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# INTRODUCTION

## MASACCIO'S *TRINITY* AND THE EARLY RENAISSANCE

*To Meg and Fred Licht*

Who can understand the omnipotent Trinity?
Saint Augustine[1]

If a fifteenth-century Italian Humanist were asked to define the Renaissance – a period that named itself – he (or occasionally she) might speak of the revival of classical antiquity, literally its rebirth, *rinascità,* or Renaissance, or more precisely the revival of classical Latin. This was not in any sense an un-Christian or anti-Christian enterprise.[2] On the contrary, a fundamental concern of the Humanists was to master Latin grammar, syntax, and vocabulary so that they might be certain of the Latin writings of the Church Fathers and especially of the Latin edition of the Bible, the Vulgate, traditionally though wrongly attributed to Saint Jerome. Indeed, Lorenzo Valla's historical detective work in analyzing the text of the "Donation of Constantine" may be taken as a paradigm of fifteenth-century Humanist scholarship. Employing methods of textual analysis informed by knowledge of the usage of classical Latin, Valla demonstrated that the "Donation," a document in which the fourth-century Emperor Constantine purportedly ceded certain political rights and properties to the Church, was in fact a forgery written some four hundred years after the emperor's death.[3]

Until late in the fifteenth century, interest in the subjects of classical literature and art was secondary, even peripheral, to the funda-

mental concern with the Latin (and Greek) words of God and his saints. Most Italian artists continued to represent the traditional themes of Christian art – and patrons continued to commission representations of these same subjects, including Masaccio's *Trinity,* completed c. 1426 in Santa Maria Novella, the primary church of the Order of Preachers (the Dominicans) in Florence (Figs. 1, 3, 5–7, 10–11, 14). Many more Madonnas were painted or carved in the fifteenth century than mythologies, more images of Christ and the saints than of pagan gods and heroes. Even portraiture (itself a "classical" genre) remained bound to its customary roles in Christian art. Until the mid-fifteenth century, most portraits were not made as independent works of art but as commemorations of donors or as effigies of the deceased on their tombs. The likenesses that flank Masaccio's *Trinity* fit this description: They are donor portraits and perhaps also posthumous portraits associated with the subjects' tomb.

What, then, did "Renaissance" mean for the early Quattrocento, the period that fifteenth-century people themselves recognized as representing a new era? The answer is that Renaissance art is not necessarily concerned with new (pagan) subjects but that it represents "old," that is, traditional Christian subjects in a new way, with new verisimilitude. Renaissance art looks, or is intended to look, real – it simulates or resembles truth – even though it is not and cannot be a photographic reproduction of reality. Nor is it always accurately described as naturalistic. Naturalism or realism is not necessarily suited to the supernatural themes of Christian art or the commemorative intentions of Renaissance portraiture. A verisimilar image, on the contrary, appears real or at least plausible even though what is represented may be unreal or improbable and, more often than not, idealized. Albertian perspective, for example, is not reality but an abstraction – but its purpose is to simulate three-dimensional space, which is one (fundamental) element of reality. Renaissance verisimilitude is both psychological and physical. It concerns both the representation of emotions in a manner intended to engage the beholder's empathy and the representation of visible reality in terms of space and light.

Masaccio's *Madonna and Child,* the central panel of his altarpiece for the church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Pisa, illustrates both of these verisimilitudes, the psychological and the physical (Fig. 2).[4] The traditional and inherently contrived representation of an enthroned woman with an infant in her lap becomes convincing

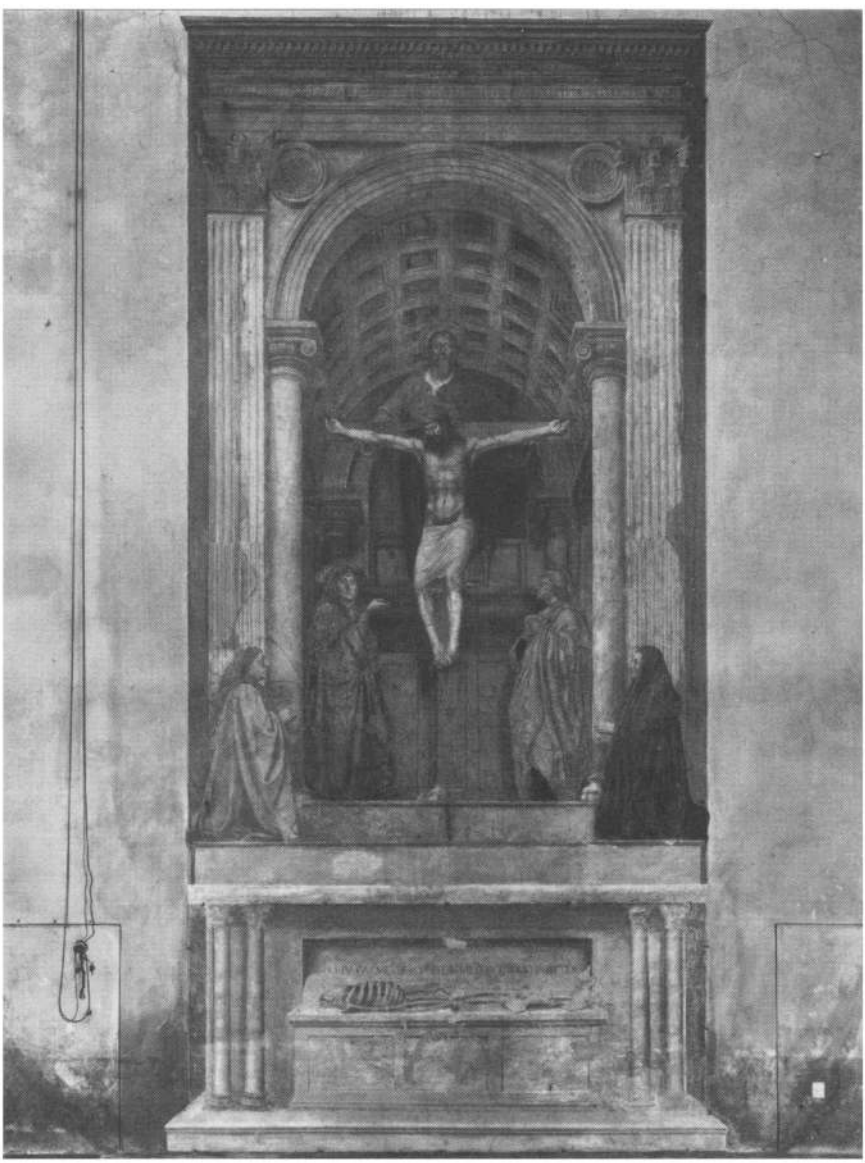

**Figure 1.** Masaccio. *Trinity*. Fresco. Florence, Santa Maria Novella. C. 1426–27. (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, New York)

when the infant puts his fingers in his mouth like any human child. The action persuades us that the child is real – and really a *human* baby, not a symbol of divinity. Only later, after we have taken his babylike behavior at face value, do we see that he puts his fingers in his mouth to suck the juice of the grapes his mother offers him. The grapes represent or adumbrate Christ's sacrifice, repeated in the Eucharistic offering of the Mass, and drinking their juice signifies his acceptance of his foreordained immolation – and his mother's endorsement of that death.

Masaccio's *Madonna and Child* also demonstrates physical conviction – not to say, the physicality – of early Renaissance art. Even gold ground can seem spatial when populated by such massive figures. Rather than the two-dimensional, abstract network of gold striations to signify the folds of garments, figures are now modeled in gradations of light and shade. These newly volumetric beings inhabit a three-dimensional world that can contain them or that at least does not deny them space in which to exist. In gold-ground panel painting, as in gold-ground mosaics, a figure modeled with gold striations seems to merge with its background: The gold ground in itself is not flat (rather it is aspatial or spaceless, literally without spatial limitations); but in combination with gold-striation modeling, it acts to bring figures to the surface, binding them there with its threads of gold. The eye reads these figures more as silhouettes than as three-dimensional forms requiring or even implying a three-dimensional spatial realm.

A gold ground (or the unmodulated flat blue of some fresco painting) thus acquires spatiality by virtue of its volumetric figures: The human form creates its own space. Alternately, the artist – painter or relief sculptor – can provide more precisely described spatial realms, defined by architecture and/or by landscape. If the space is represented as a landscape, the artist may imply depth by two means: diminution of scale and a softening of colors and contours to suggest distance. Eventually, fifteenth-century painters made all colors blue at the horizon, thus evoking the actual effects of atmosphere in the out-of-doors and the viewer's ocular experience of landscape vistas. This blurring effect is called aerial or atmospheric perspective, and fifteenth-century artists could have seen numerous examples of it in surviving ancient Roman wall paintings. Similar effects can be achieved in relief sculpture by softening of outlines, and indeed the first example of aerial perspective

**Figure 2.** Masaccio. *Madonna and Child Enthroned* (Pisa *Madonna*). Central panel of altarpiece for Santa Maria del Carmine, Pisa. 1426. London, National Gallery. (Photo: Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, National Gallery, London)

in Renaissance art seems to be in relief, namely Donatello's *Saint George and the Dragon,* which decorated the base of the niche of his statue of the saint at the Florentine church of Orsanmichele (cf. Fig. 29).[5] The arcade in the right background of the relief where the princess prays for deliverance illustrates an early example of perspective applied to such geometrical forms – but by no means the first example of such perspective in Italian art.

Already in the fourteenth century, the Sienese Duccio, the Florentine Giotto, and their younger contemporaries – most notably the brothers Ambrogio and Pietro Lorenzetti – had experimented with this kind of receding form to suggest spatial recession. Lines incised on the surface of such panels as Ambrogio's *Annunciation* of 1344 (Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale) allow us to reconstruct the pragmatic procedure he followed in establishing the angles of diagonal lines of the tiled pavement to create the impression of three dimensions on his two-dimensional surface. Some seventy years later, c. 1410–15, the Florentine sculptor-architect Filippo Brunelleschi experimented with mirrors to help define the receding diagonals of a view of the piazza in front of the cathedral in his native city.[6] And approximately twenty years after Brunelleschi's experiment in perspective, in 1435, the Humanist sculptor-architect-author Leon Battista Alberti wrote his Latin treatise *On Painting* (an Italian edition followed in 1436, dedicated to Brunelleschi) with a detailed explanation of a procedure whereby an artist could create consistent three-dimensional settings, usually with one vanishing point or centric point, that is, one point on the horizon where all receding diagonals converge.[7] Now that the diagonals are no longer isolated elements but part of a controlling scheme of the entire composition, they are called orthogonals. Alberti's system, known as one-point or mathematical perspective, was not quite the same method employed by Masaccio for his *Trinity,* though many authors have made that assumption. The Brunelleschian system, related to use of the astrolabe, may be seen as a precursor of Alberti's system but is not identical to it.[8] The goal was the same, however: to create an illusion of three dimensionality that would convince beholders of the reality of the image, or at least allow them to associate the fictive world of the image with experience of this world. Convincing the senses, the artist may hope also to convince the spirit, encouraging belief in

the actual presence before us of the beings represented, making them seem accessible to us.

Masaccio's perspective in the *Trinity* achieves this accessibility by creating the illusion of a vaulted space opening from the west aisle wall of Santa Maria Novella, that is, opening from the actual space where the beholder stands. Masaccio confirms the relation between our space and the fictive realm and the reality of the beings within that realm by two means, psychological and visual. Mary's insistent gaze – Masaccio's psychological means – convinces the beholder of her awareness and hence her presence (Fig. 3). The shadows cast by the sacred beings – Masaccio's visual means of persuasion – convince the beholder of their imminence, their actual presence within this illusionistic realm that opens from our own world.

The device of the cast shadow was not yet to be taken for granted in Italian art in the 1420s despite the examples provided by ancient Roman wall painting. The earliest cast shadows in Italian art, or at least the earliest known to us, are those painted by Pietro Lorenzetti in his fresco of the *Last Supper,* completed before 1319 in the Lower Church of Saint Francis at Assisi, which is also one of the first nocturnes in Italian art.[9] Most of Lorenzetti's successors eschewed this kind of verisimilitude. That is, later masters suppressed or avoided evocations of natural experience of this world in representing the supernatural beings and miraculous events that cannot by definition be explained by laws of nature. Especially after the disasters of the mid-fourteenth century, most notably the Black Death of 1348, artists rejected the stylistic innovations of the earlier fourteenth century and returned to the abstractions of preceding periods.[10]

Many if not most earlier fifteenth-century Italian painters continued to elaborate the more abstract and decorative stylistic elements of the fourteenth-century style that has come to be called International Gothic. Slender, elegant, elongated figures are gowned in extravagantly contoured draperies; fair-skinned, youthful, small-featured blond Madonnas and saints are dressed in the height of contemporary courtly fashion.[11] (Sandro Botticelli, who died in 1510, carried elements of this style into the sixteenth century, and some of its purposefully artificial qualities characterize Tuscan Mannerism of the 1520s and later.) These figures often inhabit worlds characterized by abrupt contrasts of scale, so that a very small landscape in the background, for example, is juxtaposed with

**Figure 3.** Masaccio. Detail of *Trinity* (Virgin Mary). (Photo: Courtesy Ornella Casazza)

large forms (landscape or architecture) in the foreground, with no middle ground to suggest transition. Despite the patent artifice of the figures – no body can really be so attenuated, no drapery fall into such exuberant calligraphic patterns – their environments may be natural landscapes blooming with plants and flowers represented with almost botanical precision. (Animals too, when they are present, often seem as exact as zoological illustrations of their species.) In any case, like the figures, the settings are exquisite, providing a beautiful world for beautiful beings. Lorenzo Ghiberti was perhaps the most conspicuous master of the International Style in Tuscan sculpture, and Lorenzo Monaco and Gentile da Fabriano in painting.[12] Perhaps it was no coincidence, then, that a new style – which was in part a revival of Giotto's style of the previous century – was put forward as an alternative manner by their greatest rivals. Filippo Brunelleschi, who almost certainly designed the architecture of Masaccio's *Trinity,* had competed directly with Ghiberti in the contest for the commission of the Florence Baptistry doors in 1401. Ghiberti won the commission, though the Florentines preserved Brunelleschi's competition panel as well as Ghiberti's and melted down all the others for their bronze.[13] In the 1420s, Masaccio and Gentile da Fabriano came head to head in an implicit competition or at least a confrontation of their different styles in Santa Maria Novella, with the foreigner painting his *Adoration of the Magi* as the altarpiece of the Strozzi Chapel in the left, or north transept, and the Florentine his *Trinity* in the north aisle (Figs. 1, 4).

These two major commissions came shortly after (and were indirectly related to) a period of particular significance in the history of the church and convent of Santa Maria Novella.[14] Pope Martin V had resided in the convent during his eighteen months in the city (1418–20), using its chapter house as his papal chapel. A son of the noble Colonna family of Rome, Martin had been elevated to the papacy at the Council of Constance in 1417, an election that signified the end of the Schism and the papacy's return to the Eternal City. The pope demonstrated his affection for the Preachers and their Florentine church in various ways, including his attendance at the consecration of Santa Maria Novella on 1 September 1420, with Cardinal Orsini officiating.[15] A few years later, in residence in Rome, Martin (or another member of the Colonna fam-

**Figure 4.** Gentile da Fabriano. *Adoration of the Magi* (Strozzi Altarpiece). Central panel. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi. 1423. (Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, New York)

ily) turned to Masaccio for a major commission, a double-sided altarpiece for the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. It seems unlikely that the pontiff had seen works by Masaccio during his (Martin's) eighteen-month residence in Florence, but perhaps his Florentine friends later brought the young painter to his attention.[16] Meanwhile, back in Florence, the pope's conspicuous signs of favor to Santa Maria Novella seem to have encouraged patronage of the church, including the commissions to Masaccio and Gentile da Fabriano. (If the *Trinity* refers to the Guelphs, the papal party, as has been suggested, this would represent another link to the pontiff.[17]) Although the patrons of Gentile's Strozzi *Adoration* and of Masaccio's *Trinity* shared fealty to the Order of Preachers, however, they clearly differed in matters of taste.

Gentile, like Ghiberti and Lorenzo Monaco, favored the delicate