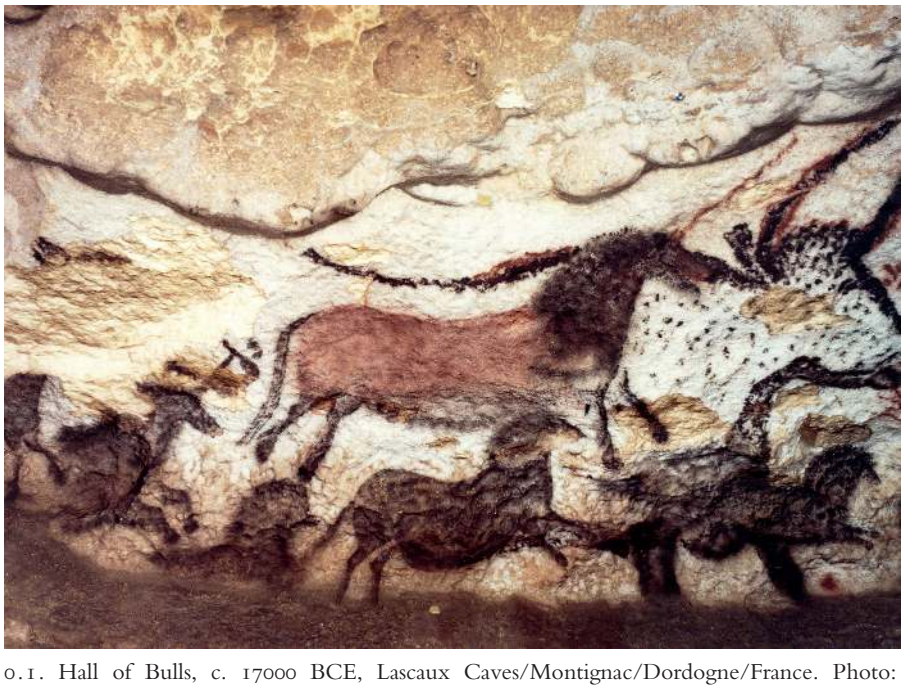
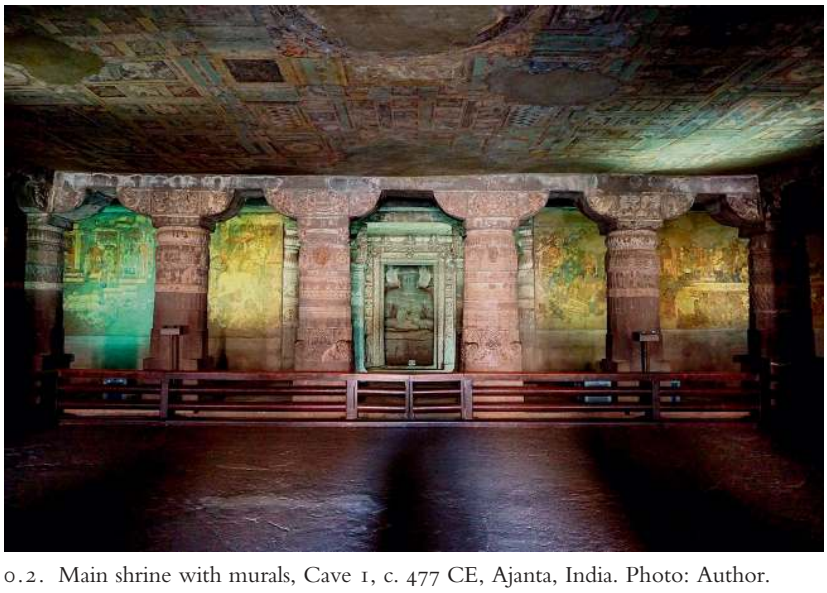
INTRODUCTION

Artists have painted monumental images on walls throughout time. Images as diverse as the stampeding bulls and horses in the prehistoric caves of Lascaux, Dordogne, France (c. 17000 BCE, Figure 0.1), the enigmatic scenes at the pre-Columbian Maya site of San Bartolo in Guatemala (c. 300 BCE–50 CE), and the languid Bodhisattvas from the fifth century in the Ajanta cave 1 in India (Figure 0.2), decorated tombs, shrines, temples and houses.[1] Fragmentary survivals from Greece, Crete, Rome, and early Christian Europe attest to a continuous tradition of mural painting in the West. Wall paintings reflected profound social change by embracing new imagery, formats, and styles. Striking examples survive in the late Roman catacombs. Murals in the catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus in Rome from the late third or early fourth century CE were painted in a simplified Roman technique and depict images, such as of the Good Shepherd, that appealed to pagan, Jewish, and Christian worshippers.[2] Stories from classical mythology and the Hebrew Bible grace the chambers in the Via Latina catacomb from the mid-fourth century.[3] In early Christian basilicas, fourth-century Old Saint Peter's and Saint Paul outside the Walls, the lives of Jesus and the saints unfolded in expansive narrative images above the nave arcade, these last sadly lost to us but known from copies.[4]

Today murals as expressions of racial and ethnic identity cover the walls of buildings in cities around the world. In the United States, public art has been long been associated with social activism. Studies of the *Wall of Respect*, a mural

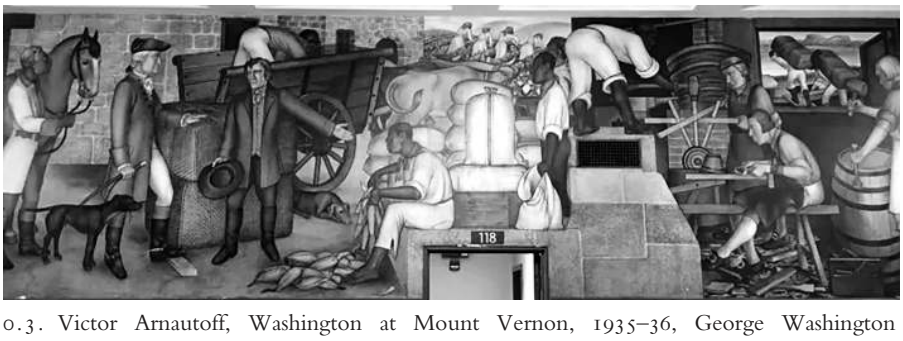


0.1. Hall of Bulls, c. 17000 BCE, Lascaux Caves/Montignac/Dordogne/France. Photo: © Ministère de la Culture / Médiathèque du Patrimoine, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

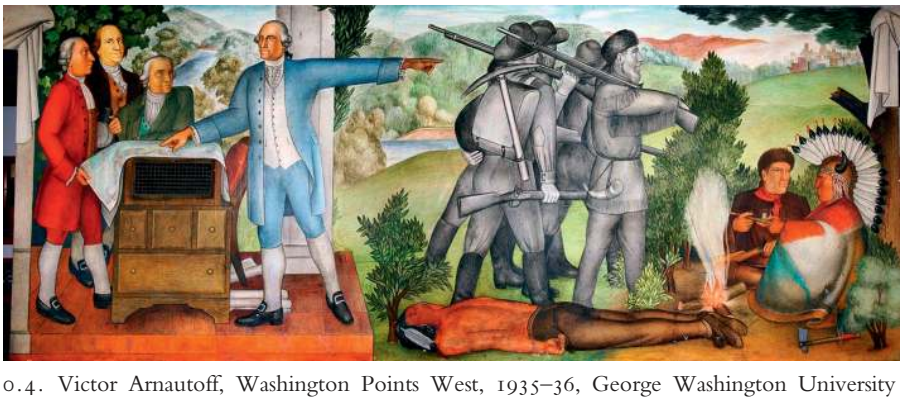


0.2. Main shrine with murals, Cave 1, c. 477 CE, Ajanta, India. Photo: Author.

painted in Chicago in 1967, have highlighted its role in the civil rights movement as a visualization of African American identity.[5] During the 1930s, New Deal agencies, the Public Works of Art Project (1933–34) and the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (1934–43), sponsored



0.3. Victor Arnautoff, Washington at Mount Vernon, 1935–36, George Washington University High School, San Francisco, California. Photo: Jim Wilson/The New York Times.



0.4. Victor Arnautoff, Washington Points West, 1935–36, George Washington University High School, San Francisco, California. Photo: Jim Wilson/The New York Times.

mural projects in public buildings, employing out-of-work artists and sparking a dramatic revival of monumental wall painting in the United States.[6] One such project, the *Life of George Washington* in the George Washington High School in San Francisco, has today aroused controversy.[7] The murals, painted in 1935–36 by the Russian émigré artist Victor Arnautoff (1896–1978), depict Black African slaves and the corpse of a Native American (Figures 0.3–0.4).[8] Unremarked at the time, today such images have prompted calls for their destruction.

The passionate debate over the Washington High School murals reminds us of the power of monumental images to shape ideas, experience, memory, and history. *Wall Painting, Civic Ceremony, and Sacred Space in Early Renaissance Italy* focuses on two interconnected themes. The first is how monumental wall paintings in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries visualized and shaped cities' histories and identities. As social, political, and economic conditions changed, they were reflected in monumental civic images. The paintings discussed here adorn important sacred spaces – the chapel of the Holy Belt in the *pieve* (baptismal church) of Prato, the Camposanto in Pisa, and the cathedral of Spoleto.

The Virgin's Holy Belt in Prato, the hallowed ground of Pisa's monumental cemetery, and the sacred image of the *Madonna Avvocata* in Spoleto were central to the historical, institutional, and religious identities of the host cities. The mural paintings examined here visualize hallowed legends and contemporary realities. The second theme investigates the artists who traveled outside their native city to paint these murals. The exceptional stature and importance of the sacred spaces that these murals adorned led patrons to seek famous artists from abroad for these projects. Florentine artists Agnolo Gaddi, Andrea Bonaiuti, Benozzo Gozzoli, and Fra Filippo Lippi painted the murals between 1377 and 1484 at the invitation of patrons in Prato, Pisa, and Spoleto. The demand for Florentine artists was evident much earlier in the Trecento. Giotto's (c. 1267–1337) peripatetic career spanned the Italian peninsula, working in Assisi, Padua, Rome, and Naples as well as Florence. Agnolo Gaddi's father, Taddeo (c. 1300–66), completed an altarpiece for the city of Pistoia in 1353, for which the commission documents reveal the prestige attached to artists from Florence in the eyes of provincial patrons.[9] Taddeo Gaddi replaced the obscure local painter who had started the altarpiece after consideration of the most famous painters of the day in Florence and Siena. In the wake of the Black Death (1348), the patrons felt it necessary to demand a higher level of quality and prestige. In 1338, the Pratesi had also turned to the Florentine artist Bernardo Daddi (active c. 1312–48) to paint an altarpiece for the new altar housing the relic. The following chapters, centering on specific mural cycles, probe the civic value of monumental images and describe how they came to be made and how they were understood by contemporary viewers. Wedded to architecture, the murals discussed here adorned spaces for public ritual that fostered civic pride and perpetuated memory of historical events, even as they impressed through their scale and artistry. In contrast to panels painted in an artist's workshop, mural paintings were the result of artists' collaboration with scores of workers on a construction site – carpenters, masons, stonecutters, and others. Working on site, the artists were, of necessity, traveling artists, who brought assistants with them, but who also collaborated with local artisans. Documents offer a compelling picture of the complex relationships between the artists and their patrons, on the one hand, and the organization of the worksite, cooperation between local and "foreign" artisans, and adaptation to local traditions, on the other. Close reading of these documents sheds light on the meaning these murals had to multiple audiences. Mural painting, as part of the surging demand for church furnishings in the early Renaissance, adapted to its new role as public imagery by embracing new subjects and a new visual language.[10] The

monumental and public nature of wall paintings such as these was a primary reason that mural painting flourished in the early Renaissance and that its practitioners were valued socially.

My research on the murals in this book is informed by the contemporary debate about the role of monumental painting in the public sphere. The vast literature about public art, including mural painting, considers it from multiple points of view, which are, in many cases, the same as those adopted in the following chapters.[11] Then as now, the site defines public art, implying monumental scale and broad access. It is bounded by architecture and linked to the urban fabric. The design of the space controlled how public images were seen, but the urban setting also determined how viewers approached the space, both physically and psychologically. Mobile viewers' visual experiences take place in time, so that the images unfolded within a larger spatio-temporal context.

The audience for public art, both intended and not, considers who has access to the art and the form and degree of their engagement and participation. Public images, such as those considered here, we can assume addressed a broad audience, including all classes of society. Examining the social roles of spaces in the civic and religious lives of cities lends insight into the make-up and reactions of audiences.

Ceremonies, both civic and liturgical, take place in public spaces. Processions penetrated the surrounding spaces and tied dedicated spaces to the wider city. These rituals, where they can be reconstructed, shed light on the form and meaning of wall painting, as described in several of the following chapters.

Patronage – who commissions and pays for the art – is especially revealing for public art. Who has the authority to determine which forms, subjects, and artists will address the public? What kind of process results in a public work or art? Recent accounts of Renaissance patronage envision it as a collaboration between the patron and his client.[12] What is the nature of that relationship, and what is the artist's share? What technical and logistical challenges confronted the artist in the execution of monumental images in each site, and how did he or she meet them? What role does the patron have in the execution of the project?

Beyond the questions involving site, audience, patron, and artist, issues in contemporary mural art might seem irrelevant to fourteenth- and fifteenth-century murals, the subject of this book. Modern and contemporary mural painting, particularly in its populist, collaborative, and temporary aspects, offers few comparisons. Certainly today, expectations for public art are different from those of the fourteenth and fifteen centuries, and art itself is utterly changed in materials, technique, style, and social function. Similarly, contemporary audiences are more diverse. In early Renaissance Italy, Jews, Muslims, slaves, and

other marginal groups were not considered as potential viewers, not least because sacred stories addressed an overwhelmingly Christian audience. While the wall paintings studied here were directed at elite and non-elite audiences, the conditions of access to them were controlled through communal statute and religious practice. Even so, public art reflects the social structures, beliefs, and values of its time and place. Aspects that shaped meaning in the murals of the past are explored in the following chapters.

Renaissance mural painting began with the restoration of early Christian murals in Roman basilicas in the late thirteenth century.[13] During Pope Nicholas III Orsini's two and a half-year papacy (1277–80), the Roman artist Pietro Cavallini (c. 1240–after 1330) restored and enlarged the mural decoration of the basilica Saint Paul outside the Walls as part of an ambitious program to rejuvenate venerable early Christian sites. Nicholas's patronage included the decoration of the Sancta Sanctorum in the Lateran palace and work in Old Saint Peter's and the Vatican palace. Cavallini decorated Santa Cecilia in Trastevere with the *Last Judgment*, the most dramatic, surviving example of the new idiom to emerge from this experience, probably in the early 1290s. There, in true fresco, the artist painted massive figures rendered in vigorous chiaroscuro and brilliant color. With his contemporary Jacopo Torriti (active c. 1270–1300), author of the mosaic apses in the Lateran (1291) and Santa Maria Maggiore (1296), Cavallini may have worked in the vast decoration in the upper church of San Francesco in Assisi, which involved Tuscan artists such as Cimabue (c.1240–before 1302) and – according to some scholars – Giotto, as well as Roman ones.[14] The new style emanating from Assisi owed a substantial debt to Roman painting and patronage.

The new visual language and technique, most associated with Giotto, accompanied a new treatment of subject matter. As Belting explains, if the narrative scenes in Assisi render the life of a recent saint with telling details, the murals Giotto painted in the Arena Chapel in Padua in 1305 cast the events of Christ's life as a "drama of souls."[15] Both invite the audience's empathy and affective participation. In this, the new imagery responded to the new social function of narrative. Narrative images and monumental allegories according to Belting, "no longer told a story but served other ends: [they] became a way of arguing, of phrasing topics of general interest, a reading device." The new rhetorical function of narrative emerged at the same time as communal governments in northern and central Italy.[16] Contemporaneously, in the thirteenth century, mendicant orders such as the Dominicans and the Franciscans sprang up to serve the urban faithful.[17] Charismatic preachers told stories of the lives of Christ and the saints, appealing to worshippers' experiences and emotions. Murals lining the walls of the newly built basilicas modeled and reflected viewers' personal relationships with holy figures.

Today mural painting is most commonly associated with the Italian Renaissance, celebrated in the exhibition *The Great Age of Fresco: Giotto to Pontormo*, shown in Europe and America following the 1966 Florence flood, and Eve Borsook's *The Mural Painters of Tuscany*, first published in 1960, revised in 1980.[18] Since then a vast outpouring of books, articles, film, and digital media on mural painting has followed and is unabated today. General studies, such as the multivolume work *Italian Frescoes*, by Joachim Poeshke, Steffi Roettgen, and others, have focused on the production history, imagery, and authorship of select mural painting complexes in Italy.[19] Specific works, often following significant restoration projects, such as of Michelangelo's murals in the Sistine Chapel, the murals of the life of Saint Francis in Assisi, and Giotto's Bardi and Peruzzi chapels in Santa Croce in Florence, have highlighted technical discoveries and revealed heretofore unknown aspects of their original appearance.[20]

Previously neglected in histories of mural painting, murals' social role has begun to engage scholars through investigations of patrons and audiences. Most recently, George Bent's *Public Painting and Visual Culture in Early Republican Florence* studied a broad class of public pictures in Florence from the late thirteenth until the early fifteenth century.[21] By "public" Bent means images that people belonging to all classes – from the landed aristocracy (magnates), to merchants, bankers, and artisans (the *popolo*), to the manual laborers (*sottoposti*) – would have been able to see. These included images on exterior walls of buildings and in street tabernacles, and in secular and sacred structures to which a broad public had access, such as guildhalls, confraternity meeting rooms, government offices, and spaces accessible to the laity in churches. Conversely, altarpieces and mural decoration in privately funded chapels, primarily in the mendicant churches, were blocked from public access through grilles or curtains, or they were located beyond the rood screen that sequestered spaces for the clergy. Female viewers, regardless of class, were often barred from these spaces as well. Bent's nuanced readings of public images such as Bernardo Daddi's *Madonna* in Orsanmichele (1347) and Orcagna's opulent tabernacle, which encloses it (1359), consider viewer access and response and deepen our understanding of the many ways images were seen in late medieval Florence.

Many studies of individual patrons have revealed the history of specific commissions in detail. Books and essays on Medici patronage abound; Dale Kent's study of Cosimo de' Medici and the scholarship of F. W. Kent, Laurie Fusco, and Gino Corti, on Lorenzo de' Medici, are only a few among many in a distinguished group.[22] The patronage and collecting of prominent families in and outside Florence include studies of the Spinelli and Tornabuoni among recent contributions.[23] The magisterial *The Roman Crucible* by Julian Gardner is one of the most recent studies of papal patronage.[24]

Accounts of the patronage and use of images by monastic orders, especially the mendicants, have been revelatory. Not surprisingly for an order identified with its charismatic founder, the Franciscans pioneered the use of narratives and images of its founding saint. The hagiographic scenes of Saint Francis's life in San Francesco in Assisi reestablished the centrality that monumental narrative images had enjoyed in the early Christian basilicas. Classic studies of Assisi by Belting, Stubblebine, Romano, and, most recently, Donal Cooper and Janet Robson have mined, but not exhausted, this rich topic.[25] Focused studies of Franciscan patronage by Julian Gardner and Cooper have revealed details of production and reception of specific works.[26]

Joanna Cannon's *Religious Poverty, Visual Riches* reveals a slightly different picture of Dominican patronage in central Italy in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[27] Cannon's rich study addresses mural painting in the naves, apses, and private chapels in Dominican churches. She finds that monumental narrative decorations were located in the choir, where the laity had only restricted access. Private sponsorship of murals in the main chapels of Dominican churches, in contrast to that of altarpieces, was sparse. Sporadic evidence of narrative cycles survives, but variety, not consistency, characterizes these images. In private chapels, where mostly wealthy laypersons held sway, narrative murals were favored, especially in Santa Maria Novella in Florence.

My study differs from previous works in numerous ways. In the first place, the murals examined here are all civic commissions that adorn the most important sacred spaces in the city – in Prato, a reliquary chapel in the *pieve*; in Pisa, the monumental cemetery; in Spoleto, the cathedral apse. Social and political conditions in the host cities and the motivations of the patrons – insofar as they can be reconstructed – reveal how these images were understood by multiple audiences, including the clergy, the laity, civic officials, and the public. In addition, they were all painted by celebrated Florentine artists of the time, including Agnolo Gaddi, Andrea Bonaiuti, Benozzo Gozzoli, and Fra Filippo Lippi. These artists were working outside their native cities on prestigious civic commissions – the reason that patrons sought well-known artists from abroad. These works are less studied than those in Florence by scholars writing in English, and they lead us to consider the renown of individual artists, the civic value of artistic skill, and the role of artists as cultural ambassadors and instruments of civic prestige.

These projects also reveal the artisan networks that the artists deployed to execute each project. In each case, documents and the works themselves allow an in-depth, comparative study of mural painting that has not been done before. Existing records have been newly transcribed and are presented in the Appendix. Overlooked and unpublished entries offer correction and amplification to previous historical accounts and telling insights. Examining specific major fresco commissions from this perspective leads to a detailed

picture of the design and execution of individual works, which, by comparison with less well-documented cycles, allows a general view of mural painting practice. Historians' discoveries about the personal and professional relationships of artisans during the period shed light on the conditions under which these mural paintings were made. Models for my work exist in the literature, such as William Wallace's account, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur* (1994), and his recent study, *Michelangelo, God's Architect; The Story of his Final Years and Greatest Masterpiece* (2019), although the wealth of documentation Wallace analyzes – in particular, Michelangelo's letters – does not exist for the period of my study.[28] Using technical and archival information, Wallace reveals the role stone cutters and other craftsmen played in Michelangelo's projects. This account of the cooperative enterprise of mural painting in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries considers issues such as the relationship of the artist to his artisan collaborators as well as to his patrons.

The method adopted here is to examine selected murals in the context of their architectural setting, investigating history, technique, and procedure. In keeping with current methodologies in art history, patronage circumstances of each project, and, where possible, the audience response, are described. These case studies argue for a conception of patronage as a social negotiation among parties and the work of art as a product of contingencies that are generalizable up to a point.[29] Stakeholders, such as members of boards of works (*operai*); political leaders such as Pietro Gambacorta; clerics such as Filippo de'Medici and Berardo Eroli; masters and local artisans – played roles in the enterprise that led to the final work of art. Close reading of the documentation lends insight into how participants came together to complete these projects and allows an in-depth picture of collaboration that has not been previously available.

Chapter 1 examines Agnolo Gaddi's work between 1392 and 1395 in the chapel in Prato Cathedral, which was built to house the Virgin's Belt, the most important relic in the city. Primary sources allow reconstruction of the ceremony during which the precious relic of the Virgin's Belt was displayed to the public. The monumental narratives of the origins of the Holy Belt and its journey to Prato celebrated Prato's favored status as custodian of the relic. Detailed surviving payments, here published in full for the first time, reveal a narrative of the chapel's construction and decoration and bring to light how the artist, Agnolo Gaddi, collaborated with Florentine and Pratese artisans in the enterprise. Agnolo's professional and personal connections with the Pratese Opera, and the social identities of its members, expose a rich network of relationships in which the commission unfolded.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the extensive decoration of the Camposanto in Pisa, the monumental cemetery adjacent to the cathedral complex. Ceremonies associated with death, burial, and remembrance animated the vast

spaces. Unlike previous assumptions of a single program that guided the mural decoration from the beginning, I propose that the wall paintings, completed during three discrete periods, reflected the changing social and religious significance of the Camposanto as a communal burial space open to all classes of Pisans. Chapter 2 examines the murals of the life of the Pisan patron Saint Rainerius, begun by Andrea Bonaiuti and completed by Antonio Veneziano in 1386. Commisssioned by Pietro Gambacorta, the *Signore* of Pisa, they celebrate Pisa's identity as a vibrant polity with a venerable history, against the backdrop of a fast-changing political reality. Chapter 3, by contrast, describes the imagery and production of the murals of the Old Testament, completed by Benozzo Gozzoli in 1484. Archbishop Filippo de' Medici's role in the commission is placed in the context of his patronage and diplomacy throughout a long career. These murals, painted during Pisa's subjection to Florence, enhanced an impressive locus of Pisan identity and pride, while signaling the political reality of Florentine control.

Chapter 4 pivots to Umbria, where Fra Filippo Lippi painted the apse decoration in the cathedral of Spoleto between 1466 and 1469. Here again, primary and secondary sources reveal the ceremonies that took place in the cathedral and highlight the relationship of the apse paintings and the venerated Madonna icon of the cathedral. The bishop of Spoleto, Berardo Eroli, played a leading role in the commission, which is set in the context of his art patronage in Umbria and Rome. From the copious documentation for the Spoleto project – here published in full for the first time – emerges evidence that Eroli conceived the Coronation murals as a magnificent setting for the Madonna icon of the cathedral and its display on holy days, especially the feast of the Virgin's Assumption on August 15. In his vision and his active involvement in the project during its execution, Eroli sought to link the Spoleto Duomo visually and liturgically with the venerable basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.

Common themes emerge that link the chapters. All the projects decorate spaces that were stages for public ritual, in the case of Prato and Spoleto focusing on relics and icons central to the religious and civic identities of the state, and in Pisa for ceremonies for the dead. In reconstructing the ceremonies where possible, a clearer idea of multiple audiences and their degrees of engagement and participation emerges. The imagery of the murals resonated with civic meaning, particularly in the scenes from Saint Rainerius's life in Pisa and the narratives of the translation of the Virgin's Belt to Prato. Their rhetorical function in fostering civic identity and perpetuating memories of singular historical events in civic history was reinforced by monumental scale and compelling style. In the case of Pisa and Prato, the projects were carried out against the background of Florentine state building during the late Trecento and Quattrocento. Cultural patronage, often seen as a hallmark of