

## INTRODUCTION

**T**HIS BOOK EXAMINES a major transformation of the Florentine church interior that fundamentally impacted the artistic, practical, and liturgical life of the church. The painting in Figure 1 presents an evocative view – albeit imagined and idealized – of a fifteenth-century church. Traversing the nave, an immense monumental screen incorporates chapels decorated with gilded altarpieces and brocaded altar frontals. Laymen socialize and perambulate through the screen’s central opening, beyond which friars congregate in the high altar area. During the course of the late Renaissance, these subdivided spatial arrangements were gradually transformed into open, unified interiors such as that portrayed in Figure 2, which itself was then further embellished in the baroque era and restored in modern times. Lacking a screen, this uninterrupted space – equipped with uniform side altarpiece frames, a pulpit and organ – focuses attention on a large Eucharistic tabernacle on the high altar, behind which friars conducted their liturgy completely hidden from view.

As agents of both segregation and mediation, screens (known as *tramezzi* in Italian) were important liminal structures that in essence divided the laity in the nave from the clergy in the choir. However, in a widespread phenomenon that gained momentum in the later sixteenth century, *tramezzi* were destroyed and original arrangements of choir stalls in the nave were transferred to so-called retrochoirs: sites behind the high altar either in the high chapel or in a dedicated extended space. This “revolution in church planning and liturgical practice” has marginalized the contemporary significance and cultural value of *tramezzi*, which are sometimes entirely overlooked by historians of Italian religious art.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 INTRODUCTION



**Figure 1** Fra Carnevale (Bartolomeo di Giovanni Corradini), *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* (?), c. 1467. Oil and tempera on panel, 146.4 × 96.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Charles Potter Kling Fund 37.108. Photograph ©2022 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston





Figure 2 Ognissanti, Florence. Interior view facing northeast. Photo: author

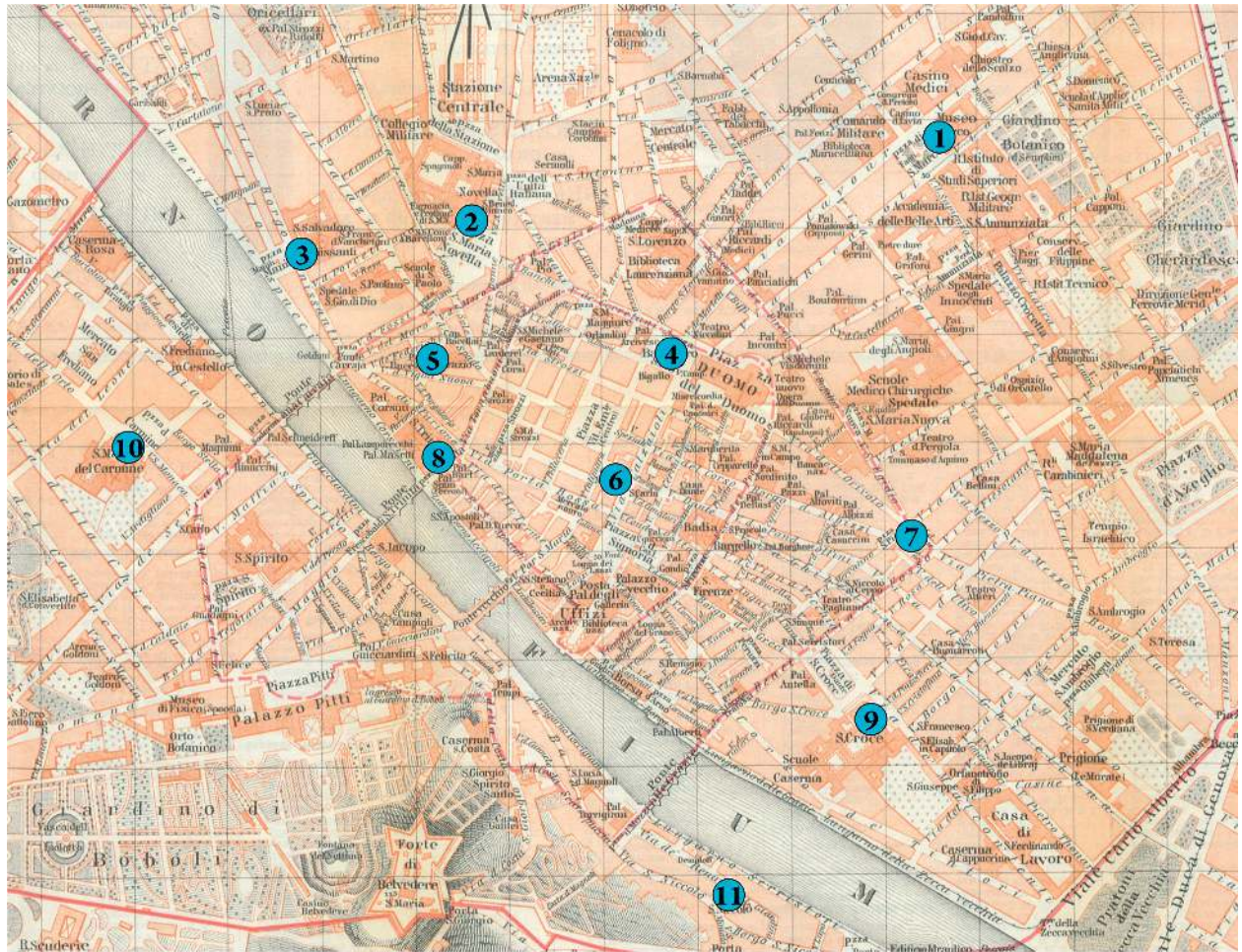
Marcia Hall's groundbreaking studies of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella in the 1970s definitively proved the existence of large-scale tramezzi in Florentine churches and detailed their destruction within the climate of the Counter-Reformation. By restoring screens as essential components of the church interior, Hall instigated an entire field of enquiry into Italian art and architecture. While subsequent studies have revealed evidence for tramezzi in individual Italian churches, this book has two broader aims: to establish the original arrangements and functions of nave choirs and tramezzi, and to explore motivations for their later elimination, overall providing a significant reappraisal

of how Italian Renaissance art and architecture were originally experienced, both before and after the renovations.

Current scholarship suggests that Florence was the only Italian city to witness the systematic removal of screens and nave choirs – many more than previously thought – within a short interval between the 1560s and 1570s. These alterations often formed part of broader artistic schemes involving the whitewashing of earlier fresco decoration and construction of new uniform altarpiece frames and high altar Eucharistic tabernacles. The churches that experienced such transformations include the Franciscan church of Santa Croce; the Dominican Santa Maria Novella;



## 4 INTRODUCTION



- |   |                     |    |                         |
|---|---------------------|----|-------------------------|
| 1 | San Marco           | 7  | San Pier Maggiore       |
| 2 | Santa Maria Novella | 8  | Santa Trinita           |
| 3 | Ognissanti          | 9  | Santa Croce             |
| 4 | San Giovanni        | 10 | Santa Maria del Carmine |
| 5 | San Pancrazio       | 11 | San Niccolò Oltrarno    |
| 6 | Orsanmichele        |    |                         |

Figure 3 Map of Florence indicating churches altered between c. 1560 and 1577. Map image: The British Library

the Observant Dominican San Marco; the Carmelite Santa Maria del Carmine; Ognissanti (initially Humiliati, then Observant Franciscan from 1561); the Vallombrosan monks' churches of Santa Trinita and San Pancrazio; San Pier Maggiore, a Benedictine nunnery with parish duties; San Niccolò Oltrarno, a collegiate church with parish duties; the civic oratory of

Orsanmichele; and the Baptistery of San Giovanni (Figure 3). Other fifteenth-century churches in Florence, like San Lorenzo, had already been constructed without the presence of monumental interior screens. Following an introductory chapter focused on the function and developments of screens, two linked chapters are devoted to a broad overview of sacred space in

Florentine churches. Five case studies – on the mendicant, male and female monastic, and civic contexts – demonstrate the almost ubiquitous presence of screens and nave choir precincts. Presenting unpublished archival documentation and new architectural reconstructions, each case elucidates wider issues that include gender segregation, patronage, function, and access.

The transformation of the church interior remains a thorny issue in Italian art history. What motivated these renovations and who instigated them? How profound was the impact of religious reform on the articulation of sacred space? How did the removal of nave choirs and tramezzi fundamentally change the experience of the church interior?

Although the destruction of tramezzi and the shift to retrochoirs had been gaining momentum outside the city from the mid-fifteenth century, and medieval examples existed in neighboring Umbria, in Florence both the chronological intensity of the transformations and the strong political motivations of the actors involved appear to be unique.<sup>2</sup> These alterations were enacted toward the conclusion of the reign of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, who centralized political power and cultural patronage in an unprecedented manner in both Florence itself and the greatly enlarged Tuscan state. As this study will show, primary sources demonstrate that Duke Cosimo and his court artist and architect Giorgio Vasari were personally involved in many of the new schemes. Cardinal Carlo Borromeo, whose later writings on sacred architecture were widely disseminated and in many ways shaped perceptions of the 'reformed' church interior, may have encouraged Duke Cosimo to pursue the renovations so vigorously. The church renovations allowed the duke to pursue multiple objectives, which included promoting Catholic reform, reviving early Christian and Quattrocento Medici spaces, and demonstrating widespread artistic patronage throughout the

city. In the years leading up to his official abdication, Duke Cosimo also invited Archbishop Antonio Altoviti to return from political exile, which appears to have intensified this architectural and liturgical revolution. More broadly, historians have related the Florentine episode to shifting architectural and pictorial aesthetic taste, economic considerations, religious motivations related to the Council of Trent, local and state politics, and changes in social mores. In individual cases, flood damage, decline in monastic populations, exchanges of religious communities, and institutional reform were also instrumental. A complex intersection of motivating factors – including practical, aesthetic, and religious concerns – and a range of figures, including the duke, lay patrons, and ecclesiastical leaders, contributed to the single largest transformation of Florence's architectural landscape since the early Renaissance.

Chronologically, the Florentine alterations neatly postdate the conclusion of the widely influential Council of Trent in 1563. The council pursued two main objectives: to reaffirm church teaching, especially concerning the doctrines refuted by the Protestants; and to establish pastoral reform, in particular to enhance the roles of bishops and parish priests.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the twenty-five decrees issued between 1545 and 1563, the council had many wider consequences, such as an increase in papal and episcopal power, the development of the sensuous in the arts, and an emphasis on the Catholic Church's differences with the newly instituted branches of Protestantism.<sup>4</sup> As other historians have noted, Trent did not legislate on ecclesiastical architecture or furnishings directly or make any direct injunctions concerning the placement of choirs.<sup>5</sup> However, several decrees – especially those that emphasized the importance of the Eucharistic sacrament, encouraged preaching, and castigated against secular or disrespectful acts in churches – sanctioned a shift in the function, atmosphere,



6 ∩ INTRODUCTION

and meaning of the church interior. In a period of both Catholic reform, characterized by an emphasis on lay engagement and clerical betterment, and Catholic renewal, characterized by intensified sacramental devotion, the church renovations were an economical way of expressing these institutional objectives in architectural form.

### THE EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT

Almost exclusively treated as a Catholic – and specifically Italian – phenomenon, these church renovations have rarely been viewed in the broader European context.<sup>6</sup> In fact, across Europe in the later sixteenth century, churches experienced radical alterations in both the

Protestant and Catholic spheres. In some cases, similar architectural outcomes across religious denominations – such as the removal or adaptation of screens or whitewashing of walls – expressed fundamentally differing concepts of the role of the church interior.<sup>7</sup>

In the Lutheran tradition, while many existing Catholic spaces were cleared of screens, some chancel screens were replaced by galleries for grand musical performances in Germany (Figure 4).<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, many were maintained in Denmark, and in the Norwegian and Swedish contexts were employed as devices to create restricted spaces that expressed social standing.<sup>9</sup> In the Low Countries, Calvinist iconoclasts ransacked churches in the major ecclesiastical centers of Flanders and Brabant in 1566, precisely paralleling the Florentine period of alterations.<sup>10</sup> Religious images and altars were



Figure 4 Ägidienkirche, Lübeck, Germany. Musician's gallery in the nave, view facing southwest. Photo: Bodo Kubrak



**Figure 5** St. Peter's Church, Leiden, The Netherlands. Screen viewed from the nave, facing east. Photo: Harm Joris ten Napel

destroyed but many screens not only survived but were actively saved and repurposed as important elements in Calvinist religious practice.<sup>11</sup> Sculpted rood groups (depictions of the crucified Christ) present on those screens were often replaced by panels listing the Ten Commandments (Figure 5).<sup>12</sup>

In sixteenth-century England, after widespread removals under Henry VIII and Edward VI, roods were erected or reerected under the Catholic Mary I.<sup>13</sup> During the Elizabethan return to Protestantism, religious authorities endorsed the removal of roods but the preservation of screens. In 1560, roods were removed from many London churches and the following year orders issued either directly from the Crown or from Archbishop of Canterbury Matthew Parker gave further clarification regarding the alteration or “transposynge” of roodlofts and the installation

of “some convenient crest” (the Royal Arms).<sup>14</sup> The removal of screens themselves was not proposed at that point, but further Orders of 1571 stated that “all roodlofts are to be altered.”<sup>15</sup> The Anglican animosity, therefore, was directed toward the “popish” roods themselves rather than the physical barriers, which reinforced a desired sense of hierarchy and authority in the church interior, and became important sites of lay identity.<sup>16</sup>

In early modern Spain, neither a development toward retrochoirs nor a definitive acceptance of nave choirs can be observed.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Spanish cathedrals frequently had distinctive spatial arrangements in which the laity already occupied a privileged position directly in front of the high altar where they were more visually engaged with the liturgy.<sup>18</sup> While unrealized designs for Valladolid and Salamanca Cathedrals placed



## 8 ∩ INTRODUCTION



Figure 6 Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, Paris. Screen viewed from the nave, facing east. Photo: David Iliff

stalls in retrochoirs,<sup>19</sup> sometimes Spanish choir precincts were moved from the high altar area into the central nave, while the laity would remain in the area in front of the high altar.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, mendicant and monastic choirs were

frequently moved to raised balconies above the church entrance doors.<sup>21</sup>

In France, various adaptations to the church interior took place gradually over a longer time span. Often screens (known as jubés in the





Figure 7 Il Gesù, Rome. Interior view facing east. Photo: author



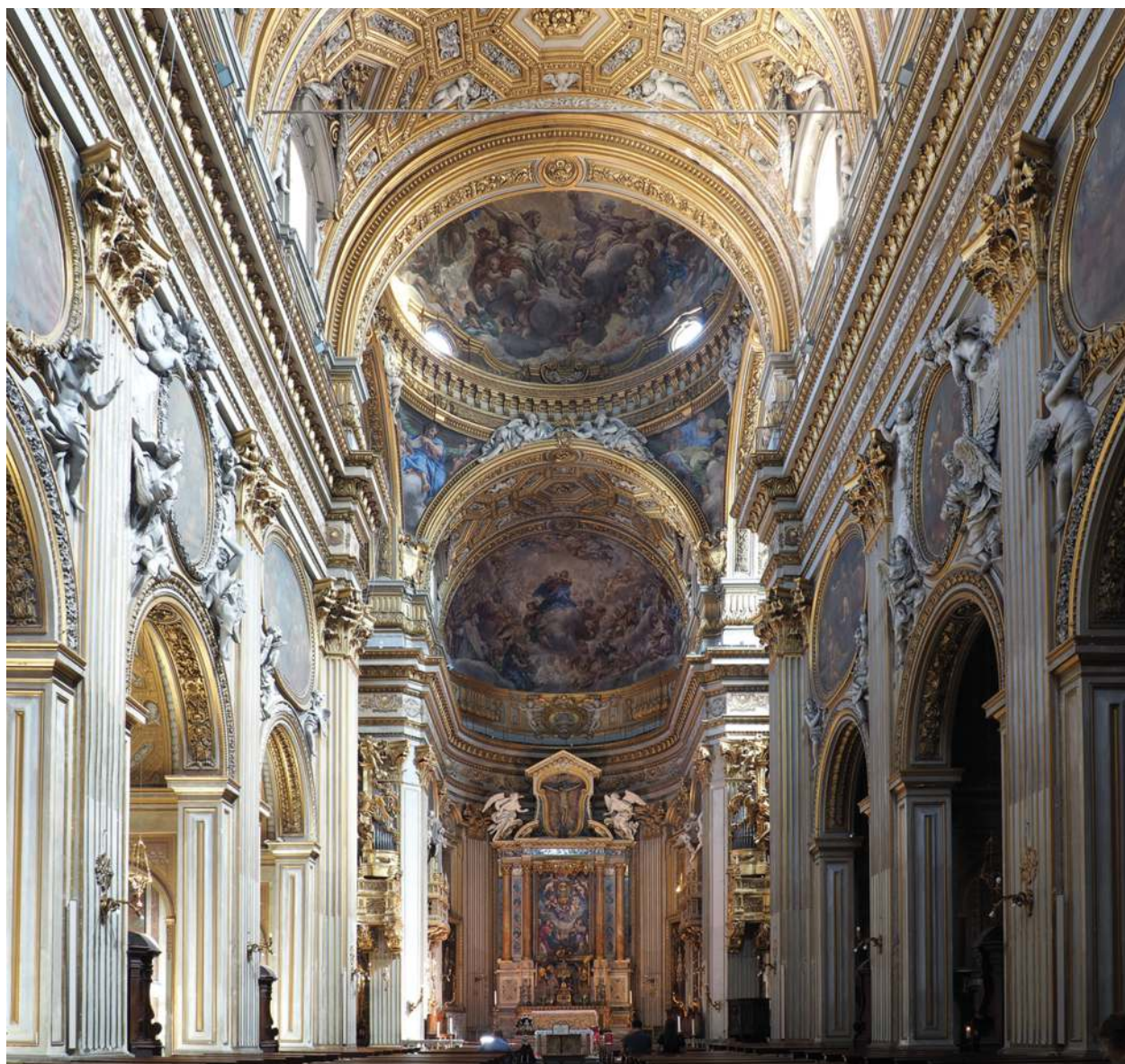


Figure 8 Chiesa Nuova (Santa Maria in Vallicella), Rome. Interior view facing north. Photo: author

French context) were demolished or refashioned, or more rarely nave altars were erected in front of screens, which were consequently relegated to architectural curiosities.<sup>22</sup> In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, jubés were constructed with more open forms such as porticos or triumphal arches, seen, for example, in Saint-Étienne-du-Mont in Paris (Figure 6).<sup>23</sup> The lay liturgical historian Jean-Baptiste Thiers displayed the French reticence to entirely eliminate screens

in his influential 1688 *Dissertations ecclésiastiques*, in which he emphasized the continuous historical presence of screening devices, labelling their demolition a rejection of ancient church tradition, authority, and liturgical practice.<sup>24</sup>

Across the Italian peninsula, countless churches were transformed, and new buildings were equipped with retrochoirs during the latter decades of the sixteenth century. Writing in 1588, Pompeo Ugonio recorded the effects of the