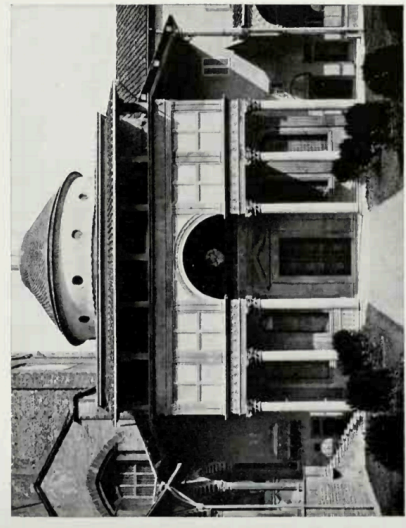


CHAPTER 12 · THE CONQUEST OF REALITY  
The Early Fifteenth Century



147. An Early Renaissance Church: the Carpella Pazzi, Florence.  
Designed by BRUNELLESCHI about 1430

**T**HE word Renaissance means rebirth or revival, and the idea of such a rebirth had gained ground in Italy ever since the time of Giotto. When people of the period wanted to praise a poet or an artist, they said that his work was as good as that of the ancients. Giotto had been exalted in this way as a master who had led to a true revival of art; by this, people meant that his art was as good as that of the famous masters whose work they found praised in the classical Greek and Roman writers. It is not surprising that this idea became popular in Italy. The Italians were very much aware of the fact that in the distant past, Italy, with Rome her capital, had been the centre of the civilized world, and that her power and glory had waned since the Germanic tribes, Goths and Vandals, had invaded the country and broken up the Roman Empire. The idea of a revival was closely connected in the minds of the Italians with the idea of a rebirth of the grandeur that was Rome. The period between the classical ages, to which they looked back with pride, and the new era of rebirth for which they hoped, was merely a

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sad interlude, 'The Time Between'. Thus the idea of a rebirth or renaissance was responsible for the idea that the intervening period was a Middle Age—and we still use this terminology. As the Italians blamed the Goths for the downfall of the Roman Empire, they began to speak of the art of this intervening period as Gothic, by which they meant barbaric—much as we still speak of vandalism when we refer to the useless destruction of beautiful things.

We now know that these ideas of the Italians had little basis in fact. They were, at best, a crude and much simplified picture of the actual course of events. We have seen that some seven hundred years separated the Goths from the rise of the art that we now call Gothic. We also know that the revival of art, after the shock and turmoil of the Dark Ages, came gradually and that the Gothic period itself saw this revival getting into its full stride. Possibly we can understand the reason why the Italians were less aware of this gradual growth and unfolding of art than the people living farther north. We have seen that they lagged behind during part of the Middle Ages, so that the new achievements of Giotto came to them as a tremendous innovation, a rebirth of all that was noble and great in art. The Italians of the fourteenth century believed that art, science and scholarship had flourished in the classical period, that all these things had been almost destroyed by the northern barbarians and that it was for them to help to revive the glorious past and thus bring about a new era.

In no city was this feeling of confidence and hope more intense than in the wealthy merchant city of Florence. It was there, in the first decades of the fifteenth century, that a group of artists deliberately set out to create a new art and to break with the ideas of the past.

The leader of this group of young Florentine artists was an architect, Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446). Brunelleschi was employed on the completion of the Cathedral of Florence. It was a Gothic cathedral, and Brunelleschi had fully mastered the technical inventions which formed part of the Gothic tradition. His fame, in fact, rests partly on an achievement in construction and design which would not have been possible without his knowledge of the Gothic methods of vaulting. The Florentines wished to have their cathedral crowned by a mighty cupola, but no artist was able to span the immense space between the pillars on which the cupola was to rest, till Brunelleschi devised a method of accomplishing this. When Brunelleschi was called upon to design new churches or other buildings, he decided to discard the traditional style altogether, and to adopt the programme of those who longed for a revival of Roman grandeur. It is said that he travelled to Rome and measured the ruins of temples and palaces, and made sketches of their forms and ornaments. It was never his intention to copy these ancient buildings outright. They could hardly have been adapted to the needs of fifteenth-century Florence. What he aimed at was the creation of a new way of building, in which the

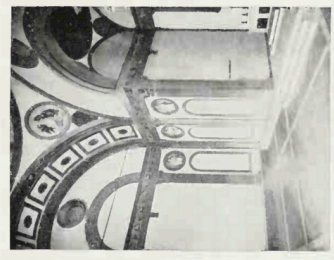
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forms of classical architecture were freely used to create new modes of harmony and beauty.

What remains most astonishing in Brunelleschi's achievement is the fact that he actually succeeded in making his programme come true. For nearly five hundred years the architects of Europe and America have followed in his footsteps. Wherever we go in our cities and villages we find buildings in which classical forms, such as columns or pediments are used. It was only a generation ago that some architects began to question Brunelleschi's programme and to revolt against the Renaissance tradition in building, just as he had revolted against the Gothic tradition. But most of the houses which are being built now, even those which have no columns or similar trimmings, still preserve remnants of classical form in the shape of mouldings on doors and window-frames, or in the measurements and proportions of the building. If Brunelleschi wanted to create the architecture of a new era, he certainly succeeded.



148. Interior of the Cappella Pazzi. Designed by BRUNELLESCHI about 1439

Fig. 147 shows the facade of a little church which Brunelleschi built for the powerful family of the Pazzi in Florence. We see at once that it has little in common with any classical temple, but even less with the forms used by Gothic builders. Brunelleschi has combined columns, pilasters and arches in his own way to achieve an effect of lightness and grace which is different from anything that has gone before. Details such as the framing of the door, with its classical gable or pediment, show how carefully Brunelleschi had studied the ancient ruins. We see this even more clearly as we enter the church (Fig. 148). Nothing in this bright and well-proportioned interior has any of the features which Gothic architects valued so highly. There are no high windows, no slim pillars. Instead, the blank white wall is subdivided by grey pilasters (that half-columns) which convey the idea of a classical order, although they serve no real function in the construction of the building. Brunelleschi only put them there to emphasize the shape and proportion of the interior.

Brunelleschi was not only the initiator of Renaissance architecture. To him, it seems, is due another momentous discovery in the field of art, which also dominated the art of subsequent centuries—that of perspective. We have seen that even the Greeks, who understood foreshortenings, and the Hellenistic painters who were

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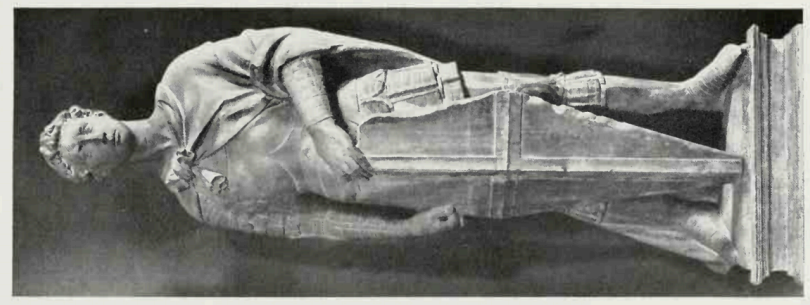
skilled in creating the illusion of depth (p. 77, Fig. 79), did not know the mathematical laws by which objects diminish in size as they recede into the background. We remember that no classical artist could have drawn the famous avenue of trees leading back into the picture until it vanishes on the horizon. It was Brunelleschi who gave the artists the mathematical means of solving this problem; and the excitement which this caused among his painter-friends must have been immense. Fig. 149 shows one of the first paintings which were made according to these mathematic rules. It is a wall-painting in a Florentine church, and represents the Holy Trinity with the Virgin and St. John under the cross, and the donors—an elderly merchant and his wife—kneeling outside. The artist who painted this was called Masaccio (1401-28), which means 'clumsy Thomas'. He must have been an extraordinary genius, for we know that he died when hardly twenty-eight years of age, and that by that time he had already brought about a complete revolution in painting. This revolution did not consist only in the technical trick of perspective painting, though that in itself must have been startling enough when it was new. We can imagine how amazed the Florentines must have been when this wall-painting was unveiled and seemed to have made a hole in the wall through which they could look into a new chapel in Brunelleschi's modern style. But perhaps they were even more amazed at the simplicity and grandeur of the figures which were framed by this new architecture. If the Florentines had expected something in the vein of the International Style which was as fashionable in Florence as elsewhere in Europe, they must have been disappointed. Instead of delicate grace, they saw massive heavy figures; instead of easy-flowing curves, solid angular forms; and instead of dainty details such as flowers and precious stones, there was nothing but austere majestic architecture. But if Masaccio's art was less pleasing to the eye than the paintings they had been accustomed to, it was all the more sincere and moving. We can see that Masaccio admired the dramatic grandeur of Giotto, though he did not imitate him. The simple gesture with which the Holy Virgin points to her crucified son is so eloquent and impressive because it is the only movement in the whole solemn painting. Its figures, in fact, look like statues. It is this effect, more than anything else, that Masaccio has heightened by the perspective frame in which he placed his figures. We feel we can almost touch them, and this feeling brings them and their message nearer to us. To the great masters of the Renaissance, the new devices and discoveries of art were never an end in themselves. They always used them to bring the meaning of their subject still nearer to our minds.

The greatest sculptor of Brunelleschi's circle was the Florentine master Donatello (1386?-1466). He was older than Masaccio by many years, but he lived much longer. Fig. 150 shows a work of his youth. It was commissioned by the guild of the armourers whose patron saint, St. George, it represents, and was destined for a niche on the outside of a Florentine church (Or San Michele). If we think back to

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150. DONATELLO: St. George. Marble statue from the Church of Or San Michele, Florence. About 1416. Florence, Bargello.

the Gothic statues outside the great cathedrals (p. 136, Fig. 127), we realize how completely Donatello broke with the past. These Gothic statues hovered at the side of the porches in calm and solemn rows looking like beings from a different world—Donatello's St. George stands firmly on the ground, his feet planted resolutely on the earth as if he were determined not to yield an inch. His face has none of the vague and serene beauty of medieval saints—it is all energy and concentration. He seems to watch the approach of the enemy and to take its measure, his hands resting on his shield, his whole attitude tense with defiant determination. The statue has remained famous as an unrivalled picture of youthful dash and courage. But it is not only Donatello's imagination which we must admire, his faculty of visualizing the knightly saint in such a fresh and convincing manner; his whole approach to the art of sculpture shows a completely new conception. Despite the impression of life and movement which the statue conveys it remains clear in outline and solid as a rock. Like Masaccio's paintings, it shows us that Donatello wanted to replace the gentle refinement of his predecessors by a new and vigorous observation of nature. Such details as the hands or the brows of the saint show a complete independence from the traditional models. They prove a new and independent

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151. DONATELLO: Herod's Feast. Gift-bronze relief from a font in S. Giovanni, Siena. Completed in 1427

study of the real features of the human body. For these Florentine masters of the beginning of the fifteenth century were no longer content to repeat the old formulae handed down by medieval artists. Like the Greeks and Romans, whom they admired, they began to study the human body in their studios and workshops by asking models or fellow-artists to pose for them in the required attitudes. It is this new method and this new interest which makes Donatello's work look so fresh and so real.

Donatello acquired great fame in his lifetime. Like Giotto, a century earlier, he was frequently called to other Italian cities to add to their beauty and glory. Fig. 151 shows a bronze relief he made for the font of Siena ten years after the St. George, in 1427. Like the medieval font of p. 127, Fig. 119, it illustrates a scene from the life of St. John the Baptist. It shows the gruesome moment when the princess Salome had asked King Herod for the head of St. John as a reward for her dancing, and got it. We look into the royal banqueting hall, and beyond it to the

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musicians' gallery and a flight of rooms and stairs behind. The executioner has just entered and knelt down before the king carrying the head of the saint on a charger. The king shrinks back and raises his hands in horror, children cry and run away, Salome's mother, who instigated the crime, is seen talking to the king, trying to explain the deed. There is a great void around her as the guests recoil. One of them covers his eyes with his hand, others crowd round Salome who seems just to have stopped in her dance. One need not explain at length what features were new in such a work of Donatello's. They all were. To people accustomed to the clear and graceful narratives of Gothic art, Donatello's way of telling a story must have come as a shock. Here there was no need to form a neat and pleasing pattern, but rather to produce the effect of sudden chaos. Like Masaccio's figures, Donatello's are harsh and angular in their movements. Their gestures are violent, and there is no attempt to mitigate the horror of the story. To his contemporaries, the scene must have looked almost uncannily alive.

*The new art of perspective further increases the illusion of reality.* Donatello must have begun by asking himself: 'What must it have been like when the head of the saint was brought into the hall? He did his best to represent a Roman palace, such as the one in which the event might have taken place, and he chose Roman types for the figures in the background. We can see clearly, in fact, that at that time Donatello, like his friend Brunelleschi, had begun a systematic study of Roman remains to help him bring about the rebirth of art. It is quite wrong, however, to imagine that this study of Greek and Roman art caused the rebirth of 'Renaissance'. The position was rather the other way round. The artists round Brunelleschi longed so passionately for a revival of art that they turned to nature, to science and to the remains of antiquity to realize their new aims.

The mastery of science and of the knowledge of classical art remained for some time the exclusive possession of the Italian artists of the Renaissance. But the passionate will to create a new art, which should be more faithful to nature than anything that had ever been seen before, also inspired the artists of the same generation in the north.

Just as Donatello's generation in Florence became tired of the subtleties and refinements of the International Gothic style and longed to create more vigorous, austere figures, so a sculptor beyond the Alps strove for an art more lifelike and more forthright than the delicate works of his predecessors. This sculptor was Claus Sluter who worked from about 1380-1400 at Dijon, at that time the capital of the rich and prosperous Duchy of Burgundy. His most famous work is a group of prophets which once formed the base of a large crucifix marking the fountain of a famous place of pilgrimage (Fig. 152). They are the men whose words were interpreted as the prediction of the Passion. Each of them holds in his hand a large book or scroll on which these words were inscribed and seems to be meditating on this

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155. CLAUSS LUTER: *The Prophets David and Isaiah*. From the Moses Fountain near Dijon, erected between 1393 and 1492.

coming tragedy. These are no longer the solemn and rigid figures that flanked the porches of Gothic cathedrals (p. 136, Fig. 127). They differ from these earlier works just as much as does Donatello's St. George. The man with the turban is Daniel, the bearded old prophet, Isaiah. As they stand before us, larger than life,

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