

Introduction

The *Gates of Paradise* (1425–52; Plates I–II), the second set of bronze doors Lorenzo Ghiberti (ca. 1380–1455) made for the Florence Baptistery and a masterwork of Italian Renaissance art, constitute the most artistically innovative and dazzlingly beautiful Old Testament cycle completed in Florence during the early Renaissance.¹ Ghiberti organized approximately forty individual biblical episodes in the polyscenic narratives of the doors' ten panels, employing the revolutionary technique of linear perspective to construct space in several of the reliefs and finding inspiration in ancient sculptures for his representation of figures. Over the last thirty years the *Gates* have been cleaned and restored (today one sees them behind glass in Florence's Duomo museum), and now that centuries of accumulated dirt and incrustations have been removed viewers can finally see the panels' brilliant gilded surfaces and the finely finished buildings, bodies, plants, and animals that so vividly manifest Ghiberti's early training in his stepfather's goldsmith shop.²

The remarkable restoration and cleaning present students of Italian sculpture with the opportunity to reevaluate and, in some cases, examine for the first time all aspects of Ghiberti's great work, including the formal qualities of the doors' historiated panels and the relief statuettes in the frame, his casting technique, the role of his workshop, and the meaning of the stories represented in the cycle. A number of these topics have been the focus of previous studies, most prominently Richard Krautheimer's magisterial monograph, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, which reshaped, and continues to define, our understanding of the artist and his creations.³ In Krautheimer's book Ghiberti's sculptures hold center stage while also serving as points of departure for the investigation of themes that Krautheimer calls "Renaissance problems," each linked in some way to Ghiberti's life and professional career: the invention of linear perspective and the possible influence on Ghiberti of Leon Battista Alberti's writings and

thought; the culture of humanism and its connection to artists; the representation of architecture in painting and sculpture; the influence of antiquity and of Trecento painting and sculpture on fifteenth-century art; and the artist as writer. In exploring this last theme Krautheimer focuses on Ghiberti's *Commentaries*, the remarkable three-book treatise in which Ghiberti, drawing on a host of ancient and medieval texts, presents a history of art – the first written after antiquity – that culminates in his biography as well as a discussion of optics comprising mostly excerpts from earlier writings on the physics of light and vision.

Even as Krautheimer highlights Ghiberti's close relationships with members of the humanist movement and acknowledges his intellectual aspirations, he does not read his reliefs and statues in the light of the numerous sources that Ghiberti engaged or, with one brief exception, ideas current in the first half of the fifteenth century.⁴ In analyzing the sculptures,

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Krautheimer emphasizes not their meaning but instead Ghiberti's artistic innovations, including his adaptation of ancient and medieval models, his revival of classical poses and techniques in the colossal bronze statues he made for Orsanmichele, and, in the reliefs, the evolution of his approach to the construction of space. In Krautheimer's admirably rich analysis of Ghiberti's greatest masterpieces, the two sets of bronze doors he made for the Florence Baptistery (Fig. 1 and Plate II), the reader finds no sustained descriptions of the sculpted stories (his first set contains a New Testament cycle) that identify the figures or explain what is happening, much less what, if any, interpretation – theological or otherwise – is offered through the narratives. His chapter on the *Commentaries*, in which he concludes that “humanist writing and scholarship were but the unhappy loves and aspirations in [Ghiberti's] life,” never connects the themes Ghiberti explored in his writings to his art.⁵ One is left with the impression that, despite his formal and technical brilliance, Ghiberti did not express ideas – his own or those of others – through imagery or use his sculptures to comment on philosophical, religious, or political questions of his day. Given that Krautheimer's *Ghiberti* was published some seventeen years after Erwin Panofsky's analysis of meaning in art, *Studies in Iconology*, and that Krautheimer wrote, immediately after the appearance of Panofsky's landmark study, the most important early article on the application of iconographic analysis to architecture,⁶ it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Krautheimer chose not to explore the content of the reliefs and statues because he believed that Ghiberti was fundamentally uninterested in meaning and interpretation.⁷

Certainly Krautheimer's characterization of Ghiberti does not accord with the conception of art and the artist that one finds spelled out in the *Commentaries*.⁸ In the opening pages of the treatise, in a section inspired by Vitruvius but that Ghiberti altered to suit his personal vision, he establishes his views on the proper practice of painting and sculpture when he provides a list of the different disciplines artists need to study and make use of in their work.⁹ Essential, he claims, are grammar, geometry, philosophy, medicine, astrology, optics, history, anatomy, draftsmanship, and arithmetic. In the very next sentence he stresses that painters and sculptors must possess both manual

skill and knowledge gained from engagement with these ten disciplines. More than practitioners of any other profession, he adds, they must use imagination (“invention”). Art, for Ghiberti, is a product of both the hands and the active, striving mind.

He states in book two of the *Commentaries* that he adhered to these guidelines in fashioning the *Gates of Paradise*. In this section he reiterates his belief in the importance of both craftsmanship and learning, writing that in creating his second set of Baptistery doors he employed “skill and measure and ingenuity.”¹⁰ Ghiberti's emphasis on the need for ability and knowledge and his unusually well-defined intellectual interests raise key questions about the *Gates* that have not been broached: in particular, how, as an artist interested in books and ideas, fascinated by the science of vision, and deeply engaged in his period's revival of classical learning and culture, he approached a commission to represent the Old Testament. We can safely assume that, like many autobiographers, Ghiberti was given to some exaggeration, but careful examination of the *Gates of Paradise* makes clear that his ideas about the creative process, in particular his belief in the importance of study and in the application of learning in the production of images, are not merely rhetorical but reflect his actual practice.

This book explores the Old Testament narratives in the *Gates*' ten reliefs, each the focus of a separate chapter, and provides a close reading of the panels that demonstrates Ghiberti's profound engagement with the meaning of the stories, and not just, or even primarily, with their traditional theological significance. For centuries before his time, Christian writers, preachers, and liturgists had understood the events of the Old Testament as typological precedents for occurrences recounted in the New Testament.¹¹ Ghiberti, however, also connected them to a range of topics of special interest to him and his contemporaries, fashioning original interpretations of biblical stories that the reliefs conveyed to both the viewing public and members of his artistic and intellectual circles. Much like the panels after the cleaning, Ghiberti emerges from this study in a wholly new light, as an artist who, through his selection, imaginative reading, and knitting together of moments from the Bible and his examination of ancient and medieval sources (visual and textual), created images that function not merely as didactic representations but as multitextured

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Figure 1. Lorenzo Ghiberti, north doors of the Baptistery of San Giovanni, 1403–24, Florence; Photo: Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence.

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narratives exploring the drama of the human condition and commenting on the social, political, philosophical, historical, and artistic issues of his day.

Although Ghiberti famously asserted that he was given permission to complete the doors in the way he thought would turn out most “perfect, ornate, and rich,” it is possible that he was instructed to follow a general program of stories devised by some scholar or theologian.¹² As is well known, in 1424 Leonardo Bruni compiled for the Arte di Calimala, the guild that supervised artistic and architectural commissions at the baptistery, an initial list of twenty Old Testament subjects and eight prophets to be included in twenty-eight reliefs of a new set of doors. Accompanying the list is a letter in which Bruni outlined his ideas concerning the content and appearance of the stories to be represented.¹³ The decision of the guild to turn to Bruni for advice was not unusual; Renaissance patrons often asked theologians and intellectuals to assemble plans for artists.¹⁴ For reasons not specified in extant documentation, however, the Calimala rejected Bruni's proposal. The doors in their finished form contain just ten panels with twenty-four relief statuettes set into flanking niches. Many of the stories that Bruni suggested do not appear, and a number that do are not included in his schema. Various other sources have been proposed as the inspiration for the cycle as realized. In a general consideration of the subject matter of a few of the panels, and of isolated details that Edgar Wind had linked to patristic commentaries on Genesis, Krautheimer suggested that the overall plan depended heavily on the “writings of Saint Ambrose,” which, he surmised, Ghiberti probably knew through his connection to Ambrogio Traversari, the general of the Camaldolite order at Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence whom Ghiberti befriended in the 1420s.¹⁵ Frederick Hart linked the program to a single text, Antoninus's *Summa theologica* (even as he acknowledged that the panels were cast before the *Summa* was written).¹⁶ Others have suggested that broad Christian themes served as organizing principles. Eloise Angiola has argued that the panels display examples of the faith that permits entrance into Paradise.¹⁷ Ursula Mielke proposed that the program aims to represent, through symbolism and typology, the evolution of the Church, from its creation to its union with Christ.¹⁸ In a similar vein, Iris Marzik sees in the doors an extensive, ecclesiological cycle

whose stress on the primacy of the papacy reflects ideas supported by Traversari and the Spanish Cardinal Juan de Torquemada, who attended the Council of Florence in 1439 and spoke in support of the notion of papal primacy (and against conciliarism).¹⁹ Most recently, Gwynne Dilbeck connected the plan, and in some cases details of individual panels, to the pre-Lenten, Lenten, and baptismal liturgies.²⁰

In examining the cycle it is important to distinguish between Ghiberti's interpretations of the narratives and a putative program he may have followed. My approach does not seek to identify an author or source of such a plan (if indeed the Calimala supplied him with one) and instead aims to uncover the ideas Ghiberti presents in the doors. Needless to say, his large crew of assistants, who worked alongside him in his workshop in Florence, which was located across the street from the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, played an important role in casting the doors and, especially, in the time-consuming processes of cleaning and chasing required after the framework and relief elements emerged from the casting pit.²¹ But the design of the panels, as Krautheimer asserts, must be attributed to Ghiberti, and I would add that, whether or not he was supplied with a list of subjects, the ideas offered through the doors, forged in consultation with members of his circle and deeply influenced by intellectual currents of the day, originate in Ghiberti's own interests and concerns.²² Naturally, in representing the constituent episodes of the panels Ghiberti often relied on, or made reference to, preexisting visual depictions and textual explications – and, in some cases, elaborations – of Old Testament stories. However, as will become clear in the following chapters, Ghiberti sometimes strayed very far from both visual and textual traditions as he fashioned his own artistic visions. In this sense, his approach was no different from that of an author like Dante, who, while relying on the authority of the Bible and major theological sources, felt free to reimagine and reinvent biblical events in developing literary images and interpretations.²³

GHIBERTI'S LEARNING AND CULTURE AND HIS APPROACH TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

Ghiberti was born into a society that prized books – ancient, medieval, and contemporary – and the

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ideas and learning that could be gleaned from them. Florence, by the late 1420s, boasted a literacy rate of 70 to 80 percent for men, and the interest in books was, not surprisingly, intense and widespread.²⁴ In the first half of the fifteenth century there existed in the city a number of large convent libraries – Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella, for example – that housed thousands of volumes by mainly Christian but also, and in very high numbers, Jewish and pagan authors.²⁵ Many private citizens, like Ghiberti's patron, sometimes advisor, and close associate Palla Strozzi, one of the wealthiest men in Florence in the early fifteenth century, also assembled large and diverse collections of books. Palla's library contained close to 370 volumes in 1431 and continued to expand until his death in 1462.²⁶ Ghiberti's humanist contemporaries, many of whom made it their aim to discover complete and, they hoped, accurate copies of ancient works and bring them to Florence, amassed impressive collections of classical and medieval texts. The library of Niccolò Niccoli, Ghiberti's friend and interlocutor, was without question the most famous collection in private hands.²⁷ Poggio Bracciolini claimed, and others confirmed, that Niccoli's library contained more than eight hundred volumes.²⁸ Coluccio Salutati's was about as large.²⁹ Other Florentines possessed smaller assortments of books, often in connection with their professions or particular interests, as, for example, in the case of Giovanni Chellini, the doctor who owned a limited yet diverse group of books, many on medicine, that he often loaned out to colleagues and friends.³⁰ Even those Florentines working in trades not reliant upon literary skills owned books. An inventory of 1420 indicates that Papi di Benincasa, a wool dyer, kept in a *scrittoio* in his home books by Dante (almost certainly the *Divine Comedy*) and Cecco d'Ascoli (probably *L'Acerba*), as well as a copy of Ovid's "Pistole" (possibly the *Epistulae ex Ponto*, in Tuscan translation).³¹ And others not able to purchase manuscripts, or interested only in sections of certain works, made personal anthologies, borrowing and copying selected passages from them to produce *zibaldoni*, compilations containing excerpts from a range of sources and produced in very high numbers in fifteenth-century Florence.³² The remarkable accessibility of and interest in books, and thus in ideas, helps to explain, and made possible, Ghiberti's approach.

One of the most intellectually engaged and well-read artists of the early fifteenth century, Ghiberti sought out texts of interest to him, both those available for purchase and other rarer works he could only borrow, in connection with his various sculptural commissions and the writing of the *Commentaries*. Ghiberti's will, which does not survive in the original but from which excerpts were recorded, shows that he owned books that he kept in a room in his workshop that functioned as a study (a "scriptorio").³³ That he acquired books is proven by still other sources, like his tax declaration of 1430, which records a debt of the relatively high sum of five florins for a copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy* that he purchased from the Opera of Santa Croce.³⁴ Ghiberti also received on loan rare manuscripts not available for purchase. In or just before 1430, for example, he wrote to the humanist Giovanni Aurispa, asking to borrow his copy of Athenaeus Mechanicus's *On Machines*, a treatise in Greek on siege machines from the first century BCE.³⁵ Ghiberti had previously seen the manuscript and, with the assistance of a humanist contemporary (probably Traversari), learned something of its contents. The *Commentaries* reveal that Ghiberti consulted a startlingly large number of texts, many of which he probably owned. In addition to Pliny's *Historia naturalis* and Vitruvius's *De architectura libri decem*, he cites, summarizes, or excerpts the following works: Athenaeus's *On Machines*, Alhazen's eleventh-century *De aspectibus* (translated from the Arabic original; the text was also available in Italian in the fifteenth century), Roger Bacon's thirteenth-century *Opus maius* and in particular the parts on optics, John Peckham's thirteenth-century *Perspectiva communis*, Witelo's late thirteenth-century *Perspectiva*, Avicenna's eleventh-century *Liber canonis medicinae* (also originally in Arabic), and Averroes's twelfth-century medical encyclopedia known in Latin as the *Colliget* (translated from Arabic).³⁶ And in all three sections of the *Commentaries* he names authors and texts he knew but from which he does not cite passages directly. In the first book, for example, he mentions Ptolemy's *Geographia* (calling it the *Cosmographia*, as was common in the fifteenth century) and Dante's *Divine Comedy*.³⁷

Ghiberti certainly read books in Latin as demonstrated by his translations of large sections of Pliny and Vitruvius, and indeed by some inaccuracies of his

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translation efforts.³⁸ To consult sources in Greek he would have needed a translator, and he probably would have required assistance to understand more complex Latin passages. Although he consulted many written works on his own, a great deal of his knowledge of them must have come from discussions, exchanges, and debates with contemporary humanists, many of whom he counted among his friends and associates. Several intellectuals who participated in Florence's culture of reading and manuscript exchange were close to artists and took an interest in the arts, ancient and modern. In 1430 and 1431 Poggio Bracciolini wrote letters in which he praises antiquities he had seen, mentioning in one that Donatello spoke highly of an ancient sculpture he had acquired.³⁹ Poggio developed classical script and used it in manuscripts he produced between 1408 and 1422, and Ghiberti and Donatello adopted this style of lettering in the mid-1420s.⁴⁰ Ghiberti, moreover, almost certainly discussed ancient inscriptions with Traversari, who influenced the design of the epigraph Ghiberti added to the reliquary casket for saints Protus, Hyacinth, and Nemesius that he made for Santa Maria degli Angeli (1425–8).⁴¹ Vespasiano da Bisticci, in his late fifteenth-century biography of Niccoli, says that Niccoli was on close terms with a number of artists, including Ghiberti.⁴² And Ghiberti confirms this connection in a memorable passage in the third book of the *Commentaries*, where he writes about a chalcidony intaglio he saw among a group of ancient objects owned by Niccoli. He praises at length not only the gem, but also Niccoli, who was, he says, an “investigator [*investigatore*] and seeker [*cercatore*] of very many excellent ancient things, both writings and volumes of Greek and Latin texts.”⁴³ Traversari and Niccoli can be tied directly to the origins of the project for the *Gates* and were clearly interested in sculptural commissions being planned for the baptistery. On June 21, 1424, after the Calimala requested from Brunni his program for the doors, Traversari wrote to Niccoli acknowledging, in only general terms, Niccoli's ideas for the stories to be included and mentioning, with evident disapproval, that the guild had instead turned to Brunni for advice.⁴⁴ Later Ghiberti discussed manuscripts, including the aforementioned *On Machines* by Athenaeus Mechanicus, with Traversari. His close relationship with Palla Strozzi gave him access to his manuscripts and, as importantly, to Strozzi's knowledge of them.

The relationship between Ghiberti and Palla Strozzi was so close that, when Palla went to Venice in 1424 as one of two Florentine ambassadors charged with negotiating an alliance with the Venetians, Ghiberti accompanied him in his retinue.⁴⁵ We cannot but assume that Ghiberti and Palla, who also served as an advisor for Ghiberti's first set of doors, discussed shared interests over the course of their long association.⁴⁶ These are some of only the documented instances of Ghiberti's contacts with members of the scholarly community. As we shall see, certain details in the doors strongly imply that contemporaries communicated to Ghiberti information about a range of topics from sources they were reading in the very years in which he designed and cast the relief elements of the *Gates*.

Although Ghiberti did not possess the skills of his humanist contemporaries in reading ancient languages, his inclinations – his dogged search for knowledge, the intense desire to learn from sources he deemed authoritative in order to get things right – matched many of theirs.⁴⁷ In some cases the breadth of his knowledge, which derived from a variety of ancient works and medieval texts, from Dante's *Commedia* to optical treatises by Arab philosophers, might well have exceeded theirs. Ghiberti's goals in examining sources also differed from those of members of the humanist community. Niccoli, for example, sought out books largely in order to correct the flawed Latin of the current versions of ancient works. Ghiberti, by contrast, consulted, sometimes through the interventions of contemporaries, a number of texts to learn how to view and make sculpture. For example, in describing in the *Commentaries* several ancient statues and reliefs, including Niccoli's chalcidony intaglio, Ghiberti emphasizes that the subtly carved, beautiful surfaces of such works can be properly appreciated only when a soft, low light illuminates them.⁴⁸ Immediately before this assertion Ghiberti inserted into his text an excerpt from Alhazen's *De aspectibus* in which the philosopher claims that viewing delicately sculpted reliefs in temperate light allows one to see most clearly their fine details.⁴⁹ In Alhazen Ghiberti found an authoritative voice that taught him how to study and examine images – or confirmed his beliefs concerning the best way to do so. Reading, Ghiberti confirms, also formed part of his creative process. The section of the *Commentaries* in which he mentions

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Ptolemy's *Geographia*, a book translated into Latin in the first decade of the fifteenth century, comes in the context of his description of a painted *mappamondo* – Ghiberti calls it a “Cosmogrofia” – in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena by Ambrogio Lorenzetti. He writes that Ambrogio's depiction of the land was imperfect because, in the time of Lorenzetti, “there was not then knowledge of the *Cosmography* of Ptolemy.”⁵⁰ Ghiberti's effusive accounts of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's paintings confirm that he esteemed him perhaps more than any other earlier artist, but, no matter how skilled, all painters, sculptors, and architects, Ghiberti believed, could benefit from ancient and medieval knowledge. To read was to understand the world and therefore to know how to represent it, its people, forms, and structures, in the proper manner.

THE THEMES OF THE GATES

Ghiberti was a devoted student of history. In the history of art in the *Commentaries* he gives the names of earlier artists and describes their major works, adding, whenever possible, anecdotal detail to round out the picture. In addition to supplying such information, his interest in historical change and the progress of events led him to attach chronological markers to his narrative, and in a most unusual form. He measures time according to the Olympiads, a technique he picked up from Pliny but that no other fifteenth-century writer used before him.⁵¹ In his account history flows forward chronologically, and it moves in discrete, demarcated units, allowing readers to attach specific dates to each event. Viewers of the *Gates* find this interest in historical development reflected in the panels, where the world, its people, and their creations and communities evolve according to authoritative ancient and medieval notions concerning the ways humanity and the environment changed over time. Ghiberti and his contemporaries in fact understood the Bible as an historical text. This belief often led fifteenth-century Florentines, in their *zibaldoni*, to provide the precise dates of birth (according to years after Creation) of Old Testament figures and to enumerate the six historical ages of biblical time proposed by Augustine and Isidore of Seville.⁵² In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries a number of early translators of the Bible into French and Italian bound together their

new versions of biblical books with pagan histories, accounts of previous events in Christianity, and encyclopedic texts that deal with the history of the world.⁵³ Such compilations provided a variety of perspectives on the history of previous ages.

Visual evidence in the *Gates* indicates that Ghiberti considered particularly important the notion of the simultaneity of history – the belief that biblical history unfolded concurrently with the development of other peoples and societies. This idea had, for centuries, structured understanding of the ways human civilization changed over time. Perhaps the most famous proponent of the concept was Augustine, who, in the *City of God*, narrates the history of the world, starting with Creation and moving through to the eras shared by Abraham and the Assyrian King Ninus, Joseph and Argus (who ruled over the Argives), Moses and various Assyrian and Greek kings, Aeneas (and his descendants) and the Old Testament figures Saul and David, and Romulus and the Jewish King Hezekiah; he ends with the birth of Christ.⁵⁴ The notion that societies coexisted and developed concomitantly affected a vast range of writers after the fifth century. Isidore of Seville's long chronology in the extremely popular and influential *Etymologies* lists events in groups, pairing entries from the Old and New Testaments alongside those from a variety of ancient cultures.⁵⁵ The *Fioretti della Bibbia*, a fourteenth-century elaboration of the Bible that, though written in Catalan, had been translated into Italian by the late fourteenth century and was extremely popular in Ghiberti's Florence, chronicled in one account Judeo-Christian events, the history of ancient pagan kingdoms, and polytheistic mythology.⁵⁶

Many of these texts make the connections between peoples explicit and direct. Isidore, for example, in discussing music, writes that the Hebrews influenced the development of other cultures. David, he states, invented hymns that pagans then borrowed and performed in honor of Apollo and the Muses. And Solomon, he says, wrote songs that pagans imitated and performed on stage and at nuptial ceremonies.⁵⁷ In Ghiberti's cycle, the influence also flows in the other direction, as biblical history receives the imprint of cultural developments from the wider Mediterranean world. He grafted ideas he found in historical accounts of ancient pagan peoples directly onto the narrative

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fabric of the Bible in order to represent the evolution of the earth's inhabitants as well as the objects and edifices they create. Sculpted decoration, for example, adorns buildings only in panels whose events, according to accepted belief, took place after the beginning of the civilization of the Greeks, who, says Pliny, invented the art of sculpture. And a horse-drawn chariot appears for the first time in the *Joshua* panel, which was understood to represent events happening in the period when, according to Isidore, the Trojan Erichonius invented the chariot.⁵⁸ The biblical figures Ghiberti represents may not share their faith with the pagans, but they partake of their cultural innovations.

In many cases Ghiberti used the Old Testament narratives in the *Gates of Paradise* to confront artistic challenges and explore intellectual themes of particular interest to him and his contemporaries.⁵⁹ Some of these arose as a result of his awareness of artistic or architectural achievements described in ancient sources. Pliny, for example, claims that Apelles, in painting a storm, represented thunder and lightning. He never gives details about the work in question, leaving readers to puzzle over just how Apelles painted forces that can only be heard – and thus not captured by vision or the brush – or that flash through the sky with a rapidity that makes it difficult to visualize them in art. Ghiberti took up this challenge in the *Moses* panel. Other problems that drew his attention are connected to the representation of narrative in art and the desire to present stories with emotional depth. In designing the *Cain and Abel* panel he considered how an artist might visualize internal emotional states, and especially subtle ones like Cain's instability and simmering anger, or suggest a character's destiny. In panels in which figures, in the context of the story being told, remember earlier events or envision future ones, he used relief sculpture and the overlapping of episodes inherent in the medium to suggest memories and prophecies.⁶⁰ And he devised a way to represent the content of human imagination – the image conjured up by the mind but not actually captured by physical sight – in order to make scenes in one particular tale, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, legible and logical. Among other issues he pondered was the origin of creativity in humans and in the natural world. He devised a startlingly original representation of the birth of creativity in, not surprisingly, the *Adam and Eve* panel. Finally, as an artist

and a reader, he knew that uncontrollable circumstances often bring about the destruction of paintings, sculptures (and especially those in costly bronze), and buildings. This fear guided the approach in the *Joshua* relief, where acts of construction and destruction form the basis of the narrative.

The earliest stages of the project, during which Ghiberti was developing ideas for the panels, must have involved intense and lively discussions with members of his workshop and intellectual circle. The panels and frame figures remained in the shop for fifteen years after they had been cast and before they were inserted into the doors' massive framework and placed on the baptistery, and Ghiberti and his interlocutors would have had, in this long period, ample opportunity to study at close range every figure, animal, plant, and structure. As will become clear, he added certain details with these restricted audiences in mind, and one can well imagine that he enjoyed talking over each panel after it had been cast and during the cleaning and chasing processes. Although in certain places he invented new iconographies that were probably understood only by a limited number of Florentines, numerous viewers at least knew the basic biblical stories from sermons and liturgical readings, and many of the ancient and medieval texts from which Ghiberti drew ideas were read by a majority of literate Florentines. Dante's *Comedy*, for example, which inspired Ghiberti's approach in a number of the panels, was very widely read in Renaissance Florence (and by, it seems, a number of artists).⁶¹ And a number of ideas about the natural world that Ghiberti accepted and which ultimately derive from ancient texts were repeated or summarized in well-known sources, such as Isidore's *Etymologies* or Brunetto Latini's *Treasure*. The panels thus not only reveal Ghiberti's interests and beliefs, but in certain aspects also function as snapshots of how fifteenth-century Florentines understood their world – including not only, and not even primarily, Florence or Italy, but also the faraway places where the Old Testament events purportedly happened – and its origins and physical evolution over time.

The analysis I offer of the still largely unexplored thematic and artistic complexity of the *Gates of Paradise* will thus highlight the ubiquity and multivalence of biblical lore in the Renaissance while also fashioning

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a portrait – the first for any early Renaissance artist – of Ghiberti's intellectual personality. Such an analysis is possible because, thanks to his decision to write and to accidents of survival, a mass of documentation survives in connection with his work on the *Gates* project that simply does not exist for any of his contemporaries. The commission is, for the most part, well documented; Ghiberti's contacts with contemporaries during the period of work can be established; and the *Commentaries* reveal his interests, aims, and even anxieties. All artists inject something of themselves into their works, and certainly the paintings and sculptures of sixteenth-century Italian artists like Raphael, Michelangelo, and Cellini have been mined for ideas about their preoccupations and interests, which were often developed in concert and consultation with advisors and scholars.⁶² For the earlier decades of the Renaissance this has not been done, in large part because for most artists the evidence of their intellectual engagement was not recorded or does not survive. But in the case of Ghiberti it *does*, and the aim of this study is to examine the images of the *Gates* – the culminating work of his career and life – in the light of his learning, his interests in history and art, and the intellectual climate of the early fifteenth century. The early Renaissance represents a transformative moment in the history of art, when artists began asserting their own ideas and aims. Ghiberti's *Gates* allow us to understand the areas of thought that one early Renaissance artist began to explore when given the opportunity to develop his own interpretations of canonical biblical stories.

Although Ghiberti drew information from sources that he and his contemporaries were reading, the successful expression of his ideas required the careful manipulation of composition, setting, pose, gesture, drapery, and space in the panels and flanking relief statuettes. His formal innovations – the organization and presentation of complex polyscenic narratives, the integration of ancient models, and the use of linear perspective – played important roles in the presentation of his artistic interpretations. His travels, throughout Italy and to Rome in particular, allowed him to examine ancient sculptures and medieval images, and he often turned to such works to find models and inspiration for the presentation of his ideas.⁶³ And he used perspective both to create fictive spaces that serve as settings for the narratives and to help viewers understand

the significance of certain episodes and the reactions of figures participating in them. Especially important was the use of polyscenic narrative, which, I propose in this book, Ghiberti embraced not only because it permitted the presentation of complex stories involving many episodes but also because it opened up new interpretive possibilities. In grouping together numerous scenes within single, visual fields, Ghiberti understood that readers could view the panels' episodes in isolation, in chronological succession (as they are recounted in the Old Testament, akin to reading pages of the Bible consecutively), or together – in pairs or triples – in juxtapositions or sequences that did not necessarily follow chronological order. His choice of episodes for each panel reflects interpretive purposes that transcend the traditional understanding of the individual events considered separately. Indeed, in numerous cases Ghiberti invites viewers to consider how various episodes affect and redefine one another when examined together and out of sequence, and frequently such comparisons stimulate new understandings of familiar stories.⁶⁴

CHRONOLOGY AND THE *COMMENTARIES*

Much of the original documentation for commissions at the Florence Baptistery does not survive because, in the eighteenth century, a fire in the archive of the Calimala destroyed most of the guild's books and papers.⁶⁵ Fortunately, in the seventeenth century Carlo Strozzi copied or summarized sections of the original documents, and these records, which fill three volumes today at the Archivio di Stato in Florence, provide a relatively detailed picture of Ghiberti's schedule in completing his two doors.⁶⁶ The chronology for the *Gates* is well known but its relevance to this study merits a brief summary. Ghiberti signed the contract for his second doors on January 2, 1425, believing that, when completed, they would be installed on the north face of the baptistery because his first doors then occupied the east side (opposite the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore) and the first set, by Andrea Pisano, had since 1336 stood at the south entrance.⁶⁷ He began modeling the relief elements shortly thereafter and by April 1437 had cast in bronze all ten panels, as well as the twenty-four strips containing the relief statuettes and floral decoration.⁶⁸

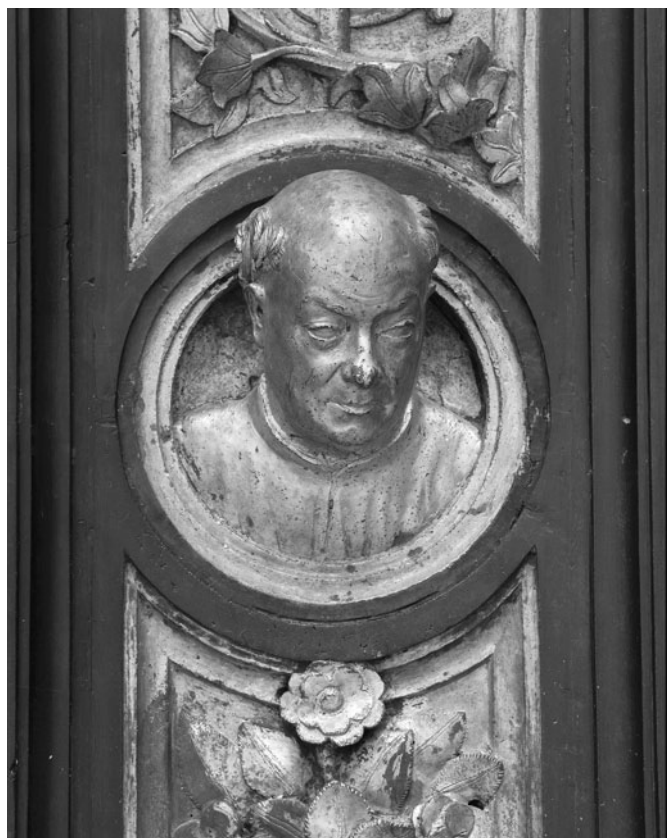
LORENZO Ghiberti'S *GATES OF PARADISE*

Figure 2. Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Self-Portrait* from the *Gates of Paradise*, 1425–52, Museo dell'Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence; Photo: Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence/Antonio Quattrone.

The years between 1437 and 1452 were dedicated to four major tasks: the time-consuming processes of cleaning, chasing, and gilding the panels and frame strips, which produced the gleaming, richly detailed surfaces of the bodies, landscapes, and buildings; the casting of the doors' massive back panels, with their integral frames on the front into which the relief panels and framing elements were eventually inserted; the modeling and casting of the twenty-four small busts, including Ghiberti's self-portrait and a portrait of his son Vittorio (Figs. 2–3); and the creation of the doors' threshold, lintel, and jambs. Ghiberti carried out all of this work with extensive assistance from his shop, which included, for periods of time, Michelozzo (who, although a member of the workshop crew when Ghiberti signed the contract for the *Gates* in January 1425, departed the shop in March or April of that year and then came back in 1437 to help with the chasing; he remained there through

1442 – and possibly beyond), Benozzo Gozzoli (who worked on the *Gates* from 1444 until, at the latest, 1447, probably also assisting with the chasing), and Vittorio Ghiberti.⁶⁹ A document of July 1439 gives some indication of the progress of work. By that point the chasing of five of the ten reliefs had been completed or very nearly finished (*Cain and Abel*, *Moses*, and *Jacob and Esau*) or begun (*Joseph* and *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*). A record from 1443 indicates that four of the panels were still not finished (i.e., not yet entirely cleaned and chased).⁷⁰ The panels were done by 1447, and during the final four years of work Ghiberti and members of the workshop cleaned and chased the frame strips; fashioned the doors' framed busts and the lintel, jambs, and threshold; and gilded the relief elements.⁷¹ Ghiberti and his assistants constructed the massive doors, with the framework into which the relief elements were inserted, between 1439 and 1449.⁷² In 1452, after twenty-seven years of work, the project was finished, and the consuls of the Calimala decided that these new doors, “on account of their beauty,” should occupy the prominent, eastern face of the baptistery. In July 1452 they were indeed installed on the east façade of San Giovanni, displacing Ghiberti's first set to the north entrance.⁷³

It is impossible to determine precisely when Ghiberti designed and modeled each panel or in what order he sculpted them because no document provides details about the specific progress of work between 1425 and 1437.⁷⁴ A careful stylistic analysis led Krautheimer, who believed that the work of designing and casting was begun only in late 1428 or 1429, to propose that Ghiberti created the panels in the order in which they appear on the doors from the top down, a suggestion accepted by most art historians.⁷⁵ He dated the *Adam and Eve* panel to around 1429; the *Cain and Abel*, *Noah*, and *Abraham and Isaac* reliefs to around or just before 1434; the *Jacob and Esau* and *Joseph* panels to 1434 and 1435; and, finally, the last four reliefs, *Moses*, *Joshua*, *David*, and *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, to the period between 1435 and 1437. More recently, Francesco Caglioti revised Krautheimer's chronology, suggesting that Ghiberti might well have begun the work earlier, around 1427.⁷⁶ Ghiberti was, Caglioti reminds readers,