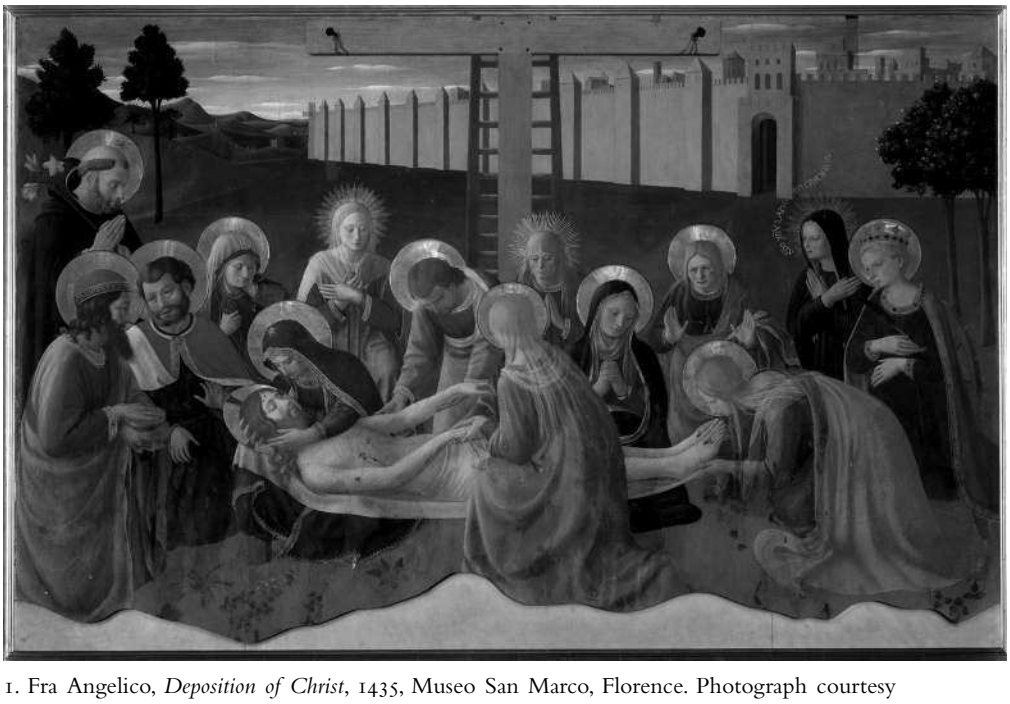
INTRODUCTION: PUBLIC PAINTING AND VISUAL CULTURE IN EARLY REPUBLICAN FLORENCE, 1282–1434

On his way to the executioner's block, the condemned criminal in Florence ran a gauntlet of acrimony. After a particularly sleepless night inside the Chapel of the Magdalene in the Palace of the Podestà, the prisoner was led from his chamber by hooded members of the Confraternity of Santa Maria alla Croce, down the steps of the government palace, and out into the streets.[1] With small paintings of the Crucifixion held before him by confraternity members, he was led through the center of the city to the place where the ancient crossroads of the *cardus* and *decumanus* met in the Mercato Vecchio.[2] There, at the very navel of Florence, the prisoner was made to kneel before a painting bearing the images of the Virgin, the Child, angels, the Baptist, and Saint Luke, known as the *Madonna della Tromba*. He was urged (and maybe required) to say a prayer – a Hail Mary, a Salve Regina, or anything else that came to mind. Activity in that bustling mercantile zone came to a momentary halt as vendors and clients alike took advantage of this opportunity to hurl garbage, rotten food, and insults at the condemned man before he was lifted up by his cloaked guardians and marched north and east through the Piazza San Giovanni and the city cathedral. The procession continued up the Via Servi, all the way to the ancient church of Santissima Annunziata, where the prisoner once again knelt before an image – this one the famous miracle-working picture of the Virgin Annunciate – to pray for his own soul on this, his final day on earth. Before long, he was uprooted from his position and processed

down a different route to the church of Sant'Ambrogio, on the east side of town, and then through the Porta alla Croce to the killing fields of Florence.[3] Again he heard the taunts of bystanders and felt the blows of fists and refuse as they struck him, but all he could see was the Tavoletta of the Crucifixion held only inches from his eyes by a member of the confraternity. The procession stopped at its final destination, the oratory of the Tempio, owned and operated by the confraternity and furnished to accommodate its members on occasions such as these.[4] The condemned was positioned before a crucifix and, by the middle of the fifteenth century, the painting by Fra Angelico of the *Deposition of Christ*, currently in the Museo San Marco, before which he murmured still more prayers (Figure 1). A lengthy series of questions, answers, songs, and final remarks were uttered by both the prisoner and his keepers before the retinue exited the chapel for the gallows or the chopping block, whichever fate the court had determined. At no point was the condemned left on his own during this process, and at no point was he deprived of an image. Indeed, the route was specifically chosen to position the condemned before public paintings, one in the heart of the commercial district, others situated in churches and respected for their healing powers, and still others at the end of his journey toward death. The city was littered with public pictures for common people, and these pictures took on a variety of different forms depending on their location, intended message, and expected audience.

THE EARLY REPUBLICAN CITY

Fourteenth-century Florence was a large and bustling city, as pristinely beautiful in its most prosperous neighborhoods as it was dirty and disease-ridden in its poorest. Different groups and classes rubbed elbows in most of them, with the city's wealthiest captains of industry living literally next door to the local cobbler, baker, or mason. Men and women lived separate lives, but often encountered each other at market, in church, and sometimes even in guildhalls. The landed aristocracy, banished from holding public office as "magnates" with a violent past, lived off rental incomes and avoided the humbling prospect of entering trades or professions, which they feared would reduce their social status. Merchants recognized a pecking order, too, with bankers and silk manufacturers vying for power with wool merchants, while grocers, armorers, and linen weavers brought up the rear in the annual civic processions of the guilds. Most boys and many girls attended school until they were twelve or thirteen, which helped create a fairly well educated population: there they learned to read and write, calculate figures, and even acquire a smattering of Latin to prepare them for the education awaiting them as apprentices in workshops (if boys) and newly wedded young women (if girls). Some of the quicker studies might advance to university with an eye toward garnering a career in the clergy



1. Fra Angelico, *Deposition of Christ*, 1435, Museo San Marco, Florence. Photograph courtesy Nimatallah/Art Resource, New York.

or courts of law, but if they did so they knew they would be sentenced to years of studying canon or civil law, medicine, or theology.

And then there were the poor, the unenfranchised, and tens of thousands of manual laborers who worked in the dangerously unsafe workshops of the wool industry as dyers, carders, and weavers. Many of these *sottoposti* – literally "underlings" unable to join the guilds reserved for wealthier merchants – were immigrants from small towns in Tuscany, second or third sons, either alone or with their wives and children, who needed work once their father's inheritance had been officially handed over to the eldest brother. Some came from Italian regions beyond the Apennines, speaking in accents that made them difficult to understand and lacking the social connections they needed to help them find the work they sought. The most vulnerable of the city's residents came from places where the entire Italian language, let alone the Florentine dialect, was completely and utterly foreign. These foreigners packed into tenements cheek to jowl, shared beds and clothes and food and bacteria, and – if they were lucky – held some of the very worst jobs imaginable. The most destitute of them turned to crime and vice, as Florence had its fair share of petty larceny, prostitution, and even occasional outbreaks of violence. The city crawled with these day laborers and hand-to-mouth wretches, and they were the most impressionable and most frequent viewers of public pictures in early Republican Florence.

When we speak of audiences, we need to remember that the vast disparities of income and education and family connectivity made for as eclectic a viewership as any artist would ever be forced to accommodate. In a city that promoted its communally based republic, only about three thousand men, or roughly 3 percent of the population, were actually eligible to hold office. These men constituted an elite class of merchants, and they enjoyed certain privileges unknown to their social, political, and economic inferiors. Among these were the right to purchase the rights to burial chapels already situated inside local churches and monasteries, the right to decorate those spaces as they saw fit, and the right to visit those spaces should the occasion arise. At the same time, we must also acknowledge the probability that many of these people had little interest in the images they had already paid for. Money does not necessarily buy culture, and the hobbies and interests of wealthy merchants and aristocrats of early Republican Florence were just as eclectic as those of their twenty-first-century descendants today. Some people just don't care very much for imagery, and it is no exaggeration to assert that the very best paintings produced in the city during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were intended for a very small percentage of the city's population, and were seen with any frequency by an even smaller one.

By contrast, a much larger number of people daily sought out pictures in the public realm, like the *Madonna of Orsanmichele* (Plate VII). They passed by frescoes in piazzas and panels in tabernacles at all hours of the day and night. They knew which pictures worked miracles and which ones didn't. They looked at paintings tucked into niches in the walls of staircases that wound up from the shop on the ground floor of the Wool Guild to the Sala d'Udienza upstairs, and then they stared at the fresco of Junius Brutus fending off threats from angry men in fancy clothes (Plate XXIV). They saw images on the sides of the exterior walls when they walked by the jail and the office of the podestà, inside communal offices operated by the state, and on the piers of churches when they flirted with *giovani* during the sermons they were supposed to be listening to (Plates XVI, XVII, XVIII, and XXXVI). Hundreds, maybe even thousands of people saw these public pictures every single day of every single week of every single year during the early Republican period. The artist who wished to burnish his reputation among the people of Florence was wise to accept a commission that would allow him to install his work on a street corner normally filled with immigrant prostitutes. The few common people who actually commented on images in their written chronicles or memoirs always and without exception named as the greatest examples of Florentine workmanship those objects on view in the public domain. Giotto's frescoes in the depths of Santa Croce were never hailed as the city's best art objects: that honor went to Andrea di Cione for his monumental tabernacle that contained the Madonna in the semipublic guild church of Orsanmichele (Figure 21).[5]

Despite the disadvantages that came with being of the "wrong" class, gender, or social status, common viewers in Florence got to see and contemplate an abundance of works of art in the city. True, they probably did not have the opportunity to see liturgical pictures like Andrea di Cione's *Strozzi Altarpiece* in the locked chapel of Santa Maria Novella or Giotto's *Coronation of the Virgin* behind its drawn curtain in Santa Croce, and their exposure to the more elaborate and imaginative fresco cycles that presented narrative illustrations of saintly lives in the burial chapels of their social betters was probably quite limited. Despite the fact that common people did not see these images, they did receive some visual instructions on proper devotional methods. Churches placed pictures of important heroic saints on the piers and columns on the congregation's side of the nave with some frequency (Plates XXV, XXVI, and XXVII). Devotional pictures based on the altarpiece design graced confraternity halls and governmental offices (Plates XVIII, XIX, and XX). Guilds promoted the celestial advocates who interceded on their behalf (Plate XXIV). If they wanted to, common people could see representations of all sorts of images, and of a variety that actually surpassed that aimed at their wealthier and better-positioned contemporaries in the transepts and choirs of strictly maintained ecclesiastical spaces.

One such example of liturgical art for the common man was Giottino's famous *Lamentation of Christ*, now in the Uffizi Galleries (Plate I). Giorgio Vasari first noticed the picture on the right side of the *tramezzo* in the modest-sized church of San Remigio, but his imprecise description of its placement there makes its original orientation unclear: we do not know whether the image faced the congregation occupying the front half of the church's nave or the clergy on the other side of the *ponte*.[6] At first the panel seems to feature a single event, the mourning of Christ's body after his deposition from the cross. But closer inspection reveals that Giottino painted two separate moments onto this otherwise unified field. The vertical crucifix forming the central axis effectively splits the scene into two discrete parts: to the right, mourners anoint Christ's body, discuss the injustice he has suffered, and (according to Vasari's description) express their profound grief with tears and subtle gestures of tenderness. This narrative representation of the Passion stands separately from the more contemporary fourteenth-century mystical apparition on the other side, to the left. Here, an ascetically dressed nun and a much more luxuriously depicted laywoman – perhaps sisters, with the more glamorous of the girls being the older of the two – kneel together, facing the group to our right. Depicted rather stoically, these young women strike subtly different reverential attitudes, with the nun pressing her hands together in prayer and the older woman crossing her hands over her chest. Joining them stand two contemporary male patrons, the first dressed as an ascetic reformer abbot – Benedict, Bernard, or perhaps even Romuald – and the second

appearing as a more worldly bishop saint, each one appropriately matched to the vocational status of the two girls. The monastic saint touches the head of the nun while the bishop does the same to the elegantly garbed lay woman, as both saints directly infuse into the minds of these two women the proper thoughts, attitudes, and emotional responses they ought to conjure as they contemplate the scene on the right. And finally, serving as an exemplary figure upon which to model their behavior, a kneeling female saint appears to the far left, her hands pressed together and her faced compressed into one of the more descriptive expressions of human grief produced in the whole of fourteenth-century European art. If the monk and the bishop instill in these women the intellectual thoughts they need to understand the meaning of Christ's sacrifice, the raw, almost guttural reaction of this woman provides viewers with the physical attitude they must strike as they think their thoughts. The painting, then, is not about the *Lamentation of Christ* per se, but is more accurately a picture about a *Vision of the Lamentation* that these two women experience – what they must think, how they must behave, and which emotions they should trigger to reach a similarly perfected, mystical state equal to that enjoyed by the nun and her sister in Giottino's painting. Lay viewers were shown how to worship, were instructed on the art of emotive veneration, and were privileged to see examples of what everyone in the church of San Remigio ought to do when considering Christ's ultimate sacrifice.

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) the limited access women had to liturgical pictures in formal ecclesiastical spaces, pictures placed in the public sphere often featured female characters as main protagonists. The actual presence of Mary or a particular saint represented in pictures was, as we now know, a foregone conclusion in the minds of most European Christians during the late Middle Ages.[7] Images were processed through the streets of Italian cities not only to allow people to see pictures normally tucked away inside chapels and rooms of medieval churches, but also to allow those figures depicted on the image to see (and bless) those who had come out to greet them.[8]

Bernardo Daddi's remarkable painting of the *Madonna del Bagnuolo* from 1335 illustrates dramatically the potential for animation with which all holy paintings were imbued, and does so in a way that features not only a female saint, but a contemporary supplicant as the recipient of heavenly benevolence from above (Figure 2).[9] Here, in what was almost certainly a copy of an earlier painting of this subject emanating from Daddi's workshop, two women and an acolyte kneel before an altar supporting a large painting of the Virgin.[10] Saints Catherine and Zenobius stand outside the frame that contains Mary, and as Christ blesses us as living viewers standing before this picture, the kneeling donors and their clerical attendant beseech a painting of the Blessed Virgin to come to their aid. Much to our surprise, we see immediately that the prayers offered by our genuflecting donor will be answered in the

2. Bernardo Daddi, *Madonna del Bagnuolo*, ca. 1335, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence. Photograph courtesy Gabinetto Fotografico del Polo Museale Regionale della Toscana.

affirmative: the Virgin's right hand dips down toward the supplicant, breaking the lower edge of the frame, crossing over the top of the table upon which the image has been perched, and extends into the realm of the living devotees below. The picture has unexpectedly come to life before their eyes – and ours. While Bernardo Daddi's illustration of this event confirms the miracle-working properties of the original image of the *Madonna del Bagnuolo*, it also suggests the pregnancy of potential that all devotional paintings possessed, which could allow them to respond directly and personally to those who invoked the advocacy of the holy figure represented there. Any and every picture, Daddi tells his audience in this frame-within-a-frame painting, has the potential to work

miracles, to come to life as animated figures, and to interact directly with human beings in this world.

It was an important lesson for common people to learn, and artists assumed the responsibility of teaching it to them. How painters came to understand the needs and expectations of such a wide range of viewers – wool workers and immigrants, prostitutes and illiterates, middle managers and doctors, mothers and lawyers, pickpockets and washerwomen – is a question we may never be able to answer.

But understand them they did.

STAGING A VISUAL CULTURE

At the end of her article concerning the patronage of a woman named Datuccia Sardi Da Campiglia, who commissioned Taddeo di Bartolo to decorate a chapel for her in the Pisan convent of San Francesco, Gail Solberg addressed one of the issues that she had raised in her own article.[11] Recognizing the problems inherent in a situation whereby a woman possessed rights to a chapel located in a sacristy where only priests were routinely permitted access, Solberg wondered,

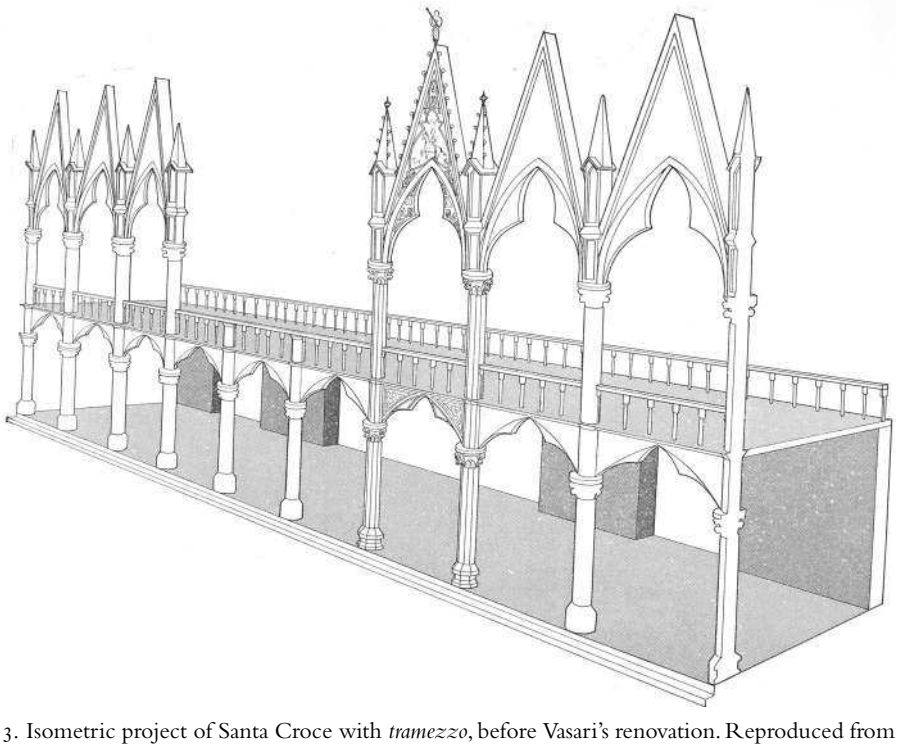
> Did she (Datuccia) occupy her chapel only for her own funeral rights, the chapel that, through numerous visual devices, is so personal as to appear infused with her presence? Or was her insistence on being visually included her way of compensating for her physical absence?[12]

In a broader sense, Solberg asks essential questions: what were the rights of wealthy female patrons in fourteenth-century Italy? Could a woman access her own burial space, located deep within an ecclesiastical center, while she was still alive? Did she have to wait until she was dead before she could enter it? And, if the latter was so, did Datuccia try to overcome her exclusion from her own chapel by having references to her identity placed inside it by an artist so that she could be present symbolically, if not physically, during her lifetime?

Solberg's queries lead us to bigger, broader issues concerning the vagaries of viewership during this period. Exactly who got to see paintings during the waning of the Middle Ages? Where could they see them? What rituals, if any, were performed before them when they did? And how did artists and patrons find ways to address viewers of common birth or the undereducated or those condemned to die or women or children too young to understand what wealthy, smart, enfranchised males were privileged to see? What role must viewership and audience play in our interpretation of image, texts and even musical performance in this period? These are not only good questions: they are, in fact, fundamental ones that scholars of Florentine painting of the early Republican period have only recently begun to ask.

Florentines of common birth, or those unlucky enough to have been born female, did not have the same opportunities to see the city's most influential works of art as could men born into prominent families or admitted to the clergy. As had been the case throughout the thirteenth century when major Italian urban centers experienced a surge in the production of the visual arts, paintings produced during the fourteenth century tended to decorate spaces intended for only a few spectators. The most important and influential images were often created with funds donated to churches and religious institutions by wealthy laymen and, occasionally, their wives or widows. These patrons often wished to decorate ecclesiastical spaces with fresco cycles, altarpieces, sculpted effigies, and a vast array of votive and symbolic instruments to facilitate official religious services. Donors eagerly acquired burial chapels for themselves and their descendants not simply because they provided for their families suitable resting places that could service them until the Day of Judgment, but because they enhanced their social status within their neighborhoods and communities. Exactly how often they visited these burial chapels, or even whether they were allowed to visit them at all, has remained an elusive topic.

The explosion of building projects that marked the city's rise during the late Middle Ages surely laid the groundwork for the volume of fresco cycles and altarpieces painted in Florence during the period. But most of these pictures were installed deep within the architectural confines of religious communities. Paintings in the Franciscan church of Santa Croce by Giotto, Taddeo Gaddi, Maso di Banco, and Bernardo Daddi – most of them landmarks in the history of western painting – could have only been seen by those willing to venture through and behind the massive *tramezzo* (or *ponte*) that ran from one side wall to the other, a marble barrier that effectively divided the large church into two sections (Figure 3).[13] In big churches, like Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella, this *ponte*, or literally "bridge," was an architectural unit unto itself, a building within a building, rising anywhere from four to nine meters up into the air and extending back toward the transept another eight meters. Chapels and tombs could be embedded in it, which in turn allowed churches to raise additional funds from donors who sought alternative spaces to inter their ancestors and descendants (Figure 4). An occidental relative of the Byzantine *iconostasis*, the *tramezzo* created a barrier that formed two distinctive spaces inside a church: one for the laity, who were expected to mill about in the nave, and one for the clergy, who controlled the choir, crossing, transept, and support rooms in the back. Wealthy benefactors appear to have had the ability to buy their way into this reserved space. No written records specifically state that women and common men were disinvited from visiting the spaces beyond the *tramezzo*, but that massive obstacle with solid walls and doors that stood between them and, say, the frescoes by Giotto in the Peruzzi Chapel acted as a deterrent.



3. Isometric project of Santa Croce with *tramezzo*, before Vasari's renovation. Reproduced from Marcia Hall, *Renovation and Counter Reformation: Vasari and Duke Cosimo in Sta Maria Novella and Sta Croce 1565–1577* (Oxford, 1979), 198, Figure 3.

Friars, laymen with ownership rights to the burial chapels in the transept, and influential civic and mercantile leaders with business in the heart of the church had access to these magnificent pictures. But the level of accessibility to poor men, women, and children is much harder to ascertain. Some evidence suggests that access to spaces behind the *tramezzo* was limited and gender specific, although no chronicles, textual descriptions, or contractual arrangements specifically say so. Circumstantial evidence suggests that women were discouraged from inspecting altars at close range. Giovanni Boccaccio, when framing the narrative for *The Decameron*, opens his story by placing his seven heroines inside the church of Santa Maria Novella, where they commemorate their dead not by seeing or attending Mass but rather by listening to it from a distance – presumably from the congregation's side of the *tramezzo*. The famous frescoes of the *Miracle at Greccia* and the *Burial of Saint Francis* in the upper basilica of San Francesco at Assisi, both of which clearly depict female devotees cordoned off from the sanctuary (but eagerly straining to see inside), suggest that women were unwelcome beyond the *ponte*. Gates attached to *tramezzo* entrances and, often, to the portals of burial chapels sometimes made access into these sacred