

Between Simplicity and Magnificence: A Friar in Mercantile Florence

Katharine Stahlbuhk

This week we will go back in time to the second half of the fifteenth century, to Florence. Through the lens of art history, we will investigate the role friars played in the formation of cultural and social identity by, broadly speaking, questioning the mendicants' participation in humanist discourses.

My presentation will be divided into two parts: the first will be a case study on the relationship between a literary work, the *Vitae nonnullorum fratrum beatae Mariae Novellae*, written in the late fifteenth century by the Dominican friar Giovanni Caroli (1428–1503), and in particular on the therein contained *Life of the blessed Alessio Strozzi*, and the decoration of a chapel in the transept of Santa Maria Novella featuring Filippo Strozzi the Elder's commission of the frescoes to Filippino Lippi.

The second part of my presentation will address the larger project, intimately connected to my planned monograph on Caroli, which studies the convent libraries of the Friar Preachers under the following aspects: architecture, furnishings and interior design, holdings and systematization, the books as objects, and access to the stored knowledge.

Both, the project on the libraries and the monograph on Caroli, investigate the confrontation with, and contribution of mendicants to Humanism. I explore the intertwining of the convent with the city from an art historical yet multidisciplinary perspective in order to shed light on how certain materials visually and tactilely equate to the conceptualization of community, and how an image-generating use of language promotes or enables the tangible notion of collectivity.

The relation between religion and humanist thought has been the topic of important scholarship at least since the 1970s with the studies by Paul Oskar Kristeller, Kaspar Elm and Charles Stinger, and continues to arouse scholarly interest mainly in disciplines like history of religions and history of philosophy. There is instead a clear gap in art historical studies on this subject. I seek to approach Humanism – which has to be understood as a cultural and pedagogical phenomenon, that

touched every facet of human cohabit, also aesthetics – on the part of a specific category of religious people: the mendicants. The first and utmost fundamental difference of these orders, which were relatively ‘new’ during the early stage of Humanism, respect to older monastic orders, is exactly their deep relation with the urban centres. Their structures were not built far away from highly populated areas, but intimately linked to the expanding towns and cities; a fact that on its own foregrounds the social and public impact of their actions. Their preaching and teaching activities are the most emblematic examples of their efforts, and will be the underlining topic of the second part of my talk.

With this pre-paper I provide some basic information about the place: Santa Maria Novella, its history and significance within Florence with a focus on the Quattrocento as well as a quick look on the two Strozzi chapels. In parallel, I will deliver some biographical information on Giovanni Caroli, as well as short notes on Alessio and Filippo Strozzi.

Santa Maria Novella

The place of action of Fra’ Giovanni Caroli is the Dominican convent in Florence: Santa Maria Novella. Its origin goes back to the arrival of twelve friar Preachers in Florence in 1219, and the assignment of a small church outside the city walls in 1221. The huge gothic basilica [fig. 1] (the first of its kind in Florence, shortly followed by the cathedral and by the Franciscans at Santa Croce) and the vast convent were built from the thirteenth century onwards, most of the complex being completed by 1360 circa. By the time Caroli wrote the *Vitae*, Santa Maria Novella was, after circa 250 years of Dominican presence in Florence, one of the most important spiritual and ‘civic’ institutions of the town. I underline the civic aspect not only thinking about the fact that mendicant churches served as burial sites and thus as places of memory and self-representation of important families, nor due to the presence in of numerous lay confraternity oratories in even remote spots of the convent area, which (besides undoubtedly addressing spiritual needs of the members) offered occasions of gatherings and the formation of networks with immense social and political implications. Regarding Santa Maria Novella, of primary significance are the papal apartments built on behalf of the Florentine republic

alongside the northern and eastern pass way of the Chiostro grande to host Martin V, the first pope after the great schism in 1419–1420; an event of extraordinary prestige for the city. In the decades and centuries to come these apartments hosted not only popes but also the most eminent secular rulers while visiting the town. But it was precisely from the mid 1430s that Santa Maria Novella, as Florentine Lateran, undoubtedly became one of the intellectual hot spots of the Western world for circa a decade. From 1434 to 1443 Santa Maria Novella hosted pope Eugenius IV. The impact (cultural, socio-political and economic) was immense, not least due to the council that led to the Union with the Greek, bringing to Florence (and precisely to Santa Maria Novella) not only the patriarch of Constantinople or eminent eastern thinkers like Isidor of Kiev or Bessarion, but ancient Greek, Hebrew, Arab and Byzantine knowledge in form of manuscripts. The consultations and debates during the Council of the Union, first with the Greek, followed by those with the Armenian and then with the Coptic Church took place in Santa Maria Novella (most likely in the Rucellai chapel dedicated to Saint Catherine of Alexandria, who significantly is the patron saint of philosophers and scholars). These circumstances are as unique as emblematic for the intertwining of the convent with the city. The Dominicans would encounter on a daily basis not only lay representatives of the city, cardinals, highest ranking prelates and worldly leaders, but also (or rather foremost) the most skilled thinkers: worth to recall that nearly all the leading humanists acted as papal secretaries, and thus were dwelling constantly in Santa Maria Novella. Significant in this sense is also the famous debate on the nature of ancient Latin and the vernacular, that was disputed by Leonardo Bruni, Flavio Biondo and others in 1435 in the antechamber of the papal apartment.

It is important to highlight that even on a less intellectual level, the social function of the mendicant churches in general, and of Santa Maria Novella in particular, is at stake. It is not by chance that one of the founding texts of Italian vernacular literature, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, has its opening setting in the Florentine Dominican church: It was in the basilica of Santa Maria Novella that the group of young girls, sitting pleasantly on the ground of the nave in a circle, while gossiping after their prayers, encountered the group of young men and spontaneously decided to have a horse-ride

out of the city the upcoming day—the huge columned halls of such basilicas evidently functioned as daily meeting places for the lay citizens with a much broader connotation than mass attending or confession.

Before quickly illustrating how Giovanni Caroli fits into all this, being an art historian, I like to evoke what Caroli and his interlocutors would have had before their eyes while dwelling in Santa Maria Novella in the late Quattrocento. Indeed, Santa Maria Novella hosts (or hosted) many of the most emblematic art pieces of medieval and Renaissance Florence: The *Maestà* by Duccio di Buoninsegna [fig. 2] and the wooden cross by Giotto [fig. 3], once on top of the *tramezzo* which divided the lay from the friar's church. Passing from the Trecento to the Quattrocento worth mentioning are at least the wooden sculpture of the crucified Jesus by Brunelleschi (the one from the famous dispute with Donatello told by Vasari), Ghiberti's bronze slab for the tomb of Leonardo Dati, Masaccio's *Trinity* [fig. 4] and Paolo Uccello's *Deluge* [fig. 5]. Besides the murals by Filippino Lippi in the Strozzi chapel (which will be directly addressed in my talk), in the time frame I will consider in my presentation, in the main chapel of the church, Ghirlandaio and his *bottega* (which included the young Michelangelo) renewed the wall decoration with its huge fresco cycle showing scenes of the *Lives of Mary and of Saint John the Baptist* [fig. 6], including not only glimpses of the cityscape, and interiors of Florentine homes, but above all the people; the young women of the Tornabuoni household and the leading humanists of the time such as Marsilio Ficino. Stepping out of the basilica, I conclude this small panegyric route by remembering that Santa Maria Novella is the only(!) Florentine church with a Renaissance façade adorned by the marble incrustation designed by Leon Battista Alberti and commissioned by Cosimo Rucellai [fig. 7].

A little more than 50 years after the circumstances we will be dealing with this Wednesday, Santa Maria Novella was the first church in Florence, where Giorgio Vasari, on behalf of Cosimo I Medici, reorganized the church interior following the dictates of the council of Trent tearing down the screen and the choir, as well as reshaping the walls of the nave with homogenous altars decorated

with huge canvas paintings instead of the ‘chaotic’, over centuries stratified wall ornamentation with its paintings, altars and ex-voto, modifying dramatically and irrevocably the experience of that space.

Giovanni Caroli (1428–1503)

Giovanni Caroli arrived in Santa Maria Novella in 1442, at the age of fourteen. Apparently, he was soon recognized as an *enfant prodige* under the guise of the then archbishop, highly venerated and later sanctified Antonino, also a Dominican originally of Santa Maria Novella, who Caroli himself considered his mentor throughout his life. Caroli was a prolific writer in Latin and in the vernacular, he taught and presided as decan the faculty of theology of the Studio fiorentino, as well as the *studium* of the convent (Santa Maria Novella, since the early Trecento, was see of a *studium generale*). Caroli was a complex personality, certainly one of the leading intellectuals on the spiritual side in the second half of the fifteenth century with a clear agenda in terms of linking the convent to the city, humanist with religious studies. The friar is not unknown to scholarship, partly because he documents the most important events in the second half of the fifteenth century: His history of Florence (*Libri de temporibus suis*) was one of the most important sources for Machiavelli, but, like almost all of his works, remains unpublished to this day. Fundamental to Caroli remain the studies of the religious scholar Salvatore Camporeale from the 1980s and the more recent contributions by Amos Edelheit, who has provided a first edition of Caroli’s *Liber dierum lucensium*, about whom I also have written elsewhere.

Shortly after Antonino’s death in 1459, during his first priorate of Santa Maria Novella, Caroli had to struggle with no less than with the pope, Pius II, and his attempts of passing the regular convent of Santa Maria Novella into the Observant Lombard Congregation. These kinds of actions often, and surely in this case, are more political than just concerning the observance of religious rules and the morality of individuals. Indeed, not only did Caroli have on his side the local Florentine authorities, who for no reason wanted to see a city convent of such magnitude as Santa Maria Novella, under Lombard jurisdiction. But Caroli himself, as mentioned a direct follower of the Dominicans’

celebrated observant Saint Antonino, was committed to a precise model of reform, while remaining outside the northern observant congregation, that means independent from ‘foreign’ administration. Be that as it may, the open fight with the master general of the Dominicans and with Pius II ended in Caroli being sent into exile to Lucca. There he wrote one of his better-known works, the just mentioned *Books of his Days in Lucca*. In the *Liber dierum*, the reader ascertains a conscious use of a purely secular vocabulary and locutions of a ‘Roman mold’. In the last of these *Books of his Days in Lucca*, Caroli recounts a dream concerning the destruction of church and convent. As in the last book of Cicero’s *De re publica*, the famous *Somnium scipionis*, authoritative figures appear to the friar to comment on the situation and, above all, to illustrate how it will be possible to “restituere” the “patria”. Re-establishing the “domus” – and thus reuniting the dispersed Florentine Dominican community in particular and the order of Preachers in general – will only be successful if the “romana res” will be taken as an example and, at the same time, if there will be a commitment to the study of the “litterae”, with particular attention to the “humanitatis studia”. These few lines demonstrate the profound acceptance and reaction on the side of the friar to Humanism. One can maybe even go so far in saying that Caroli is using the Ciceronian model in a distinctly ‘civic humanist’ way.

During my presentation I will instead focus on Caroli’s major literary work, the *Vitae nonnullorum fratrum beatae Mariae Novellae*, written in the 1470s and 1480s, and which put on display the reciprocity, porosity and intertwining of the religious and the civic sphere. Here we find the evident attempt of being integral part of the humanist movement already in the dedication of the text to Cristoforo Landino, lecturer of rhetoric and poetry at the Studio fiorentino since 1458. The *Vitae* (preserved in one integral copy in the convent archive, and another incomplete version at the Biblioteca Laurenziana) contain seven biographies of friars from Santa Maria Novella from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. The structure and the selection of the commemorated persons indicate that Caroli followed a clear concept for his historiographical writing. Of major interest to me is his way of argumentation through massive architectural metaphors and continuous references to

visual and material evidence, paintings and all kinds of artworks with a precise intention to convey his historical reflections with the semantics of a certain aesthetics – and political agenda.

As mentioned in the beginning of this pre-paper, during my presentation I will focus on one of the *Lives* written by Caroli, that of the Blessed Alessio Strozzi. And I will link Caroli's decision to dedicate one of the seven biographies to this particular friar from the fourteenth century to his actions in exactly those years aimed at a campaign to modernize the church interior, precisely the transept, where Caroli was directly involved in the decoration of the Strozzi chapel commissioned by Filippo Strozzi the Elder.

The Two Strozzi Chapels in Santa Maria Novella

As background and underlay to the analysis of the function of the *Life of Alessio Strozzi* within the *Vitae* of Giovanni Caroli, I will (besides the Strozzi chapel commissioned by Filippo in the late Quattrocento) relate also to the former Strozzi chapel of the precedent century. Both chapels by two branches of the illustrious bankers of the Strozzi family are located in the transept of Santa Maria Novella, that is behind the *tramezzo* and the choir.

The first Strozzi chapel, later renamed Strozzi di Mantova, and dedicated to no one less than Thomas Aquinas, is located at the left end of the transept on an elevated level [fig. 8]. It was built in the first half of the fourteenth century over and connected by a stairway to the cemetery of the Chiostrino dei Morti as a burial chapel for the Strozzi family, as stated in the inscription: “the tomb of the sons of Rosso de Strozzi, his descendants, and their wives” (SEPULCRA FILIORUM ROSSI DE STROZZI EORUMQUE DESCEDENTIUM ET UXORUM).

The chapel is still striking for the presence of the wall paintings and preservation of the altarpiece *in situ*, as well as the original floor and stained-glass window. It is therefore a rare record of a family commission preserved almost in its entirety (missing, of course, are furnishings and other precious objects; and the murals – detached in the mid twentieth century – manifest decay and loss of chromatic vividness). Responsible for the decoration, executed in the 1350s, was the workshop of

the Cione brothers, one of the largest and most distinguished at the time. Nardo di Cione carried out the mural paintings with the *Last Judgment* on the altar wall, *Paradise* [fig. 9] on the left and *Hell* [fig. 10] – one of the most precise visual interpretations of Dante’s *Inferno* – on the right wall. (There is a friction in the presence of the *Inferno* here, as it was precisely in the convent of Santa Maria Novella that the provincial chapter ordered in the 1330s to not read the vernacular texts of Dante Alighieri.)

Andrea di Cione, called Orcagna, painted the altarpiece in 1357 [fig. 11] with the unusual representation of Christ in the *mandorla* handing over the book to Saint Thomas Aquinas and the keys to Saint Peter, accompanied by other saints. Donor of the altarpiece was (tellingly) ‘Tomaso’ Strozzi, one of the richest citizens of Florence. Fatherless at a young age, Tomaso was able to enlarge the family business disproportionately with major commitments in London, and to support his mother and five siblings. In collaboration with his relative, the Dominican Fra’ Pietro Strozzi, he ensured that his father’s will, which wanted to return large sums of money earned through usury for the salvation of their souls, was made possible. The complex iconographical program of the chapel was supposedly ideated by that same important theologian Pietro Strozzi, who died in 1363 and was buried in the Strozzi chapel.

It is just at this point in time that Alessio Strozzi (1351–1384) – of whom we will hear more in the presentation – entered the convent of Santa Maria Novella in young age. Alessio later on commissioned the pavement and other smaller things. His mother Diana Giambullari paid for the festivities in honor of Thomas Aquinas, and both were buried in the chapel in front of the altar, that is in a highly prestigious position. The dedication to the most important saint of the order (under certain points of view even more important than the founder himself) gives even more value and prestige to their burial site, as important masses of the friars and special veneration by the order took place in this family chapel. Even though the direct involvement in construction and decoration of the chapel of Alessio’s and Diana’s burial site appears to be very limited, later sources eventually emphasize their role and effort in the commission.

Alessio Strozzi was born as only son of Jacopo di Strozza di Rosso Strozzi and Diana di Domenico Giambullari. While still an infant he remained his father's orphan. Alessio entered the convent of Santa Maria Novella at the age of fourteen against the will of his mother and of his other relatives. The Florentine state archive preserves the parchment scrolls documenting the process concerning the request of the Strozzi family to pope Urban V in Avignon and to the local city government, to remove Alessio from the convent, denouncing the friars of Santa Maria Novella for having seduced him to the life of a friar with the sole aim of obtaining his large fortune. As the documents tell, Alessio stood still and continued in his perseverance to become a Dominican at Santa Maria Novella. The family, in the end, accepted his decision, and the immense sum of properties owned by Alessio were administered by the Dominicans and by Diana to feed the poor and to embellish the convent.

In my paper I will analyze Caroli's motifs to include the *Life of Alessio* into his *Vitae*, and why he insisted on certain points rather than others, giving the reader a dramatic but concise account of the story driven by the intention to sanctify the lay donations for the construction and embellishments of church and convent. It is precisely the exaltation of the fourteenth-century patronage of the Strozzi family that is to be compared with the second chapel, the decoration of which I understand to be in very close relation to the work of Caroli.

The second Strozzi chapel in Santa Maria Novella [fig. 12] is located to the right of the main chapel, patronized by the Tornabuoni family and decorated with Ghirlandaio's fresco cycle. Filippo Strozzi (1428–1489) acquired the rights on his chapel in 1486 and commissioned its decoration to the painter Filippino Lippi and the sculptor Benedetto da Maiano. The decoration campaign spans over 15 years, from 1487 to 1502, years in which the political and social situation in Florence underwent dramatic change: from the death of Lorenzo de' Medici in 1492, to the exile of his son in 1494 and the power grab of Savonarola, to the burning of the same on the Signoria square in 1498 and the city government under Soderini.

When Filippo succeeded to acquire the patronage of a chapel in such an eminent position in 1486 – the transactions of which were overseen by Giovanni Caroli! –, the Strozzi was at the height of his career. Born as son of Matteo di Simone Strozzi and Alessandra Macinghi, Filippo was sent into exile with his family as a six-year-old boy following the Medici's political takeover in 1434. Just one year later, his father, Matteo, died of the plague. Filippo, in his youth, experienced financial disruption and lack of proper education (he never learned Latin) and he was forced to live outside his homeland – in Sicily, Spain and Naples – for most part of his life. From that decades a rich letter correspondence between Filippo and his mother has survived: she played a leading role throughout Filippo's life and would guarantee a lasting connection with Florence. Be that as it may, being a Strozzi, Filippo could count on a Europe-wide network of banking contacts, and in the end, it was Filippo's managerial qualities and his ties to the Neapolitan royal family and King Ferrante d'Aragona that enabled him to return to his *patria*. With the armistice of September 1466 Filippo was finally able to return legally to Florence, with full rights, which included also the ability to hold public office. Once back in the city at the Arno River, Strozzi's enormous success in the banking business led to his rapid rise to become the second richest man in Florence, just behind the Medici. The most significant example of this is the building of the Palazzo designed by Giuliano da Sangallo, whose dimensions and monumentality still characterize the Florentine cityscape today. This construction is, in prestige, immediately followed by his burial chapel in Santa Maria Novella.

In the chapel Lippi painted four patriarchs on the spandrels of the vault, two scenes from the life of St. Philip on the right wall [fig. 13], two scenes from the life of St. John the Evangelist on the left wall and, finally, the grandiose and highly complex altar wall with a triumphal arch and allegorical figures in nearly monochrome tones [fig. 14]. Benedetto da Maiano is responsible for the Madonna and Child relief in white marble that functions as altar piece surrounded by panels in porphyry, as well as for the impressive sarcophagus in basalt (or *pietra di paragone*) right under the relief at the center of the altar wall.

The chapel has been extensively researched. Rarely do we have the opportunity to have such a broad and diverse range of sources at our disposal, which vividly demonstrates the complexity, never-ending fascination and adaptation possibilities for new research interests in this type of Renaissance art. For example, the more recent contributions concerning the representation of the Mamluks and Ethiopians within the frescoes. Specifically, the debated dating of these scenes could be narrowed down by the depicted headdresses and the presence of North African delegations in Florence in 1498 [fig. 15].

It was said that in this Strozzi chapel for the first time the functions of a burial place of a lay person are given priority over Christian devotion. The conjunction of the private tomb in that specific position (and created with the use of highly eloquent materials alluding to imperial power and holiness) in relation to the altar of an unsanctified, lay individual are said to be without precedent in fifteenth century chapels. This “megalomania that characterizes this extraordinary decorative project is typical of Filippo Strozzi’s patronage”. In my presentation I intend to look at this chapel from a hitherto neglected angle, that is from the perspective of the Dominicans of Santa Maria Novella. In doing so, I intend to highlight the convergences between Caroli’s ideas about patronage expressed in the *Vitae* and Filippo’s expenses in Santa Maria Novella, as well as point out the frictions and ambiguities between the two positions.

The second part of my talk, which will present my project on the convent library will eventually come back to Caroli’s *Vitae* with the aim also to highlight the encompassing effort in self-representation and the creation of a certain mindset through the possession and location of books in the reading hall.

Looking forward to your critique and comments.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

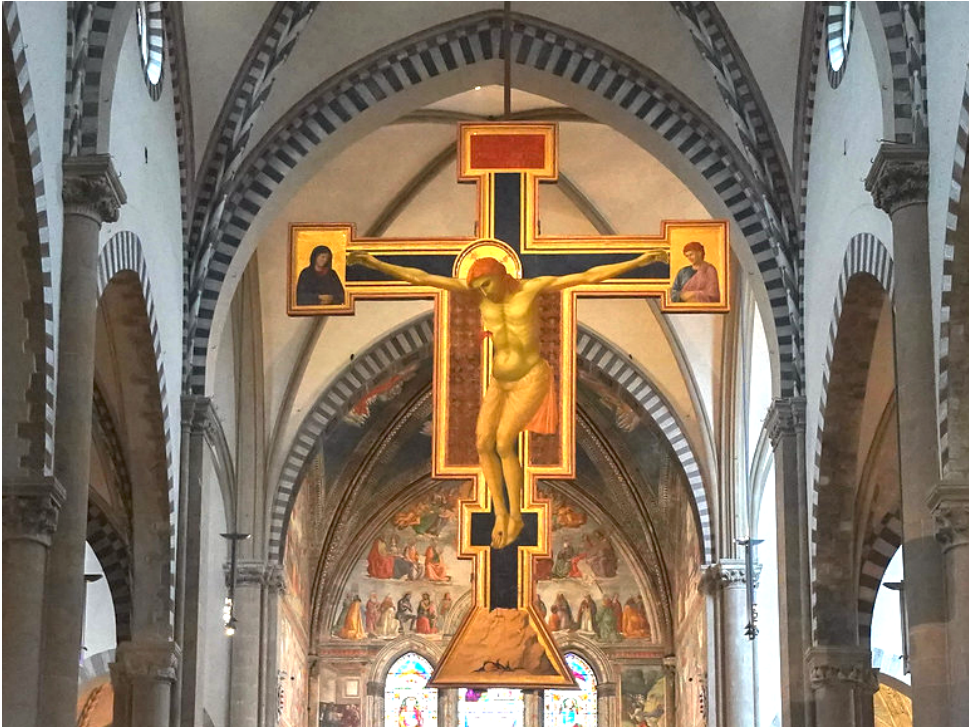


Fig. 3

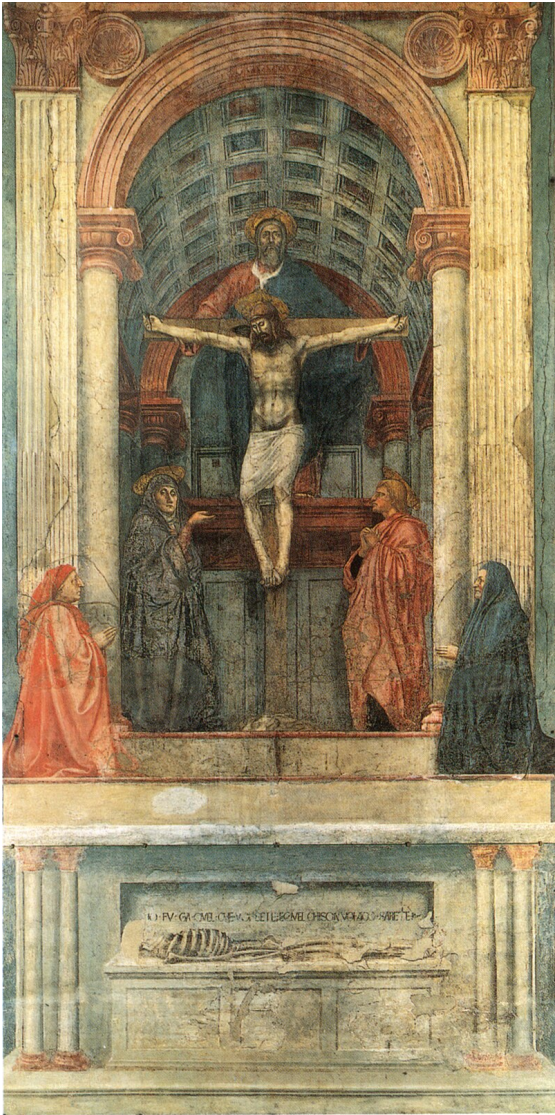


Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

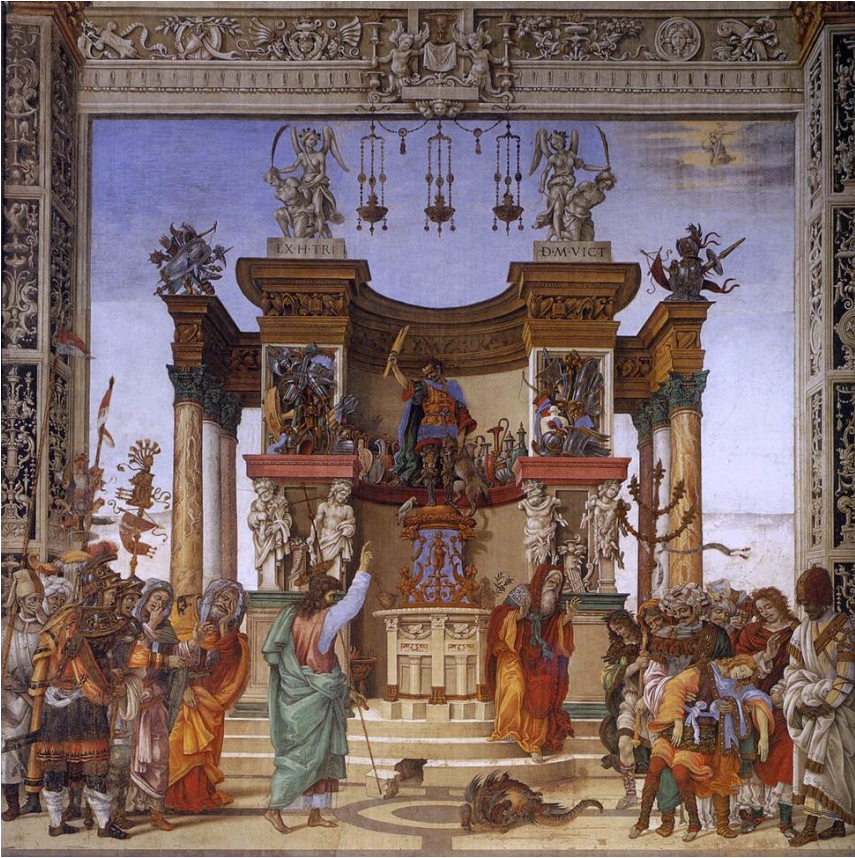


Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15