tuscan Gothic articulation with the *pietra serena* is also found. This displays the fusion of Classical and Gothic styles Brunelleschi experimented with in the Old Sacristy.

As far as the construction of this dome, Klotz cites the medieval Florentine Baptistery as the principal model in the way Brunelleschi added a strut above every rib which ran up to the lantern. This also served other important functions; it added strength to the ribs and intervening webs and carried the ring and lantern which replaced the Gothic center stone. Klotz says that by doing this, Brunelleschi linked the Florentine tradition with the Paduan Gothic tradition, creating an entirely new way of constructing a dome.⁴² This fusion of styles also demonstrates Brunelleschi's interest in different types of architecture that he molded to create his own style, which, in turn, paved the way for many Renaissance architects to utilize similar designs that might otherwise have never come to fruition. This speaks to Brunelleschi's aspiration to create architecture that was able to stand alone from ornament, enabling it to be unique from the structural design of architects that came before him. He wanted a distilled space where the simplicity and beauty of the architecture could be understood without the distraction that ornament causes.

CHOIR AREA

Adjacent to the main space of the sacristy is a choir area which is topped with a smaller frescoed dome. The choir area appears to be a smaller proportioned version of the main area of the sacristy in that Brunelleschi incorporated similar arches, pendentives—which include shells in the same position as the tondi in the main sacristy—and a dome over the central altar area.

⁴² Klotz, 140.

The incorporation of geometry is an important Renaissance element because symmetry and geometry, as I mentioned earlier in discussing the humanistic Vitruvian methods, are all primary elements of Renaissance architecture. The shell shapes seen in the pendentives are forms repeated in many other Renaissance architectural structures including the lantern of the dome of the Florentine Cathedral.

The lantern, as well as the three-niched choir, helps suggest the directionality of the viewers' eyes, focusing on a central important location. Mass would have been said in the choir area, and the focus would have been set on that altar, where the "host" or body and blood of Christ would be placed. The lantern would have illuminated the table in the center of the larger area of the sacristy, under which Giovanni di Bicci's tomb rests. This directionality and focus for the eyes was crucial in the design of both spaces.

SUMMARY

In this chapter I introduced the Old Sacristy, giving both a background of the patrons as well as the architect Brunelleschi. The layout and flow of the sacristy's original design helps convey the ideals that Brunelleschi was trying to achieve. Austere, clean, and pure, the Old Sacristy is in strict contrast to the busy International Gothic style of architecture that was prevalent in Europe around Brunelleschi's birth. Though there are some differences, it has been shown that Brunelleschi's style was influenced by local and nearby Romanesque architecture, instead of the International Gothic style that influenced many of Brunelleschi's contemporaries, such as Lorenzo Ghiberti.

At this point, before the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici, the Old Sacristy had very little in the way of ornamentation. The fluted pilasters were crowned with identical Corinthian capitals, scallop shells rested in the pendentives of the choir area, and a rope-like frame

surrounded each of the domes and the archway leading into the choir. This was the only ornamentation for which Brunelleschi, himself, was responsible. Other than that, the sacristy existed as a clean unornamented space.

The most important thing to realize from this chapter is best described by Saalman: “Filippo sought single-mindedly after simplicity, homogeneity and clarity of design along traditional lines, Cosimo enjoyed contrast, variety, richness of form and material, complex humanist allusion, and though always within the bounds of propriety and modesty, a certain ostentation.”⁴³ In the next chapter, I will revisit the Old Sacristy and discuss the ornamentation added by artists such as Donatello under the direction of Cosimo de’ Medici.

⁴³ Saalman, 150-151.

CHAPTER 4

THE OLD SACRISTY REVISITED: THE IMPACT OF DONATELLO AND COSIMO DE' MEDICI

In this chapter, I will be discussing the changes that took place to the Old Sacristy after the death of Giovanni di Bicci. The additional ornament that was added by Cosimo de' Medici is not limited to additions made by Donatello, though his are the most numerous and will make up the larger portion of this chapter.

SMALL DOME

The smaller, painted dome, has received much attention.⁴⁴ Scholars have debated the date in which it was painted, the meaning of the imagery, and the identity of the artist. James Beck, in his article on the subject, details his opinion that Leon Battista Alberti conceived of and painted this celestial “cielo” fresco sometime between 1435 and 1436.⁴⁵ In the absence of any official public record of the commission, hypotheses by scholars are speculative. If, in fact, the dates of Beck's proposal are correct, the sacristy would already have been under the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici as a result of the death of his father in 1429, and this additional decoration was probably not the intention of Giovanni di Bicci or Brunelleschi.

Dale Kent explains that during the time of the painting of the small dome, many prominent Florentine citizens such as Palla Strozzi, Leonardo Bruni, and Roberto de' Rossi—Cosimo's teacher—were greatly intrigued by astrology. Accordingly, subject matter like this is not uncommon for a sacred space. The fact that Cosimo was not only studying, but also using, astrology in his affairs and decision making explains the presence of this otherwise out of place

⁴⁴ Scholars who have written concerning the dates of the fresco in the dome are Isabella Lapi Ballerini, James Beck, Alessandro Parronchi, and Aby Warburg.

⁴⁵ Beck, 13.

astrological ornamentation.⁴⁶ I believe it is important to see that Cosimo understood that this astrological theme was related to Christianity. In his cell at the Convent of San Marco, a fresco of the *Adoration of the Magi* by Fra Angelico and Benozzo Gozzoli includes a man holding an astrological instrument.⁴⁷ Although astrology played an important role in Cosimo's life, it did not detract from his faith in Christianity, but enhanced it, and need not to be looked at as pagan, but simply classical.



Fig. J, The painted dome in the choir of the Old Sacristy

Seen in figure J, the scene is that of a night sky with astrological symbols and constellations. Many scholars have tried to pinpoint the exact date being portrayed in the image based on the position of the stars. A variety of dates have been proposed: one relating to the birth of Piero di Cosimo de' Medici on July 16, 1416,⁴⁸ although the painting would have

⁴⁶ Kent, 192.

⁴⁷ Kent, 192.

⁴⁸ Parronchi, 134-146.

postdated this event by a decade or more. Another scholar claimed it represented July 9, 1422,⁴⁹ and another the date of July 6, 1439, when the Council of Florence was concluded.⁵⁰ And finally, a more recent suggestion posits the day July 4 or 5, 1442.⁵¹

The date of July 4, 1442 holds an important connection with Florentine history. This is when René d'Anjou arrived in the city. René was the king of Naples who influenced Cosimo de' Medici's decision to open the first public library in Europe and have the University teach Greek. This in turn opened the minds of Florentines to ancient Greek concepts of life and likely contributed to the classical elements later added to the Old Sacristy by Cosimo as well as throughout the church of San Lorenzo. The information about the influence of Greek culture on Cosimo's design decisions holds important implications for the ornamentation of the Old Sacristy as a whole, while the fresco also serves the practical purpose of adding color and light to an otherwise dark space in the sacristy.

TOMB

When entering the Old Sacristy, one of the first things visitors see is the tomb located in the center of the room. Because this room was not only meant to be a mausoleum, but also a sacristy, the tomb is covered with a table to make the room more functional as the latter. The sarcophagus is generally attributed to Brunelleschi's adopted son, Andrea di Lazzaro Cavalcanti, called Buggiano, although the designing mind seems to have been Donatello's.⁵²

Because we can date the tomb itself to no later than 1433, as declared in a tax document by Brunelleschi, we know that Cosimo and Lorenzo would have had control over the construction of the tomb, as their father died in 1429. Saalman suggested that it is entirely

⁴⁹ Warburg, 34.

⁵⁰ Bing, 46.

⁵¹ *Il giornale dell'arte*, 46.

⁵² Crum, 143.

possible that Giovanni did not want such an elaborate tomb, but possibly just a modest stone on the floor of the sacristy marking his place of burial.⁵³ Certainly such a tomb would have coincided more appropriately with the overall sense of space and with the limited architectural ornamentation that Brunelleschi envisioned, rather than the elaborate tomb that in which Giovanni now rests.



Fig. K, Buggiano, *Tomb of Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici*, Old Sacristy

Another significant feature of the Old Sacristy is the table that covers the sarcophagus of Giovanni di Bicci. This table is difficult to date. Though it was probably intended from the start, all we know for certain is that “it was in place by July 1459 when the canons held a chapter meeting in the sacristy... In his tax declaration of 1433 Brunelleschi speaks of ‘a tomb and an

⁵³ Saalman, 132.

altar and several other works which [Andrea di Lazzaro] made for Cosimo de' Medici and other citizens.' The table could be among the 'other works.'"⁵⁴

ALTAR IN THE CHOIR

According to Manetti, "Il Buggiano, ...evidently produced the altar of the scarsella, which contained Brunelleschi's treasured relief representing the Sacrifice of Isaac and the centrally located marble sarcophagus."⁵⁵ This interesting fact suggests that a Brunelleschi sculpture was used as ornamentation in the Old Sacristy, and Manetti is hardly the only writer to attest that the sculpture's original location was on the altar table. Manetti also documents this in the 1480s, and according to Saalman "it seems probable that it was there from the beginning, either given or sold to Giovanni or Cosimo by Filippo for this very purpose."⁵⁶ If this is true, this ornament was possibly the only additional ornamentation that Brunelleschi felt was acceptable.

Crum saw the altar and the table over the tomb as unifying elements in the Old Sacristy and described his feelings as such:

As the table is formally and iconographically united to the architecture of the sacristy, so too is it united to the adjacent altar chapel. While the table is centrally located in the space in which it stands, the alignment of its rectangular form serves to unite the sacristy proper and the altar chapel. There is thus created an important visual and symbolic axis, facilitated by the opening in the altar rail, between the tomb of Giovanni di Bicci and the altar.⁵⁷

The alignment that the table presents is a crucial factor in the interpretation of the Old Sacristy, as we can see. Visual harmony and unity were important to Brunelleschi, and

⁵⁴ Saalman, 132-133.

⁵⁵ Manetti, 42.

⁵⁶ Saalman, 133.

⁵⁷ Crum, 150-52.

according to Crum, this table would have enhanced that experience in the Old Sacristy; however, it was not the intention of Giovanni di Bicci to have such an elaborate tomb. Indeed this was one of the first major changes in the aesthetic of the Old Sacristy under the direction of Cosimo de' Medici. Brunelleschi must have been willing to comply with Cosimo during these early stages of his control, as he could not have known that so much of the sacristy would eventually change as well.

INTRODUCTION TO DONATELLO AND HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH BRUNELLESCHI

Donato di Niccolò dei Bardi, commonly called Donatello, meaning little Donato, was born in Florence around 1387. He began training in the Florentine workshops during the late fourteenth century, when the transition away from the Gothic style of art was just beginning.⁵⁸ It is unknown to what extent Donatello trained with Brunelleschi, and it is more widely thought that most of his training came from Ghiberti.⁵⁹ The significance of this latter probability would become apparent when Donatello and Brunelleschi begin to work simultaneously on the Old Sacristy, around the year 1435. An apprenticeship under Ghiberti would make sense, since Donatello displayed many of Lorenzo's principles when it came to architectural ornamentation, as I will discuss shortly.

The intertwining of Brunelleschi and Donatello's lives is well noted in many primary and secondary sources, including Vasari, who speaks of their great affection for each other near the start of this *Life* of Brunelleschi.⁶⁰ Vasari respected both men and their work without deifying either of them, unlike Manetti, who was partial to the work of Brunelleschi over that of Donatello.

⁵⁸ Bertelà, 3.

⁵⁹ Beck, 11.

⁶⁰ Vasari, <http://www.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariBrun.html>.

The relationship between Brunelleschi and Donatello in the first two decades of the fifteenth century has been fairly well documented. Roger Tarr summarizes it as follows:

First of all, there is the aetiologizing testimony of Manetti in his description of Brunelleschi's life, which explains both men's interests in the remains of antiquity through a trip to Rome, when, like "treasure hunters" as Manetti says they were called, they excavated the ancient city in search of sculptures and buildings of the Roman past. Second, there is the anecdotal evidence of their acquaintance as witnessed in their mutual involvement in the unkind joke of the fat woodworker, recorded by Manetti, and in their rivalry, described by Vasari, in a story adapted from Pliny, of two crucifixes when Brunelleschi criticized Donatello's as being more like the figure of a peasant on the cross than that of the Son of Man. Third, there is the factual documentation of their collaboration on the aborted project for a gigantic figure for one of the buttresses of Florence Cathedral, commissioned in 1415 and for which some kind of model encased in gilded lead was made. Fourth, there is the less secure record of their further collaboration on the statues of St. Peter and St. Mark for Or San Michele, found in the *Libro di Antonio Billi*, in the *Anonimo Magliabecchiano* and in Vasari.⁶¹

I would like to begin with the first account by Tarr of the two artists making the journey to Rome. The only evidence that this event occurred was supplied by Manetti, who wrote as follows in his biography of Brunelleschi: "Many in Rome believed he and Donatello were treasure hunters while they were in Rome because they were 'here one day and there the next' and they did stumble upon gold pieces, cameos, carved stones, and other items of value every once and a while."⁶² The two were not exactly searching for gold or other valuable treasures of the past, but rather for architectural and sculptural treasures they could use in their work. This trip to Rome must have been pivotal for Brunelleschi, in his efforts to revive Classical elements in the architecture of Florence, which had for so long been dominated by the Gothic tradition.

The second sentence of Tarr's statement points to the two artists' uneven relationship. The story of the fat woodworker was recorded by Manetti, not in his biography of Brunelleschi,

⁶¹ Tarr, 101.

⁶² Manetti, 50.

but in the *Novella of the Fat Woodworker* (*Novella del Grasso Legnaiuolo*).⁶³ The story of the Fat Woodworker displays the unfailing collaboration between Donatello and Brunelleschi that was needed in order to pull off the prank, and suggests that the two were, in fact, friends in the same social circle.

The subsequent story recounted by Tarr, the one of the wooden cross that Brunelleschi criticized, describes the differing approaches each artist took towards sculpture. In fact, these differing opinions will be seen once again when it comes to the ornamentation of the Old Sacristy under the direction of Cosimo de' Medici. According to Vasari, Brunelleschi felt his work was of better quality and superior to that of Donatello, which suggests that the two men held divergent opinions about artistic quality and ornamentation that would later become apparent in the Old Sacristy.

The final two sentences of Tarr's summary note that the two artists collaborated on potentially three other projects (a gigantic figure for one of the buttresses of Florence Cathedral and the statues of St. Peter and St. Mark for Or San Michele) prior to the construction of the Old Sacristy. Assuming that all three projects were in fact collaborations between the two artists, we can begin to agree with Tarr that Donatello had a student-and-teacher relationship with Brunelleschi and that the two worked together in order to further each others' careers.

DONATELLO'S WORK AS A SCULPTOR

Of course, Donatello was not wholly dependent on anyone for the creation of his own sculptures. As I mentioned in chapter 2, Donatello created the Niche of St. Louis at Orsanmichele, but he was also busy working on different sculptural works during and around the

⁶³ Brunelleschi and his colleagues, Donatello included, planned a practical joke on the fat woodworker called Manetto for not showing up to a dinner party. The group successfully tricked the man into believing he was someone else through an elaborate series of events.

time of the construction of the Old Sacristy. In the years prior to working in the sacristy, Donatello completed his sculptures of *St. John* originally located adjacent to the main door of Florence Cathedral (1408-15), *St. Mark* of Orsanmichele (1411-13), his marble *David* (c. 1412), the *St. George* of Orsanmichele (1416-17), and the *Pazzi Madonna* (1417-18). Additionally, as Tarr pointed out, “From as early as December 1415, at the same time as he was most likely working on the *St. George*, Donatello had also been at work on the first of five marble figures of the Old Testament prophets for the Campanile... These figures are securely identified as the *Beardless and Bearded prophets*, the *Abraham and Isaac*, the *Jeremiah* and the *Habbakuk*.”⁶⁴ All of those sculptures were complete by January, 1436.

G. Gaeta Bertelà, an expert on Donatello, notes that a “Gothic quality, although tempered by a moral intensity and fierce spiritual pride foreign to Ghiberti, pervades the Marble *David* of 1409 in the Bargello.”⁶⁵ Bertelà describes the influences that surrounded Donatello early in his career, and it becomes clear during which period he was being influence by certain artists. For instance, she writes of how two similar sculptures of prophets for the Florence Cathedral completed during the years 1406-1409, show two separate influences, the smaller being more Gothic in style and therefore influenced by Ghiberti—the larger being “closer to the classical dignity” of another famous Italian Renaissance sculptor, Nanni di Banco.⁶⁶ Tarr points out that some scholars believe that the *St. Mark* was possibly sculpted in collaboration with Brunelleschi.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Tarr, 126.

⁶⁵ Bertelà, 5.

⁶⁶ Bertelà, 5.

⁶⁷ Tarr, 120.

DONATELLO'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE OLD SACRISTY

The first phase of construction of the Old Sacristy spanned from 1419-1428; but, it was not fully complete and decorated to Cosimo's specifications until around 1440. During that time Donatello would complete several ornamental additions to the sacristy, including eight tondi, a frieze of terracotta seraphim and cherubim, and two reliefs flanking the choir area above a pair of sculpted bronze doors. I will describe each of these elements in this section.

Because of the lack of documentation on the decoration of the Old Sacristy following the architectural completion in 1428, almost all the dates for Donatello's additions to the space are much debated by scholars. Bertelà, for one, claims that Donatello was directly involved with the Old Sacristy from 1435 to around 1443.⁶⁸ In contrast, Paoletti explains:

Although we have no way of knowing for sure what decoration may have been contemplated for the sacristy as part of its initial architectural design, the evidence indicates that the building was finished before any decoration was attempted. Given Donatello's stay in Rome in 1432-33 and the Medicis' exile from Florence from October 1433 to October 1434, Donatello may, like Buggiano, have worked on the decoration of the sacristy between 1429 and 1432, or between late 1434 and his departure for Padua in 1443. Given the extensive nature of his sculpture there in stucco and bronze, the later dating seems the more reasonable one, especially in view of the outstanding commissions in Donatello's shop during the late 1420s and early 1430s.⁶⁹

If we accept Paoletti's proposal that Donatello worked on the decoration of the Old Sacristy between 1434 and 1443, then it should be clear the patronage was Cosimo's. This circumstance is important because it suggests that the sculptural elements that caused such a rift between Donatello and Brunelleschi may not have been intended by the original patron. Brunelleschi would have been completely finished with his portion of the Old Sacristy towards the latter part of the 1420s and possibly just into the early 1430s.

⁶⁸ Bertelà, 16.

⁶⁹ Paoletti, 47.

Cosimo seems to have been enthusiastic about the ongoing work in the Old Sacristy and enjoyed visiting the site to aid in its direction. According to Vasari, “Cosimo pressed this work forward with greater ardor, and while one part was being begun, he would have another finished. Looking on the work as a pastime, he was almost always there, and it was his solicitude that caused Filippo to finish the sacristy, and Donato to make the stucco-work, with the stone ornaments for those little doors and the doors of bronze.”⁷⁰ With this information it is now clear that Brunelleschi was still in the process of finishing the sacristy while Donatello was creating the ornamental elements, leading me to believe, if we accept Vasari’s account as fact, that the earlier dates of 1429-1432 are more likely for Donatello’s work in the Old Sacristy. Cosimo’s constant presence, like that of a supervisor over his employees, would possibly have made the completion of the sacristy quicken, but would have also exacerbated the conflict between Brunelleschi’s and Cosimo’s visions of the sacristy.

In fact, Roger Crum points out that while the sacristy was under the patronage of Cosimo, it was clear that Brunelleschi was no longer in control of or happy with the way the sacristy was being ornamented.⁷¹ I point this out to suggest that Giovanni di Bicci was likely responsible solely for the architecture of the sacristy, the only part which Brunelleschi designed and was pleased with. Brunelleschi envisioned and realized bare space with very little in the way of ornamentation, and he was discontented with the additions proposed by the Medici sons.

DONATELLO’S TONDI AND FRIEZE

Donatello was responsible for the two sets of bronze doors and the terracotta ornament located above them, the alternating series of seraphim and cherubim in the frieze, the four

⁷⁰ Vasari, <<http://www.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariBrun.html>>.

⁷¹ Crum, 148.

Evangelists in the lunette tondi, and the four scenes in the pendentive tondi, which were originally meant to be blank roundels similar to those Brunelleschi used in previous structures.⁷²

The lunette tondi, located just below the arches in the main sacristy, feature portraits of the four Evangelists while the pendentive tondi, which rest just above the Medici coats of arms in the four corner pendentives, feature four scenes from the life of St. John the Evangelist.⁷³



Fig. L, Donatello's pendentive tondi, Old Sacristy, (top left) *Raising of Drusiana*, (top right) *Martyrdom of St. John*, (bottom left) *St. John on Patmos*, (bottom right) *Ascension of St. John*.

⁷² Crum, 146.

⁷³ Crum, 153. According to Crum, "One of the most interesting discoveries of the recent restoration was that Donatello made these tondi in situ," meaning he created the stucco pieces directly on the wall.

These stucco reliefs were painted in blues, reds, and in golden, almost sepia tones, leaving the prominent figures and some ornamental decoration in white, making them stand out in sharp relief. The arrangement and choice of imagery are indicative of what the patrons wanted the sacristy to convey. The Medici included the images of the Evangelists as well as other saints associated with their family. The tondi that feature St. John the Evangelist, patron saint of Giovanni di Bicci and his grandson Giovanni di Cosimo (b. 1421), were meant to create a direct association with the patron and his descendants.

The two types of tondi in the Old Sacristy, those of the lunette and pendentives, have two very different functions. The original placement of the unsculpted roundels in the pendentives served an architectural function that bound the arches on the sides of the pendentives to the dome above. The lunette tondi, which were added later by Cosimo, serve no real architectural function other than to fill in a space that would otherwise have been an empty section beneath an outlined arch. Because these tondi had no architectural integrity, it is not surprising that Brunelleschi would have been unhappy with their placement.



Fig. M-1, Donatello's lunette tondi, Old Sacristy, (left) *Evangelist Matthew*, (right) *Evangelist Luke*.



Fig. M-2, Donatello's lunette tondi continued, Old Sacristy, (left) *Evangelist John*, (right) *Evangelist Mark*.

Regarding the pendentives Klotz wrote:

The pendentives which open out towards the dome lead down into the corners where the broken pilasters provide the only supports for the architrave...The supporting strength of the building develops from the corners and spreads upwards and outwards through the pendentives to the dome itself. The walls themselves have no pilasters, for above them the arches stretch upwards, each with a tondo at its highest point.⁷⁴

This not only helps us to visualize the space, but practically allows us to feel the function of the architecture. Instead of having pilasters running up from the side walls, Brunelleschi chose to have three small consoles support the architrave, thus minimizing ornamental features for the sake of architectural purity. The Medici coats of arms are tightly compressed in the middle of the pendentive moldings just below the tondi. Because of their distinct shape, these coats of arms fit neatly into that area, emphasizing their form and color. Even though the sculpture in the tondi and the coats of arms were likely not Brunelleschi's intention, their

⁷⁴ Klotz, 133.

addition does enhance the experience of the room for the viewer and aids in emphasizing the geometrical elements featured in the coats of arms.



Fig. N. Donatello, *Seraphim and Cherubim*, frieze, Old Sacristy

Thanks to Donatello, the horizontal frieze that bisects the sacristy features alternating seraphim and cherubim in terracotta. These were painted red and blue, with gold frames. I believe it is conceivable that the frieze would have been part of Brunelleschi's original design, as it helps separate the cube that makes up the lower portion of the sacristy from the upper portion, adding to the "skin and bones" attribute mentioned in chapter 3. However, it is likely that the frieze in its original design would not have included the terracotta seraphim and cherubim, but rather have been something similar to the frieze or molding that is utilized above the pendentives in Brunelleschi's Hospital of the Innocents, its function being only to separate the different sections of the building to aid the viewer in navigating the spaces visually.

DONATELLO'S DOORS

The doors that flank the outer portion of the sacristy's choir were designed by Donatello and, curiously, met with negative responses from two famous Quattrocento writers. As Paoletti notes: "Shortly after they were made, Filarete, in his treatise on architecture, denigrated the

figures of the individual panels as ‘fencers’ (*schermidori*), and Manetti, in his life of Brunelleschi, castigated them and their heavy surrounding aedicules for having ruined the pristine clarity of Brunelleschi's architecture.”⁷⁵ These responses show two different alleged flaws with the doors. Filarete refers to the sculpted figures in the panels, which feature forty apostles and doctors of the church spread over twenty panels, as “fencers,” most likely because each individual panel holds two characters standing opposite and sometimes gesticulating toward each other. Each character is basically upright, either facing or in some cases turning away from the other character in the panel, with whom he is interacting. The compositions are nearly the same in every panel, making the characters seem similar from a distance. Only upon close inspection can one make out who the figures represent based on what they are holding or wearing, or some other identifying feature.



Fig. O, Donatello, (left) *Door of the Martyrs*, (right) *Door of the Apostles*, Old Sacristy

⁷⁵ Paoletti, 39.

Walker notes that many scholars attribute the heavy marble door frames to Michelozzo rather than Donatello. Michelozzo, another early Italian Renaissance architect and sculptor, as well as Donatello's former partner, was in the process of supplanting Brunelleschi as the most prominent architect in Florence. His architectural prowess had become so respected that Michelozzo succeeded Brunelleschi in supervising the Florentine Cathedral in 1446, when Brunelleschi died. In Walker's opinion, however, "Michelozzo never approached Brunelleschi in originality or genius, and these porticoes are an abomination, squeezed in tightly between the tops of the doors and reliefs above."⁷⁶ The clumsy interventions in the pre-existing space of the sacristy was enough to provoke Brunelleschi to cut ties with Donatello.⁷⁷ Although it was Michelozzo who was most likely responsible for the door frames, he and Donatello were working closely together, even collaborating on various projects, beginning around 1425. Apparently, the ornament for which Donatello was responsible had been adding up in Brunelleschi's mind like one insult after another, and when Michelozzo added the cumbersome door frames, his association with Donatello likely prompted Brunelleschi to cut ties with his old friend. Manetti mentions that several sonnets were written by Brunelleschi distancing himself from any involvement in Donatello's ornamentation of the sacristy. Unfortunately none of these survive today; however, in another poem attributed to Brunelleschi he addresses Donatello:

Tell me frankly, Donato,
who is more worthy of praise:
he who in the lists blows the trumpet,
or he who clashes most in the fight?

But you, who are so proud of your many triumphs,
should also silence that chatterbox crowd
and go to work in peace;
then you will gather great store

⁷⁶ Walker, 190.

⁷⁷ Walker, 190-191.

of the most worthy praises,
because then you will be what in truth you are
and do yourself most good.⁷⁸

Though this poem can be interpreted in various ways, the most accepted interpretation suggests that Brunelleschi was telling Donatello that even though he is getting praise for his work from many critics, he should not be boastful and simply be a sculptor for himself, meaning he should sculpt from his heart, not just sculpt what gets him the most recognition.⁷⁹ While we cannot be sure that the poem is related to events occurring at the Old Sacristy, we do know from Manetti that Brunelleschi and Donatello were quarrelling over the sacristy during the time it was written. Manetti claims that the door commission caused Donatello to become arrogant, and upon finding out that Brunelleschi was displeased with his sculptural additions of the bronze doors, Donatello and others retaliated and began to criticize Brunelleschi.⁸⁰ It is likely that the poem was written in direct relation to that incident. In Walker's opinion, because of Donatello's growing involvement "beyond straightforward sculpture into areas that have been called decorative or pictorial architecture... the two old friends went their separate ways."⁸¹

According to Bertelà, this rejection of Brunelleschi's wishes for the design of the Old Sacristy may have also been intentional. She says:

They [the saints and martyrs on the bronze doors] meet, they engage in discussion, and in the heat of their arguments they appear to detain and pursue one another. Every scene is animated by an acute dynamic tension, and for the first time in the Renaissance, space is shown as infinite. In this way... Donatello laid the foundations of modern impressionistic sculpture, but he also broke dramatically with the aesthetic canons of Brunelleschi, so that to the great

⁷⁸ Walker, 190.

⁷⁹ Walker, 190.

⁸⁰ Manetti, 108.

⁸¹ Walker, 190-191.

architect and the intellectual milieu of which he was the leader, such works seemed little less than provocation.⁸²

Thus Bertelà sees the characters on the panels quite differently than Filarete. She respects the qualities of the interaction between the two figures in each panel, while also noticing the infinite space which each set of characters seems to occupy. The blank spaces that serve as the backgrounds for these images are certainly unusual, as most earlier relief panels had at least attempted to show scale and hierarchy by including some sort of background. In this way, Donatello made the apostles, doctors of the church, and the martyrs seem larger than life while also humanizing them by attributing tension to their postures. The backlash from contemporary critics was likely due to the novelty of their style, whose influence could not be predicted. Be that as it may, some contemporary viewers evidently had negative views about their quality, and it is likely that Brunelleschi did as well, given what we know from Vasari about his criticism of Donatello's wooden crucifix.⁸³

Above the doors are two large arches, each of which features a pair of martyrs, seen in figure Q. On the left are *St. Stephen and St. Lawrence*—name saint of San Lorenzo and his frequent companion in Christian iconography—and on the right are *St. Cosmas and St. Damian*. The latter two saints were both medical doctors, and were the patron saints of the Medici family.⁸⁴ The use of saints and martyrs as subject matter was hardly uncommon during the time of the ornamentation above the doors, as well as the reliefs on the doors themselves. Around that same time period, Ghiberti was working on his East Doors of the Baptistery, the so-called *Gates of Paradise* (1425-1452), while another prominent Renaissance sculptor, Luca della Robbia, was

⁸² Bertelà, 18.

⁸³ Walker, 189.

⁸⁴ Opera Medicea Laurenziana Webpage,
<http://www.operamedicealaurenziana.it/eng/basilica/schedeOpere/sacrestia.asp>.

creating his doors for the sacristy of the Florentine Cathedral (1442-1475), both of which contain saints and martyrs.⁸⁵ It is possible, then, that because the subject was in vogue at the time of the doors' creation, Cosimo would have asked Donatello for something similar. By doing so, he compromised Brunelleschi's original idea of an unornamented sacristy, but, as we shall see, he also set the stage for greater compromises to come.



Fig. P, Donatello, (left) *St. Stephen and Lawrence*, and (right) *St. Cosmas and Damian*, located above the bronze doors, Old Sacristy

SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have discussed the interventions that Donatello and others undertook at the Old Sacristy under the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici. From the fresco of the choir to the insertion of a decorative frieze, and from the addition of sculpture inside the tondi to the placement of the Medici coat of arms, these alterations profoundly affected the original Brunelleschian space. Some of these alterations were already controversial in their time, and the

⁸⁵ Paoletti, 58.

disputes that ensued most likely soured the relationship between Brunelleschi and Donatello. After all is said and done, the resulting space stands as a unique display for two widely differing attitudes about the role of architectural ornamentation.

In my final chapter, I will account for the changes in architectural ornamentation that occurred in the Old Sacristy. By discussing the context in which these changes took place, I will explain the overall effect that they had on the Old Sacristy as we know it today.

CHAPTER 5

THE CONTRASTING VIEWS OF ORNAMENT: EXPLANATION OF THE CHANGES IN THE OLD SACRISTY

The contrast between Brunelleschi and Donatello's work was summarized by Saalman: "Filippo sought single-mindedly after simplicity, homogeneity and clarity of design along [his restrained all-antica interpretation of] traditional lines, Cosimo enjoyed contrast, variety, richness of form and material, complex humanist allusion, and though always within the bounds of propriety and modesty, a certain ostentation."⁸⁶ Overall, I agree with this description. Where it comes short is as an explanation of the evolution of the space. Now that I have described the early state of the Old Sacristy as patronized by Giovanni di Bicci and conceived by Brunelleschi, as well as a later state that displays Cosimo de' Medici's influence and the ornamentation of Donatello and others, explaining these changes in light of both aesthetic considerations and patronage remains the subject of this final chapter.

Brunelleschi was concerned with creating a sacristy where the understanding of spirituality was communicated through the simplicity and beauty of the architecture, not through figurative storytelling as featured in the ornament commissioned by Cosimo. There are two important buildings within Brunelleschi's early oeuvre that point to the use of unornamented wall surfaces. Though he utilized roundels across the facade of the Hospital of the Innocents (1419-1427), they were originally designed to be simple, concave blank circles. It wasn't until 1490 that Andrea della Robbia was commissioned to fill them in with the glazed terracotta infant figures seen in place today.⁸⁷ Similarly, the Barbadori Chapel, which was also constructed around 1419-1427, contains roundels that rest between the arches of the pendentives. The

⁸⁶ Saalman, 150-151.

⁸⁷ Saalman, 48, 64.

roundels seem to fit just inside the molding of the arches and the dome above, making them appear to have a supporting function for the dome. This is reminiscent of what we see in the Old Sacristy. In all three cases, ornamentation is restrained and controlled by the structural logic of the buildings.



Fig. Q, Brunelleschi, *Hospital of the Innocents*, Florence, 1419-1427

The fact that in both preceding buildings the roundels existed, but were intentionally left unsculpted—or unpainted as the case may be—only supports my assertion that Brunelleschi, in the years leading up to his commission at the Old Sacristy, was developing a clean, unornamented fusion of Classical, Gothic, and Romanesque architecture. Giovanni di Bicci was no doubt impressed with the clean aesthetic at the Hospital of the Innocents, as he hired him in the very same year to create his sacristy at San Lorenzo. As I mentioned previously, the only architectural ornaments in the Old Sacristy that was completed under the direction of Giovanni di Bicci and Brunelleschi were the Corinthian capitals on the fluted pilasters, the scallop shell shapes in the choir area, the ornamental rope that surrounds the domes and arch just outside the choir area, and very likely unsculpted roundels where the pendentive tondi are now located. All

additional ornament was completed after Cosimo de' Medici became patron. So why, then, did Cosimo feel that additional ornament was necessary for the Old Sacristy after the completion of the basic architectural structure that was under the direction of his father?

Clearly, Cosimo and, to a lesser extent, Lorenzo de' Medici, did not deem the sparsely decorated space worthy of its function as either a sacristy or a mausoleum for their father. Were they simply trying to make it more lavish or "ostentatious," as Saalman observed, to impress their contemporaries and display their wealth? I believe the commission for the bronze doors by Donatello is one of the primary examples of how Cosimo was utilizing the space to display the family's wealth. However, I do not believe this was his only intention. The lack of ornamentation, other than where it was deemed necessary in order to articulate the space, was inherent in Tuscan Gothic architecture. It is possible, with the influx of the highly ornamented International Gothic style, that Cosimo wanted something different from Brunelleschi's unornamented style—something more ornate. The figures Donatello used for the additional ornament all denote the family's tie to the Old Sacristy. The use of St. John the Evangelist in reference to Giovanni di Bicci and Giovanni di Cosimo, as well as the Sts. Cosmas and Damian, the patron saints of the Medici family, are meant to inform all who enter who is in the tomb in the center of the sacristy and by whom the space was commissioned. Clearly the additional coats of arms served the very same function, but in the key of heraldry, rather than spirituality. Innovative sculpting techniques that took perspective into account were also used by Donatello in the tondi, as they were meant to be seen from below. Having this new knowledge present in the sacristy would also add an element of both prestige and intellect to what was an otherwise unimpressive space in the mind of Cosimo. Each of these reasons helps explain why he commissioned additional ornamentation in the Old Sacristy.

Eugenio Battisti discussed the ornamental contradiction present in the sacristy as follows: “Certainly the decoration [added after the death of Giovanni] does not coincide with the supporting elements. No doubt this marks a break (and perhaps not for the better) with the Gothic system of design, in which, at least during a notable period of experimentation, structure itself became the real ornament.”⁸⁸ I agree with Battisti that Cosimo’s additional ornamental elements detract from the Tuscan Gothic articulation of the space. In combining the Classical proportions and vocabulary with the Gothic syntax of the space, Brunelleschi was, in fact, continuing the experimentation seen previously in both the Barbadori Chapel and the Hospital of the Innocents. All told, in the Old Sacristy, Brunelleschi devised a classically-proportioned space, ornamented with a minimum of classical vocabulary, all of which was articulated through a substantially Gothic syntax.

I do not agree with Battisti’s suggestion that the additional ornamental elements were “not for the better” of the sacristy as a whole. Surely, they were out of place in comparison to Tuscan Gothic architecture; however, what they did to the space changed the way future architects would view architecture and architectural ornament. Essentially, the resulting hybrid interior of the Old Sacristy became the pivot between Gothic and what would later be known as Renaissance architecture. It is no coincidence that, at a later date, even the empty tondi of the Barbadori Chapel and the Hospital of the Innocents were filled to enrich the wall articulation in keeping with newer, more Renaissance notions of ornamentation. Although the ornamentation ordered by Cosimo de’ Medici ruined Brunelleschi’s idea for a perfectly balanced Old Sacristy, it also launched a new architectural form and gave meaning and an aesthetic of ornateness which would lead to what we now call Renaissance architecture.

⁸⁸ Battisti, 79.

Socio-political factors also influenced the architecture and architectural ornament of the Old Sacristy. The 1300s were generally a miserable time in Florence, characterized by plague, war and famine. The changing of political power in cities like Milan and Naples brought an influx of foreign figures, namely German and French, into power. With them came what scholars call the International Gothic style of architecture. Though this wasn't the first time Italy had been introduced to the Gothic—one thinks of the style promoted by the earlier Mendicant orders—the association that Gothic had with new political powers certainly accelerated the movement. Frank D. Prager and Gustina Scaglia in their book, *Brunelleschi: Studies of His Technology and Inventions*, wrote about a backlash against International Gothic architecture. During the Trecento in Florence, instead of embracing the new and highly ornamented architecture, many artists and architects opted for an “anti-gothic or conservative style” that consisted of the renewal of classical and humanist architectural styles.⁸⁹ Arguments about this matter among officials in the city who were involved with architectural commissions were prevalent. A specific case mentioned by Prager and Scaglia occurred during the construction of the dome for the Florentine Cathedral, which Brunelleschi was eventually charged with. The inconsistencies in the more Gothic and more Romanesque styles proposed a problem for the integrity of the dome as well as irregularities throughout the cathedral. Remarkably, the citizens of Florence who had seen designs for the cathedral preferred the less Gothic architectural approach.⁹⁰ In sum, Florentine architecture during the late Trecento and early Quattrocento was characterized by two contrasting modes of ornamentation. To a certain extent, the Old Sacristy straddled both: at first, it was a reaction to the elaborate ornamentation of the International

⁸⁹ Prager, 4.

⁹⁰ Prager, 7.

Gothic, and then under Cosimo it succumbed to busier, lavish treatments, which were initially deemed unnecessary.

This thesis has aimed to interpret and evaluate the research that has been done on the Old Sacristy and, in turn, to offer an explanation for the vicissitudes that mark the development of architectural ornamentation in light of patronage and of aesthetic considerations. The combined geniuses of Brunelleschi and Donatello as well as the patronage Giovanni di Bicci and Cosimo de' Medici allowed for the innovation of a hybrid space so revolutionary in its combined form that it would launch a movement called the Renaissance.

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