





Early Renaissance Narrative Painting in Italy

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Director's Note

It is not difficult to imagine the response at a game of word association to "history painting." "*Washington Crossing the Delaware*," a voice would instantly reply. The response would, of course, be perfectly justified, but it does not convey what Raphael, Poussin, David, Ingres, and any number of other painters living between the fifteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries would have understood by the term. For them history painting went well beyond the representation of an historical event. It implied a narrative picture built around a story—fictitious or true—whose representation was governed by the inventiveness of the artist and the intrinsic properties of the subject. Insofar as history painting required a mastery of all aspects of painting—landscape, architecture, genre, figure painting—and sought both to delight as well as to edify the viewer, it enjoyed an unchallenged position as the supreme endeavor of an artist. The influential French critic and painter Roger de Piles was simply expressing a commonly held view when he wrote in *Cours de peinture par principes* in 1708 that "painters, with reason, use the word 'history' to signify the highest kind of painting, which consists in bringing many figures together. And it is usual to say, 'such a painter does history, such a one paints beasts, such a one landscape, such a one flowers,' and so forth."

The use of the word "history" to denote narrative painting almost certainly goes back to the influential fifteenth-century humanist Leon Battista Alberti, and it is in the fifteenth century that narrative painting first acquired its status as the preeminent mode of expression. In this issue of the *Bulletin* Keith Christiansen, Associate Curator in the Department of European Paintings, examines some of the Metropolitan's most notable narrative paintings of the early Renaissance. Some of them, like Perugino's *Resurrection* or the three panels by Benozzo Gozzoli, formed parts of altarpieces. Others, such as Mantegna's *Adoration of the Shepherds* or Botticelli's *Last Communion of Saint Jerome*, were painted for a private chapel or the room of a palace. Still others, like Piero di Cosimo's fascinating *Hunting Scene*, were part of the decorative furnishings of a patrician room. And what is perhaps the most intriguing and certainly one of the most delightful narrative paintings of the Renaissance in the Metropolitan, *The Birth of the Virgin*, by the so-called Master of the Barberini Panels, is so unconventional that its exact function has long puzzled critics. All of these pictures, however, illustrate stories, and foremost in the minds of the artists who painted them must have been their effect as "historiae," or history paintings. Certainly the narrative devices they employ would have been considered proper to history painting by such later masters as Poussin and Ingres.

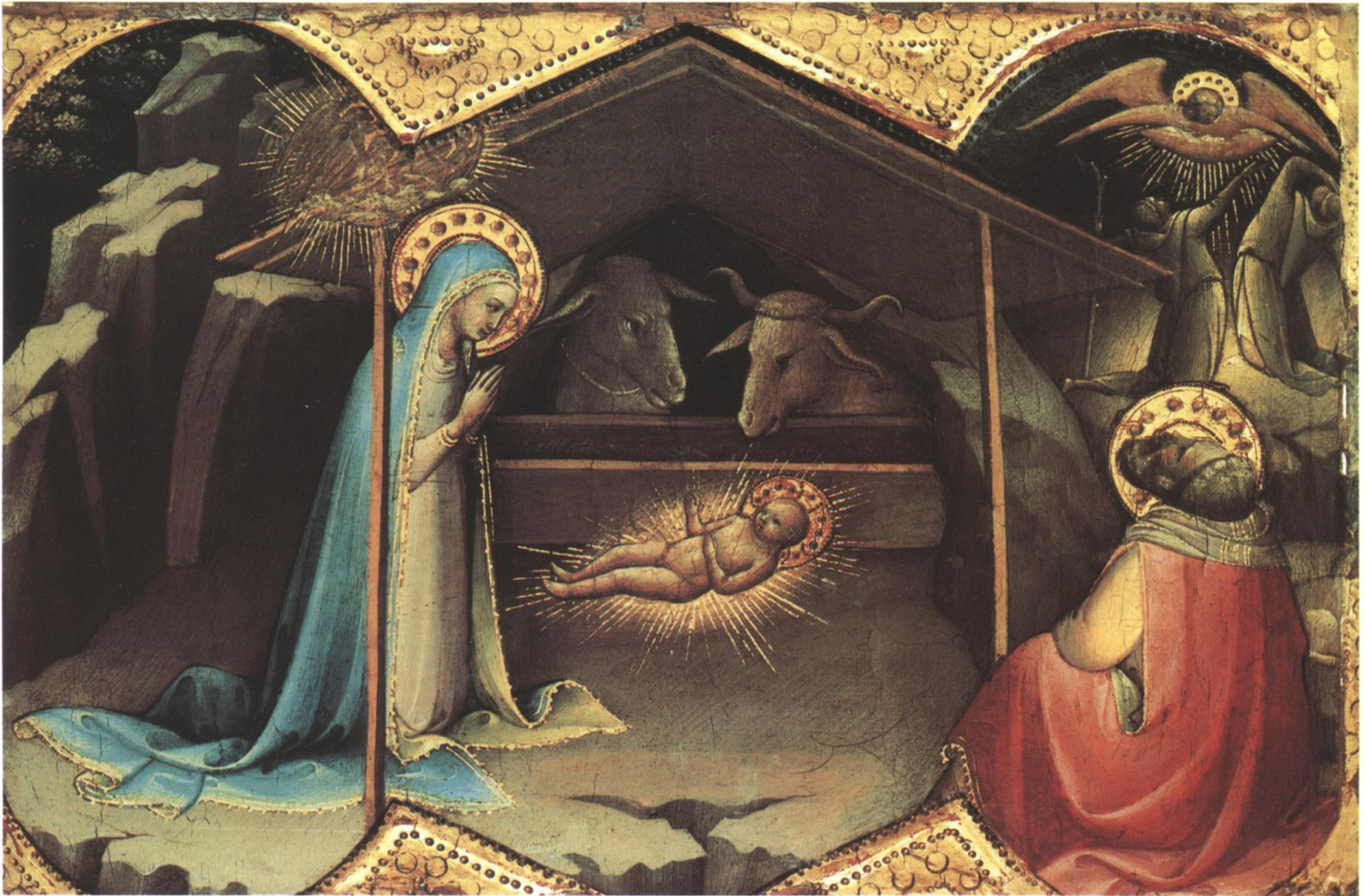
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Director

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Early Renaissance Narrative Painting in Italy



“The great work of the painter is the narrative” (*Amplissimum pictoris opus historia*), declared Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise on painting, the *De Pictura*. The statement must have seemed strangely anachronistic in 1435, when it was written, for at the time an artist’s activity still centered on the production of altarpieces and devotional paintings of the Madonna and Child. However, for Alberti, who wrote from a humanist point of view, narrative painting placed a number of special demands on an artist that justified its exalted status. It of course presupposed highly developed representational skills that would enable an artist to portray a variety of expressions and actions. As Bartolomeo Fazio observed in his *De Viris Illustribus* in 1456, “No painter is accounted excellent who has not distinguished himself in representing the properties of his subjects as they exist in reality. For it is one thing to paint a proud man, but quite another to paint a mean, or fawning, or improvident one, and so forth.” Narrative painting also required a mastery of the optical theory of one-point perspective. For, Alberti remarked, “no objects in a painting can appear like real objects, unless they stand to each other in a determined relationship.” And for narrative painting to be truly effective, an artist, like a poet, had to carefully consider the salient aspects of the event he wished to depict so that he might select those details that would most enhance his representation.

As novel as Alberti’s ideas may have seemed to contemporaries, to a degree they reflected the prior achievements of artists. It was in the 1420s, when the conventions of

1. Lorenzo Monaco (before 1372–after 1422), The Nativity. The picture, which retains part of its original gilt surround, is one of four known scenes of the infancy of Christ belonging to the predella of an unidentified altarpiece. Tempera and gold on wood. 8½ x 11¾ inches. Robert Lehman Collection, 1975 (1975.1.66)



2. *Gentile da Fabriano* (active by 1408; died 1427), *The Nativity*. The panel is from the predella of *Gentile's* celebrated altarpiece of the *Adoration of the Magi* completed in 1423 for the *Strozzi* family of Florence. Tempera and gold on wood. 9 3/4 x 24 1/4 inches. Uffizi, Florence

late Gothic art still predominated, that a realistic representational technique and a fresh, critical approach to subject matter first appeared. To appreciate the radical transformation that was effected, one has only to contrast Lorenzo Monaco's enchanting Nativity of about 1405 in the Lehman Collection (fig. 1) to Gentile da Fabriano's Nativity from the predella of his altarpiece of the Adoration of the Magi, painted in 1423 for the humanist Palla Strozzi (fig. 2).

In Lorenzo Monaco's painting the Virgin, strikingly clad in a violet dress and a blue cloak with a chartreuse lining, kneels beneath the pitched roof of a makeshift shed. In front of her, at what is roughly the middle of the composition, lies the Christ Child, his naked body surrounded by an aureole of gold rays. Behind the Child is a cave, and behind the manger that blocks its jagged opening are an ox and an ass. In the lower right sits the figure of Saint Joseph, his gaze directed heavenward, and above him, in a flood of light, an angel announces the birth of Christ to two gesticulating shepherds. It is tempting to regard this jewellike picture as Lorenzo Monaco's personal evocation of the birth of Christ, but in fact it employs a number of motifs that can be traced to specific literary sources. The Gospel of Saint Luke describes how, at the Annunciation to the Shepherds, "the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were very much afraid," and the so-called Proto-Evangelium, which dates back to at least the second century, identifies a cave rather than a stable as the place where Christ was born; both details had been standard features in painting for almost a century. The touching depiction of the radiant, naked Child, on the other hand, was inspired by a more recent event. In 1370 a Swedish widow of great piety and religious fervor, Bridget Gudmarsson (she was later canonized as Saint Bridget), made a pilgrimage to Bethlehem, and while she contemplated the grotto where Christ was presumed to have been born, she had a vision of the birth of Jesus that she later recorded:

I saw the child in [Mary's] womb move and suddenly in a moment she gave birth to her son, from whom radiated such an ineffable light and splendour, that the sun was not comparable to it. . . . I saw the glorious infant lying on the ground naked and shining, his body pure from any kind of soil and impurity. Then I heard also the singing of the angels, which was of miraculous sweetness and great beauty. . . . The Virgin . . . immediately worshipped him, her head bent down and her hands clasped.

It is this precise vision that Lorenzo Monaco has incorporated into his Nativity.

However diverse the literary sources that underlie this small masterpiece, they were not the primary factors that governed its appearance. Rather it was the irregular, quatrefoil

shape of the gilt surround, which has been cropped at either side, that determined its composition. There was a long tradition in Florentine art for the use of the quatrefoil; prior to 1400 Lorenzo Monaco had employed it for the predella of an altarpiece now in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence, and he used it repeatedly until quite late in his career. However, he first incorporated the shape of the quatrefoil as a principle of pictorial design in the Lehman Nativity and three companion scenes in other collections. In the Nativity the roof of the shed is inscribed beneath the quatrefoil's apex, the supports are closely aligned with the point of juncture of the frame's curved and straight portions, and, while the seated figure of Saint Joseph fills the lower right-hand lobe, the position of the angel's outstretched wings and arms has been determined by the curve of the upper right-hand lobe. Part of Lorenzo Monaco's adeptness in dealing with this inherently decorative form came from his practice as a book illuminator, where the shape of a letter determined the picture field, but this seemingly virtuoso ability to embellish irregularly shaped surfaces was also part of the training of all Gothic artists. Though the result here is singularly attractive, this approach severely limited the sort of image produced, for it placed the emphasis on the decorative rather than the narrative potential of a scene.

Gentile's approach was the opposite. Though he employed the same literary sources as Lorenzo Monaco, he adopted a more critical attitude toward them and he sought to endow his painting with a descriptive precision that would approximate theirs. Christ's radiance was the most striking feature of Saint Bridget's vision, and Gentile has made it the focus of his narrative as well. Instead of depicting the light radiating from Christ as the symbolic aureole of Lorenzo Monaco's painting, he has interpreted the light radiating from Christ naturalistically. It lights the underside of the opening of the cave, the front wall of the ruined house, and the bare branches of the bush against which Joseph rests. And since the Nativity was believed to have taken place at midnight, Gentile has properly contrasted this brilliance to the silvery glow of the moon—not the sun, as mentioned by Saint Bridget—conferring a wonderfully poetic quality on the picture. The faint shadow cast by the lean-to onto the side of the house is derived from the moon in the upper-left corner, and it is purposely juxtaposed to the well-defined shadow cast by the house onto the underside of the roof of the lean-to. Yet a third light source is described by the angel in the background. Gentile also abandoned the quatrefoil in favor of a simple rectangular field, and he has carefully defined the foreground space by the receding wall of the ruined house. No less notable is his tactile rendering of the figures and his careful study of their attitudes and expressions—the rapt devotion of the Virgin, the sleepy curiosity of one of the midwives, and the deep sleep of Saint Joseph. Gentile's approach to narrative painting placed a premium on exposition, and it required a descriptive technique that was simply beyond the reach of a Gothic artist like Lorenzo Monaco.

Two years after Gentile completed *The Adoration of the Magi*, Ghiberti received the commission for the third set of doors for the Florentine Baptistry, later known as *The Gates of Paradise*. Initially a program was devised by the humanist chancellor of Florence, Leonardo Bruni, who envisaged an arrangement similar to that of the two earlier sets of doors: twenty narrative scenes contained in twenty quatrefoil frames. The plan must have seemed painfully old-fashioned, and Ghiberti later wrote with pride how he was given a free hand to design the doors as he saw fit. The quatrefoil was discarded in favor of a simple square picture field, and the number of narrative reliefs was reduced from twenty to ten while the narrative episodes were increased to over forty. Obviously such a dramatic change was not made casually. It bound Ghiberti to a far more complex representational technique, and it required a greater degree of narrative inventiveness. Ghiberti himself singled out the imitation of nature, his use of a proportional system (*misura*), and what amounts to the implementation of one-point perspective as the features that distinguish the narratives on this door from those of his earlier, Gothic door. Contemporaneously, Masaccio began work on a fresco cycle in the Brancacci Chapel at Santa Maria del Carmine that took the principles embodied in Gentile's painting a stage further. With these two events the Gothic conventions that underlay Lorenzo Monaco's little masterpiece were definitively superseded.

3. Benozzo Gozzoli (about 1422–1497), *The Death of Simon Magus*. The panel is from the predella of an altarpiece painted in 1462 for the *Compagnia di San Marco* in Florence. Tempera and gold on wood. 9½ x 14 inches. H. M. the Queen, Hampton Court

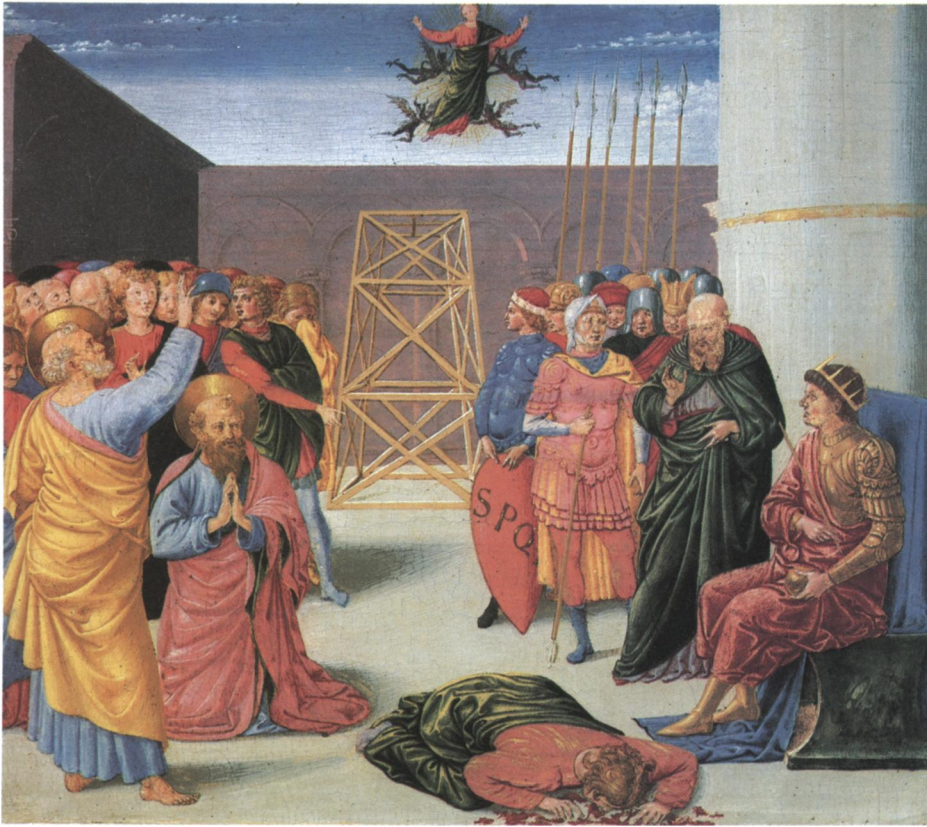


No fifteenth-century painter had a more extensive career as a narrative artist than Benozzo Gozzoli. In 1444, when he was twenty-two years old, he contracted with Ghiberti to work on the third set of Baptistery doors, then still incomplete, and a few years later he was employed in Rome by Fra Angelico in the decoration of a chapel for Pope Nicholas V. Among his first independent commissions were a fresco cycle of the life of Saint Francis and another of Saint Jerome in the Umbrian town of Montefalco. These were followed, in 1453, with a cycle of the life of Saint Rosa, now destroyed, in the saint's hometown of Viterbo and, in 1459, with his now-famous frescoes of the Journey of the Magi in a chapel of the Medici palace in Florence. Then, in 1465, Gozzoli decorated the apse of the church of Sant'Agostino in San Gimignano with scenes from the life of Saint Augustine, and four years later he began a fifteen-year enterprise, which his contemporaries rightly viewed as his greatest achievement, the now-ravaged scenes from the Old Testament in the Camposanto at Pisa. Given this extraordinary activity, it is small wonder that the narrative predellas of his altarpieces reveal an inventiveness at variance with the conventional images they stood below. The Metropolitan possesses four scenes painted by Gozzoli for the predella of the high altarpiece of the church of San Pier Maggiore in Florence. Two of these (figs. 4, 6) are of special interest in that their subjects were treated on another occasion by Gozzoli in panels now at Hampton Court (fig. 3) and Berlin-Dahlem (fig. 5). An analysis of the differences between the two sets provides a rare insight into his approach to narrative painting.

The first pair shows the death of the ignominious magician Simon Magus, who had promised to ascend into heaven in the presence of the emperor Nero and the Apostles Peter and Paul as a demonstration of his divine powers. Gozzoli's treatment conforms to the story as told in *The Golden Legend*:

On the appointed day [Simon Magus] climbed to the top of a high tower . . . and thence he rose in flight, with a laurel crown upon his head. And Nero said to the two apostles: "Simon says sooth! You are both imposters!" And Peter said to Paul: "Lift up thy head and look!" Paul lifted his head, [and] saw Simon flying about. . . . Then Peter cried out: "Angels of Satan, who hold this man up in the air, in the name of my Master Jesus Christ, I command you to hold him up no longer!" And straightway Simon was dashed to earth, his skull was split, and he died.

In the panel at Hampton Court Gozzoli shows the emperor Nero seated on an elevated throne at the left, staring gloomily at the fallen figure of Simon Magus with blood



4. Benozzo Gozzoli, The Death of Simon Magus. The picture is one of four scenes in the Museum that made up the predella of a preexistent fourteenth-century altarpiece in the church of San Pier Maggiore, Florence. It was over-cleaned in the late 1940s. Tempera on wood. 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 18 inches. Rogers Fund, 1915 (15.106.1)

streaming from his broken skull. To the right are the Apostles Paul (shown kneeling with his head uplifted, as described in the text) and Peter, who with raised hand commands the demons suspending a minute figure of Simon Magus in the background to let the magician fall to the ground. Beguiling though this scene is, Gozzoli's faithfulness to the text and his decision to show Simon Magus twice posed a number of pictorial problems that he could not readily resolve. Foremost among these is the fact that while Simon Magus is shown flying at the back of the courtyard, Saints Peter and Paul are in the foreground and their actions seem to be directed toward the dead man. This has sadly compromised the dramatic focus of the story. Scarcely less disturbing is the disparity of scale between the two groups of figures and the scaffold, which appears to have the dimensions of a footstool. In the panel in the Metropolitan (fig. 4) Gozzoli has rethought the narrative with these difficulties in mind. He has reversed the position of the saints and Nero, taking into account that a viewer naturally reads a painting from left to right and that the focus in this story properly lies in Saint Peter's commanding gesture, not in the passive figure of Nero. He has defined the courtyard with greater precision and grouped the spectators into two equal masses. And he has shown Simon Magus floating above the wall, at once giving the figure greater prominence and providing additional space for a larger scaffold. Most important, he has rotated the figure of Saint Peter forty-five degrees so that it faces the flying figure of Simon Magus, toward whom the saint's vigorous gesture is directed. The focus of Nero's attention has also been transferred from the dead Simon Magus to Peter, thereby heightening the sense of dramatic moment, and Paul has become the very image of immovable faith. Moreover Gozzoli has added three details of topical interest. He has given one of the armed soldiers a shield with an inscription identifying his Roman status, he has revised the figure of Nero with reference to a classical relief or coin, and behind the emperor he has portrayed a curved wall to suggest an ancient Roman building. By these means Gozzoli has enriched the story and given it new dramatic force.

The same ability to rethink a narrative and its pictorial potential is exemplified in the

5. *Benozzo Gozzoli, Saint Zenobius Resuscitating a Dead Child. Like fig. 3, this painting is from the predella of the altarpiece for the Compagnia di San Marco in Florence. Tempera and gold on wood. 9½ x 13⅜ inches. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin-Dahlem (60 C)*



two scenes showing Saint Zenobius resuscitating a dead child. According to his most authoritative fifteenth-century biographer—the Dominican archbishop of Florence, Saint Antonino—Zenobius had been entrusted with the care of a sick boy by a mother making a pilgrimage to Rome. One day, while the saint was participating in a procession at the church of San Pier Maggiore on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the child died. The mother returned the same day and, finding her dead child, picked up his body and ran to meet Zenobius. She encountered the procession on the Borgo degli Albizzi, where “the holy man of God, after he had offered up a prayer and made the sign of the cross over him, restored him to his mother, brought back from the dead.” When Gozzoli painted the scene in Berlin (fig. 5), both Ghiberti and Domenico Veneziano had already represented the same miracle. Gozzoli was a less inventive artist than either of them, and he has taken over from Ghiberti’s relief in the cathedral the idea of a rectangular piazza dominated by the façade of San Pier Maggiore as well as the symmetrical placement of Saint Zenobius and the mother along the bottom edge of the composition. However, unlike either Ghiberti’s or Veneziano’s depictions, Gozzoli’s work shows the dead child laid out on a blanket perpendicular to the picture plane and both the mother and the saint turned inward with hands clasped. It was a solution possessing no dramatic power, and the beauty of the picture resides in the delicate treatment of the figures and the charming manner in which the child stands up and walks toward the saint on tiptoes. In the panel in the Metropolitan (fig. 6) the piazza has been made more convincing by opening it up at the left and increasing the scale of the surrounding palaces. The crowd has been grouped more loosely to better suggest the confusion attending the mother’s arrival with her dead son, and the child has been placed parallel to the picture plane. Zenobius now faces both the child and his mother, and his prayer becomes the agent of the child’s resurrection, which in turn is the source of the mother’s astonishment. Lavishing as much descriptive care on this scene as he did on that of Simon Magus, Gozzoli has replaced the Gothic church façade in the Berlin panel with a Renaissance one of great elegance.

The panels at Hampton Court and Berlin are known to have formed part of an altarpiece painted in 1461, the main panel of which is in the National Gallery, London, and it stands to reason that the more clearly articulated panels in the Metropolitan were painted later, not earlier, than that work. Their fresh approach to narration helps to rectify the present-day estimation of Gozzoli as a charming but unimaginative artist.

In Gozzoli’s panels architecture is subordinate to the figural content. Nevertheless, he



6. Benozzo Gozzoli, Saint Zenobius Resuscitating a Dead Child. The picture is a companion to fig. 4 and, like it, was over-cleaned in the late 1940s. Tempera on wood. 15½ x 18 inches. Rogers Fund, 1915 (15.106.3)

was careful, especially in the Metropolitan scenes, to create the sort of plausible relation between figures and architecture that Alberti considered fundamental to narrative painting. In a passage of the *De Pictura* that was directed against a current practice of Gothic artists, Alberti writes, “Another thing I often see deserves to be censured, and that is men painted in a building as if they were shut up in a box in which they can hardly fit sitting down and rolled up in a ball. So all the bodies should conform in size and function to the subject of the action.” Within the restrictions imposed by its modest size, Botticelli’s *Annunciation* in the Lehman Collection (fig. 7) answers Alberti’s prescriptions perfectly. It shows the Virgin in an antechamber of a patrician palace—her parents were believed to descend from the royal house of David—kneeling before a lectern on which a prayer book has been laid, with a high-backed bench, or cassapanca, behind her. Through an open door at the back of the room can be seen her bedchamber with a crimson covered bed, and at the front of the building a curtain has been drawn aside to permit this intimate view. The Virgin’s quarters occupy somewhat less than half of the surface of the panel, the remaining space being given over to a corridor separating her rooms from the street.

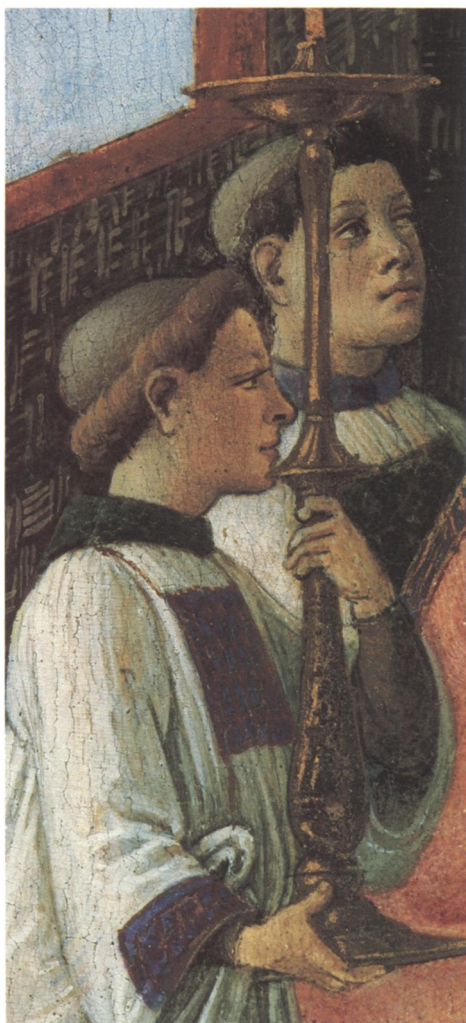
Vasari has left a description of a famous altarpiece of the Annunciation by Masaccio, in which the most remarkable feature was a row of columns viewed in acute foreshortening. This became a standard detail in most subsequent pictures of the Annunciation, including the Lehman panel, where a series of pillars in strong recession separates the Virgin from the angel Gabriel. Behind Gabriel an open door admits two shafts of light. One is natural and falls across the pavement, lighting the back of Gabriel’s wings and fluttering garment, one side of the pillars, and the Virgin’s face. The other is the divine light of God, agent of the Incarnation, and is represented as gold rays descending on the Virgin. It is a poetic distinction of the highest order and contributes not a little to the vibrant beauty of this painting.

Architectural settings as complex as this one are relatively rare in Botticelli’s work—even the fresco formerly in San Martino alla Scala, which shares certain features with the Lehman Annunciation, is simpler. Not surprisingly, the perspective construction





7. Sandro Botticelli (1444/45–1510), The Annunciation. The picture was conceived as an independent work and, though damaged, retains great delicacy and feeling. Tempera and gold on wood. 9³/₈ x 14³/₈ inches. Robert Lehman Collection, 1975 (1975.1.74)



8. (right) Sandro Botticelli, *The Last Communion of Saint Jerome*. Painted for the Florentine wool merchant Francesco del Pugliese, the picture is one of Botticelli's finest small paintings. Tempera on wood. 13½ x 10 inches. Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913 (14.40.642). Above: Detail showing acolytes.

conforms in its essential features to Alberti's tenets. The vanishing point is on the vertical axis of the picture, which runs through the center of the unobstructed arched window, and its height has determined the alignment of the inclined heads of the Virgin and Gabriel along a common horizontal. In this way the structure of the painting underscores the intimate colloquy of the figures.

Less complex but no less ingenious is the structure of Botticelli's equally small *Last Communion of Saint Jerome* (fig. 8). The fourth-century scholar and ascetic was a favorite of humanists not only for his extensive learning, but also for his love of Ciceronean style—he once had a dream in which he was accused by God of being a disciple of Cicero rather than of Christ—and a scene of Jerome at work in a well-furnished study or before his cell near Bethlehem was a popular humanist subject. The panel in the Metropolitan depicts a far less common episode from the last moments of the saint's life. Jerome is shown in his wattle cell, the front wall of which has been removed. Around him are the monks of the order he founded. One has donned a red chasuble while the two youngest are dressed as acolytes and hold large candlesticks with lit candles. Through the windows and above the roof can be seen the intense blue of an early evening sky. In portraying the scene Botticelli has followed a letter then attributed to Eusebius that enjoyed great popularity:

As soon as the priest who held the eucharist came near to him the glorious man, with [the monks'] aid, raised himself on his knees, and lifted his head, and with many tears and sighs, beating his breast many times, he said: "Thou art my God and my Lord, who suffered Death and the Passion for me, and none other!" . . . and [then he] received the most holy body of Christ, and cast himself again upon the ground, with his hands crossed upon his breast, singing the canticle of Simeon, the prophet. . . .

Behind the affecting group of figures Botticelli has shown Jerome's bed draped with a sheepskin coverlet and foreshortened so that it resembles an altar. Above and to the right of the headboard hangs Jerome's cardinal's hat, while the crucifix is placed so that the picture's vanishing point coincides with Christ's feet, making the cross the symbolic focus of the composition. Behind it hang three palms, symbols of victory over death, and to either side there is a juniper branch, possibly as a symbol of chastity. Compositional structure, symbolism, and emotional content conjoin in this picture as in few others.

The earliest mention of the painting is in the will of the Florentine wool merchant Francesco del Pugliese, drawn up in 1503. There it is listed as "the Passing of Saint Jerome, by the hand of the said Sandro [Botticelli]." Pugliese appears to have been a patron of decided tastes. He had a room in his palace on the Via de' Serragli decorated with a narrative cycle by Piero di Cosimo that impressed Vasari for its fantasy. Two pictures from this cycle have sometimes been identified as the *Hunting Scene* and *The Return from the Hunt* in the Metropolitan (see pp. 40–45); these are among the most unorthodox pictures of the Renaissance, and if they could be shown to have been definitely owned by Pugliese they alone would establish the patron's unconventional bent. Then, for a chapel in his villa at Sommaia, Pugliese collected a number of pictures of striking devotional character. In addition to *The Last Communion of Saint Jerome*, there was a small triptych with a Flemish painting of Christ's face on Veronica's veil at its center and two wings showing Christ and the Woman of Samaria and a *Noli Me Tangere* by Filippino Lippi, a *Last Judgment* by Fra Angelico flanked by two wings by Botticelli, a small painting by Pesellino, and an *Adoration of the Magi* by Filippino Lippi. In the will of 1503 Pugliese states his intention to leave these five pictures and his property to the Dominican convent of San Marco, with which he had been closely associated during the priorate of Savonarola. Pugliese had been one of Savonarola's most ardent disciples and was in the convent—"breathing like a bull," one witness declared—on the night





9. *Sandro Botticelli, Three Miracles of Saint Zenobius. The painting is one of four panels possibly intended to decorate a room of a confraternity in Florence. Tempera on wood. 26½ x 59¼ inches. John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1911 (11.98)*

Savonarola was seized. He was later exiled from Florence for having referred to the duke of Urbino, Lorenzo de' Medici, as "Il Magnifico Merda." It is a well-known fact that, like Pugliese, Botticelli's brother was a disciple of Savonarola. Whether or not Botticelli shared his brother's and Pugliese's feelings as early as 1495, the probable date of the Museum's picture of Saint Jerome, is uncertain, but the intense feeling with which he has treated this uncommon subject suggests at least a nascent sympathy with Savonarola's ideal of moral reform.

Sometime between 1500 and his death in 1510, Botticelli received a commission for a series of four panels showing the life of Saint Zenobius. They were perhaps intended to decorate a room of a confraternity and would have been framed above a wainscoting. Two of these, showing scenes of the saint's youth and three miracles, are in the National Gallery, London (figs. 10, 11). The third, also showing three miracles, is in the Metropolitan (fig. 9), and a fourth, showing three episodes of one miracle and the saint's death, is in Dresden (fig. 12).

Like most late works by Botticelli, they are less seductively drawn and executed than his earlier paintings, and they all employ architecture both to identify the scene of a particular miracle and to separate one miracle from another. In the first panel in London (fig. 10) two-thirds of the picture is devoted to the depiction of a church in which Zenobius is baptized and then consecrated as bishop of Florence by Pope Damasus, and in the second panel (fig. 11) the three miracles are shown against the façades of three different-colored buildings. In the Dresden panel (fig. 12) a composite structure with an elaborate projecting porch dominates more than two-thirds of the picture surface and separates two episodes of one miracle from that of the saint's death. But of the four panels, that in the Metropolitan (fig. 9) is perhaps the most audaciously composed. The central area is dominated not by the imposing mass of a building but by a void defined by the converging lines of the palace at left and the square, the palace, and the façade of a church at the right. To a degree this unusual solution was dictated by the diverse settings of the three miracles

Detail of fig. 9: Saint Zenobius resuscitates a dead youth.





10, 11, 12. *Sandro Botticelli, Miracles of Saint Zenobius. The three panels are companions to fig. 9. Each tempera on wood. 26¼ x 58¾, 25½ x 55 inches, National Gallery of Art, London (3918, 3919); 26 x 71¾ inches, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden (9)*

and their sequence in Clemente Mazza's life of Saint Zenobius, composed in 1475 and published in 1487.

The miracle shown on the left, where Zenobius meets the funeral procession of a dead youth and restores the boy to life, took place on a street in Florence. In the Metropolitan's painting the Florentine setting is suggested by the large palace with its simple, classical detailing. Mazza next describes how, while transporting the relics of four saints across the Apennines, a porter fell and was killed. Zenobius came upon his companions weeping over the corpse and was moved to pray that the porter be restored to life in the name of the four saints whose relics he was accompanying when the accident occurred. Apparently we are to read the distant landscape, not the bordering palace and square, as the setting of this miracle. The scene on the right, told in a successive chapter by Mazza, illustrates how Zenobius blessed a glass of water and salt for his subdeacon Eugenius to use in restoring to life a relative who had died without receiving the Sacrament. To clarify the fact that the miracle was performed through Zenobius and not Eugenius, Botticelli has shown the event in three episodes. In a room of the palace in the background Zenobius hands the water to Eugenius who, though infirm, rises, crosses the square, and revives his relative in the foreground.

Here, as in so many fifteenth-century paintings, the textual source has been followed as closely as possible. However, this does not mean that in the Saint Zenobius series Botticelli has slavishly assumed the role of an illustrator. What strikes the viewer of the Metropolitan panel today and what must have struck contemporaries even more is its essentially unreal, almost hallucinatory quality, which has been achieved by the simple, cubic forms of the buildings, whose cornices, window frames, and basements all recede to an area at the foot of the distant, leafless tree; by the schematic treatment of the landscape, devoid of any enveloping atmosphere; and by the insubstantial figures, whose frenetic movements seem impelled by some superior force. This was not an effect Botticelli arrived at casually. Incisions on the façade of the left-hand building clearly indicate that initially he contemplated an ornate arcade in place of the simple pilasters and pedimented doors, and the juxtaposition, in the central scene, of the dead body of the porter with the two skeletons in a casket is an incomparably powerful invention that can only have resulted from careful deliberation. If this picture is compared to Gozzoli's panel of Saint Zenobius resuscitating a dead child, it will be seen how Botticelli has utilized a conventional representational technique in an unorthodox way to achieve an effect of unreality and how the sense of urgency these scenes convey is derived from that effect.

One of the reasons fifteenth-century narrative painting sometimes seems so artificial to a modern viewer is its frequent use of perspective as a principle of organization. There were, of course, occasions when this was impractical. In the three scenes (figs. 13–15) from the predella of Ghirlandaio's altarpiece from San Giusto alle Mura, datable to about 1480, the dimensions of the individual panels were simply not great enough to permit complicated, spatial compositions. For this reason the story of the Marriage of the Virgin is set before the altar and window of what can only be surmised to be the apse of a church that has been opened at the sides (fig. 13). Likewise, in illustrating the legend of how a dead tree sprang to life when it was touched by the bier of Saint Zenobius, Ghirlandaio has indicated the spot where this occurred by showing the lower portion of the marble revetment of the Florentine Baptistery and the campanile of the cathedral (fig. 14). But he has necessarily resigned himself to an unavoidable disparity in scale between the figures and the buildings. Even in the charming scene of Tobias and the Angel (fig. 15), where the city of Florence can be seen in the distance, the landscape is simply composed of a series of four overlapping hills bordering a lake. But such casually constructed scenes were the exception.

The new style of narrative painting, with its emphasis on exposition and the careful description of a setting, was not the prerogative of Florentine art. In his *Lives of the Artists* of 1568 Vasari remarks that "even in Modena there have always been excellent practitioners of our profession . . . as is seen in four altarpieces . . . which were painted in tempera a hundred years ago in that city and are, for that time, very beautiful and diligently

13, 14, 15. *Domenico Ghirlandaio* (about 1448–1494), *The Marriage of the Virgin*; *The Burial of Saint Zenobius*; *Tobias and the Angel*. The three panels formed part of the predella of Ghirlandaio's altarpiece painted for *San Giusto alle Mura*, outside the walls of Florence.

The curved indentations at the sides of the picture fields followed the silhouettes of the frames. Tempera on wood. Each $6\frac{1}{4} \times 16\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Francis L. Leland Fund, 1913 (13.119.1–3)



16. Bartolomeo degli Erri (active between 1460 and 1479), A Miracle of Saint Dominic. This painting is the only surviving scene from the predella of the high altarpiece of San Domenico in Modena, commissioned in 1467. Tempera and gold on canvas, transferred from wood. 14 x 17½ inches. Bequest of Michael Dreicer, 1921. The Michael Dreicer Collection (22.60.59)



executed. The first is on the high altar of San Domenico, and the others are in the chapels of the rood screen of the church.” We now know that the high altarpiece of San Domenico was commissioned in 1467 from Bartolomeo degli Erri and that the Metropolitan’s scene of Saint Dominic resuscitating Napoleone Orsini (fig. 16) was probably from the predella of that altarpiece. It is, therefore, contemporary with the Museum’s scenes by Benozzo Gozzoli, and even judged against them it seems very remarkable. Bartolomeo was a less accomplished draftsman than Gozzoli, but his scene is more rigorously organized: the manner in which the vanishing point has been established along the axis of the pointed arch of the large palace in the background and at the height of the two foreground figures is in accordance with Albertian practice. Moreover, perspective has been employed to clarify the narrative. In the foreground we see Saint Dominic kneeling over the dead figure of Napoleone Orsini, who was killed when he fell from his horse on Saint Valentine’s Day, 1221; the gesturing figure in the left foreground is described in a thirteenth-century biography of the saint as arriving at the monastery “tearing out his hair and lamenting horribly.” In the background Saint Dominic restores the youth to his uncle, Cardinal Stefano da Fossanova. By confining the first episode of the miracle to the immediate foreground, where the action is directed laterally, and by setting the second episode deeper in space, with Napoleone Orsini’s back to the viewer, Bartolomeo degli Erri has avoided the narrative contradictions that Gozzoli built into his treatment of the fall of Simon Magus.

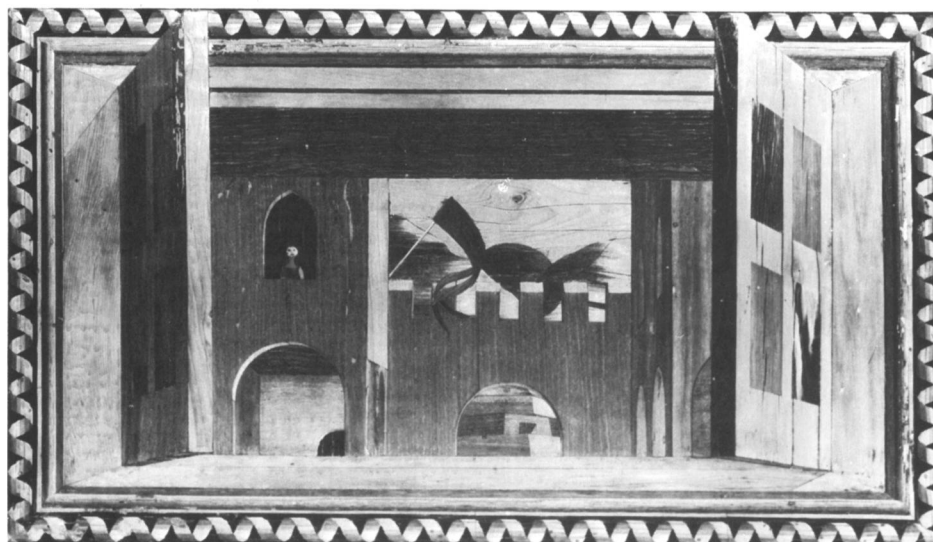
A representational technique of this sophistication presupposes contact with a major artistic center. In the case of Modena this meant contact with the Este court at Ferrara. It was under the successive rules of Lionello and Borso d’Este that Ferrara achieved a conspicuous position in the cultural life of Italy. Lionello had been a pupil of Guarino da Verona, one of the most accomplished Greek scholars of his day, and upon his accession in 1441 he set about to make Ferrara a center of the humanist movement. Men like Alberti, who dedicated a comedy and a treatise on horses to the marquis and who seems to have undertaken his architectural treatise, the *De Re Aedificatoria*, at Lionello’s insistence, were befriended, and employment was given to artists like Jacopo Bellini, Pisanello, Piero della Francesca, and Lorenzo and Cristoforo Lendinara. The Lendinara brothers were



17. Bartolomeo degli Erri, Saint Thomas Aquinas Aided by Saints Peter and Paul. The painting at the left is one of eight known scenes from an altarpiece in a chapel of the rood screen of San Domenico in Modena. Tempera on wood. 17 x 12 inches. Fletcher Fund, 1923 (23.140)

18. Lorenzo and Cristoforo Lendinara (active by 1449; died 1477 and 1491, respectively), View of a Castle. The scene in wood inlay, or intarsia, is from the choir stalls the brothers completed in 1465 for the cathedral of Modena. Cathedral, Modena

19, 20. (overleaf) Master of the Barberini Panels (probably Fra Carnevale, active by 1445; died 1484), The Birth of the Virgin; The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple. Trained in Florence in the 1440s by Filippo Lippi, Fra Carnevale was active principally in the Marches. In 1467 he was paid for executing an altarpiece for the church of Santa Maria della Bella in Urbino. The two panels shown here seem to have formed the lateral wings of the altarpiece. As is typical of Marchigian altarpieces of this date, the frame was extremely elaborate, creating a series of small arches along the top of each scene, now painted in to obtain a rectangular shape. Each tempera on wood. 57 x 37 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches, Rogers and Gwynne Andrews Funds, 1935 (35.121); 58 x 38 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Charles Potter Kling Fund Purchase (37.108)



among the most accomplished masters of intarsia, or wood inlay, and between 1449 and 1453 they were employed by Lionello and Borso d'Este in the decoration of a study at the castle of Belfiore, on the outskirts of the city.

It is with the Lendinara brothers' intarsiated scenes that Bartolomeo degli Erri's work bears closest comparison. This relation is less surprising than it might seem, for in the fifteenth century there was no strict division between painting and woodwork. The Lendinaras are documented as painters, and in his *Divina Proportione* of 1509 Luca Pacioli describes Lorenzo as "like a brother" (*caro quanto fratello*) to Piero della Francesca. Pacioli also praises Lorenzo as a supreme master of perspective. If Bartolomeo degli Erri's second panel in the Museum (fig. 17), showing Saint Thomas Aquinas aided by Saints Peter and Paul, is compared to Lorenzo and Cristoforo Lendinara's intarsiated view of a castle, from the choir stalls they executed for the cathedral of Modena between 1460 and 1465 (fig. 18), it will be found that the two works are constructed along the same lines. In both, space is suggested by the careful juxtaposition of a simple, cubic building with a void, and in each the side of the building is brightly lit and the pierced façade is left in shadow to enhance the geometric clarity of the scheme. The same type of composition recurs in the work of Piero della Francesca, and in all likelihood Lorenzo and Cristoforo learned it from Piero while they were employed in Ferrara.

Like the scene of Saint Dominic resuscitating Napoleone Orsini, Bartolomeo degli Erri's panel of Saint Thomas Aquinas belonged to one of the four altarpieces seen by Vasari in San Domenico. However, rather than forming a conventional predella, it was mounted together with perhaps eight other panels in an elaborate Gothic frame around a full-length image of the saint. The panel has been cropped at the top, and the irregularly shaped spandrels have been filled out, somewhat compromising the composition of the scene. Despite this, Bartolomeo's use of architecture as a narrative device is perfectly evident. Through the arch at the left Saint Thomas Aquinas is shown rummaging through his books searching for an explanation to a passage in Isaiah that had troubled him. In the projecting room at the right he is seen again, seated between Saints Paul and Peter, who miraculously appeared one night and explained the perplexing passage. A fellow Dominican, Brother Rinaldo, is said to have overheard Saint Thomas's conversation with the two





Detail of fig. 19, *Master of the Barberini Panels* (probably *Fra Carnevale*), *The Birth of the Virgin*

apostles and later taken down the exposition. He is shown reading in a loggia. Each episode is self-contained, and the narrative can be read without confusion.

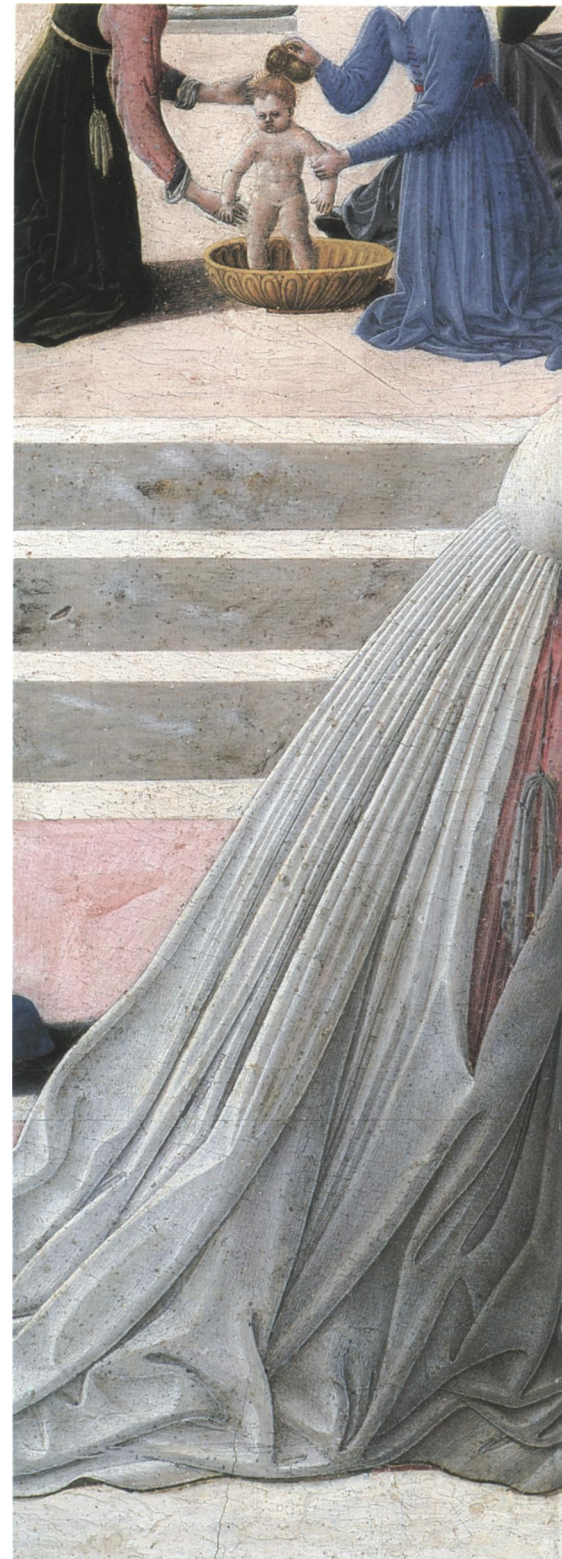
Like most fifteenth-century artists, Bartolomeo degli Erri saw his task as the representation of a given subject in the clearest terms possible. However, in a famous passage of the *De Pictura*, Alberti alluded to a very different set of values:

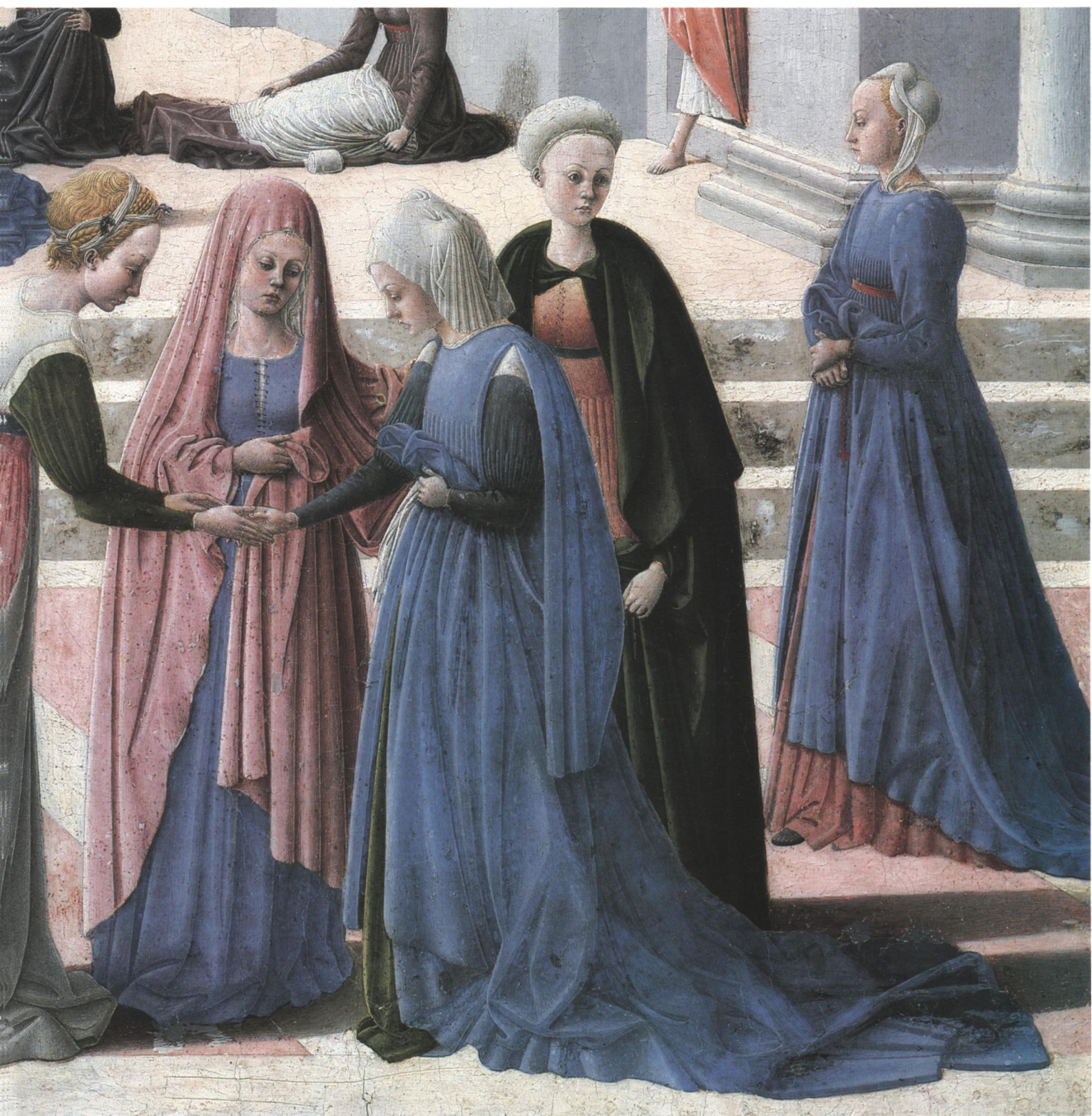
The first thing that gives pleasure in a narrative is a plentiful variety. Just as with food and music novel and extraordinary things delight us for various reasons but especially because they are different from the old ones we are used to, so with everything the mind takes great pleasure in variety and abundance. . . . I would say a picture was richly varied if it contained a properly arranged mixture of old men, youths, boys, matrons, maidens, children, domestic animals, dogs, birds, horses, sheep, buildings and provinces; and I would praise any great variety provided it is appropriate to what is going on in the picture.

The difficulty was that the variety Alberti so highly recommended was inappropriate to the subjects most artists were called upon to illustrate. However, there are two related pictures, one in the Metropolitan (fig. 19) and the other in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (fig. 20), in which the subject is incidental to creating a narrative “that gives pleasure.”

The first description of these pictures occurs in an inventory of Cardinal Antonio Barberini's possessions drawn up in 1644, where, under numbers 13 and 14, are recorded “a painting on wood that shows a perspective with some women who greet each other. . .” and “a similar painting that shows a perspective with some women on their way to church.” About thirty years later they were again described, somewhat more precisely, as “two pictures of the same dimensions: in one an edifice of a portico and another construction with various women who wash a newborn baby and with a woman in bed; in the other an edifice in the form of a triumphal arch and a view of columns in the form of a temple with various figures dressed as of old with certain poor cripples on the ground.” Even this description does not do justice to the wealth of detail that fills these two scenes, and it is understandable that the actual subject of each panel proved so elusive. In fact, the Boston painting shows the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple. The young Virgin is shown dressed in blue, about to enter the temple, which is decorated with statues of the Annunciation on the cornice and a relief of the Visitation above the left door. In the apse can be seen the attending priest. The Metropolitan's painting, which is, as the inventories note, a companion piece, shows the Birth of the Virgin. The “woman in bed” is Saint Anne, and she watches servants in an adjacent room bathe the newborn Virgin while well-wishers arrive and greet each other outside the palace.

There was a long-standing tradition in Italy of treating these events of the life of the Virgin in terms of contemporary life. In Pietro Lorenzetti's altarpiece of the Birth of the Virgin in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Siena of 1342, Saint Anne reclines on a brightly checked bedspread while two servants arrive with a pitcher of water and a basket of linen and another sits, ready to fan her mistress. In his fresco of the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple in the Baroncelli Chapel of Santa Croce, Taddeo Gaddi conveyed all of the excitement and parental solicitude that attends a first communion. In the fifteenth century Domenico Veneziano and Andrea del Castagno carried this tendency a step further in their frescoes (now destroyed) in the apse of San Egidio in Florence. According to Vasari, Veneziano's scene of the Birth of the Virgin showed “a very ornate room and a child who beats on the door of the room with a hammer,” while Castagno's *Presentation of the Virgin* on the opposite wall included “many beggars, among whom is one who beats another on the head with his bowl; and not only this figure but all of them are quite beautiful, having been done with great study and love.” However, even in these



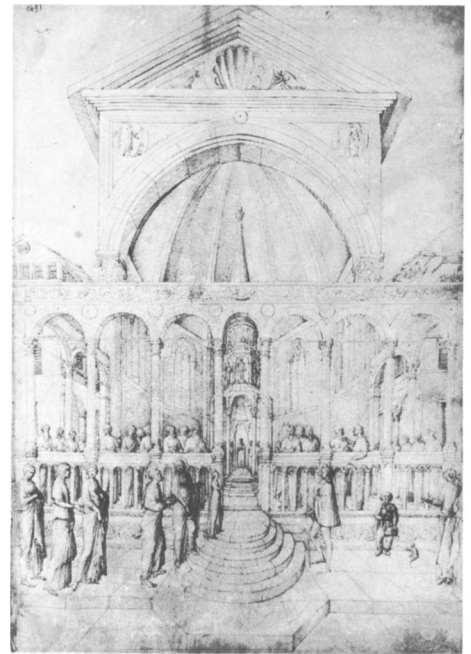


exceptionally animated scenes the genre details must have been subordinate to the principal subject. Only in Jacopo Bellini's drawings of about 1455 (see fig. 21) is there a real precedent for lavishing attention on architectural settings and incidental activities at the expense of the sacred event. Yet, Bellini's drawings were intended for private delectation whereas the panels in the Metropolitan and in Boston were almost certainly conceived as the altarpiece of a church. In Cardinal Antonio Barberini's inventory the pictures are attributed unequivocally to the Marchigian painter Fra Carnevale (Bartolomeo di Giovanni Corradini). When Barberini was papal legate to Urbino between 1631 and 1633, he confiscated Fra Carnevale's most famous work, the high altarpiece for the church of Santa Maria della Bella, substituting a picture of the Birth of the Virgin by Claudio Ridolfi. Given these circumstances, there is every reason to believe that the two panels listed in his inventory are the lateral elements of the Santa Maria della Bella altarpiece and that they were painted in 1467.

Of all the Albertian details that vie for attention in these two works—"old men, youths, boys, matrons, maidens, children, domestic animals, dogs... horses... buildings, and provinces"—it is the buildings that are the most striking. Each scene is dominated by the façade of a single structure that has been carefully conceived to complement the edifice in the other picture. In each an inlaid pavement and three steps lead up to a massive, arched opening with a view into an interior. The arch of the temple is flanked by pilasters and freestanding columns while that of the palace is flanked by engaged columns, and in both scenes marble reliefs decorate the façade. In *The Birth of the Virgin* all of the orthogonals recede to a point fixed along the left edge at the horizon, while those in *The Presentation in the Temple* recede to a point along the right edge at the height of the crown of the arches of the rood screen, underscoring their conception as pendants. Yet these similarities of composition and architectural features only serve to accentuate differences between the two buildings, for whereas the pavement and two massive columns on either side of the entrance to the temple are of richly veined marble, in *The Birth of the Virgin* the pavement and engaged columns are of a less luxurious material. And whereas the cornices, moldings, and architrave of the temple are elaborately carved, those of the palace are, by comparison, quite plain. These differences are far from casual, for if we turn to Alberti's treatise on architecture we will find a pronounced distinction between the treatment of ecclesiastical and private structures adopted as a fundamental precept:

To recapitulate the whole question in a few words, we will say this: that whereas one ought to be able to add nothing to a sacred edifice which would lead to greater majesty, beauty, or wonder, so in the private one should not be able to take anything away without lessening its dignity. ... Accordingly, severe restraint is to be used in decorating a private dwelling, though in most cases a certain liberty is permitted.

That Fra Carnevale was familiar with Alberti's ideas and with their implementation in his buildings at Rimini and Mantua there can be no doubt. One of the features of church design that had concerned Alberti was how to adapt the vocabulary of ancient architecture to the multistory form of the traditional, basilican church. In the Tempio Malatestiano at Rimini and in his designs for Sant'Andrea in Mantua, which, however, date from 1470, he utilized the features of a Roman triumphal arch for the façade. This is what Fra Carnevale has done, albeit in a far more archaeological fashion, for his temple in *The Presentation of the Virgin*. And just as Alberti's decorative details show a close study of ancient prototypes, so Fra Carnevale has attempted to reproduce ancient models in his sculptural decoration. The figures of the dancing maenad and the piping faun that decorate the bases of the columns of the temple, and the relief on the palace showing Silenus with the infant Bacchus, are derived from classical Bacchic sarcophagi. The relief showing drunken

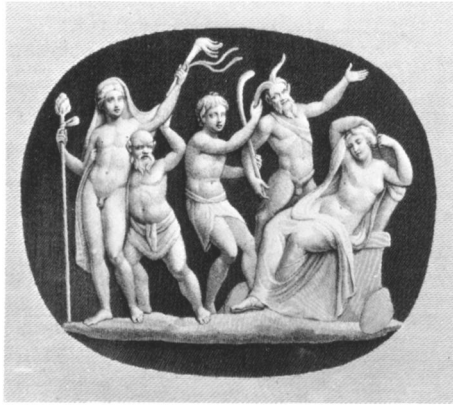


21. Jacopo Bellini (active by 1424; died 1470/71), *The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*. The drawing, part of a notebook dating from about 1455, was described in the late fifteenth century as "a building with Our Lady being offered." As in fig. 19, the religious subject matter is little more than a pretext for an animated scene dominated by the façade of an enormous temple. Pen and ink on parchment. 17 x 11³/₈ inches. Louvre, Paris

Right: Detail of fig. 19, *Master of the Barberini Panels* (probably Fra Carnevale), *The Birth of the Virgin*. Saint Anne is shown reclining on her bed while servants bathe the Virgin. Both holy figures have faint haloes.



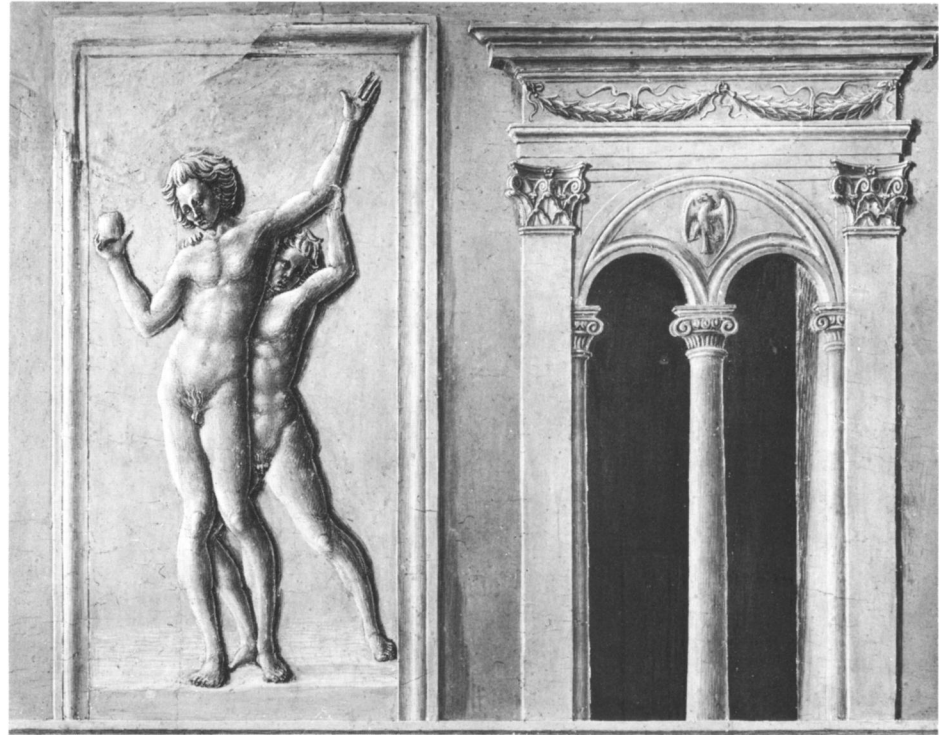




22. (above) This ancient cameo, reproduced in an eighteenth-century engraving, shows Bacchus and Ariadne. Now in the collection of the earl of Yarborough at Brocklesby Park, Lincolnshire, it was owned by Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga in the fifteenth century. It was replicated in a number of plaquettes and was the source for a relief in the courtyard of the Palazzo Medici, the borders of several illuminated manuscripts, and the figures of Bacchus and his companion in the detail from fig. 19 (above right). Two other ancient versions, one of which belonged to Lorenzo il Magnifico, are known.

Above right: Detail of fig. 19 showing a feigned relief with Bacchus supported by one of his followers. The composition derives from the ancient gem illustrated in fig. 22 or from a contemporary plaquette. However, in the relief Bacchus has been made to hold a glass of wine rather than his thyrsus, and his companion no longer has the traits of Silenus.

Left: Detail of fig. 19, Master of the Barberini Panels (probably Fra Carnevale), *The Birth of the Virgin*. In this detail well-wishers arrive in front of the palace.



Bacchus supported by another figure is based on a classical cameo, versions of which were owned by the Medici in Florence and the Gonzagas in Mantua (above right, fig. 22). And what at first looks like an extravagant holy-water font at the entrance of the temple contains a branch and is probably intended as an ancient incense burner (or *candelabrum*, as Alberti referred to it in the seventh book of the *De Re Aedificatoria*).

These refinements would be inexplicable were it not for the cultural environment of Urbino, where Fra Carnevale worked, and the extraordinary character of its duke, Federigo de Montefeltro. The fifteenth-century bookdealer Vespasiano da Bisticci has left a celebrated biography of this remarkable man, who was one of the great military leaders of his day. After describing some of his achievements on the battlefield, Vespasiano turns to his mastery of Latin, noting that "the Duke of Urbino had a very great knowledge not only of the stories and books of the Holy Bible, but he was well informed in philosophy . . . and he had Livy, Sallust, Quintus Curtius, Justin, *The Commentaries of Caesar*, which he praised infinitely, read to him. . . ." Then, of his achievements in architecture, Vespasiano writes, "He wanted to be informed on architecture and in his day there was no one, whether prince or private, who was so well informed as his grace." Alberti was a frequent visitor at the court of Urbino, and in 1467 the Dalmatian architect, Luciano Laurana, was hired to supervise the construction of the ducal palace along Albertian lines. Fra Carnevale is said to have been employed by Federigo on work in the palace, and a number of architectural details in *The Birth of the Virgin*—the square window frames, the elegant Corinthian capitals on the façade, the capital decorated with dolphins on the interior, and the medallions bearing the Montefeltro device of the crowned eagle—are taken from the building. However, Fra Carnevale can hardly have been a practicing architect. The manner in which the features of the Arch of Constantine have been imposed onto the basilican form of the temple with no indication of how the upper



23. Benozzo Gozzoli, *The Conversion of Saint Paul*. Like figs. 4 and 6, this panel is from the predella of the high altarpiece of *San Pier Maggiore* in Florence. Tempera on wood. 15 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 18 inches. Rogers Fund, 1915 (15.106.2)

story of the interior is to be accommodated is evidence of a pictorial, not a practical, mind. In a like manner, the palace has been constructed with a disregard of proportions and a baffling mixture of decorative elements. Fra Carnevale may have been familiar with Alberti's ideas, but he has applied them in a dilettantish fashion, and in his attempt to enrich the stories that are his subjects with a wealth of classical allusions, he has sacrificed the dramatic focus that lay at the heart of Alberti's conception of narrative painting. One wonders what the syndics of the confraternity of Santa Maria della Bella, who commissioned the altarpiece, thought when presented with these unconventional pictures in which the religious subject is submerged in secular detail.

A passion for architecture is a recurrent feature of fifteenth-century narrative paintings. Sometimes it is the architecture of a specific region or city. In Gozzoli's *Saint Zenobius Resuscitating a Dead Child*, the church façade at the back of the square resembles that of the contemporary Florentine church of San Felice, and in Bartolomeo degli Erri's *A Miracle of Saint Dominic*, the pink buildings repeat the local Gothic architecture of Modena. Sometimes, as in Fra Carnevale's two paintings, the architecture is fictitious and is



intended to suggest an ideal, timeless setting or to recreate the glories of ancient Rome. But in every case the architecture defines the space in which the narrative takes place and, in the most distinguished cases, its details help to articulate the action. This approach to narrative painting had a long and fruitful history, as anyone who stands before El Greco's *Miracle of Christ Healing the Blind*, Poussin's *Rape of the Sabine Women*, or David's *Death of Socrates* will readily appreciate.

Landscape backgrounds occur with far less frequency, for nature is filled with shapes whose irregularity defies the tidiness of perspective constructions and easily deflects attention from the action. The most straightforward solution, the one favored by Florentine painters, was simply to impose upon nature an artificial regularity. In Benozzo Gozzoli's *Conversion of Saint Paul* (fig. 23), it is the geometry of the composition, based on two sets of converging diagonals, that has determined the slopes of the Tuscan hills in the background. One set is described by the foreground hill and the placement of Saint Paul on the ground; these diagonals converge in the shoulder of the fleeing soldier in the left foreground. The other, subsidiary, set is described by the left-hand slope of the centrally placed hill and by the beam of light that extends from Christ's hand to Saint Paul. The dramatic intensity of the scene arises from this geometric scheme.

In all probability it was Uccello who was responsible for the most extreme solution to the representation of landscape backgrounds. In a ruined Nativity painted for a lunette in the cloister of the Spedale di San Martino, the furrows of the flat, distant fields all converge to a single point that was determined by means of an elaborate perspective construction. Perugino's approach was only a little less artificial. He probably received his first training from Piero della Francesca, and from an early age he formed the habit of visualizing the world in tidy, geometric terms. He perceived figures, architecture, and landscape details primarily as elements in a spatial composition and only secondarily as the protagonists of a narrative. It is this frame of mind that accounts for the almost total lack of drama in the Museum's *Resurrection* (fig. 24), which may well have formed part of

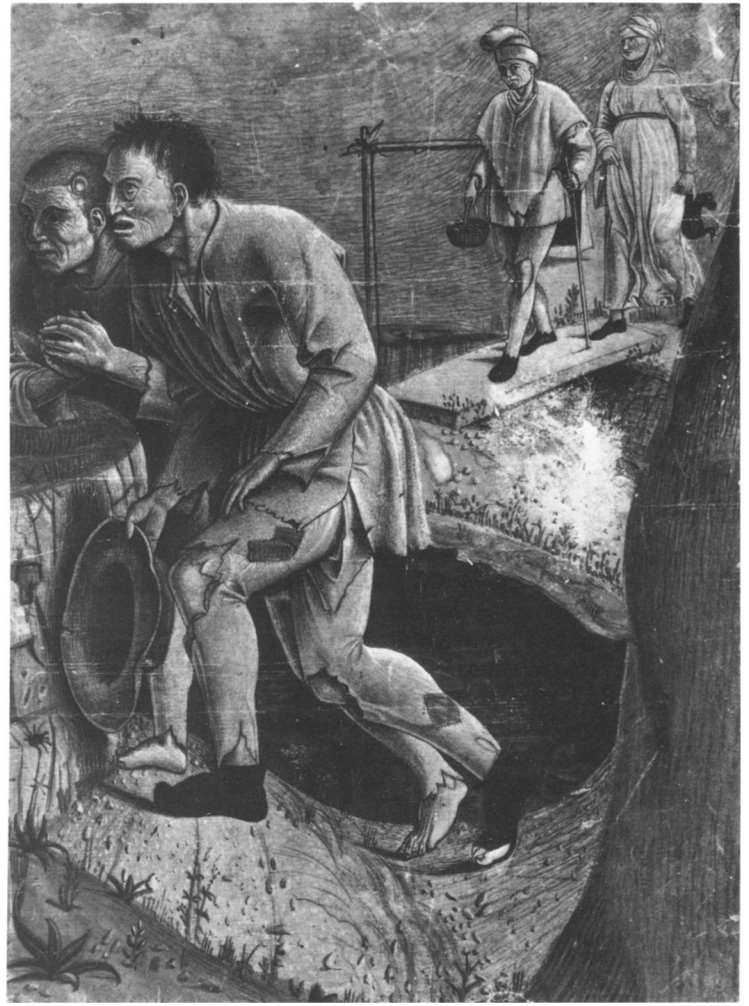
24. *Pietro Perugino (active by 1469; died 1523), The Resurrection. The painting is one of five scenes of the life of Christ that may have formed the predella of Perugino's altarpiece in Sant'Agostino in Siena, commissioned in 1502. The feigned frame is original. Tempera on wood. 10 5/8 x 18 inches. Frederick C. Hewitt Fund, 1911 (11.65)*



25. *Andrea Mantegna (about 1430–1506), The Adoration of the Shepherds. Tempera and gold on canvas, transferred from wood. 14⁷/₈ x 21 inches. Anonymous Gift, 1932 (32.130.2)*

the predella to Perugino's altarpiece for Sant'Agostino in Siena, commissioned in 1502. Everything in the panel has been conceived to enhance the effect of an ideal, geometric order. The figure of Christ rests his victory standard on a point along the vertical axis of the picture, each of the two Roman soldiers in the foreground has been arranged so that one arm and one leg is on the same plane as the front edge of the sarcophagus, and the two soldiers in the background have been positioned on the converging lines of a pair of orthogonals. Even the angled placement of the cover of the sarcophagus has been integrated into this geometric scheme, and the distant landscape has the character of a die board with the hills arranged at the sides at regular intervals. Artificial and static this composition may be, but to fifteenth-century viewers the resultant idyllic calm constituted a positive, not a negative factor. "His things have an angelic air and are very sweet" (*Le sue cose hano aria angelica, et molto dolce*) were the words the duke of Milan's agent in Florence used to commend Perugino's work to his master.

Such a drastic solution found little favor in northern Italy, where Gentile da Fabriano's pupil, Jacopo Bellini, established a far more subtle and poetic approach. It is Jacopo's son-in-law, Andrea Mantegna, who is the author of what is without doubt the most beautiful fifteenth-century narrative painting in the Metropolitan with a landscape setting. Mantegna was trained by a disreputable entrepreneur by the name of Squarcione, in whose workshop he was encouraged to draw from ancient reliefs and casts of antique sculpture. From that training evolved his preternatural inclination for surfaces described so precisely as to appear chiseled. In *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (fig. 25) he has depicted



26, 27. The picture at the upper left is a fragmentary replica of the Museum's Adoration of the Shepherds, and it firmly establishes that about two and one-half inches have been cut from that work. However, the old woman in the replica has one foot on the wooden bridge and one foot off while in the Museum's picture both feet are on the bridge. The fifteenth-century drawing at the upper right, which repeats this detail from the fragment, must have been copied from the replica before it was cut, and not from the Museum's picture. Tempera(?) on wood, 9 7/8 x 6 1/4 inches, Private Collection; brush drawing in colors on paper, 11 7/8 x 8 5/8 inches, H. M. the Queen, Windsor Castle (12794)

28. Andrea Mantegna, The Agony in the Garden. Tempera and gold on wood. 27 1/2 x 36 1/4 inches. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours



each pebble or blade of grass with crystalline clarity and shown the coarse, sun-tanned features of the two shepherds with unflinching fidelity. But this precision has not prevented him from conveying an intense feeling for the natural beauty of his native countryside of the Val Padana. On the banks of the meandering river in the background can be seen a woman seated beneath a tree spinning and a man preparing two barrels for shipment while, on the opposite bank, an angel casually approaches an unsuspecting shepherd. Whereas in Perugino's *Resurrection* space is created by the application of a perspective grid, here it is suggested in a much more natural fashion by a succession of curves. And whereas in Perugino's scene the perspectival construction determines the picture's narrative focus and the placement of the figures, here a craggy mountain in the landscape and a rocky prominence in the foreground underscore the Virgin and Child's dominant position. These two landscape features once played an even more important role in emphasizing the narrative focus of the composition, for there is good reason to believe that originally the Virgin was placed off-center. Careful examination of the painting seems to indicate that while the left-hand edge is original, the right-hand one is not. Moreover, there exists a fragmentary replica of the upper right-hand portion of the picture, which clearly suggests that about two and one-half inches are missing from that side. Judging from the fragmentary replica (fig. 26) and a contemporary drawing that records its lower right-hand features (fig. 27), the foreground hillock of the Metropolitan's painting made a continuous curve below the two shepherds and a large tree dominated at right. Besides creating an asymmetrical composition, this addition made the figures appear to be deeper in space and smaller in scale. This sort of asymmetry seems to have originated with Jacopo Bellini, and it recurs in two youthful works of Mantegna, his celebrated *Agony in the Garden* in the National Gallery, London, and his predella panel to the San Zeno altarpiece in Tours (fig. 28). It is in comparison with these two works that we can best judge the effect of the original composition of *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, with its careful balance between a pastoral landscape setting and the emotionally charged figures in the foreground.

There is, unfortunately, no way of knowing for certain when the mutilation of the painting took place. The picture is first listed in the collection of Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini in Rome in 1603, but without any dimensions, while later inventories specify only the height. Pietro Aldobrandini acquired a quantity of pictures from the



29. Girolamo da Cremona (active between 1451? and 1483), *The Adoration of the Shepherds*. Girolamo adapted Mantegna's image (fig. 25) for this miniature from the missal of Barbara of Brandenburg, marchioness of Mantua. Tempera and gold on parchment. Biblioteca, Mantua (fol. 26)

30. Girolamo da Cremona, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*. This illuminated initial from a gradual, or choir book, is also based on Mantegna's composition. Tempera and gold on parchment. Libreria Piccolomini, Cathedral, Siena (Codex 29, fol. 70)

Detail of fig. 25, Andrea Mantegna, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*





31, 32. Cosimo Tura (before 1431–1495), *The Adoration of the Magi*; *The Circumcision*. The two paintings are companion panels to Tura's *Flight into Egypt* (fig. 33). The three works may be from the predella of the Roverella altarpiece, painted about 1474 for San Giorgio fuori le Mura in Ferrara. Each tempera on wood. Diameter 15 inches, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.; diameter 15¼ inches, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

d'Este collection in Ferrara, where in 1588 a Nativity by Mantegna is mentioned among twenty-three pictures in a chapel of the duchess, Margherita Gonzaga. The chapel must have been quite extraordinary, for in addition to three pictures by Mantegna—one identifiable as *The Death of the Virgin* now in the Prado in Madrid and another probably *The Madonna and Child with Saints* in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston—there were others by Raphael, Correggio, Dosso Dossi, Girolamo da Carpi, and Mazzolino arranged on three of the walls with stucco surrounds. Upon the death of her husband, Alfonso II d'Este, Margherita took some of the pictures with her back to Mantua, where the Prado and Gardner pictures were purchased in 1627 for Charles I of England. However, the Nativity seems to have been left in Ferrara. The picture was probably acquired by Pietro Aldobrandini in 1598. Perhaps, like the Prado *Death of the Virgin*, which has been cropped at the top, it was cut down to enable its insertion into the chapel's decorative scheme. The 1588 notice mentions a *Christ Washing the Feet of the Disciples* by Mazzolino as a pendant to the Nativity. This picture has been plausibly identified with a painting in the John G. Johnson Collection in Philadelphia that, curiously enough, is exactly the width of the cut-down *Adoration of the Shepherds*.

The provenance of the picture from Ferrara is of some interest, for in 1449 Mantegna, then only eighteen years old, was commissioned by Lionello d'Este to paint his portrait. The present picture, which is an early work, was possibly also done at this time. In Ferrara Mantegna would have seen an altarpiece by Rogier van der Weyden, a wing of which showed Adam and Eve expelled from Paradise. Though the structure of Mantegna's landscape descends from Jacopo Bellini, its meticulous representation may have been inspired by Rogier's altarpiece, just as Mantegna's realistic portrayal of the shepherds and the extraordinarily acute depiction of emotions seem to reflect Rogier's unparalleled descriptive abilities.

Great pictures—even great pictures of modest dimensions—have a way of generating other pictures, and Mantegna's Nativity had such an influence. The miniaturist Girolamo da Cremona may have first seen the picture while employed illuminating a Bible for Borso d'Este in Ferrara. In 1461 Girolamo was commissioned—evidently on the recommendation of Mantegna—to illuminate a missal for the marchioness of Mantua, Barbara of Brandenburg, and it is on a page of this missal (fig. 29) that he first adapted Mantegna's scene to the exigencies of a miniature. He reversed the composition, so that the narrative reads in the same direction as the text, but in other respects Girolamo remained faithful to his model. As in the Mantegna, the Virgin kneels with clasped hands on a rocky ledge adoring the Christ Child, who lies on the hem of her cloak. The two rustic shepherds, one doffing rather than holding his hat, occupy a position below the ledge, and the Annunciation to the Shepherds again takes place on a sharply rising hill in the middle ground. Most important, Girolamo has preserved the asymmetry of Mantegna's original composition. What has changed is the serious mood that permeates the Museum's picture. In the miniature this has acquired a homespun quality of great charm.

About a decade later, in 1473, Girolamo had occasion to illustrate the initial of a choir book for the Cathedral of Siena with the Nativity, and once more it was to Mantegna's image, abbreviated and adapted to its new function, that he had recourse (fig. 30). The curve of the rocky ledge on which the Madonna kneels now serves to reinforce the curve of the framing *P*, and the shepherds have been shifted from the side to a position behind the ledge, actually clarifying the fictive space. Despite these changes, something of the emotional content of Mantegna's picture survives.

Like Mantegna, Cosimo Tura may have spent some time in Squarcione's workshop in Padua, and he had the example of Rogier van der Weyden near at hand in Ferrara, where from 1451 he was employed by the d'Este court. However, from the outset Tura was a visionary artist, and his best narrative paintings reveal an exceptional feeling for the unreal and the fantastic. In the Museum's tondo depicting the *Flight into Egypt* (fig. 33), one of three known scenes devoted to the infancy of Christ (figs. 31, 32), it is the landscape, with its magical pink sky over an open sea and the nightmarish rock formations dotted with barren shrubs, that underscores the isolation of the poignantly conceived Holy Family.



33. *Cosimo Tura, The Flight into Egypt. Tempera on wood. Diameter 15 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. The Jules Bache Collection, 1949 (49.7.17)*

Through a stroke of genius, the head of the donkey, the curve of whose neck echoes the shape of the tondo, has been aligned along the vertical axis of the panel and its kindly eyes alone address the viewer. Although there is much in this picture that recalls Gothic painting—the stylized drapery folds and the ornamental shapes of the rock formations—it differs from a Gothic work in two important respects. First, the composition is rigorously geometric, and such features as the back of the Virgin or the position of her legs reinforce this structure. Second, the picture’s stylized features result from a personal vision rather than a convention, and they derive their expressive power from a descriptive technique beyond the reach of Gothic artists.

Tura’s work, with its tenuous relation to nature, stands at one extreme of early Renaissance painting. At the other extreme is the work of Piero di Cosimo. Unlike Tura, Piero was an avid student of nature. Vasari describes a notebook of Piero’s with drawings of animals as “both exceedingly beautiful and bizarre,” and he goes on to note Piero’s devotion to the investigation of “certain subtleties of nature with no regard for time or effort.” Yet for Piero no less than for Tura this mastery served an eccentric and fantastical imagination. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in his *Hunting Scene* (fig. 34) in the Metropolitan. It shows a variety of figures—satyrs, centaurs, and men—hunting game in the forest and rocky hills of a primeval landscape. Some, like the two satyrs at the right, brandish crude clubs. Others, like the Herculean figure seen between two gnarled tree trunks or the man who has jumped on the back of a galloping horse, crush their prey bare-handed. And still others, like the two men and the armed satyr who have set upon three fighting animals, have banded together in a cooperative effort. In the distance a forest fire blazes, and from it animals run panic-stricken, only to find themselves at the mercy of hunters like those who lie in wait in the passage of a hill at the left. It is the appearance of a forest fire that enables the identification of two further panels belonging to the same series. One, in a damaged state (fig. 35), belongs to the Metropolitan and shows hunters returning with their game to boats made of twigs and reeds where their spouses await them; more boats filled with people glide across the calm bay. Once again a fire burns in the distance and animals can be seen swimming for safety. The third panel (fig. 36) is in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and shows a variety of animals—some benign, some vicious, and some, with humanlike faces, simply fantastic—taking refuge on a plateau. In the middle ground at the right a man—not clothed in skins but wearing a tunic, cloak, and shoes—carries a yoke clearly intended for the two fleeing oxen. A hut can be seen in the distance, and there are small figures of women drawing water at a well. The forest in the center of the scene is again afire.

The theme of this series is not open to doubt: it illustrates the evolution of man from a primitive state of bestiality to one of relative civilization. And it is, in a general way, based on descriptions of ancient authors, particularly the Epicurean philosopher Lucretius and the architect Vitruvius. In the fifth book of the *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius describes how primitive men

passed their lives after the wide-wandering fashion of wild beasts. No sturdy guider of the curved plow was there, none knew how to work the fields with iron, to dig new shoots into the ground, to prune off old branches from the tall trees with a sickle. What sun and rain had given, what the earth had produced of her own accord, that was a gift enough to content their minds. . . . Not yet did they know how to work things with fire, nor to use skins and to clothe themselves in the strippings of beasts; but they dwelt in the woods and forests and mountain caves, and hid their rough bodies in the underwoods. . . . And by the aid of their wonderful powers of hand and foot they would hunt the woodland tribes of beasts with volleys of stones and ponderous clubs, overpowering many, shunning but a few in their lairs; and when night overtook them, like so many bristly hogs they just cast their savage bodies naked upon the ground, rolling themselves in leaves and boughs.

This phase of man’s existence is the subject of the *Hunting Scene*, and a foreshortened corpse, which seems almost to project out of the picture, serves as a grizzly reminder of its dangers. In another passage Lucretius describes a subsequent stage in man’s progress:

Next, when they had got them huts and skins and fire, and woman mated with man was appropriated to one, and the laws of wedlock became known, and they saw offspring born of them, then

first the human race began to grow soft. For the fire saw to it that their shivering bodies were less able to endure cold under the canopy of heaven. . . . Nevertheless concord could not altogether be produced, but a good part, nay the most kept the covenant unblemished, or else the race of mankind would have been even then wholly destroyed. . . .

This stage would seem appropriate to both *The Return from the Hunt* and *The Forest Fire*, where man's ingenuity has contrived a more complicated as well as a more domestic existence. Lucretius then goes on to describe how "kings began to found cities and to build a citadel for their own protection and refuge." A painting in the John and Mable Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida, showing the construction of a large palace has sometimes been connected with the three scenes and could be related to this episode. It is, however, somewhat taller than the other three panels, and its feeble execution contrasts with their brilliant realization. Moreover, despite their generic relation to Lucretius, Piero di Cosimo's scenes cannot be construed as an illustration of any text, for in one important respect they depart from all ancient descriptions of primitive life.

Lucretius attributed man's advancement to the discovery and use of fire, whose warmth first drew men together. The same idea is put forth by Vitruvius in a passage that was well known in the Renaissance because it was quoted by Boccaccio in the *Genealogia Deorum*:

The men of old were born like the wild beasts, in woods, caves, and groves, and lived on savage fare. As time went on, the thickly crowded trees in a certain place, tossed by storms and winds, and rubbing their branches against one another, caught fire, and so the inhabitants of the place were put to flight, being terrified by the furious flame. After it subsided, they drew near and observing that they were very comfortable standing before the warm fire, they put on logs and, while thus keeping it alive, brought up other people to it, showing them by signs how much comfort they got from it. In that gathering of men, at a time when utterance of sound was purely individual, from daily habits they fixed upon articulate words just as these had happened to come; then, from indicating by name things in common use, the result was that in this chance way they began to talk, and thus originated conversation with one another. Therefore it was the discovery of fire that originally gave rise to the coming together of men.

Later illustrators of Vitruvius did not miss the point, and they made the discovery of fire and the gathering together of men around it the central feature of their illustrations. In Piero di Cosimo's scenes, the forest fire burning out of control has a sinister, even menacing quality, and the discovery of its potential usefulness appears to be less important than man's innate intelligence.

It is, of course, possible that the series originally included a number of other panels depicting the discovery of fire and its use. Indeed, it has been conjectured that the three scenes formed part of a cycle of "diverse stories of small figures" that Vasari first records in the 1550 edition of the *Lives* as decorating a room in the palace of the Florentine wool merchant Francesco del Pugliese. One of these pictures—the only one that Vasari describes in detail—showed "Mars and Venus with her cupids, and Vulcan, done with great skill and an incredible patience"; it was Vulcan who taught man the uses of fire. According to this hypothesis, the cycle would have combined illustrations of the life of primitive man with an allegorical cycle devoted to Vulcan. This seems a rather unlikely idea, and it does not account for the fact that in *The Return from the Hunt* and *The Forest Fire* man's progress is conspicuously not related to his control of fire.

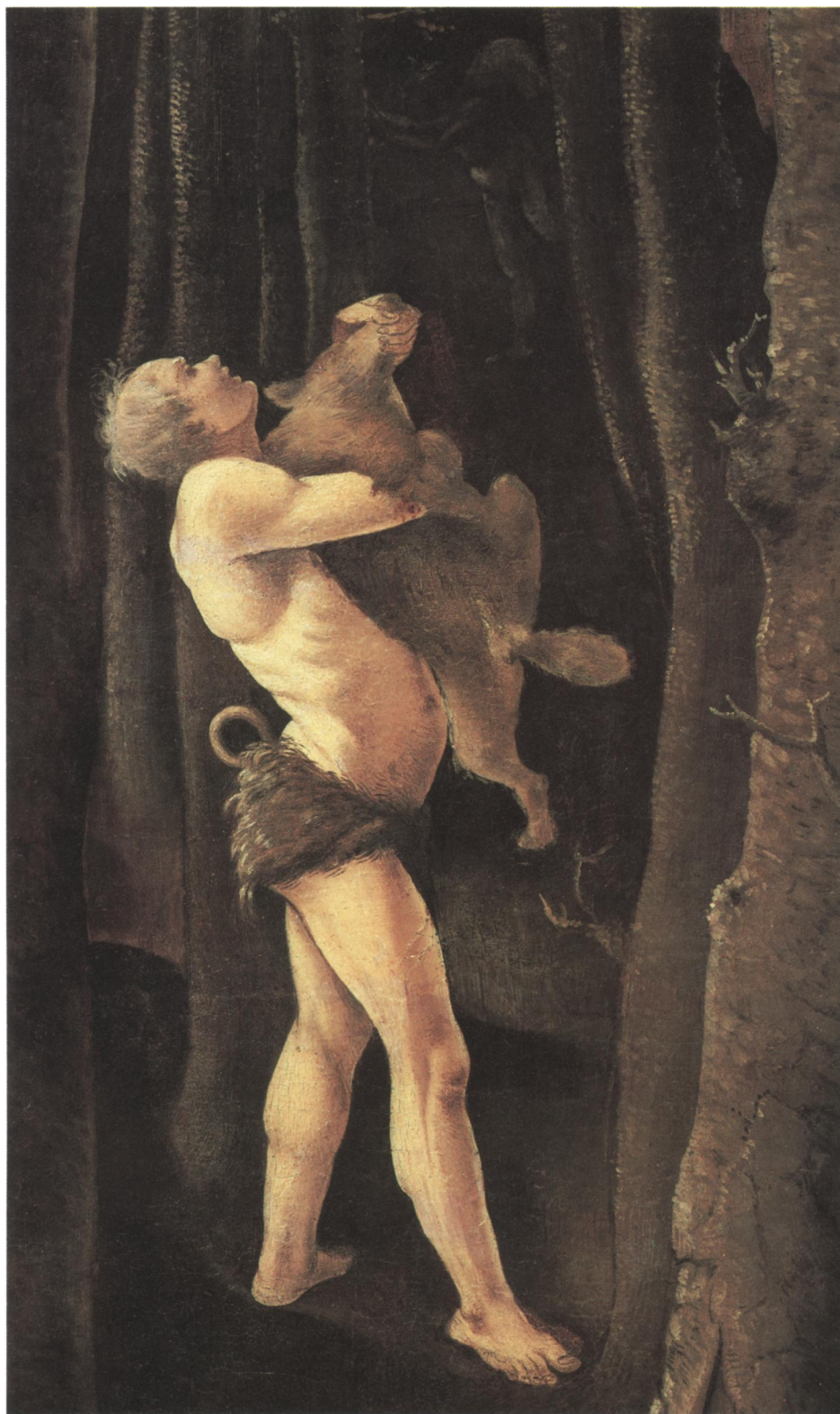
The novelty of Piero di Cosimo's treatment of primitive life resides in his use of ancient sources simply as a point of departure and in his willingness to contradict their authority. Lucretius, for example, states that primitive man "could not look to the common good" but "whatever prize fortune gave to each, that he carried off, every man taught to live and be strong for himself at his own will." Yet, even in the *Hunting Scene* both men and satyrs seem bound together by a common need for protection and food, and in *The Return from the Hunt* tenderness and mutual assistance, not bestiality, characterize primeval life. Again, for Lucretius "the wicked art of navigation then lay hidden and obscure" and "no sturdy guider of the plow was there, none knew how to work the fields with iron." Yet the building of boats and the harnessing of oxen are primary subjects in two of Piero's scenes.



34. *Piero di Cosimo (1462–1521?), Hunting Scene. Along with figs. 35 and 36, this painting was part of the decoration of a room; perhaps they were intended to be framed above a wainscoting. Oil on wood. 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 66 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Gift of Robert Gordon, 1875 (75.7.2)*



Detail of fig. 34, Piero di Cosimo, Hunting Scene. The figure of a man who crushes a bear against his chest is based on Antonio Pollaiuolo's celebrated bronze statuette of Hercules and Antaeus in the Bargello, Florence.



Detail of fig. 34: The man at the left wears a lion skin, the head of which turns back to form a collar around his neck.

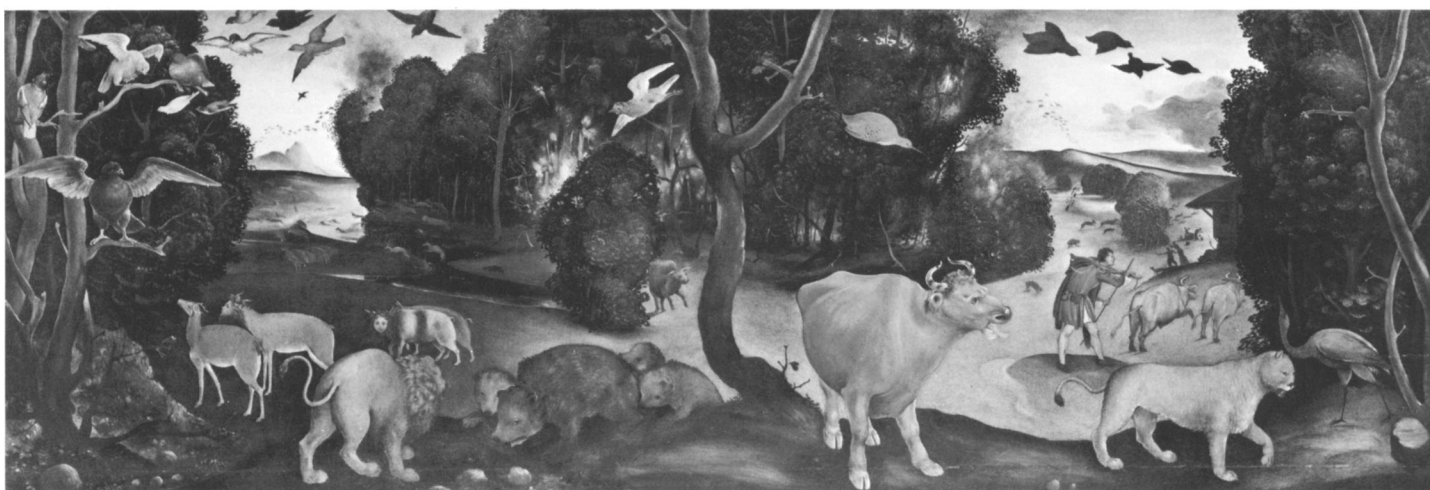






35. *Piero di Cosimo, The Return from the Hunt. This painting was a companion to figs. 34 and 36. Oil on wood. 27³/₄ x 66¹/₂ inches. Gift of Robert Gordon, 1875 (75.7.1)*





36. Piero di Cosimo, *The Forest Fire*. *The painting is a companion to figs. 34 and 35. Oil on wood. 28 x 79½ inches. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (A420)*

The reasons for Piero di Cosimo's sympathetic and compelling treatment of primitive life are not hard to uncover. According to Vasari, Piero was something of a primitive himself: "He did not like his rooms to be swept, he preferred to eat when hungry, and he did not want his garden hoed or the fruit trees pruned, preferring to let the branches of his vines trail on the ground. . . also he enjoyed seeing everything in an undomesticated state, as his own nature." More than this, he hated the sounds of city life: "The crying of babies, the coughing of men, the sound of bells, the singing of friars: all this annoyed him." And Piero was fascinated by freaks of nature, which he went out of the way to see. It was this exceptional frame of mind that enabled him to invest such classical aberrations as the satyr and the centaur—whose existence, incidentally, was denied by Lucretius—with the same believability as his men, and it was probably his disapproval of civilized life that led him to envisage primitive life as something more than deprivation and animal behavior.

Though the content of these panels is strikingly unconventional, the narrative technique employed is not. The manner in which, in the *Hunting Scene*, space is suggested by clearing two diagonal paths through the forest and aligning the foreshortened corpse and an ominous stick along one and the figure of a satyr with a club and a group of men carrying a bear along the other is a device that can be traced to Uccello, while the division of the picture surface by means of two trees in the foreground is analogous to Botticelli's use of architecture in the Museum's *Miracles of Saint Zenobius*. Certain details can, in fact, be shown to derive from other less eccentric works of art. The dog attacking a lion in the left of the *Hunting Scene* has its origin in battle and hunting scenes best documented in a number of fifteenth-century engravings, while the figure crushing a bear is patterned on Pollaiuolo's famed bronze of Hercules and Antaeus. Even in *The Return from the Hunt* and *The Forest Fire*, which are among the most ambitious landscape compositions of the Renaissance, Piero has relied upon a number of conventions. In *The Return from the Hunt* the action is confined to the foreground, and the man at the left and the centaur with a woman on his back at the right are placed along converging diagonals. In *The Forest Fire* a number of animals are strung along a plateau in a manner paralleled in numerous other pictures, and the circular form of the distant forest serves the same function as a circular church or temple dominating the piazza of a more conventional painting with an



architectural setting. These compositional devices were not restricting factors—quite the contrary. Their imaginative use testifies to the extraordinary vitality of early Renaissance narrative techniques and helps to explain their persistence long after the work of early Renaissance painters ceased to exert a direct influence on European painting.

Detail of fig. 36, Piero di Cosimo, The Forest Fire

Photographs of works from other museums have been reproduced courtesy of the institutions cited in the captions. The engraving in fig. 22 is from *Museum Worsleyanum: or, a Collection of Antique Basso Relievos, Bustos, Statues, and Gems . . .*, vol. 1, London, 1794.

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Cover: Detail, Piero di Cosimo, *Hunting Scene* (fig. 34)

Back cover: Detail, Master of the Barberini Panels (probably Fra Carnevale), *The Birth of the Virgin* (fig. 19)

Inside front cover: Detail, Sandro Botticelli, *Three Miracles of Saint Zenobius* (fig. 9)

Inside back cover: Detail, Andrea Mantegna, *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (fig. 25)



