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978-0-521-17078-9 - Nicola Pisano and the Revival of Sculpture in Italy

G. H. and E. R. Crichton

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Part I



CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LIFE
OF NICOLA PISANO

THE middle of the thirteenth century marks the beginning of a new epoch in Italian sculpture which culminated in Michelangelo. The object of the following pages is to describe the life and work of Nicola Pisano, the author of this revival.

In order to understand his achievement it is necessary to indicate briefly the economic and social conditions which rendered it possible, and to give an outline of the development of sculpture in Italy prior to his advent.

The thirteenth century was a period of change and growth in Italian history. The foundation of the Franciscan order may be said to signify the rejection of an exclusive monasticism and separation from the world as the highest ideal of the religious life, in favour of an active participation in the sufferings and poverty of the common people. At the same time the vernacular languages were beginning to take form. Literature was no longer confined to Latin for its means of expression, or to the abstruse dialectic of the scholastic philosophy as its principal theme. The poetry of Provence found its way to the court of Frederick II, and Italian literature began in the songs composed in the Sicilian dialect. At a later date the *Divine*

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[More information](#)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Comedy gave expression to the sentiment of the new age. It was theology and philosophy expressed in the popular language in terms of art, and what is more important, in terms of ordinary human emotion.

The pulpits of Nicola Pisano in the Baptistery at Pisa and in the Duomo of Siena (plates 1, 2) indicate a similar process. The theological system as expressed in the early reliefs and statues at Pisa have the formality and rigidity of ecclesiastical symbols. In the pulpit of Siena sacred events are represented as manifesting themselves in ordinary human beings. If this development be considered more closely, it will be seen that within a very short period Italian art had begun to liberate itself from symbolic religious influence, and had entered upon a path which, in the end, was bound to separate the artist from the religious foundations from which in earlier times he drew his inspiration.

These changes were the product of political events of great importance for the development of art, namely, the rise of the Italian commune, the decline in the power of the Church and the Emperor, and its concentration in the hands of persons whose activity was centred in commercial and industrial affairs. This meant, among other things, an accumulation of wealth which rendered possible an increase of ornament and luxury not only in private but also in public life. The Duomo and Baptistery in Pisa would not have been erected but for the treasure derived by Pisan traders from their enterprise in every part of the Mediterranean. It was not an accident that the revival of sculpture began in that city.

There existed on Pisan territory not only a local school of sculpture, but also a number of remains of classical art which provided a source of instruction and inspiration to an eye capable of appreciating their significance. The local sculpture was no isolated

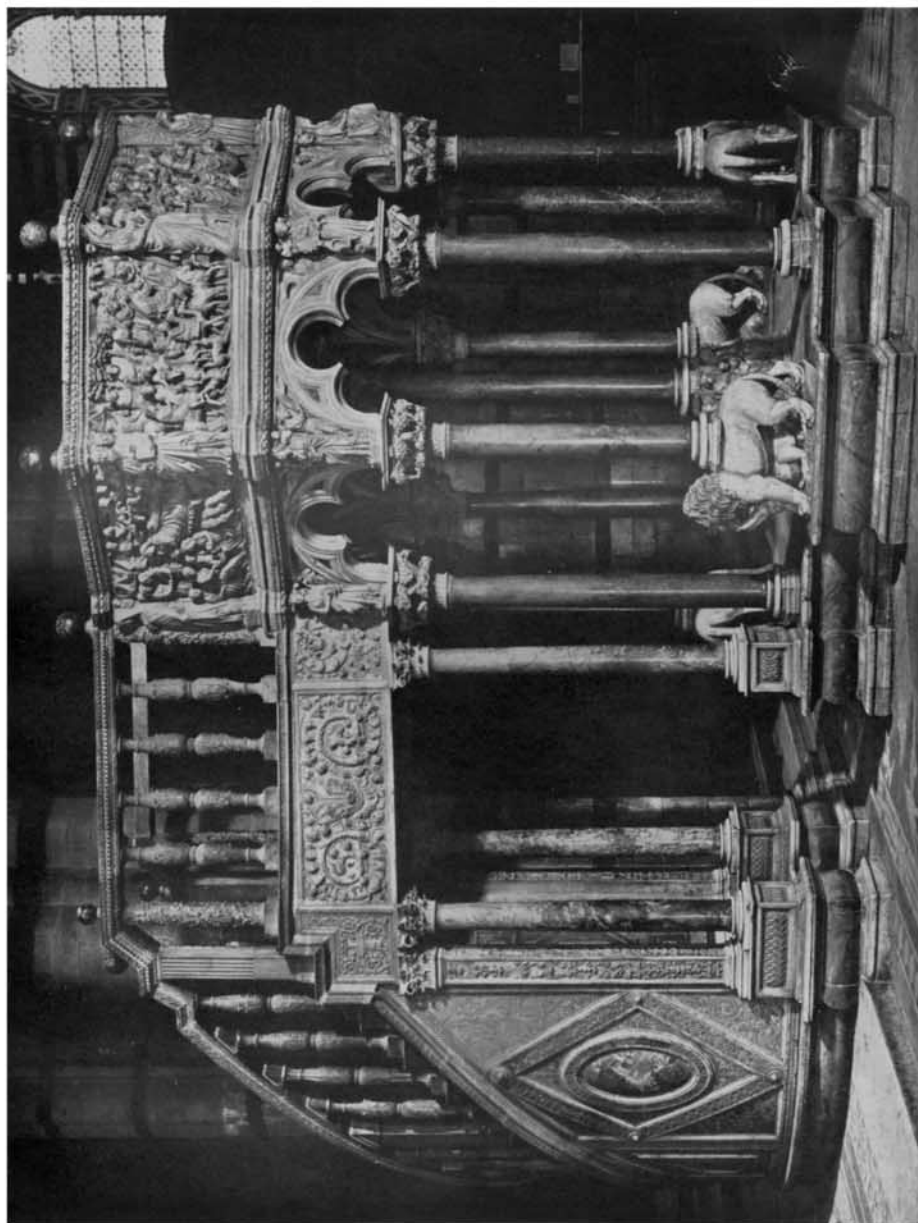
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[More information](#)



2. Siena. Pulpit in Duomo.

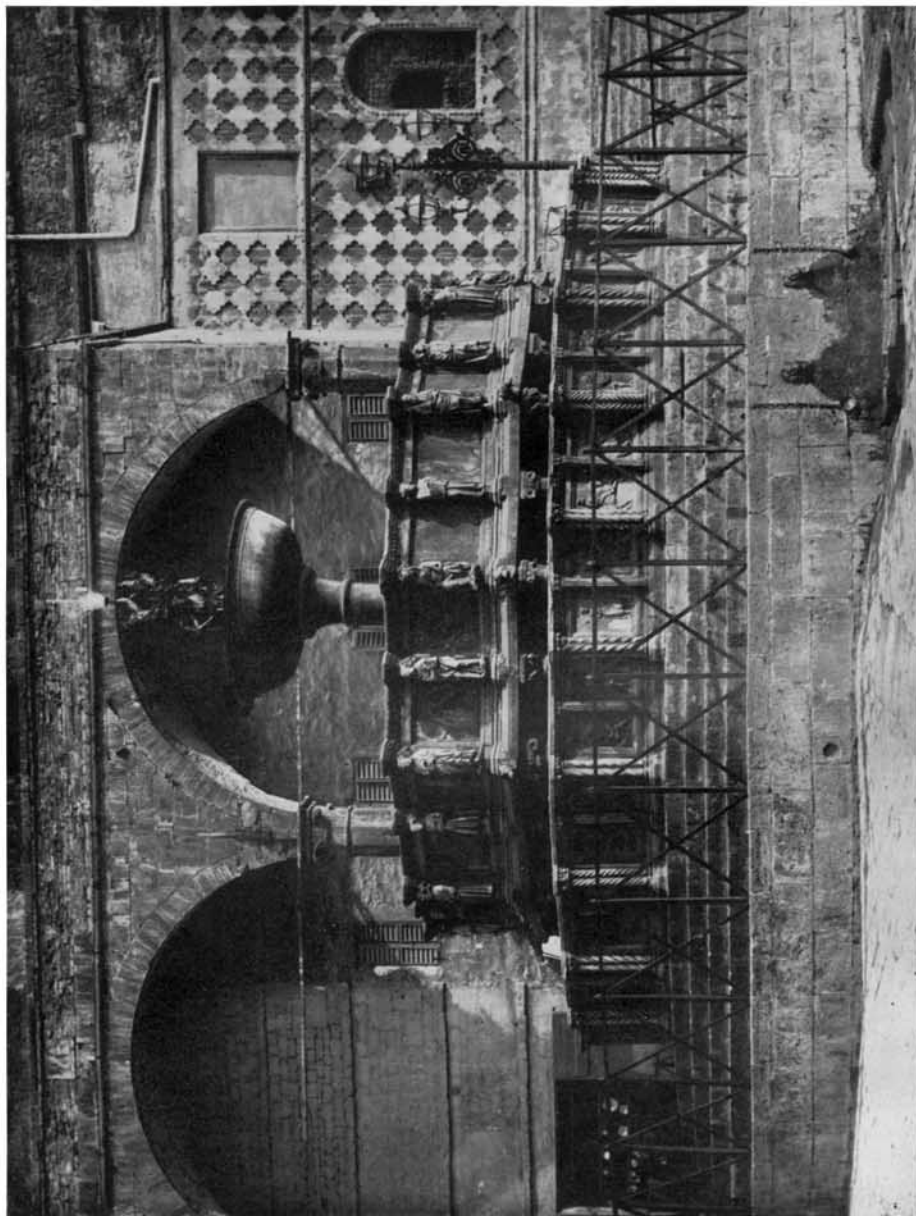
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Excerpt

[More information](#)



3. Perugia. Piazza del Duomo. Fountain.

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[More information](#)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

phenomenon, but had been enriched by influences from outside, from Lombardy, and through the foreign connections of Pisa, from France and the East. Nicola Pisano may have been of Pisan origin or he may have been an emigrant from the south of Italy, but in either event he could prove his capacity, not by a skill acquired elsewhere, but through observation and utilisation of the material which he found in Pisa, the Byzantine sculptures of the Baptistery, the pulpit of Guglielmo in the Duomo,¹ the Lombard influences to be seen in the work of his predecessors. These works were all the products of the immediate past. Nicola's genius consisted in the fact that he sought a new starting-point in a study of the monuments which had been inherited by Pisa from her Roman past, or acquired through her adventures abroad.

The pulpit in the Baptistery at Pisa was the first result which remains of Nicola's training and experience. His later works, the pulpit in Siena and the fountain at Perugia (plate 3), show how he was enabled to enlarge his powers by incorporating what had been achieved in the cathedral sculpture of France.

In any attempt, therefore, to discuss the place of Nicola Pisano in the history of Italian sculpture, it is necessary to take into account the various elements from which he learned his art, the Roman sarcophagi, the Byzantine school that worked on the Baptistery, the local Pisan art, the sculpture of Lombardy, and the Gothic movement in France. Influences from all these sources are reflected in the pulpit in the Baptistery at Pisa, whose erection marks the beginning of the renaissance of sculpture in Italy, a distinction which fell to the lot of Pisa through the historical circumstances which made her one of the chief maritime and commercial powers of the Mediterranean.

Through her commercial activities Pisa was in contact not only

¹ This pulpit is now in Cagliari. See ch. II, p. 27.

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[More information](#)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

with the material products but also with the art of the Greek Empire, of the Mohammedan Mediterranean, of Lombardy, and of the south of France. The geographical position of Pisa, the adjacent marble quarries, the forests in the hinterground providing the material for ship-building,¹ gave her importance not only in medieval but also in ancient times. The fact that the expedition against Gildo in 398 sailed from Pisa is evidence that the city was a port of importance in Roman times. It is impossible, however, to say to what extent the Roman monuments which existed in Pisa in the Middle Ages were indigenous, and to what extent later importations acquired in war or by commercial enterprise. In any case, there existed sufficient material in the first half of the thirteenth century to leave a deep impress on the nascent Italian sculpture.

After the collapse of the Empire, Pisa appears to have acquired and maintained a kind of maritime self-sufficiency during the successive waves of invasion from the North. It was in this period that the long struggle with the Saracens began, out of which was built up the fortunes of the State. Thus in 1016 Pisa, in conjunction with Genoa, freed Sardinia from the Saracens, while the year 1062 was marked by the seizure in the harbour of Palermo of six Saracen ships containing valuable booty, an event which gave the stimulus to the erection of the Duomo.² In 1087 the Pisans and the Genoese are to be found carrying the war into enemy territory and winning a battle off Tunis. This event was followed by the First Crusade in which the Pisans took part, moved as much by commercial as by

¹ For the building of the fleet employed in the Balearic expedition of 1113, cf. W. Heywood, *A History of Pisa* (Cambridge 1921), p. 61.

² The Duomo was consecrated in 1118. There is considerable controversy as to the date of the completion of various parts of the edifice. Cf. P. Toesca, *Storia dell' Arte Italiana* (Turin 1913), pp. 549, 660 n. 39, and works therein cited. The Baptistery was begun in 1153, continued in the thirteenth and completed in the fourteenth century.

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[More information](#)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

religious motives, and thereafter secured for themselves a footing in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean, corresponding advantages being acquired in the western basin in the latter part of the following century. From this date Pisa appears as a strong commercial and maritime power, drawing resources from regions as far apart as Cairo and Morocco.

A few observations as to the nature of this dominion may be added to throw light on the widespread ramifications of the interests of the city, which, standing in the centre of the Mediterranean, was brought into contact through her settlements with every form of artistic production and tradition, from Constantinople in the East, to Provence in the West. Her connections were not limited to the transitory movements of trading vessels. Colonies or rather concessions were obtained in many important cities, at Constantinople, Jaffa, Tyre, Laodicia, Antioch, Tripoli and elsewhere, where Pisan immigrants owned houses and magazines, possessed churches, acquired special rights and were governed by their own officials forming a separate community in the territory of the diverse States where they settled¹.

Of particular interest for the development of art were the Pisan settlements in Provence at Fréjus, Narbonne, S. Gilles and Montpellier, in which last town we hear of a "Domus Pisanorum". The intercourse with the south of France was not limited to Pisan immigration. The Provençals used to frequent the fair held in August of each year in Pisa, where special measures for their reception were taken. These details are of more than general and historical interest, and have been dwelt upon to show what facilities existed in the Middle Ages for the intercommunication

¹ Cf. Heywood, ch. IX, on Pisan Colonies, and A. Savelli in *Pisa nella Storia e nell'Arte* (Milan-Rome 1929), pp. 41 ff., where the development of Pisan colonial dominion is discussed in detail.

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[More information](#)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

of religious ideas, iconographical models and artistic forms between the different quarters of Europe.

Apart, however, from her relations with the East and with France, Pisa was brought into contact with two other important centres of Italian art, Lombardy and the dominions of the Emperor Frederick II in the South. The Via Francigena descended from the North into the Lucca-Pisan area, bringing it into touch with the French influences which penetrated over the Alps. This road was a constant subject of dispute between Lucca and Pisa. The struggle with Lucca for its possession, as also for the control of the communications in the lower valley of the Arno, weakened Pisa in no small degree and contributed to her downfall.

The relations of Pisa with the imperial dominions in South Italy were also of importance both in the sphere of politics and of art. Pisa remained consistently Ghibelline in her sympathies, and this brought her into conflict with her Tuscan neighbours, particularly after the formation of the Tuscan League in 1197. The political connection with the South is an argument in support of the Apulian origin of Nicola Pisano, as there must have been considerable coming and going between the two districts, and it is even possible that the Greek artists in Pisa, whom Vasari mentions in his life of Nicola Pisano, may have come there through the imperial connection. In any event, the connection with the Emperor was disastrous for Pisa. It added to the number of her enemies in that fateful period in which she embarked in a struggle for maritime and commercial supremacy with Genoa. This struggle developed in the thirteenth century. Pisa was unable to retain the position she had won and, after years of foreign warfare and internal faction, she fell finally in 1406 under the dominion of Florence.

The imperial sympathies of Pisa may have led to her isolation and ultimate decay, but the city, although in decline, was still

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[More information](#)

LIFE OF NICOLA PISANO

wealthy and powerful when the pulpit of Nicola Pisano was erected in the Baptistery. The inscription on it runs as follows and states the date, 1260:

*Anno milleno bis centum bisque triceno
Hoc opus insigne sculpsit Nicola Pisanus
Laudetur digne tam bene docta manus.*

Vasari¹ gives a detailed account of Nicola's life extending over many years prior to this date, and ascribes to him many architectural works of importance, not only in Tuscany but also in other parts of Italy. Later research, however, has shown that none of these buildings can be attributed to him, and no record of his early life or activity has come down to us. The date of his birth is unknown, and widely differing dates have been suggested by various writers.² These dates have, however, no secure foundation. Two facts alone throw light on the matter; one is that so important a work as this pulpit would not be entrusted to an unknown sculptor; the second is that in 1265 Nicola's son, Giovanni, was old enough to take part in the work on the pulpit constructed by his father for the Duomo of Siena.³ He must have been at least fifteen years old at that time, and we know that he was born in Pisa.⁴ Nicola must, therefore, have been settled in Pisa in the year 1250, and it is likely that he had

¹ For documents relating to Nicola's life see the edition of Vasari's *Lives* edited by K. Frey (Munich 1911), or for a briefer citation see the more recent edition of P. Pecchiai (Milan), 1928.

² I. P. Supino, *Arte Pisana* (Firenze 1904), pp. 43 ff., suggests 1225; G. Swarzenski, *Nicola Pisano* (Frankfurt-am-Main 1926), p. 6, 1226; Frey, 1210–20; and Milanesi in his edition of Vasari's *Lives*, 1205–7.

³ This is proved by the documents relating to the pulpit in the Duomo at Siena. See Part II, ch. II, p. 69.

⁴ Cf. the inscription on the pulpit by Giovanni in S. Andrea, Pistoia:

*Sculpsit Johannes, qui res non egit inanes
Nicolì natuſ sensia meliore beatus
Quem genuit Pisa, doctum super omnia visa.*

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[More information](#)

LIFE OF NICOLA PISANO

an atelier there as he must have had assistance in his work on the pulpit. 1230 is, therefore, the very earliest date which could be assigned with reason for his birth, and this is probably too late. A more probable date lies between 1220 and 1225.

Not only is the date of birth of Nicola unknown, but his place of origin also has been the subject of violent controversy. Three opinions have been maintained:

- (1) That he was a native of Pisa and learned his art in Tuscany.
- (2) That he was a native of Apulia and learned his art in Apulia.
- (3) That he was born in Apulia but came as a child or a youth to Pisa and was trained in Pisa.

These views are based in part on the documentary evidence, and also in part on the architectural and plastic qualities of his work. The diversity of opinion is mainly due to the fact that the documentary evidence is conflicting, but the question where Nicola was born, whether in Apulia or Tuscany is not important, and an exaggerated degree of attention has been devoted to it. This arises from the fact that the tendency has prevailed among historians of art to underrate the diffusion of methods and of forms in Europe. The barriers which now exist were absent or of a different character. The Church was a common bond and commercial, political and military relations prevented the formation of completely isolated centres of art. Early Lombard sculpture, for example, was not limited to the northern districts of Italy. Characteristic examples are to be found in Apulia, where the Pisan style of architecture had also penetrated, and is to be seen in the Duomo at Troia and elsewhere in the province.

As regards the origins of Nicola's art, there have been two views, both of which, while exaggerating local influences, have been