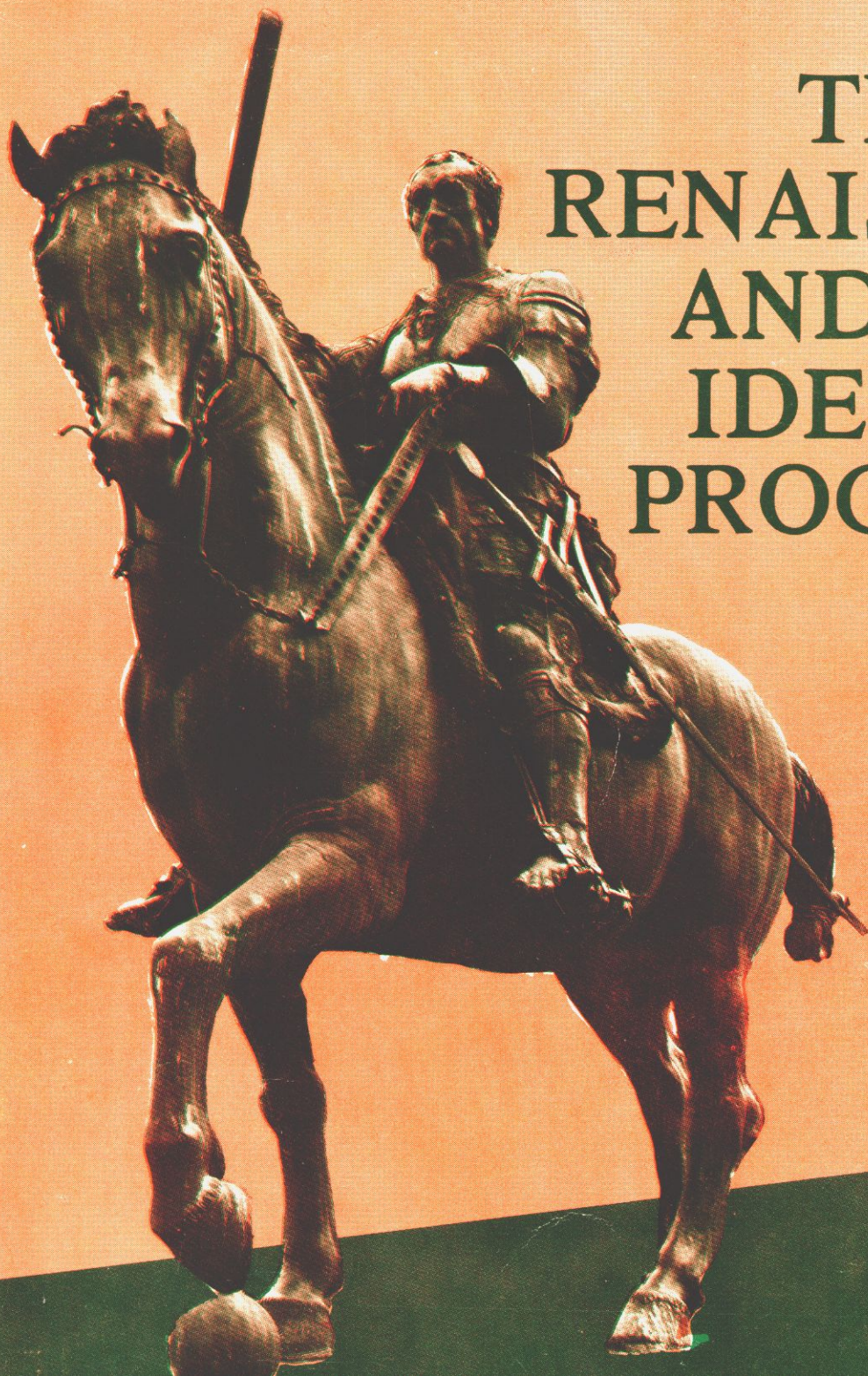


# the Campaigner

Vol. 10 Nos. 1-2 Journal of the National Caucus of Labor Committees

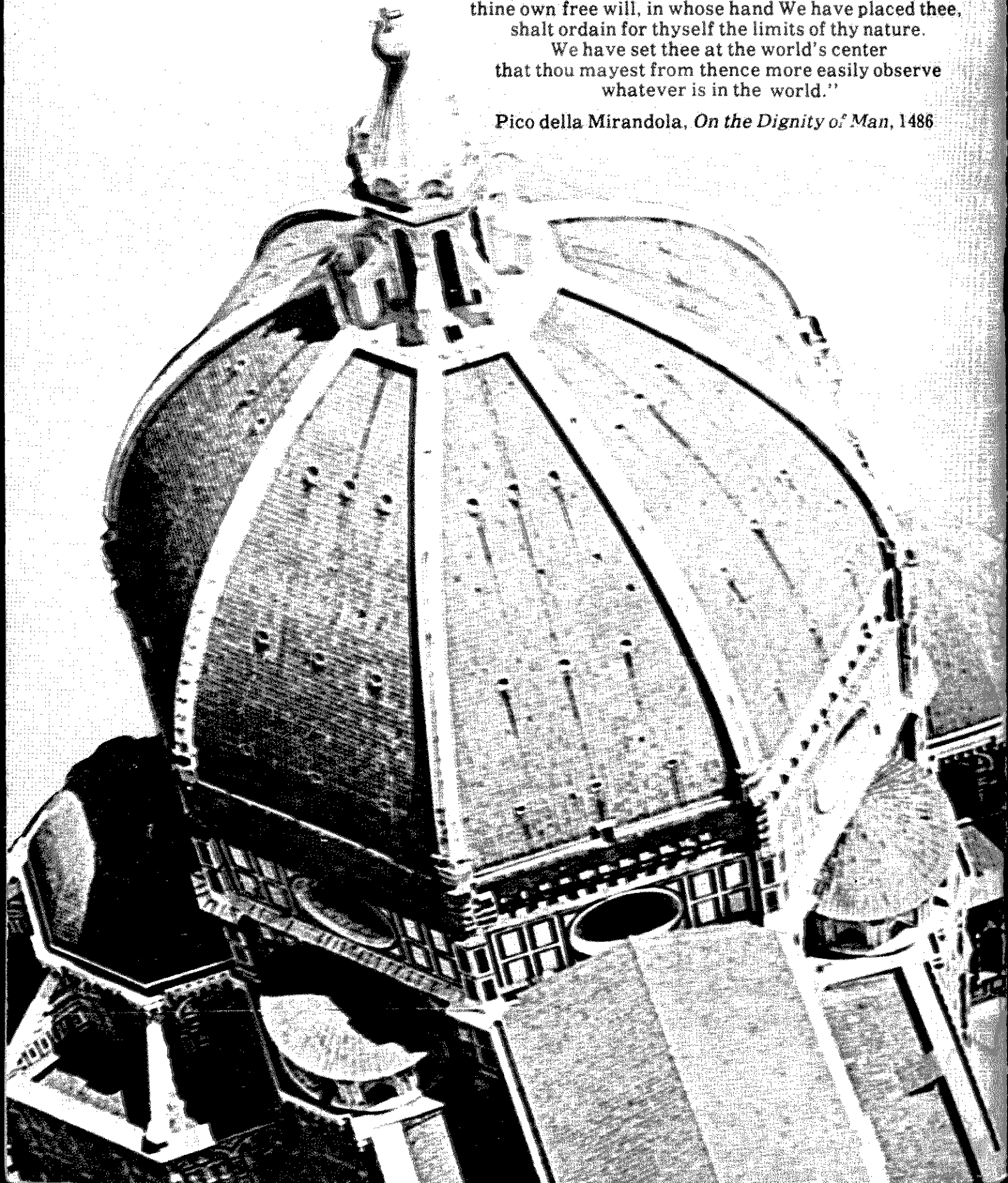
January-February 1977 \$2

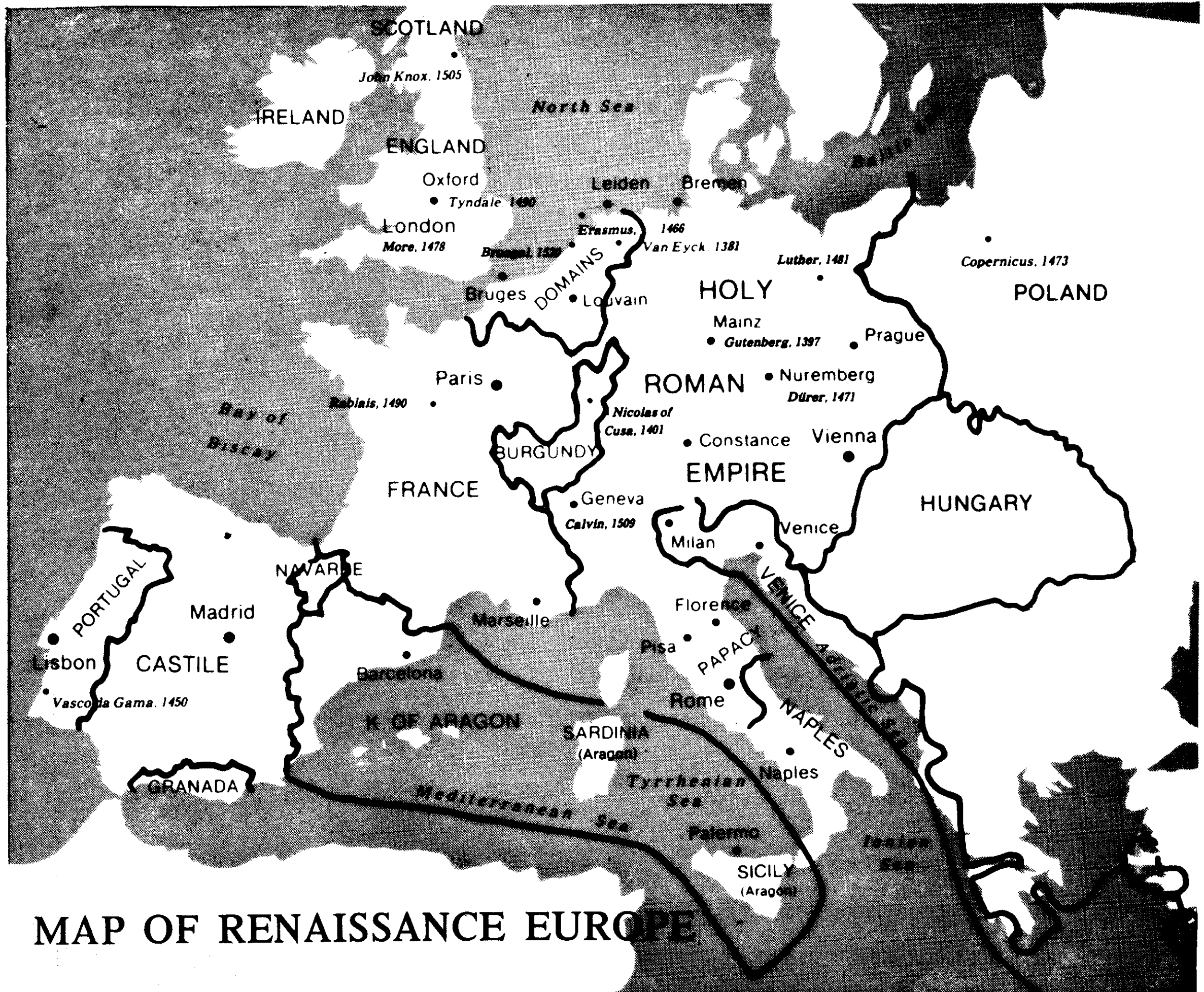
## THE RENAISSANCE AND THE IDEA OF PROGRESS



'Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with  
thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee,  
shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.  
We have set thee at the world's center  
that thou mayest from thence more easily observe  
whatever is in the world.'

Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 1486





MAP OF RENAISSANCE EUROPE

## Directory

### U.S. Labor Party

#### National Caucus of Labor Committees

**ALBANY** NY (518)463-2909

**BALTIMORE** MD 824 Calvert St. 21218 (301)752-7374

**BETHLEHEM-ALLENTOWN** PA Box 1332 Moravia Sta.  
18018 (215)865-2404

**BOSTON** MASS 120 Boylston St. Rm. 230 02104 (617)426-7598  
Box 1543 South St. Station

**BUFFALO** NY Rm. 926 Ellicott Sq. Bldg. 295 Main St.  
14203 (716) 847-2100

**CAMDEN** NJ 540B Pleiffer (609) 665-3083

**CHARLOTTE** NC Box 1606 28201 (704)332-4834

**CHICAGO** ILL 53 West Jackson, Rm. 252; Box 3620  
Merchandise Mart 60654 (312)663-3692 939-9518

**CINCINNATI** OHIO (513)871-1759

**CLEVELAND-AKRON** OHIO 745 Carnegie St. Cleveland  
44115 (216)781-2381 696-9746

**DETROIT** MICH 1301 W. Lafayette Blvd. 48226 (313)964-2550

**DENVER** COLO Box 11402 Highland Sta. (303)744-8526

**ELIZABETH** NJ (201)351-0197

**FLINT** MICH (313) 239-0078

**GARY** IND (219) 398-2691

**GRAND RAPIDS** MICH (616)458-9874

**GREENSBORO** NC 902 W. Market St. 27401 (919) 275-2452

**HARTFORD** CONN P.O. Box 6335 Station A 06106  
(203)522-9077

**INDIANAPOLIS** IND (317) 631-0866

**LANCASTER** PA (717)392-4261

**LORAIN** OHIO (216)288-9411

**MILWAUKEE** WIS Box 10195 53210 (414)447-1763

**MUNCIE** IND (317)284-2495

**NEWARK** NJ 380 Main St. E. Orange (201)673-9537

**NEW YORK** NY Box 1972 GPO 10001. National Office  
(212)563-8600. Regional Office 231 W. 29th St. 10001  
(212)563-8648 695-9806

**OXFORD** OHIO (Miami U.) (513)523-8319

**PERTH AMBOY** NJ (201)826-1620

**PHILADELPHIA** PA Box 8201 30th St. Sta. (215)387-6800

**PITTSBURGH** PA 414 N. Highland Ave. (E. Liberty) 15206  
(412)441-1989

**PONTIAC** MICH (313) 332-4651

**PORTLAND** ORE P.O. Box 14403 (503) 238-0162

**QUAD CITIES** IOWA P.O. Box 3881 Davenport 52802 (319)  
323-1608

**READING** PA Box 33 19603

**RICHMOND** VA P.O. Box 25803 23260 (804) 353-7189

**ROBESON COUNTY** NC (919) 422-8326

**ROCHESTER** NY 156 Denver St. 14609 (716) 288-3158

**SAN FRANCISCO-BAY AREA** CAL Box 4498 94101 (415)  
776-0414

**SEATTLE** WASH 71 Columbia St. 2nd flr. (206) 622-7922  
622-7923

**SPRINGFIELD** MASS Box 445 Forest Park St. 01108 (413)  
739-9121

**ST. LOUIS** MO Box 3011 63130 (314) 725-6073

**SYRACUSE** NY 1427 South State St. 13205 (315) 476-9459

**TACOMA** WASH (206) 572-2473

**TOLEDO** OHIO 2936 LaGrange St. 46304 (419) 244-2437

**TRENTON** NJ (609) 393-6523

**WASHINGTON** DC 617 K Street NW 20001 (202) 347-5359

**WATERTOWN** NY (315) 232-4168

**WILMINGTON** DEL P.O. Box 313 Claymont 19703 (302)  
792-2470

**YORK** PA (717) 233-8626

**YOUNGSTOWN** OHIO P.O. Box 2152 44504 (216) 747-8940

### North American Labor Party

**MONTREAL** Box 96, P.O., Montréal, P.Q.(514)842-1960

**OAKVILLE** Ontario (416)842-2340

**TORONTO** Box 911, Sta. A, Toronto, Ontario (416)362-3859

**VANCOUVER** (604)299-1196

# Campaigner

Vol. 10 Nos. 1-2

Journal of the National Caucus of Labor Committees

January-February 1977

- 2 Editorial: The Renaissance and the Idea of Progress  
by Christopher White
- 13 Art and Neo-Platonism in the Renaissance  
by Stephen Pepper
- 54 The Irony of Perspective: Renaissance Art as Political Cartoon  
by Nora Street Hamerman

**The Campaigner** is published by Campaigner Publications, Inc. and is the English language journal of the National Caucus of Labor Committees. Current policies of the Labor Committees are stated in Editorials; views expressed in signed articles are not necessarily those of either the Labor Committees or editorial board.

**Editor-in-Chief:** Nancy Spannaus

**Managing Editor:** Kathy Stevens

**Production Editors:** Ginny Pasiencier and Laurie Teitelbaum

**Cover:** Ginny Pasiencier

**Subscription Rates:** 1 year (11 issues) U.S.A. \$10.00; Europe (airmail) \$18.00. Back issues at single copy price published for each issue (as available).

231 West 29 Street, New York, N.Y. 10001

Copy right © 1976 by Campaigner Publications, Inc.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



# The Renaissance and the Idea of Progress

*by Christopher White*

It is instructive to imagine the gusts of hearty laughter with which the Titans of 15th century Florence would have greeted each new effort to analyze the society and culture they created and shaped. Their laughter, however, would have become tempered with different qualities of emotion as effort has succeeded effort since the days of Burckhardt, Ruskin and Symonds in the mid-19th century. From their vantage point of the centuries, the ghosts of Brunelleschi, Alberti and Ficino would ask themselves just what it was they accomplished which could have such power to evoke the most profound wonder and fear in the hearts of mere mortals. They themselves would be the first to admit that the answer is not to be found where it is most often sought.

It is the Titans of Renaissance Florence who first assert for humanity as a whole the reality of the Idea of Progress. It is they who demonstrated the power of the human mind to solve the problems of human existence through sustained socially realized innovations. It is they who, through the philosopher Marsilio Ficino, first asserted that the quality of perfection previously ascribed to God alone is, in reality, within the reach of human creative efforts — a quality whose self-development is the primary substance of human life itself.

Such notions are the content of Renaissance development and its highest achievement. That brief but concentrated efflorescence of human creative activity centered on 15th century Florence — permeating through Europe under the guise of the "*devotio moderna*" educational movement of Erasmus among other such vehicles, influencing indirectly the Tudor monarchs of England and Luther's Reformation in the 16th century — provides conclusive empirical proof that it is the power of ideas, as mediated through individual human beings and their institutions which creates and shapes human history.

The Titans of 15th century Florence would, of course, look with a keen sense of pride and achievement at the works of art, sculpture, architecture and letters which they bequeathed to the human race. Yet they would be the first to assert that, notwithstanding the lofty heights of emotion which such efforts inspire, no one will find their principal accomplishment therein.

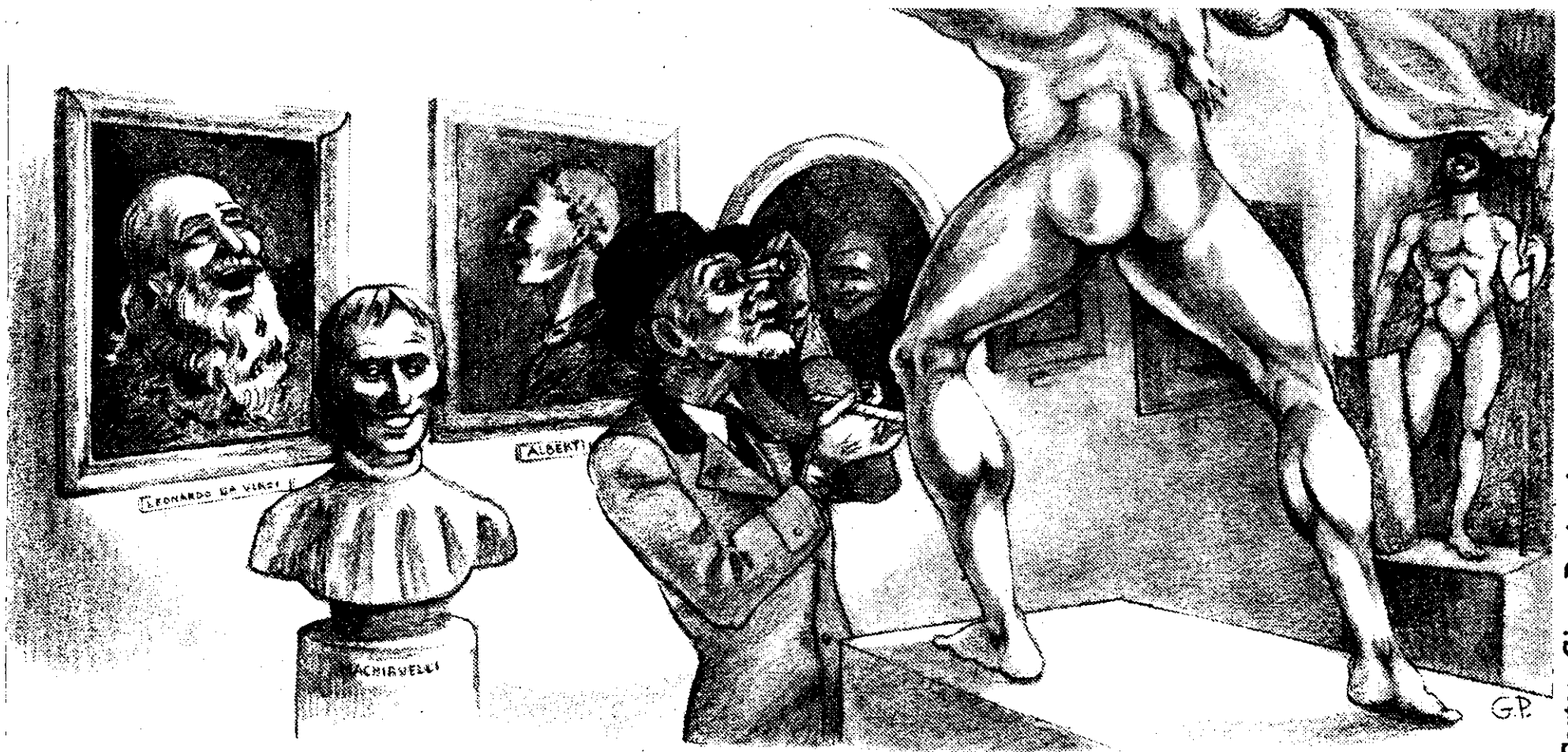
They would hold nothing but contempt for the followers of the effete and affected schools of fine arts and art criticism which have flourished under the supervision of first parasitical aristocrats and then degenerate financiers since such institutions sprouted forth at the end of the 18th century. They would politely instruct Bernard Berenson and his kind to go and do a useful day's work. Such unfortunates would be told, "understand the content of our political accomplishments and then you will understand our art. Without that, you will have understood nothing."

Matters such as these are of more than passing or even specialist interest. The Rockefeller family is presently seized with the special insanity which ultimately and lawfully grips all factions whose power depends on maintaining the political integrity of wealth denominated on scraps of paper. Like the Bardi, the Peruzzi, the Fuggers, John Law and the Rothschilds before them, the Rockefellers spare no thought for the consequences for the human race of their enraged, desperate efforts to collect the debt on which their political power is based.

The Medici, who fall between the Bardi and the Fuggers, are rather different than the usual bunch of monetarist cruds. Certainly, and in reality, they did not learn the economic consequences of the Fall of the House of Bardi. They themselves were rabid monetarists of the worst sort, and their proclivities in that direction actually set a time-span on their accomplishments. Nonetheless, the Medici are, in part at least, responsible for the development of a process of an entirely different qualitative order than prior or subsequent financial factions. And for that they will be remembered when the Rockefellers will have long been relegated to the subject matter of harmless anecdote and reminiscence.

Like the idiot Houses of Bardi and Fugger before them, the Rockefellers place mankind on the edge of an abyss looking into an apocalypse of war, famine and plague such as St. John never dreamed of.

It is for that reason that we restate here our case for the necessity of human progress. We do not seek to celebrate the Renaissance as such, but more generally to elaborate the essential qualities of Renaissance man and the implications of his discoveries for our modern political armory, thereby



Cartoon Ginny Pasiencier

celebrating by anticipation the creative energy of mankind which modern science will unleash. Compared to that force, the efflorescence of 15th century Florence will seem like a shooting star on a mid-summer's eve. First, then, we will turn our attention to the actual accomplishments of the Renaissance, the better to illuminate those basic principles which humanity now needs to draw on to break out of the present conjuncture and onto a new line of human development.

### The Accomplishments of the Renaissance

Leave aside for the moment all tangible remains of the Renaissance period. With them, leave aside all previously dominant notions of what the Renaissance was all about. Forget the works of art, the architecture and the literary achievements of that period. Leave them aside, but do not put them from your mind. Such achievements, no matter how splendid, are the mere predicates of what the process of the Renaissance was all about.

The highest accomplishment of the Renaissance is the development in germinal form of the Idea of Progress. It is that conception which has been the motor of capitalist development, despite the hate-filled efforts of all subsequently dominant factions of finance capital, beginning with the Fuggers and ending with the Rockefellers.

Herein lies the tremendous irony. The Idea of Progress itself was born out of violent political struggles against the prevailing, hegemonic bestialized world views and institutions of mercantile-feudal Europe. It was the Florentines of the end of the

14th century who swept away the dominant, bankrupt House of Bardi and thereby radically changed the content of the institutions which had been the collaborators of that House, namely the Papacy and a variety of royal thrones, etc. Yet their successors in the field of finance, from the Fuggers, through John Law to the Rothschilds and on to the Rockefellers, have invariably developed psychotic schemes for returning humanity to the devastation left by the defeated House of Bardi on 14th century Europe.

Such financial factions, like the Bardi before them, insanely refuse to recognize the existence of a real economy through which tangible forms of wealth are produced for the consumption and reproduction of society as a whole. Neither do they recognize what the Renaissance demonstrated, in defeating the Bardi, to be true for all time: that human beings can create new ideas whose assimilation for general use within the population at large can change the course of development of the real human economy itself.

Instead such factions assert the primacy of wealth denominated in mere paper, and through their political enforcement of the claims of such paper subjugate and destroy the production of real wealth. Through such policies, the Fuggers, who refused to learn the lessons of the Renaissance defeat of the House of Bardi, plunged Europe and much of Latin America into more than a century of genocidal war, famine and plague. Through such policies, the mad John Law and his followers wrecked 18th century France. The imbecilic Rothschilds, in their turn, tried their best to do the same but were unable to totally succeed because of the industrial giant that had grown

up behind their backs in the United States. Now the Rockefellers are at it again.

Yet, despite such efforts, applied consistently through the centuries, capitalism in spite of itself has progressed.

It is such progress, measured now in the potentiality of human population levels to expand an entire order of magnitude if the Rockefellers are defeated like the Bardi before them and if the potentials of controlled thermonuclear fusion technology are developed and exploited as rapidly as possible, which asserts the primacy of the scientific outlooks originated in the Renaissance period. We now build on foundations laid nearly five centuries ago in Florence.

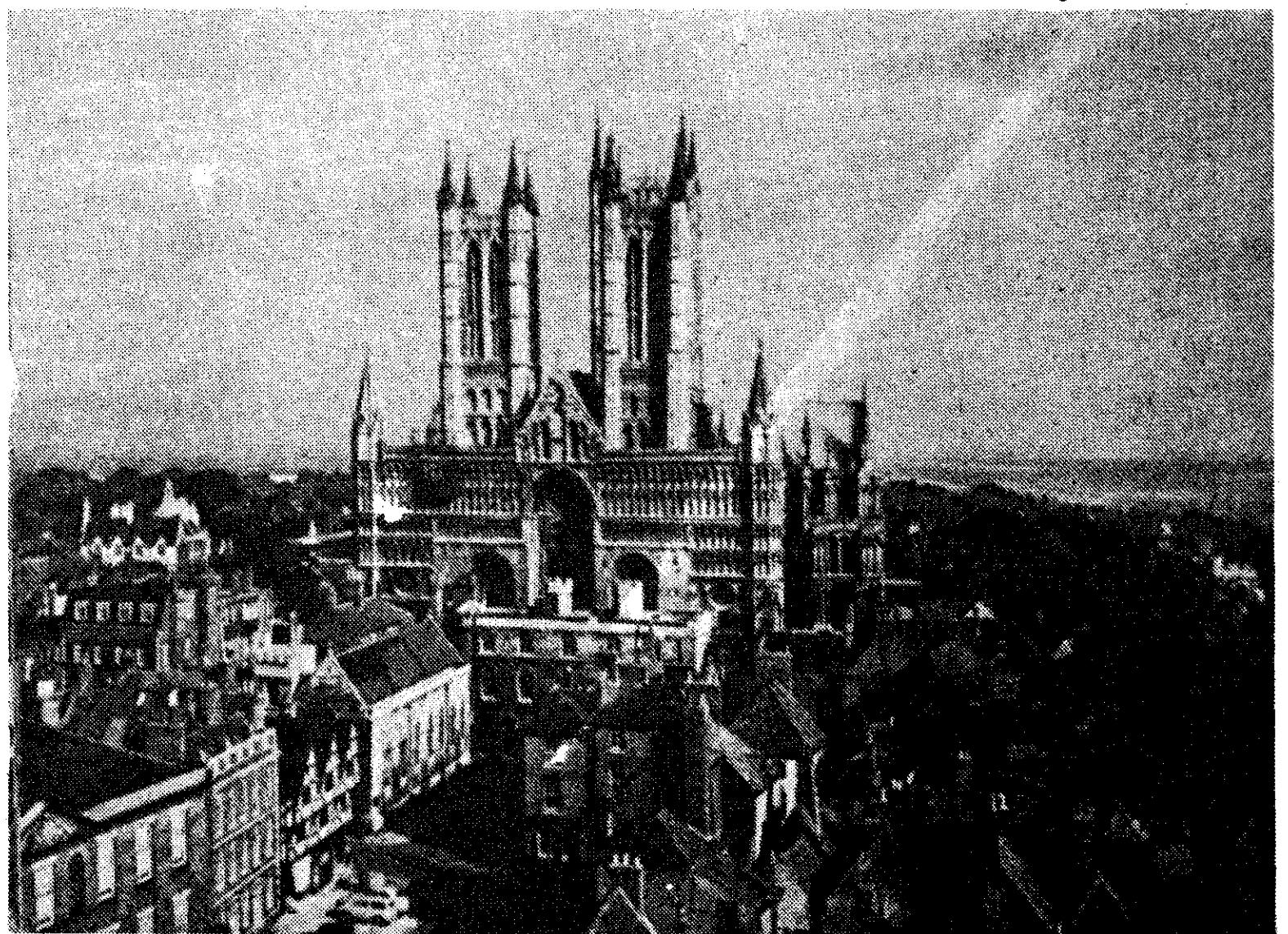
The thoughtful visitor to that city will, in actuality, locate an eerie sense of that truth as he walks through central areas of the city and compares mentally what he sees to approximately contemporaneous sites in modern England. Such a visitor would choose the well-preserved towns of York, Norwich, Lincoln and Chester for his point of reference rather than the still standing rural squalor of the 14th century wool-producing village of Bibury in Gloucestershire. The visitor would immediately juxtapose the higgeldy-pickety layout of such English towns clustered around their castle keeps with the airy spaciousness of contemporary Florence. He would note the importance of timber and plastered wattle in such still standing English constructions while marveling at the precision of the Florentine mason's wrought stone

work. The culture of Florence is urban based, not a mere commercial appendage to the dominance of rural activity. Such a visitor would conclude from his comparisons that whatever was going on in Florence was qualitatively in advance of what pertained elsewhere.

In a certain sense, the men who made the Renaissance understood that point in a superior fashion than have most of the historians of whatever bent — whether art, society, politics — who have presumed to study their activities ever since. The man of the Renaissance did not give himself the title of artist, scholar, man of letters or whatever. He knew himself as the creator of his world. He was acutely aware of the fact that his own existence depended on his ability to remake his society in such a way that it would function. Accordingly, he developed for himself a program, represented by the contemporary notions of the "*uomo universale*" and the quality of the "*virtu*." The realization of such programmatic aspirations was for him literally a matter of life or death.

That reality is nowhere better represented than in the comparison between the later writings of the much reviled figure of Niccolò Machiavelli, and the works of a similar giant figure Leon Battista Alberti. The former's *Prince*, written from exile after the turn of the century, after the Medici's Florence had been defeated by the French, and after the Medici themselves had been cast out by the priest Savonarola, is the work of the gifted political combatant whom circumstances

Lincoln, England with its houses clustered around Lincoln Cathedral (left); compare with the aerial view of Florence (right) and the famous dome of the Florence Cathedral successfully vaulted by Brunelleschi.





and defeat had cast aside. In his efforts to lay bare what went wrong and discover remedies, Machiavelli exposes by implication the individual qualities that built Florentine statecraft. Similarly, Alberti, whose programmatic conception of man, developed at the beginning of the 14th century, was brought to fruition with the generation of giants produced later on.

Such wilful figures represent real intellectual powers. There is no way that the self-conception of such Titans can be reduced to the academic's label ready to be pasted to the appropriate specimen jar and placed next to its fellows in any old dusty storage cupboard. No, such a self-conception was never a mere label of literary convenience, despite what has been written on the subject since the 19th century.

The Titans of the late 14th and early 15th centuries were the first generation survivors of one of the greatest disasters mankind has yet inflicted upon itself, the Black Death. Such individuals knew, in one way or the other, that the difference between the success or failure of their political intellectual activities meant the difference between life and death. They had to progress.

The Black Death, a pandemic of bubonic plague, hit Europe between the years of 1347 - 1351 and wiped out, according to contemporary estimates, anywhere between one-third and two-thirds of the existing population. The plague to all accounts was indiscriminate in its choice of targets wiping out rich and poor, rural and urban populations, knight and

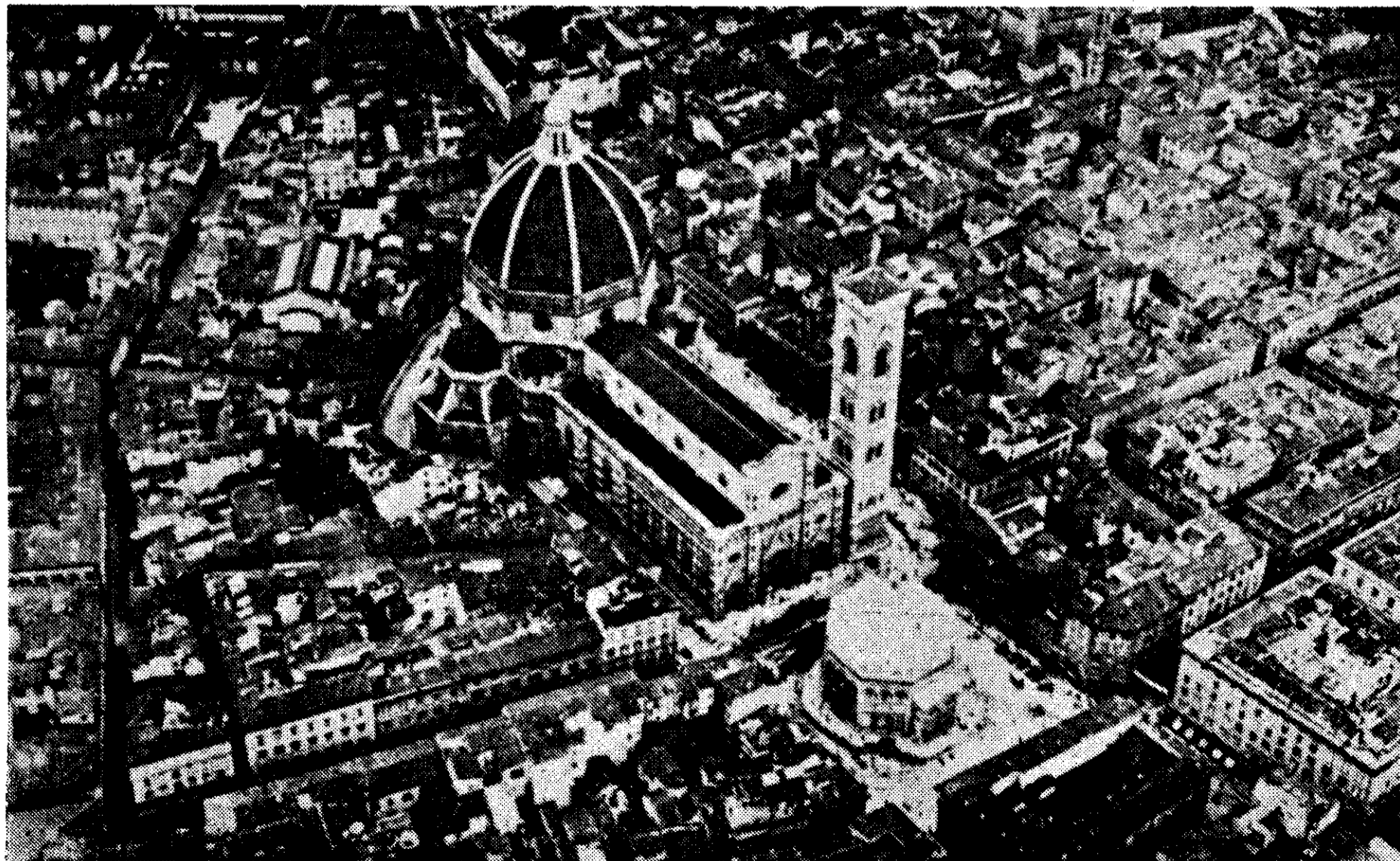
priest. In its aftermath, the once proud kingdoms of England and France were reduced, along with the German core of what was known as the Holy Roman Empire, to a squabbling mess of contending fiefdoms for a period extending more than the next century and a half. Even then, what is now Germany was not spared but was plunged back into the abyss by the insane Hapsburgs and their banking house, the Fuggers, in the 16th century. The Roman Catholic Church, it can be argued, never fully recovered its vigor, notwithstanding the impact of the Jesuits and the 16th century Counter-Reformation.

Often as not the Black Death is glossed over in school textbooks and history courses. It merits only passing reference, and is explained, to put it politely, usually in the following peremptory fashion:

and then there was the Black Death...

with a few obscene atrocities thrown in to enlighten students about the depths of depravity human beings can reach when forced to act like beasts.

Such treatment actually demonstrates a more substantive issue. The human race has still not learned the lessons of the House of Bardi. The plague, heaven preserve us, was not visited by a wrathful God on sinful mankind. Such superstitions may well have persuaded medieval peasants to desert the Catholic Church which had failed to adequately propitiate the appropriate vengeful forces. But there is, of course, no causal relationship. Equally, the plague did not come



like a bolt from the blue sky. And equally, the bubonic plague will come again, spreading from the California countryside to conurbations like San Francisco and Oakland, thence to sweep the country — if Rockefeller is not stopped.

The Black Death was man-made by predominantly the House of Bardi and their allies the Peruzzi. Such banking houses were the first monetarists in modern history and they wrecked Europe with a vengeance in essentially the same way that Rockefeller is wrecking the world now. Fortunately for us all, the Bardi did not have the technology available to the Rockefellers to deploy in support of their policies. Otherwise, we would surely not be here and the earth would resemble a scorched rock with maybe some stagnant ponds where there once were oceans. The Bardi, like the Fuggers after them, demonstrate just what the consequences are of allowing real human activity in the production of tangible useful forms of wealth to become subordinated to the demands of debt service payments.

The Bardi and the Peruzzi made their money by way of their attachment to the revenue-generating capacity of the Papacy. They ripped off the priests and Catholic functionaries who ripped off peasants. Then with their legitimate revenues they would loan at exorbitant rates to sundry royal houses, like the Plantagenets of England and the Capetians of France among other sundry feudal potentates, calculating almost actuarially the unholiness of kings and the likelihood of default. The kings, in their turn, would endeavour to repay such loans by conquering adjacent territories to rip off peasants, thereby forcing landless peasants into the neighboring king's army and assisting him to repeat the process, and so forth.

This process appeared to work to the satisfaction of all parties concerned as long as there was available sufficient cultivable land, into which given non-military technologies increasing populations could expand. Agriculture flourished. Commercial activity, based in military hardware, wool cloth and luxury goods began to boom in parts of Europe such as was then called Flanders, now part of Belgium, parts of France, and Italian cities like Genoa, Venice and Florence. An approximation of intellectual culture was developed in university cities such as Bologna, Oxford and Paris where the works of the Arab transmitters of the Ancient Greeks, Aristotle in particular, were first circulated on a wide scale under the reprov- ing eyes of Thomas Aquinas.

But as available cultivable lands reached the limits defined by existing drainage and deforestation techniques, and the horse or ox drawn plough and water mill, so the burden of the Bardi-held debt-service obligations began to mount. Farmlands were

over-intensively farmed and rendered increasingly infertile. Steadily worsening famine conditions followed the accelerating rate of bad harvests sustained per crop. Such disasters increased the social dislocations of royal looting expeditions, and made them less profitable. The banking houses of Bardi and Peruzzi became increasingly over-extended as their royal clients became concomitantly unable to pay their debts.

When England's King Edward defaulted on loans outstanding to the Bardi for the third year in succession, he unleashed a chain reaction process which brought down the Bardi in 1341 and the Peruzzi a year later. The agricultural collapse accelerated as Europe was hit by three bad harvests in succession.

It was at that point that the plague hit with full fury, ripping through the undernourished, abused and brutalized population. The population plummeted below the brink of tolerance for the maintenance of organized social activity. All countries were swept by waves of dispossessed vagabonds, as, for example, the Flagellants of the German Rhineland, seeking a refuge from the spread of the plague and scapegoats for its devastations. The very fabric of society itself disintegrated under the impact of combined plague, famine, and urban and rural revolts. Europe was plunged into the abyss.

It is in that specific sense that the self-conception of Renaissance man is a life or death question. He could not survive without remaking society as a whole.

The old institutions, whether Papal, royal, financial or commercial were finished, shattered under the impact of the preceding holocaust. Those institutions would only live again as new life was breathed into them. They were incapable of generating that breath themselves. The Titans of Florence provided that regenerative force. It is of no use to ask the traditional "what would happen if..." kind of question at this point. The human race as we know it would not survive a rerun of that catastrophe no matter what form it took. The human race cannot afford itself the luxury of allowing another insane banking house to experiment further with what are known to be the end results of the Bardi's efforts.

Such a reality would no doubt shock the hired pens of England's 19th century finance houses and their successors who were actually paid to rework in contemporary garb the policies outlined above. These whores were charged by the House of Rothschild to develop an elite which could be politically entrusted to rule the nascent British empire. It should be no surprise that the Rothschilds, who, if the words of brother Solomon from Vienna are to be believed, modeled themselves openly on the imbecilic and barbarous House of Fugger, the lineal descendants of the Bardi

St. Louis of Toulouse fulfils his clerical vows to Pope Boniface VIII, while his brother the French King Robert, the church hierarchy and the nobility look on in this 14th century fresco by Lorenzetti. The Bardi and Peruzzi used the papal revenue-generating capacity to fleece the peasantry, and then loaned the money at exorbitant rates to royal houses.



would better have spent their money on vegetable gardening. Their efforts, modeled outwardly on the splendors of the 15th century Renaissance, produced a bunch of clones. And the British Isles, never mind what the colonies of that blighted people were, have not yet recovered.

Their efforts can best be understood if compared to what the official ideologues of Marxism-Leninism did to Hegel. In the same way that they removed the old chap's brain — the better to examine the intricacies of the repository of his dialectical method — so the hirelings of the Rothschild family ripped the idea of progress from the body of the achievements of the Renaissance. To the corpse thus left, strings and ribbons were affixed and puppet-like motions were induced, but that did not make it human. It did however bring plague and war to India, starvation to Ireland, new tribes to west and southern Africa, and decay and obsolescence to Britain itself.

What they did was simple and obscenely crude. The ignorant clone, like the older, and broken Samuel Taylor Coleridge, would study his history books and assert: they had an educated elite of professional administrators, we should have one too. Or, like the de-

velopers of curricula for the modern British school and university, Matthew Arnold and Thomas Carlyle:

It is our considered opinion that such historical figures became great because they studied the classics with enthusiasm, played games sportingly and with energy and were religious. In addition material deprivation strengthened their character. We should force our young to suffer likewise. Or, like John Ruskin and William Morris: the beautiful objects produced by the gifted artisans of Florence from their quaint cottage industries have never been surpassed. They are superior in all respects to the ugly products of our mass industries. We should return to the aesthetic joys of such a natural life style. Or, like Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde: those beautiful men weally believed in Platonic love. Let us wepwoduce ouwselves, and, *mirabile dictu*, they did.

It would be true, but still absurd to point out that such views are based on a hideous reductionism. But for all that, the actual self-professed degenerate, such as Wilde and Pater, is the norm produced by this Rothschild-sponsored exercise in attempting to replicate the glories of the Renaissance by imitating the policies of the Fuggers and Bardi before them. A whore can be bought but she cannot be made to love.

Of equal significance is the fact that it is exactly this cultural monstrosity which produces the Fabian Society at the end of the 19th century. Not accidentally, both Oscar Wilde and William Morris were members of that notorious movement whose aim, according to Bernard Shaw, was to become the Jesuits of the modern socialist movement. Such honesty is perhaps unexpected, but nonetheless to the point. Rothschild-sponsored Renaissance studies and their effects, however hideous, pale into virtual insignificance against the crimes committed against the human race in the Fabian movement's assault on the capitalist Idea of Progress as perfected by Karl Marx.

Without the Idea of Progress, no matter how germinal in form, no sense can be made of what the Renaissance accomplished. For men such as Leon Battista Alberti, education was not a formal question of learning rules and procedures by rote. It was a weapon with which to fight out of the grip of brutish institutions. The Florentines turned to the classics not out of academic interest, but out of necessity. Classical schools of thought from the Roman Republic and Ionian Greece provided a cogent body of superior knowledge from which to rebuild what had been discredited and destroyed by the Bardi-induced process leading up to the Black Death. The political and moral theories of Plato and Aristotle were not read to be copied, they were grist for the mill of experiment and development in reality.

That point is amply underscored by the activities of the Platonic Academy established under Cosimo, and by the specific advances in Platonic thought made by Marsilio Ficino, the founder and intellectual mainspring of that institutional effort. Ficino develops in his treatise, *Five Questions Concerning the Mind*, the most lucid conceptual statement of the content of the Renaissance process. He formulates, for active human consideration, the problem which was only to be solved from the standpoint of Marx, Cantor, and Riemann in the 19th century, namely the problem of perfection.

It is the Florentine neo-Platonist Ficino who asserts in the guise of religious thought the content of the essential problem to be solved by the founders of the modern scientific method. Ficino demonstrates that the essential quality of the human soul is its capability for self-development and attainment of the god-like quality of perfection, through which quality of self-development the rational and, therefore, comprehensible universal laws which govern both the world and human behavior can be understood.

Ficino's treatise marks the high point in a process of development which is otherwise demonstrated by the fact that it is his contemporaries and predecessors who laid the foundations for what we know as the

capitalist state. His treatise presents in conceptual form the intellectual struggle to create such institutions through which the germinal Idea of Progress was disseminated in the world.

The history of Florence in the later 14th and 15th centuries is marked by a series of often bloody-handed factional battles through which the course of both the cultural-intellectual and political-institutional achievements of the Renaissance were elaborated. Such factional efforts are more often than not ascribed to purely venally defined self-interest of this or that faction of financial and merchant interests who sought power to further their own cause, now turning the so-called mob against their factional opponents, now attempting to use that same so-called mob to defend previously conquered positions against another faction's capability for insurgency. Such a view would be used to explain the evolution of Florentine institutions from early conciliar forms through the appearance of democratic forms to the triumph and consolidation of the Medici to what transpired under the combined effects of imminent French invasion and internal Savonarola-organized revolt in the last decade of the 15th century.

What is generally ignored in such descriptive efforts is the content of such factional battles. For the often bloody efforts represent the process of mid-wifery out of which the capitalist infant was ripped from the womb of that decaying hybrid of feudalism and mercantilism which had collapsed with the House of Bardi. The victory of the Florentine interest in that process is symbolized by the return of the Papacy from captivity in Avignon to Rome under Florentine sponsorship and tutelage. The outlook expressed in that event is best represented by Masaccio's frescoes in the Church of Santa Maria della Carmine, in which the old and bent St. Peter, the Pope, presents his tribute to the youthful and vigorous money-changer.

The arrogant smile and posture of Masaccio's money-changer sufficiently capture the hubris of that victory. Previously, banking and commercial activity had merely been the whorish hand-maiden of, primarily, the Papacy and various royal houses. The relationship is nowhere better demonstrated than in the notorious Fourth Crusade of 1204, in which Pope Innocent III handed to Venice and its merchants logistical functions to back yet another intended venture against the Holy Land. Venice, instead, turned the crusaders to more mundane purposes organizing successively the destruction of Trieste and Constantinople as trading competitors. Banking and commercial houses were, in short, a parasite feeding on the corrupted institutions of the 13th and 14th centuries. They did not have an existence in their own right or apart from such institutions.

It was the Florentines who organized the political assertion of the independence of such financial and commercial activity. They made banking and commerce viable activities in their own right. That political break defines an axiomatic shift in human outlooks. No longer was man limited to the fixed world of feudalism and its hybrid successor, in which human practice is indistinguishable from the beasts with which the bestialized peasant cohabits. Instead the expansion of human activities and qualities becomes the rule, progress. Such a definitive shift represents man's first practical statement of his potentiality to become human. That is the process which Ficino conceptualized.

Such a shift is otherwise approximated in the development of two column accounting techniques by the Medici banking house, through which book values for profit and loss, and thereby book values for expansion can be calculated. Such are the measures of progress.

As significantly, it is that quality of the necessity for progress which permeates the political institutions the Florentines shaped. It is their liberation of finance and commerce from the skirts of the Papacy which produces the development in outline primitive form of the executive and administrative institutions which became the modern state.

They break with the institutionalized practice of Papacy and crowns to create institutions whose purpose is the development of the policy as a whole. The core was their development of fiscal and census

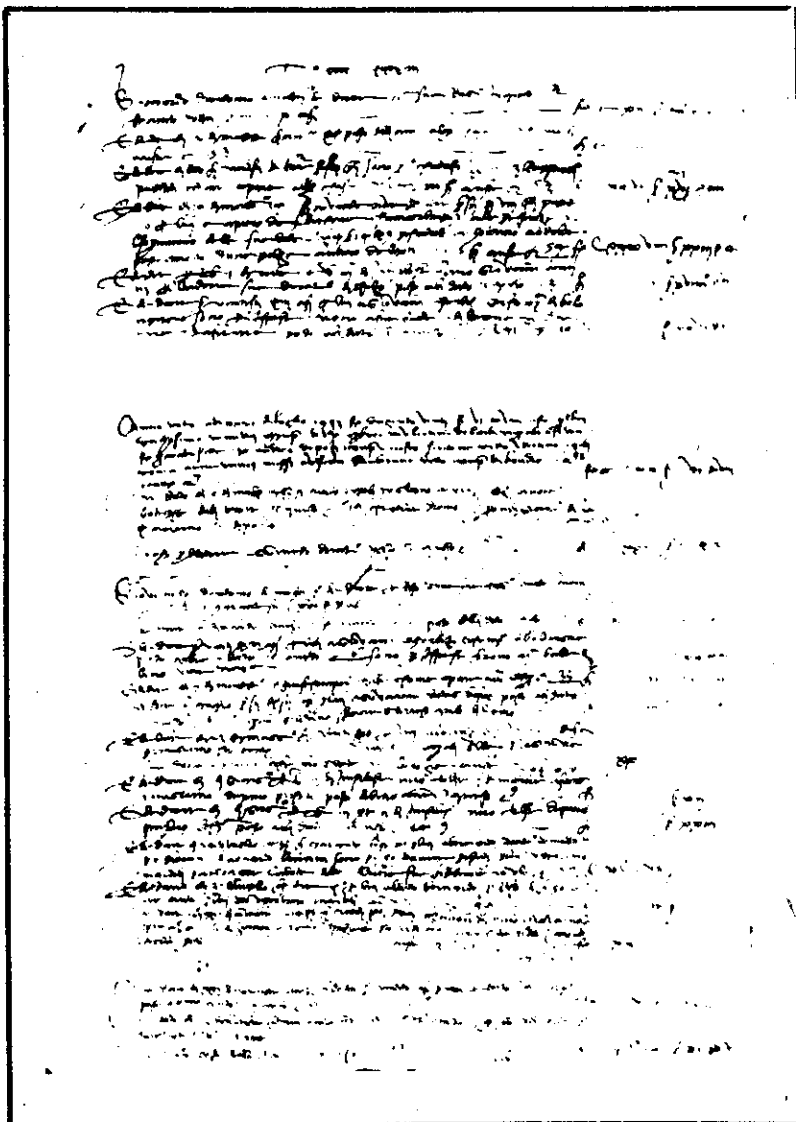
departments. Monies so levied were expended for their rudimentary compulsory education service, sanitation, studies for the development of agriculture, incentives to commercial activity, and the maintenance of a diplomatic service.

It was the programmatic conception of man as developed by Alberti and Company which powered such institutional arrangements and, educating their cadre and staffs, produced Europe's first mass-produced luxury cloth industry using water-powered machinery and artificial lighting to maintain round-the-clock shifts and developed modern calligraphy. The scope of their activity is nowhere better demonstrated than in the fact that it was Florentine money which financed, in part, Spanish and Portuguese voyages of discovery in the 15th century, and it was a Florentine, Amerigo Vespucci, who justly gave his name to the New World.

The magnificent outpouring of works of art, of which we are now the beneficiaries, is nothing if not the celebration of that triumphant political process which literally created a new world. The great men apotheosized in such works of art and sculpture are nothing if not the creators of that new world, and they knew it.

### The Significance of the Renaissance

Anyone considering the course of human evolution from the Neolithic revolution in agriculture, for example, to the present day must admit that that process is lawfully ordered, coherent, and susceptible



Ledger from the firm of Medici and Company, merchant-employers engaged in wool trade, Florence, Italy, 1431-34 marking the establishment of the firm. At the top is the sign of the cross, placed on pages containing records of financial transactions in an effort to prevent dishonest entries. The fly leaf of the ledger contains an invocation to God, the Virgin and selected Saints beseeching "Good Profit" with an additional request for salvation of soul and body. In the margins are the trademarks of the various firms — wool-working, weaving, dyeing — with which the Medici did business. Note two-column method of accounting.

therefore of rational investigation and explication. There are many in the so-called fields of history, anthropology and philosophy as presently constituted who would dispute such a view. Let them, for the time being at least. They might more productively dispute their own existence.

Seen from that standpoint there have to be certain qualities of human beings which are discoverable, adducible qualities and which represent the process of human evolution as a whole. That proposition locates precisely the significance of the Renaissance itself.

For the Renaissance, no matter how extraordinary it appears on reflection, is a determinant part of that process of human evolution as a whole. The qualities which are manifest in the Renaissance process itself are, therefore, entirely explicable. To be coherent with the process of human evolution as a whole such qualities represent lawfulness, not an exception to a general rule of mediocrity. The qualities of creative genius represented by the Titans of the Renaissance are nothing other than the qualities which distinguish all human beings from mere grunting beasts.

No doubt the present followers of Charles Darwin and his subsequent descendants in the boorish Holist school, like Aurelio Peccei and other creatures of the Rockefeller faction, would squeal with horror and sharpen their teeth at such a proposition — the better to demonstrate that so-called laws of the jungle are applicable. They only, thereby, show that they are not themselves human.

The qualities of creative human self-development, as such qualities are manifest in the Renaissance development of the Idea of Progress, are the primary substance of human evolution itself. Remove, or attempt to destroy that Idea, attempt to excise the notion that human social development depends on an accelerating rate of deliberate creative scientific and technological innovations assimilated for broader social use by populations at large and a knife is placed at the heart of what makes us human.

That knife has been in place since the early 1960s. The majority of an entire generation, has, thereby, been turned into a mere existential herd of psychotics. For as the reality of the notion of progress is cast off in cultural and scientific stagnation, industrial decay and obsolescence, so the morality of the victims of the 14th century House of Bardi is reasserted. A generation is seized with the purposeless existentialism otherwise seen in the pathetic victim of amnesia. "Who am I?" such an unfortunate asks, "Where have I come from, where am I going? Why, what is it all supposed to be about?" and is unable to locate within himself what is necessary to answer.

Such a sense of almost memoryless uselessness and purposelessness manifest in the psychotic existential-

ism which grips large strata of our populations of young adults and youth is the result of conscious policy decisions taken during the late 1950s and early 1960s. At that point the Rockefeller family assigned such British degenerates as Bertrand Russell and the Huxley brothers Aldous and Julian, along with American accomplices like George F. Kennan, the task of building a depoliticized youth movement across the advanced capitalist sector to use as a battering ram against any and all institutions which represented potentially the capitalist Idea of Progress. That was primarily what the synthetic anti-war movement, with its sick bed-mate, the rock and drug counter-culture, was all about.

Now the New York Times and the Times of London crow at their apparent success as they seize on one of the predicates of this filthy process. Our children and youth, they tell us, from both sides of the Atlantic, whether at high school or university level, now know less about their own history than any earlier generation of this century. The editorial boards of such papers do not propose any remedy for this state of affairs. Not on your life! Their silence on such matters attests to the simple fact that they, like the Rockefellers, are prepared to see the human race thrown back to the pitiable morality and life of the feudal peasant herd under the House of Bardi, whose blind and ignorant rapaciousness was responsible for the holocaust which engulfed Europe from 1341.

That is why we propose here to return to basics. The Florentine Renaissance with its multi-leveled political fight against the idiocy of the Bardi-Peruzzi, et al, its uncompromising fight out of the bestial swamp of feudal backwardness is our chosen vehicle to reassert what is primary in the process of human evolution and therefore basic to human survival.

## History

To the ordinary victim of common sense sorts of wisdom, the course of history is reasonably straightforward. It happened, much like fairy tales happen, "once upon a time." To the victim of such views, what happened is usually important only in the personal sense, in the sense that snapshots of memorable events and photographs from early childhood are important. "I was fixing myself a cup of coffee when they said on the radio that the Soviets were shipping missiles into Cuba."

It is in such moments, which are not always the most cherished, that the common sense view is shown to be not only wrong but downright dangerous. Such moments will become an increasingly common experience in the lives of millions as the enormity of the political consequences of Rockefeller's efforts to

abolish the idea of human progress hits home. It is in such moments of personal and social crisis that the reality of human historical development is recognized. For such moments demand creative initiative and innovation of men and their institutions. "How the hell do we get out of this mess?" becomes a question of life and death. The actual significance of human history is then understood by the man or woman who chooses the responsibility of making history.

It is in that specific sense that the course of human history runs absolutely counter to the usual perceptions of common sense sorts of wisdom.

Over the short run, it is true, historical evolution may seem to be a matter of the perceived evolution of capabilities which were built into particular institutions at the point at which such institutions were created. Common sense perceives such normal evolution of institutions as business as usual. The trade unionist of the late 1960s and early 1970s, for example, would not have given much thought to the circumstances surrounding the origins of his or her trade union. Then the rude awakening, which demonstrates in forceful terms that the perceptions of common sense were wrong all along, and the trade unionist in the shop with memories of the 1930s somewhere in the back of his head, among other such baggage, will seek out the communist. "What do we do now?"

The point is that the actual line of historical development runs exactly counter to what common sense seems to pose as axiomatic or awaits in anticipation. Dame History, so to speak, does not reserve a place on her bandwagon for the voyeur who peeks at her progress from behind lace curtains. What the historian may admire from a distance, depending on preference, as an exception, is in fact the rule. It is those periods of crisis in which individuals create and shape the institutions which last through generations and even centuries which are not only decisive but typical of the process as a whole.

But that process, out of which the giants of the Renaissance, and the Cromwells, the Colberts, the Marxes, the Lenins, the Beethovens and the Bessemers select themselves, is in no way arbitrary. It is as we shall see, totally lawful.

The evolution of every form of human society is bounded by that society's technology which defines certain raw materials as resources for that technology, and which defines certain institutions as appropriate for the exploitation of such resources, etc. The better such a society survives and grows without basic innovations in its fundamental technology, the less able it is in the long run to survive in that form, for the more rapidly it depletes the raw materials

necessary to maintain its own existence. At the point that existing technologies run up against the relatively finite limits of raw material resources available for such technologies, either man intervenes creatively with new technology or the new institutions which will facilitate the development of new technologies to open up new resources, or that society is finished.

That process in outline gives us a first approximation of human historical development. It is what happened in 14th century Europe. Available land for agriculture, as defined by existing technologies, was swallowed up by population growth and migrations organized through the crusades and similar such military looting operations. At the point that new land for agriculture could not be reclaimed from nature, then existing cultivated areas were over-intensively farmed to the point that soil fertility was impaired. Add in the rapacious demands of the banking House of Bardi who financed the population movements, and, as in the case of England and France, took first monetary claims on the kingdom's agricultural production, and you have devastating collapse concocted by ignorant men.

If one next takes the course of human history as a whole, and leaves proponents of cyclical theories of history on the nearest roller coaster where they belong, one sees quite readily that the human race is no mere victim of a perpetual motion machine which goes through periodic spasms of development only to descend subsequently into the abyss of collapse and retreat.

One sees rather an interconnected whole made up of successive phases of development in which the whole is characterized by an overall dominating tendency for levels of social productivity to rise from one phase to the next, at rates tending toward the exponential. Such a tendency is shown by the steady reduction of that portion of the population of North America committed by society as a whole to agricultural activities since the 18th century. Such increases in social productivity demands an increasing rate of energy throughput per capita of the population.

It is that overall exponential tending increase in the throughput of energy which defines a lawful basis for the ordering of human self-development. No other invariant will work. Human society can neither stand still on the spot, nor merely stagnate without tending toward the horrors unleashed by the House of Bardi on the 14th century.

This is easily demonstrated. Even the activity of maintaining an existing technological base for society at given levels, with neither population increase, nor innovations and improvements, will tend to exhaust at accelerating rates the resources defined for such use by such fixed levels of technology. For humanity to



Spring planting is depicted in this late 15th century painting of the *Four Seasons*. The heavy plow in the foreground was introduced on a large-scale in Northern Europe during the 10th century. The heavy plow replaced the system of intensive farming with light plows known in Greco-Roman antiquity, vastly expanding the type of land that could be brought under cultivation. With the introduction of the watermill, the heavy plow contributed to the enormous demographic growth and the commercial and urban revolution of the 10th through 13th centuries.

survive, there must be progress as measured by an exponential tendency for the rate of creative innovations to increase along with the social realization of such innovations in rising rates of energy throughput per capita through assimilation and use. The content of such a tendency is typified by the Renaissance itself, for the self-developing power of the human mind is coherent with that process itself. Otherwise we simply would not be here.

Such an outline is all fine and good, the reader may say. But the Renaissance did not last. In fact, it degenerated rather rapidly, and the undoubted glories of 15th century Florence crumbled into the horrors and bestiality of the 16th century.

The Renaissance ushered in the beginnings of capitalist culture, nothing else. The Idea of Progress is asserted as reality by capitalist society, but only indirectly governs the development of capitalist society. Capitalism develops despite itself. The fate of the Medici is exemplary in this regard. The Medici ruled Florence until early in the 18th century. They maintained a semblance of their former banking operations until then. And, in fact, their bank, the Monte dei Paschi, exists to this day in Florence. But they understood economics no more than the Bardi before them or the Fuggers after them.

The point is, as we have already implied in the emergence under the Medici of banking and commerce as a self-moving political force, that capitalism and capitalist development is governed by two fundamentally irreconcilable optimizing criteria: on the one hand, by the expansion of wealth denominated in pure paper, which when backed up by either force or

the threat of force, provides looting rights to its holders just as the Bardi were accorded looting rights; on the other hand, by the reproduction of society as a whole through a rising social productivity in the production of real tangible wealth. The two are irreconcilable to the point that now, under the present policies of the Rockefellers, acquiescence in maintaining the political integrity of the dominant monetarists' paper-dominated wealth will mean the end of capitalism and the end of the human race.

The Titans of the Renaissance, the first capitalists, if you will, could not solve that problem by themselves. But capitalism, as a byproduct of its development, makes what the Renaissance could only assert to be the case a practical problem for the whole of humanity. The spread and development of technology across the globe makes each member of the human race dependent on the productive activity of every other such member for his or her own survival, such that innovations in any part of that whole interconnected network are ultimately of benefit to the whole population. That is reality and is the basis on which that quality of creative self-development of human powers, first asserted by the Titans of the Renaissance as primary reality of all human activity, can become directly accessible to, and known by the minds of all men.

In that sense the failure of the Renaissance is our potential for victory. They could not solve the problem themselves, but they left a constant reminder for posterity of what the human race is capable of accomplishing once it decides to rise against its own self-imposed banalization and oppression.



# Art and Neo-Platonism in the Renaissance

*by Stephen Pepper*

## INTRODUCTION: THE REVIVAL OF SCIENCE

The 12th century revival of science in the Latin West was due to the influence of Arabic scientific treatises that preserved the essential content of Greek scientific thought. These writers treated the entire universe as coherent. In the West, wherever the new Arabic-Greek science was encountered by thinkers steeped in Augustinian neo-Platonism, there was an immediate revival of secular-based speculation into the nature of the universe. From Abelard of Bath in the 12th century to Robert Grosseteste in the 14th, the renewal of the ancient method of science sought to discover the essential relationship of the realm of being to the universal being, God. This was the true content of "religion" for these men as distinct from such theological ideologies as dogmatic scholasticism or nominalism.

The one assumption common to these medieval scientists was that Being in all its variety nevertheless expressed an underlying unity. This unity was material and was the efficient cause (reality) of the discrete multiple entities that make up Being. Science was the effort to demonstrate systematically the relation of this primary substance to its manifold appearances. For Grosseteste, this substance was light, the origin and propagation of all species. Science "served" true religion for it illuminated God's universal order.

But scientific inquiry was abruptly terminated by the Black Death which ravaged and destroyed Europe in the 1347-1350 period. Only as a consequence of the bitter struggle to ascend from the human suffering and degradation of the Black Death were the Humanists able to resume the development of coherent inquiry, but with a fundamental alteration. Whereas, in the view of medieval scientists, the process of species propagation from *prima materia*

was explained mechanistically, for the Humanists it was the idea (logos) expressed through God's will that "caused" the creation of being. For Marsilio Ficino and his disciple Pico della Mirandola the human soul through its highest faculty, intellect, *participates* in the logos of the universe. In this way, Ficino and Pico identified the mind as of the same substance, perfection, as universal Being. Ficino and Pico reflected in this formulation the activity of the intellect as the efficient cause of the rebirth of human society after the holocaust. Thus, for the first time, Ficino was able to identify freedom, creative activity, as necessary for human existence.

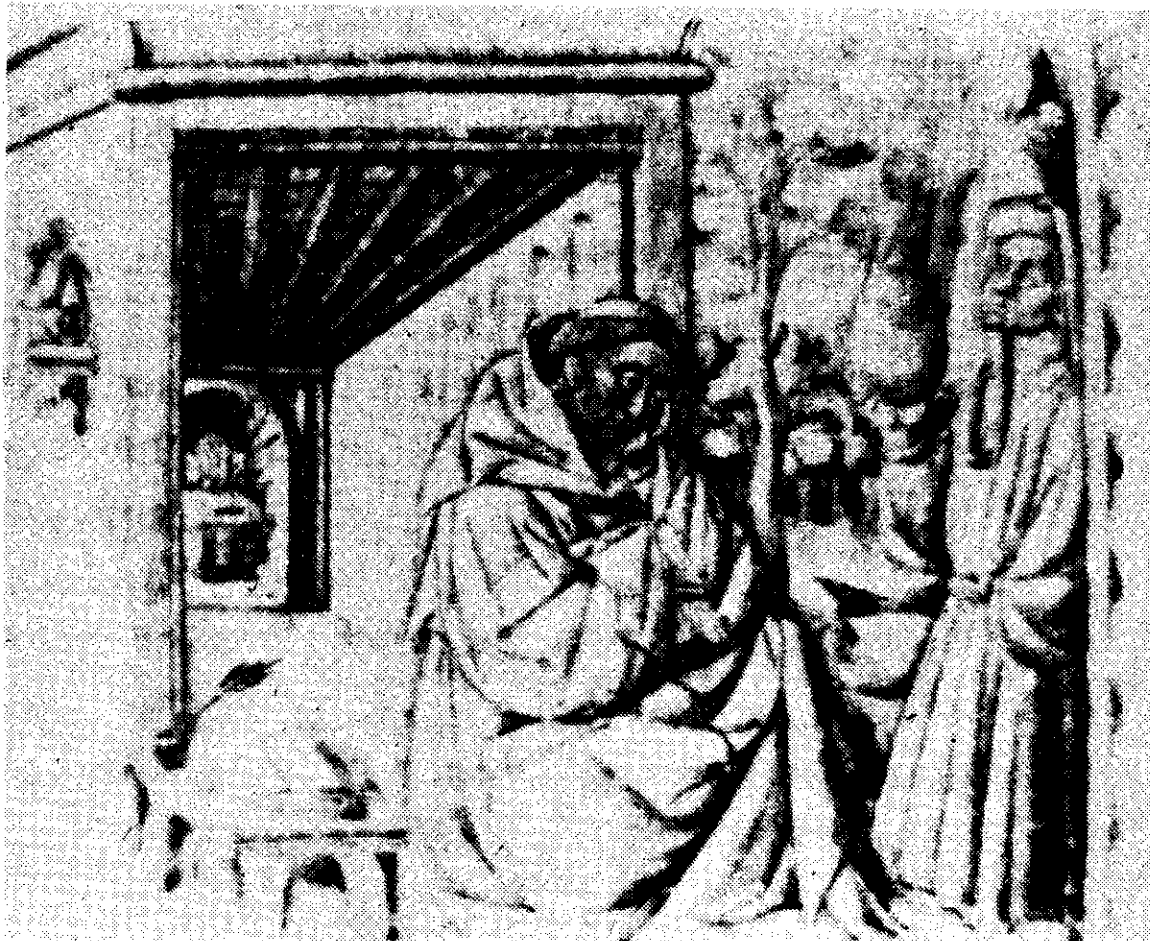
The plague had proved that existence was not a simple reflection of God's will, but a continuity mediated through human development. For Ficino and Pico the rebirth of human productive genius was the demonstration of the perfectibility of this existence, in contrast to the zero-growth ideology — God's condemnation of man's right to exist — espoused by the Dominican Order and their feudal allies.

Human intellect transforms the mere potentiality of material being into the concrete mediation of its own continued existence. This is the content of Humanism. Humanism identifies perfectibility as progress and consciously seeks to create the conditions for such progress. In Florence, this activity was embodied in the creative individual, the artist. Architects, sculptors and painters not only illustrated the idea of perfectibility, their works were the concrete means to expand universal labor. From Brunelleschi to Leonardo, creative work was necessary to develop the motion of the mind.

In this paper, architecture and, in particular,



Hieronymous Bosch. Detail of the *Good Thief and the Dominican*, from *The Bearing of the Cross*, Ghent, Musee des Beaux Arts, circa 1505.



Manuscript illustration depicting Roger Bacon, the Franciscan scientist-philosopher of the 13th century.

painting are treated as subsumed expressions of the motion which culminates in Ficino's *Five Questions Concerning the Mind*. I have approached the subject from a vantage point not available to Renaissance thinkers themselves, but, nevertheless congruent with the germinal nature of the dialectic as it then existed.

From its implicitness in Leonardo Bruni's writing to its primitive, but full-fledged realization in Ficino, the internal dynamic of Renaissance thought progressed in successive phases, predicates of one subject whose actual content is Ficino's perfectibility of existence. Ficino's work is not merely a phase within the whole, but the highest ordering — or abstraction — of the self-

movement that characterizes the entire period.

In so treating development within the Renaissance, the Renaissance is exemplary of human development in general. In a still larger context, it demonstrates the general law of negentropy for the universe. While that is not discussed here, the coherence of negentropy for both organic and inorganic matter has been rigorously demonstrated in other publications of the International Caucus of Labor Committees. (1) Immediately more significant for our present work is that such an assumption was symptomatic of Ficino and all his co-thinkers.

# I DOMINICANS vs. HUMANISTS

The Renaissance is the culmination of humanity's climb out of the Black Death which ravaged Europe in 1348-1349. In its aftermath, men asked whether humanity could, or should, survive. The medieval Church hierarchy, the Dominican Order and the feudal aristocracy were prepared to condemn the species to extinction; the intellectual and political leadership of the merchant towns who opposed them developed the ideas of the progress and perfection of existence.

The most outspoken champions of the anti-Humanist faction was the Dominican Order. The Dominicans — literally God's dogs — were a preaching order founded in the early 13th century by the Spanish bigot Dominic. Catholic Spain consisted at the time of the most viciously backward feudal lords and peasants huddled up against the Pyrenees, caught between the advanced civilizations of the Moslem Moors to the south, and the Christian Albigensians to the north. God's dog Dominic, on direct orders from the Virgin, organized a crusade of French Christian knights against the Christian Albigensians (the Moors were far too advanced for the feudal knights, having destroyed the flower of French chivalry during the previous century).

During the 13th century, the Dominicans outstanding characteristic was an inexhaustible zealotry in rooting out heresy, any expression of a proto-scientific or Humanist outlook. In Florence, Peter Martyr was the most militant and most effective expurger of heresy until he himself was finally killed.

The accelerating disintegration of life which preceded the holocaust during the first half of the 14th century undermined the stability of the institutions of the church, particularly the Papacy. The Dominicans filled the breach in authority to track down renegade tendencies among the priesthood, and to govern the thoughts of the laity. The only hope for salvation lay through the Church and the Dominican Order. They policed the Church through Thomas Aquinas' theological treatise. But the real enforcement was the Inquisition.

In 1354, six years after the Black Death had wiped out 80 per cent of the population of Florence, the Dominican preacher Passavanti published his collected sermons, *The Mirror of True Penitence* (*Specchio di vera penitenza*), which purported to portray the true state of men's affairs. Passavanti fed the collective guilt of the crazed population: humanity was a sinking ship; the plague had been a scourge visited on man to punish him. Passavanti evoked images of decaying human flesh more odorous than putrefying dogs or asses. He gave vent to this hatred

of humanity by describing heretics burnt to a crisp by bolts of lightning.

St. Dominic had already described a vision in which he had seen Christ brandishing three lances ready to destroy mankind for their pride, avarice and lust. Pride was any satisfaction in worldly achievement, lust and avarice any interest in material well-being. Human beings were consuming, greedy. One of Passavanti's followers wrote: "I understand clearly...that all sciences...are merely a dark cloud over the soul." This same man cheered himself with the vision that the fire of "love" would soon scourge and then renew the world. (2)

In the Dominican Way God was in heaven infinitely removed from man. Christ was there to punish him, or to save him through the exclusive ministry of the Dominicans. True penitence meant accepting absolution by the Dominicans, true perfection meant conforming to Dominican thought, and true religion meant the dominion of their fixed authority.

To the terrified faithful, the only alternative to the Dominicans appeared to be the Flagellants, great throngs who traveled across the countryside beating themselves. After 1348, their numbers swelled to an army, and as they approached, towns would hastily close their gates against them lest they be swallowed up by this horde. For them, truth as the Dominicans knew it was too awful, too austere. The Flagellants felt that there was an appropriate action men could take to appease their guilt and achieve their salvation. They could beat themselves! To support this conviction, Flagellants believed that a letter had been received on Christmas day in 1348, shortly after the pestilence had subsided. This letter was addressed to the Flagellants by the Virgin Mary herself, and in it she assured them that Christ had told her that he would pardon all of their sins if they would just continue to beat themselves.

Salvation, then, man's connection to some universal meaning came down to this: like a dog, a man could humbly beg contrition from the Dominicans, or like a crazed beast he could join the Flagellants to beat himself. If the only basis for survival lay in such degrading acts, even rational men began to doubt that humanity would or even should survive.

Laity and clergy alike saw existence as a vale of tears. Hack writers churned out tracts such as "In Praise of Virginité" or "Lamentations Over Life." The themes are always the same. Men are greedy; driven mad by their lust, they plunder the world and make war. The writer longs to be relieved of a life led amidst such corruption. Finally, God in his wrath

visits a plague to punish man for his sins. The holocaust, at times conceived as an all-consuming fire, is good. Out of its ashes will rise a chastened humanity, a handful of survivors, who, purified, will adopt as their religion the simple, austere life. (3)

The psychological truth in this campaign of terror was the fear men felt for their salvation. Men had been punished for their love of the world and only by abandoning the world could they expect or seek salvation.

## II THE BLACK DEATH

The real causes of the general breakdown of 1343-1348 are clear. The miserable aspect of damnation merely expressed the reality of the widespread collapse of real production throughout the medieval European economy. The overwhelmingly agrarian economy had become unable to sustain the huge mortgage payments in the form of debts and tithes (taxes) that had accumulated over time. As long as the rate of accumulation had been relatively slow, the European peasant economy was able to produce a net social surplus great enough to pay debt service and still grow. This had been the condition prevailing throughout the 11th to 13th centuries. During this period, the medieval economy expanded: new lands were brought under cultivation, scientific farming, largely nurtured by the monasteries, increased agricultural yields, and

towns, fed by peasant migrations, were able to absorb new populations. Trade, hitherto confined to the Mediterranean, spread throughout Europe.

But as the urban centers developed their demands for greater accumulation of capital, ever higher rates of tax collection and interest payments were required. The depression of the mid-14th century began around 1300 when the Papal tax farmers, the Florentine houses of Bardi and Peruzzi, began to lend out to feudal lords, like the Kings of England and France, portions of the Papal tithes which they had collected from the agrarian economies of these same lords. To pay for their wars, these feudal rulers increasingly mortgaged the annual product of their countries until the interest rate exceeded the total annual yield. Even before this point, the increased debt payments had



In Francesco Traini's famous fresco of the Triumph of Death, painted for the Pisa Camposanto (cemetery) immediately after the 1348 holocaust, young aristocrats are shown shocked by the decaying corpses of youth who died of the plague.

required accelerated exploitation of the peasant populations. Under these conditions, peasants left the land in droves, farm land went untilled and agriculture stagnated. The consequent decrease in harvests threatened the cities, now swollen by peasant migrations, and famine became increasingly frequent.

To the extent that the merchants' incomes from tax collection and interest were invested in the rapidly developing cloth industry, centered in Florence and in the towns of Bruges and Ghent in the south of Netherlands, there was a net gain from the higher productivity of labor. But in the mercantile capitalism of the day, such industry remained localized, and its yield was incidental to the growth in total debt payment demands. By far the highest rates of return could be realized on sheer speculation. The formerly wool merchant houses of Bardi and Peruzzi became exclusively concerned with banking and their huge profits reflected fictitious values on loans that could not be repaid or tax yields that could not be collected. Finally, the house of cards toppled when the King of England repudiated his debts to Florentine brokers in 1339, setting off a wave of bankruptcies in the period between 1343-1345 which culminated in the collapse of the feudal economy.

The plague which broke out in Sicily in 1347 and then in the towns of north Italy in 1348 was a direct outcome of the collapse of the living standards. Weakened by famine and the unsanitary conditions which had developed with the peasant migration, the population was unable to resist the spread of the disease. Ironically, the spread of the plague followed the routes of trade: originating in the East, it spread first to Italy and then to the rest of Europe.

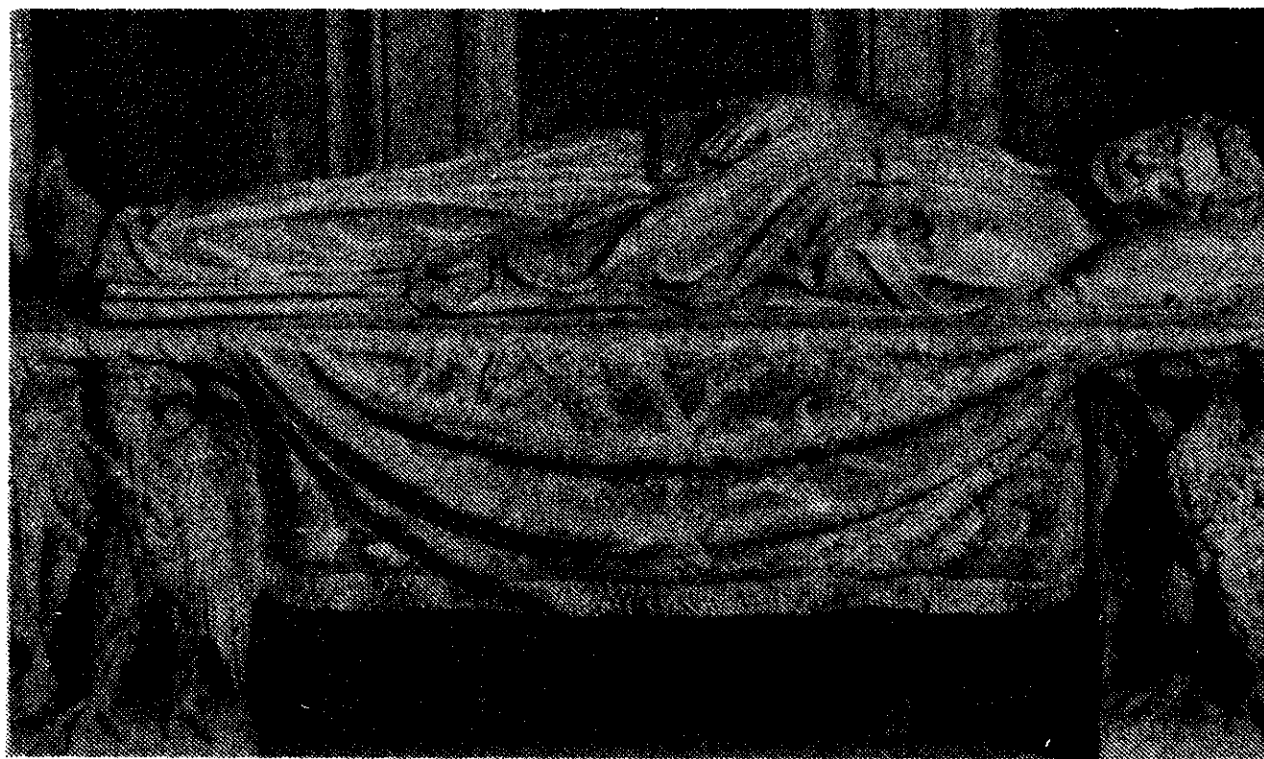
Large parts of Europe have never recovered from the holocaust. Southern France, for example, through-

out the Middle Ages maintained a higher civilization than it was ever to attain again, and supported a larger population than until more recent times. In the 13th and early 14th centuries, England was the home of flourishing schools of philosophy, science and the arts. It was the heart of the resistance to the Dominicans. After the holocaust, medieval centers such as Winchester became ghost towns. While England recovered economically, in the plastic arts, philosophy and even music, it never again attained the levels of internationally significant accomplishments reached in the 12th to early 14th centuries.

In contrast to these once flourishing medieval centers — monasteries, towns and universities — the trading cities now became the centers of civilization. They not only sucked up the wealth of the rural economies, but drew all intellectual, scientific and artistic creativity into their influence. In the cities, production was not based on the isolated peasant nor dependent on the immediately surrounding rural economy. Life was based on cooperative labor and, through merchants' activity, the cities' product was exchanged for raw materials and finished goods from the Orient, Russia and throughout Europe. Florence, for example, exchanged its finished cloth for imported grain not only from Sicily, but from northern Europe as well.

Two cultures existed side by side: the ruined strictly local culture of the vast portion of agrarian Europe no longer able to support itself or its intellectual centers in the monasteries, cathedrals, universities and the Papacy, and the trading cities where human existence depended on the progressive development of labor power. The cities demanded a higher input of socially necessary goods and services, which in turn yielded greater productivity in the form of commodities socialized to the rest of humanity through trade.

Leonardo Bruni, who coined the term "Renaissance" and broke with the medieval notion that man's destiny depends on God, portrayed in a tomb effigy from mid-15th century Florence by Bernardo Rossellino. The great man's effigy was a new idea to the period.



### III HUMANISM

The fundamental law manifested in the activity of these trading cities was that progress, human development, was necessary for human existence. This was the basis of Humanism. Its immediate aim was to create a higher quality human being capable of absorbing more advanced conceptions of science.

To only a handful of Humanists did the problem of existence appear in this form. For the majority of city-dwellers, the burghers, the problem appeared to be simply one of salvation. Within their own lifetime, men had experienced the most profound change, passing from seemingly limitless expansion to contraction and utter devastation. Prior to 1348, faith in the preservation of life had been based on the firmness of God's love for humanity, the jewel of his own creation. Had God's love turned to hate? Was he now determined to dispense with man?

This was the explanation of the Dominicans. To break through psychological terror meant to break with the most certain of all laws, that God ordained man's fate. An enormous leap in conception was required to grasp the fundamental notion on which the Humanist belief in progress was based: that men participated in determining human existence through the creative activity of their own intellects.

The Renaissance required a break with the medieval notion of man's dependence on God. Leonardo Bruni, the Humanist and historian of Florence, consciously chose the name "Renaissance" for the new movement of the 15th century following the holocaust. Renaissance, rebirth, signified Bruni's

recognition of the total transformation of species-being involved in the new world view.

Bruni's "Renaissance" contrasts the name which Dante had applied to the movement of literature and science in the pre-holocaust period of 14th century. Dante called the new movement "*rinnovatio*," renewal, consciously denying the break with the past. "*Rinnovatio*" referred to the appearance throughout Europe for the first time of the effort to fashion from the language of every day speech (*volgare*) literature capable of conveying the highest conceptions. Despite the importance of his work, Dante remained faithful to the old attitudes. He saw no conflict between the absolute omnipotence of God and his own new secular activity.

From Dante to Bruni a whole new leadership developed in Florence, tested in battles against the Papacy and its adherents, against the Dominicans, and against the feudal lordship of the Imperial ally, the Duke of Milan. The idea of Renaissance expressed the kernel of species-identity of these "new men." They had bridged the gulf that separated them from God's perfection: man brought down to earth God's universal perfection and made it the practice of their finite existence. Thus, Bruni could see a rebirth, a new age, in the gradual revival of the "*popoli italici*," the Italian nations, after the breakdown of the Dark Ages:

when the cities of Tuscany and other cities were slowly re-emerging they began to turn their activities to studies, slowly and weakly at first, but ever more strongly ... until the path was once more open to others who were eager to follow. (4)

### IV THE STRUGGLE WITHIN HUMANISM

After 1348, some new means to expand wealth other than the simple acceleration of the rate of exploitation of existing wealth had to be found. The 1343-1348 collapse had amply demonstrated the limits of such a policy. Therefore, the Humanist ideal of development had to become the social practice of an increasing circle of merchants, artists, artisans and other skilled workmen if the Humanist program was ever to become anything other than a literary fantasy for the delight of a precious circle of intimates.

Over this issue of expanded social practice, two factions emerged. The one condemned involvement in the

political life of the city and insisted, instead, that the Humanist ideal of perfection could only be attained in the isolation of contemplative retirement. This faction consisted of wealthy aesthetes and Florentines who found it more obliging to serve the Papacy — the faction of monks and scholars! The other faction led by Bruni and supported by Cosimo de' Medici, upheld the Humanist obligation to intervene in the life of the city, no matter how costly or dangerous such an intervention may be. Bruni himself had given up service in the Papal Curia to hold public office in Florence.

It is significant that Bruni conceived of his principal

task to be writing the history of Florence. For the issue of contention between him and his fellow Humanists was the principle of freedom and necessity. In contrast to the aesthetic idea of "freedom" to do whatever the mind pleased, Brunni insisted that freedom be defined as the exercise of creativity to resolve society's need for further progress. His history was a factional statement within that debate. Distinct from the long tradition of medieval chronicles, Brunni did not narrate events, but tested and demonstrated the thesis of perfectibility of human affairs.

Brunni, however, could not really convince his opponents of the reality of progress, but could only conceive of moving them through the exercise of rhetoric. For him, the writing of history, the presentation of a speech, were hortatory appeals to the higher senses within his listeners. He could not demonstrate progress because to do so he would have had to break with formal literary discourse. He was like a man trying to convey the idea of growth by pointing to a picture of an acorn.

## V BRUNELLESCHI'S CONTRIBUTION

The men who actually demonstrated progress, whose practice changed the laws of the universe, were outside the circle of literary Humanists: the architects and the artists. Foremost among them was Filippo Brunelleschi.

Not constrained to literary forms, Brunelleschi's greatest demonstration of necessity was his success in vaulting the dome of the cathedral in Florence, considered by everyone to be an impossible task. He proved the power of the human mind to supersede the existing modes of practice and to accomplish tasks hitherto deemed impossible. Brunelleschi's achievement did not formally represent progress but established its actual existence, and thereby introduced a wholly new measure to human existence.

The problem, on the practical level, was that to roof the dome required, according to traditional practice, a vast timber scaffold to support the centering needed to hold in place the stone, brick and mortar of the vault. Since the time the cathedral had been started centuries earlier, the timber available in Tuscany had been exhausted. For several decades, Florentines gloomily contemplated a situation which seemed impossible; from the standpoint of traditional practice, it was.

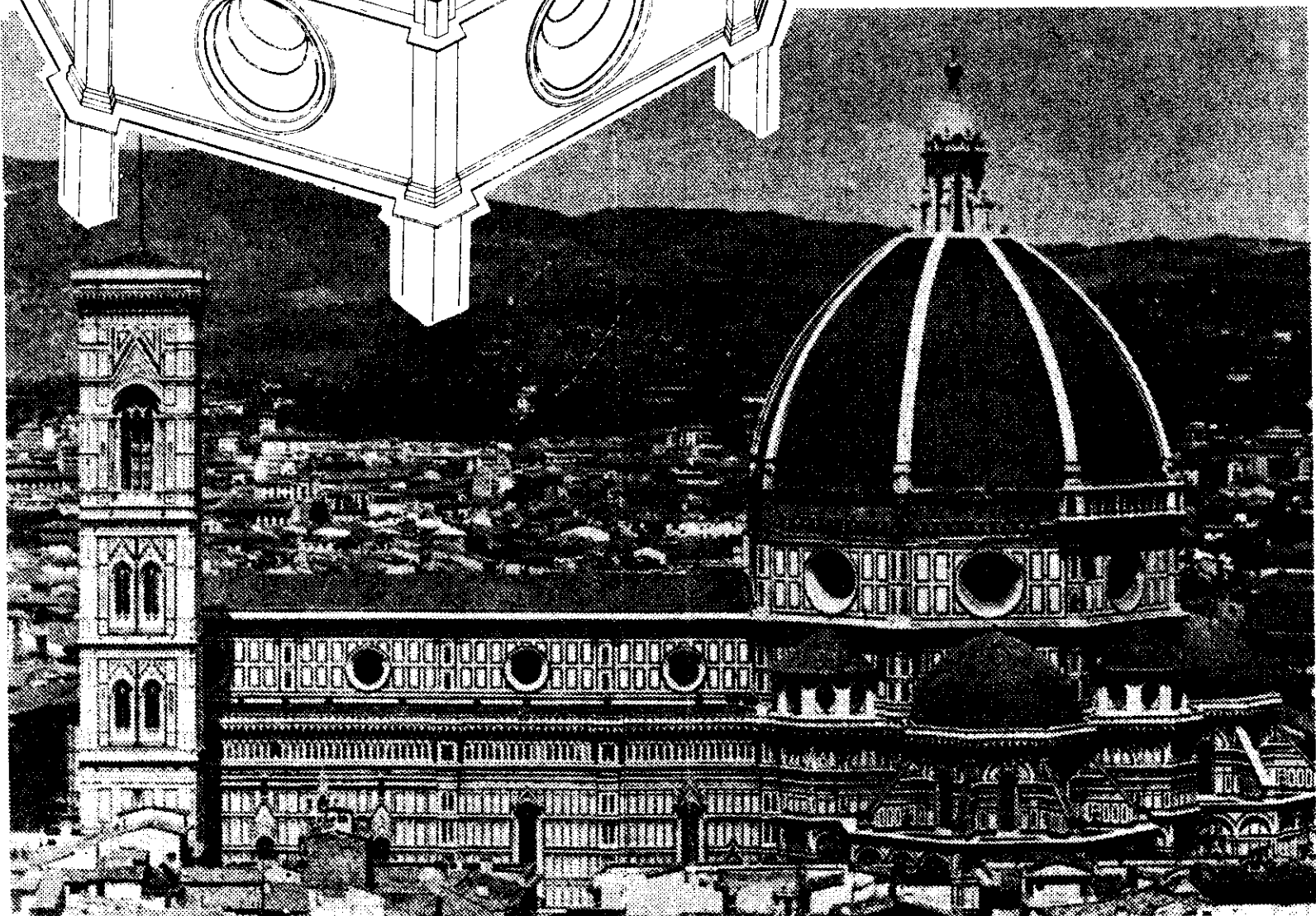
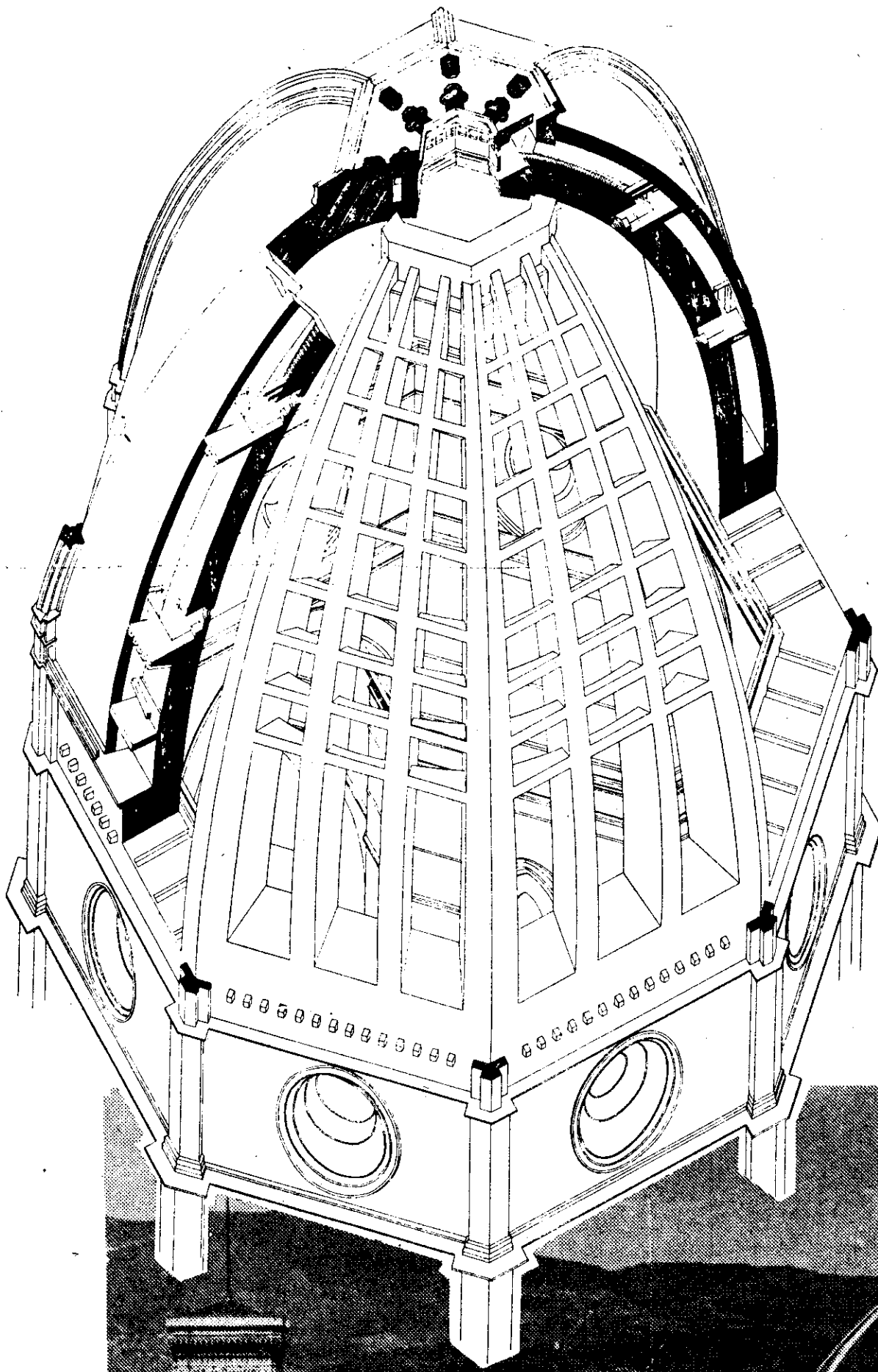
Brunelleschi succeeded by attacking the problem from a new starting point. Since the traditional approach imposed impossible conditions, he invented a new means to hold the masonry in place while it was becoming firm. This method, flying centering, required only a light scaffolding to support the workmen and materials, for the masonry was supported by temporary boards held in place by weighted wires. This system was generally known in the Middle Ages but had never been used on anything so vast as the Florentine dome. To adapt it to this usage, Brunel-

leschi had to organize the building so that the dome would be largely self-supporting and only a minimum weight of drying masonry would fall on the light temporary boards.

Brunelleschi conceived of the dome as a series of eight surfaces. He built a reinforced rib at each juncture of the octagon and within each octagonal section, two lighter ribs. As each section of rib rose to a new height, he would fix it by horizontal members. Then the masonry was placed, filling the area between the ribs. Thus, the dome was a cellular structure with a masonry fill. At each new level the ribs served to hold the masonry, and then the masonry as it set served to reinforce the ribs. Finally, by placing the masonry in zig-zag patterns, the bricks themselves formed a tightly interlocking, self-reinforcing network.

Nothing that Brunelleschi employed was new: the flying centerings had long been in use; the use of ribs and the octagon structure were well known in Gothic architecture; the zig-zag technique of laying the bricks was used by the Romans and could be studied among the ruins of their buildings. What was new was the use of these time-honored techniques to develop a new technology and solve new orders of problems. What was new was not the techniques themselves, but the method Brunelleschi employed in confronting necessity. Because he conceived the problem of vaulting the dome as not merely the extension of existing practice, but as a new order of problem that had to be solved, Brunelleschi could apply those methods which were considered marginal or inappropriate to this problem. He recognized in the human mind the capacity to define problems outside the bounds of traditional practice and then to freely innovate new means to solve such problems. Such a conception of human

Cut-away diagrammatic representation (l.) of Brunelleschi's construction of the dome, indicating the various stages of construction up to the finished dome (below) of the Florence Cathedral. Each of the eight surfaces curves upward from the octagonal base bounded on each side by a reinforced rib. Two lighter ribs were placed within each bounded surface and fixed by horizontal members. Masonry placed in a zig-zag pattern was then placed in the area between the ribs and the horizontal members. The ribs hold the masonry and the masonry, as it sets, reinforces the cellular rib structure.





creativity is the essence of Brunelleschi's contribution.

To realize his new conception Brunelleschi was forced to educate medieval workmen trained in workshop practices to discover in themselves the cognitive powers to understand and implement his innovations. To thus develop in workers new creative powers, he recognized, was not a question of skills per se, but of changing identity, so that the worker recognized the necessity of the new skill.

There is a famous story called the Joke on Grasso that illustrates how Brunelleschi attacked this problem. Grasso, a well-known medieval guildsman and a master carpenter, was the epitome of the Florentine skilled worker: sure of his craft and set in his reliance on the tradition of workshop practices in which he had been trained. Brunelleschi could not shake him or argue him into using new techniques. So he played an elaborate joke on Grasso; he convinced him that he wasn't Grasso, but somebody else. To do this involved half the population of Florence including the head of the Civil Guard. For three days, Brunelleschi kept up the joke until Grasso was reduced to the pitiable state of asking everyone he met, "Who am I?" (5)

In the medieval world, identity was unchanging,

known through its fixed place in the order of things. To lose one's identity was to drop out of existence as through a hole in the firmament. But it was precisely change that Brunelleschi demanded of Grasso, and which he demonstrated as conceivable by first taking and then restoring his identity to him.

The celebrity of this joke makes clear that its significance was well recognized. Grasso was the medieval artisan stubbornly clinging to a fixed identity in a changing world. In practice, this translated into exchanging the fixed practices of the workshop for the intellectual demands of the artist. To construct the dome, the masons had to think like architects.

Medieval masons had always dressed stones by measuring by eye their size and shape on the spot and then chipping them to fit the location. For the dome, however, the interlocking stones had to be cut on the ground and then hoisted into place. The mason had to cut the stone according to a plan that was mathematically worked out and could not rely on sense certainty and traditional techniques. The changed conception of the human mind which Brunelleschi introduced was imparted to the draftsmen who worked on the dome. He translated Brunel's appeal for progress into the sensuous practice of the workmen's daily lives.

## VI THE SCIENCE OF PERSPECTIVE

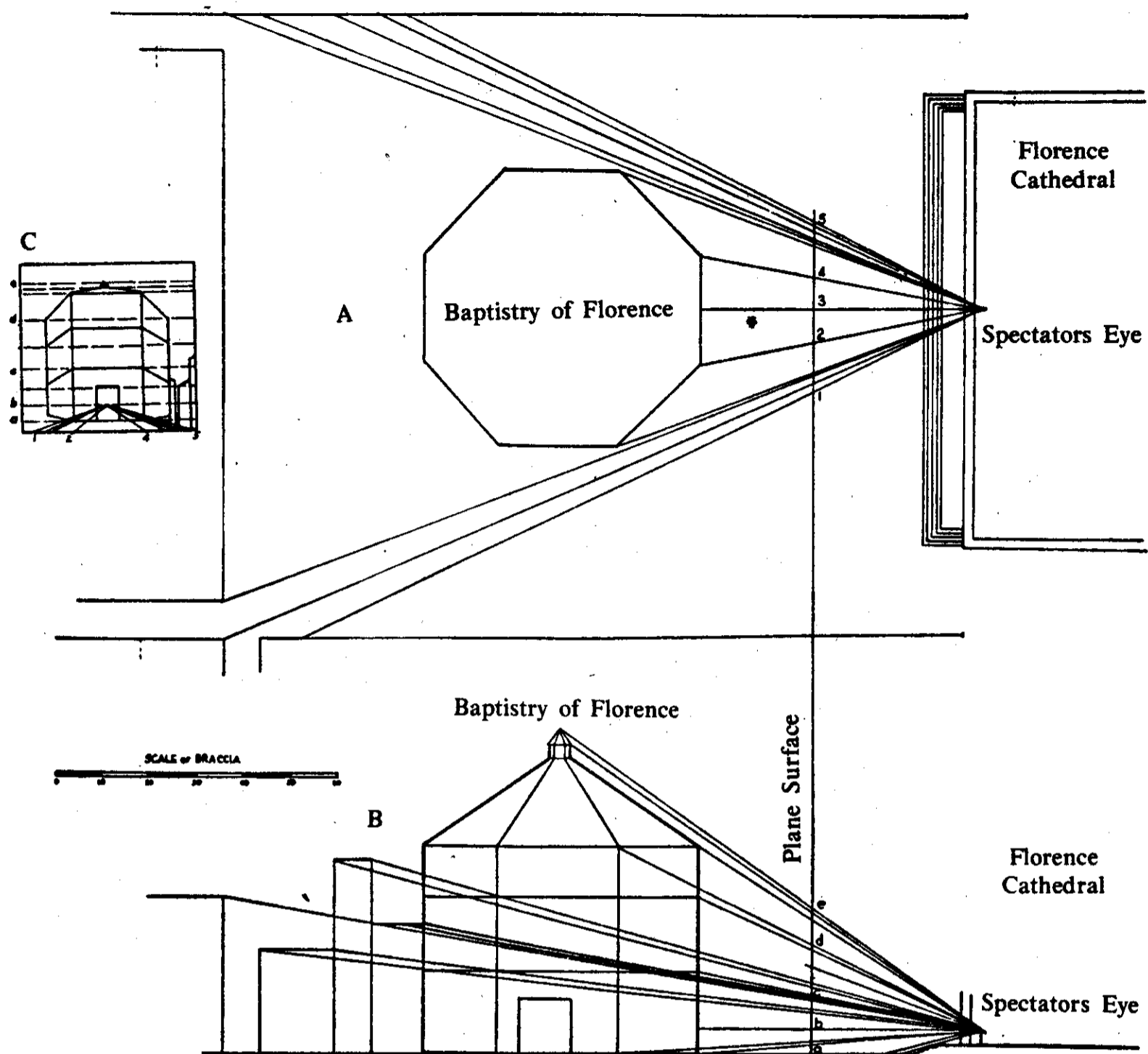
Brunelleschi's second major achievement was the discovery of the laws of perspective. In this discovery, he approaches the problem of freedom-necessity from the standpoint of the capacity of the human mind to know existence.

After 1415, while he was preparing his solutions to the dome problem, Brunelleschi successfully illustrated the laws governing visual perspective in the following way. He painted on a square panel a representation of the Baptistry of Florence in such a way that when viewed from the proper distance it perfectly reflected the way the building appeared to the eye. He forced the spectator to see it at the proper distance by making a hole in the panel on the reverse side. Then, by holding a mirror at arms length, the spectator viewed the panel reflected in the mirror. The key to the successful representation of perspective was the proportionality of the distance between Brunelleschi and the Baptistry when the panel was painted (60 Florentine Feet) and the distance between the spectator's eye and the mirror (one foot) when he looked through the hole. Since the panel was 30 by 30 small

feet (roughly equivalent to inches) the scale of the panel was 30:60 or 1:2 — each inch represented two full feet. Since the spectator held the mirror one foot away, the entire panel was rendered in the proportions 1:2:2 which corresponded to a vista in the real world of 60:120:120 (6)

In discovering and demonstrating the laws of perspective, Brunelleschi again did not invent anything new. The ratio of proportions between beholder and panel, and observer and the real-life scene could be given by Euclid's law of similar triangles. All of the laws governing such simple geometric projections were known. Equally, in the science of optics, Arabic researchers had shown that between an object and the eye there existed a relationship which connected the two and made perception possible. What Brunelleschi did was to connect the two lines of research, demonstrating that optical phenomena could be expressed in precise geometric terms.

Immediately, Brunelleschi's discovery made possible the precise representation of space in simple measurable terms that corresponded to appearances.



A spectator, standing just inside the Florence Cathedral, views with one eye the Baptistry of Florence. In A, lines extend from points along the foundation of the Baptistry to the eye of the spectator. If a plane is dropped somewhere mid-way between the Baptistry and the spectator, the intersection of the lines with the plane generates points corresponding to the groundplan of the Baptistry. In B, lines extend from all points along the facade

of the Baptistry and converge on the spectator's eye. If the same plane is dropped somewhere midway between the Baptistry and the spectator, the intersection of the lines with the plane generates points corresponding to the elevation of the Baptistry. If the two projections — groundplan and elevation — are put together, there is produced a scale mapping of the three dimensional Baptistry onto a two dimensional plane surface (c).

But the idea which lay behind this method involved much more than realistic representation.

Through the mathematician Toscanelli, Brunelleschi was quite familiar with the Platonic researches of medieval mathematicians. They had discovered certain ratios, such as the Golden Section, which seemed to prove that there was a harmonic metric to the universe. Since they proceeded from the assumption that the universe was a realm of ideal perfection having no connection to the finite realm of human existence, it did not occur to them that such harmonies were relevant to human existence or to look for concordance between universal harmonies and the perception of nature. Brunelleschi, demonstrating the precise concordance between them, dissolved the dis-

tinction between abstract perfection and human existence. He showed that laws which govern the universe apply to the realm of nature. He showed that man, the human mind, could know these laws.

For Brunelleschi, architecture was the demonstration of coherence of the universe. His buildings were conceived as three-dimensional music. To participate in any one of them was to grasp the underlying coherence of the architecture and the viewer's mind; to experience the perfectibility of one's own mental powers.

All of his activities — the construction of the dome, the discovery of the laws of perspective, the joke on Grasso and his invention of ordered, coherent archi-

ecture — make accessible to the human mind the order that underlies existence. Brunelleschi's activity is the practical complement of and the precursor to the theory of coherence that Marsilio Ficino was to pose in his neo-Platonic essay, *Five Questions Concerning the Mind*. In Brunelleschi, as in Ficino, it is the intervention of the human mind which transforms the laws of nature into coherence. Thus, perspective connects the mind — the eye that knows — with that

realm of being, and orients existence to the individual. For Brunelleschi, this carries a moral responsibility that compels man to recognize in himself on earth his connection to God in heaven.

Perspective was also the essential tool through which the new expanded realm of human intervention into nature could be conveyed. It was in the discovery of perspective that Brunelleschi made possible the first systematic exploration of existence in painting.

## VII THE HUMANIST ARTISTS

The literary conventions of the Humanists made it impossible for them to grasp the significance of Brunelleschi's ideas. Instead, it was a group of artisans, mere painters, who used those ideas to convey the conquest of reality which they made possible. Through their work, the new ideas gained ascendancy over the more conservative literary Humanism, and thereby spread the ideas to whole new circles, especially to those who could not read. From the property of a few, Humanism became the hegemonic philosophy of urban life.

From Leonardo to Brunelleschi, one theme unified the work of the Humanist artists: that the generative force of the universe could be known and represented. This was not to illustrate some simple formal abstraction, God, as in the Byzantine Iconic tradition, but to represent the entire complexity of the progress of existence, the way in which God's perfection was realized within existence. The hubris of the Renaissance artist was that he, like Prometheus, was capable of making God's law known to man.

From the collaboration of Brunelleschi and Masaccio on the *Trinity* fresco to Leonardo's *Last Supper*, universality is always represented in relation to man's comprehension. This is, of course, always treated in religious terms, but the true subject is man's growing awareness of his own mind as a concrete realization of the universal logos. In Ficino's terms,

Therefore, essence is called rest by Plato because it is without life, is torpid. Life is called "movement," because it passed into act. Mind is called "reflection," because without it life would flow out in external work. But mind halts the vital movement of essence in itself and reflects into the essence through a consciousness of itself. (7)

The actual means to grasp this relationship is the apostolic Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. For Pico, Ficino and the Humanist artists,

these are universal abstractions corresponding to real human powers: the power of reason, the power of intellect and the power of love. The highest power, love, is the unity of the three; the next, intellect, is the logos-in-being, revealed to man through moral philosophy; the last, reason, is the moral order of existence.

By means of the Trinity, the highest order, unity or God, is multiplied to animate all of existence. The chain of being extends through the lesser celestial beings, such as the angels, down to the humblest of existent things. But it is man himself, the measure of all things, who must substantiate God's universal existence. The Fathers of the Church, particularly Augustine and Jerome, truly demonstrate the power of mind to know perfection. The apostles and the saints are themselves perfected beings. Through their mediation, all mankind knows perfection in human form. The entire movement of the Renaissance conception of perfection rises to its peak of realization in Leonardo's conception of humanity itself, species-being, as the inner nature of Christ, of universal being.

For Leonardo, the actual subject, the substance of religious emotion is the change from one state of awareness to a superior one. His conception of freedom is the outcome of his polemic against Botticelli's expression of perfection as ideal, that is outside of or beyond existence. In this sense, Botticelli is more faithful to the letter of Ficino's philosophy, but violates its spirit. He accepts the theological aspect of Ficino's work, and not the Humanist movement within it.

Leonardo's conception had been implicit in Humanist art from the outset. What had been actually real for Brunelleschi and Masaccio was the relation of each individual to the universal, as represented by his occupying a real point connected to the infinite by perspective.

In one great conceptual leap, Brunelleschi and Masaccio bridged the gap separating the individual from the universal. But, in uncritically accepting the existent individual in terms of scholastic notions of existence, they had no notion of the individual himself as universal.

Fra Angelico by contrast assumed paradise as primary substance, and the individual in himself had no real existence, except through his connection to paradise. Thus is the individual in Angelico's conception universalized. But there is no necessity in Angelico's conception of this relationship. Within each plane of existence, there is no differentiation, no progress, and the relation between planes is the totally extrinsic hierarchy of perfection.

Piero della Francesca supersedes Angelico's conception of simple hierarchy in actualizing the moment of realization as the subject of religion. For him, the essential subject is not the simple continuum of paradise, but the noetic act of enlightenment, or in Ficino's term, the motion of the mind.

Piero and Angelico both accept the fixed nature of the perfect universe. Paolo Uccello, Piero's Florentine contemporary, struggles to introduce motion, evolution, into this conception of perfection. He attempts to show the evolution of the entire frame of reality changing as a result of the activity within it. His contemporary, Andrea del Castagno, attacks the same problem from a different vantage. Castagno, inheriting the tradition of Masaccio and Brunelleschi, shows man as the agent of change, not as the product of fate.

With Uccello and Castagno, Florentine Humanist painting exhausts the philosophic conceptions available to it at the stage of development reached prior to Ficino. Before turning to Ficino's contributions, we shall consider the qualitative advances of the Humanist artists in greater detail.

The *Trinity*, painted by Brunelleschi in collaboration with the painter Masaccio in the period 1423-1425 on the wall of the Dominican church of S. Maria Novella in Florence, is not only the first Humanist work, but poses clearly the polemical content common to the entire range of works. (Fig. 1)

The fundamental conception of the work is the triumph over death, locating human significance not in the mortal realm of physical being, but in the intellect.

The work is actually a painted altar. At the bottom is the decaying remains of a corpse who addresses the observer with these words, "I was once what you are, you will be what I am." This famous phrase is the medieval lament of the triumph of death. Above the altar is the Trinity; kneeling before the Cross are the donors, the then-ruling *Gonfaloniere*, or chief city magistrate of Florence, and his wife. Above the

Trinity, is a painted view of magnificent architecture seen in sharp foreshortening.

In contrast to the traditional God infinitely distant from man, the new perspective fixes him in a precise location, whose point of reference is the viewer himself. The architecture above the Trinity vaults and circumscribes God, it is the counterpoint to the decaying corpse beneath. Two worlds are contrasted: the medieval world where human life is identified with finite mortality, and Humanism where humanity is identified with creativity. The one ends in decay. The other is infinite.

The perspective requires the observer to choose between the two conceptions: Can one rise above the identity of the mocking corpse to participate in the perfection represented in the *Trinity*? Can one exercise freedom in the face of necessity? The *Trinity* becomes the means to salvation by representing the perfection of which each man is capable.

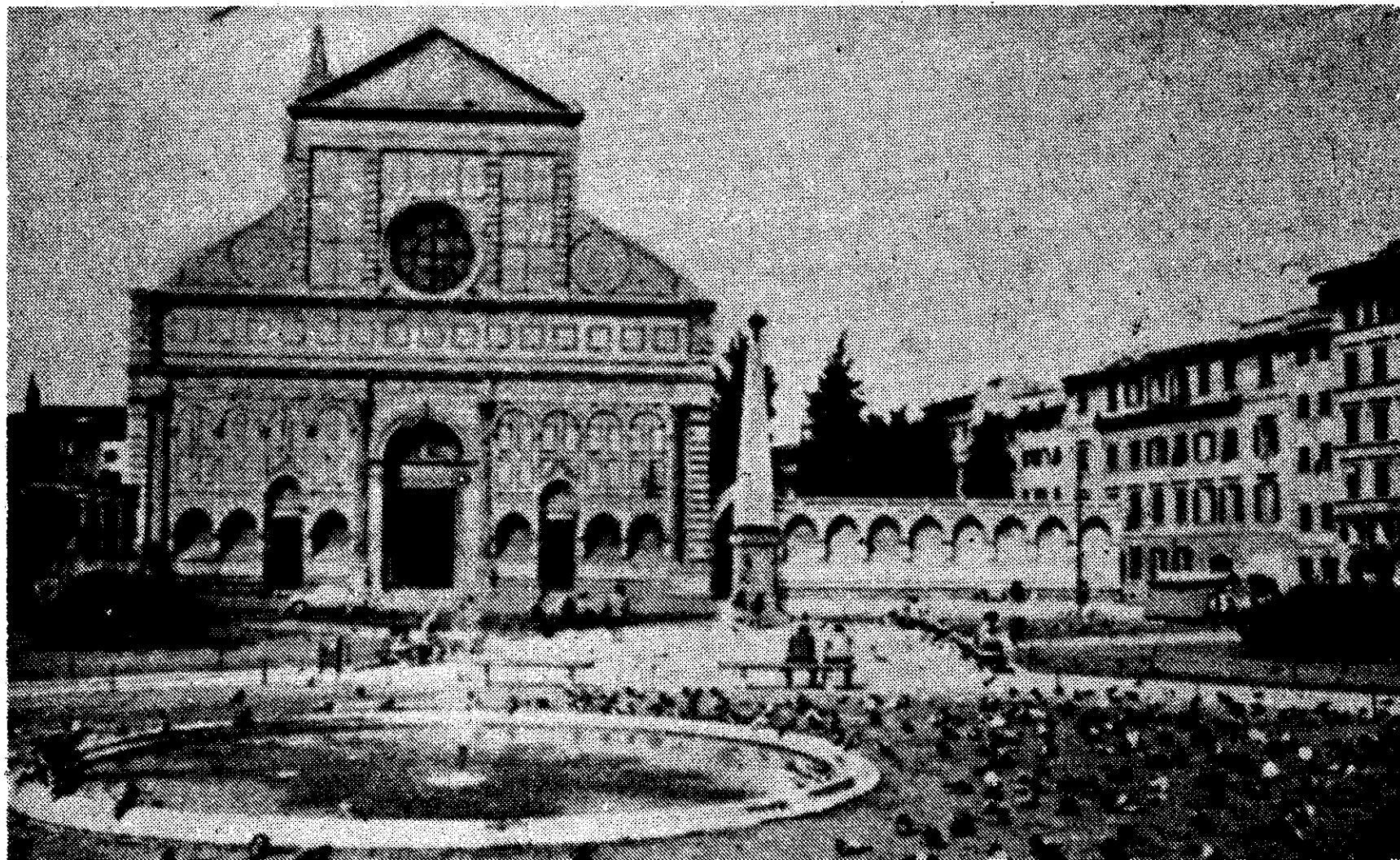
Recall now the setting — the greatest and most austere Dominican church of Florence. In the middle of an empty white plaster wall, representing the limitless extension of the medieval notion of infinity, stands the precise and immediate perfection of the *Trinity*, the color of the architecture clearly visible across the entire nave of the church. There on the first level is the secular intruder, the *Gonfaloniere* in his red robe of office. In place of the rigid abstract conception of medieval tradition, the gap between the realm of perfection, the Trinity, and the contemporary world has been bridged. (Fig. 1a)

In earlier frescoes like those in the adjacent cloister of S. Maria Novella, painted in the decades of the 1360s and 1370s, and illustrating the Dominican Way of salvation, man is an insignificant creature like a toad. His only exercise of freedom is licentiousness, drinking or gambling. He is everywhere threatened by monsters. This is the triumph of death.

Humanism locates man's real identity in his comprehension of his relationship to perfection. Because he can create that connection, man participates in perfection. By exercising this power, men are valuable to God and to each other. This is the triumph over death.

In the Renaissance, the immortality of the soul was the expression of this potential for universal action that lay within man. The quest to triumph over death by being, celebrated through creativity, was no vanity or whim of the ego. It was the recognition of the value, of the extension beyond the mortal realm, of creative life.

Humanism joined with the older notion of universality embodied in religion. It was particularly in the lives of the Saints that the reality of men who live according to universal laws could be conveyed. The



Leon Battista Alberti's new Renaissance facade (1470) for the medieval Dominican Church of Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Saint was transformed from a mystically ordained individual into a man whose life holds value for other men. His actions convey the requirements that the value of human action lies in its benefit to human existence. Masaccio's frescoes of the life of St. Peter illustrate the Humanist concept of the Saint — the perfected soul.

St. Peter was a Saint of considerable importance for the Florentines. He was Christ's vicar, the founder of the Church and the first Pope; and for the Florentines, the Church was the most important source of their banking wealth. The Papacy had been shattered during the Great Schism, when there were as many as three competing Popes. The restoration of a Humanist Pope allied to Florence was vital, for he could be the shield against the encroachments of the Dominican Order, the feudal monarchies and the Councils.

The Florentine banker Brancacci, who commissioned these paintings, considered St. Peter the representation of the Church upon whose rock his wealth and security was founded. This relationship is illustrated in the *Tribute Money* where Peter executes Christ's order to pay the gatekeeper, the representative of the city. (Fig. 2) In another scene, Peter restores to health the son of the city ruler, and in a third, painted by Masaccio's companion Masolino, two Florentine silk merchants stroll across a plaza in Florence where Peter miraculously restores to life two individuals. (Fig. 3)

Peter participates directly in the life of the city. He moves through the streets of Florence accompanied

by its citizens. He passes along a street and his shadow falls on three beggars who are thereby restored to health. One still lies on the ground like an animal, the second is half risen, the miracle of his restored humanity not yet complete, and the third is fully erect, like a man, able to give expression to his human power through prayer, for "religion is as natural to man as barking to a dog." In taking possession of his full human powers, the former beggar takes his place among the citizens, the fully human. Prayer is the natural expression of such human thought, the power to make the connection between one's real self and God, universal perfection.

Through his teaching, restoring the sick and, not least, restoring fiscal order, Peter benefits man. From these acts he himself is ennobled as a human being. He embodies the Humanist ideal, a soul that is totally universalized, is perfected, and through his deeds becomes a source for others to progress towards perfection. The layman, the citizen, is directly united to the process of perfection Peter embodies, so there is no longer a need for a special bureaucracy, the Clergy, to act as mediators between the Saint and citizen. Instead, Humanism takes over the Saints, Clergy and Order to convey the secular notion of human perfectibility.

This process of relocating perfection within the realm of being was the subordination of the religious Orders to the secular authority. Cosimo de' Medici, the secular ruler of Florence, used the painting of Fra

Angelico, in the convent of S. Marco to convey his conquest.

Fra Angelico was a member of the reformed Dominican Order of S. Marco. The Dominicans had been split during the Great Schism. The leadership joined with the anti-Papal Councils, while a faction upheld the Papacy. Cosimo de' Medici, the first of the family to rule Florence, upheld the reform faction and made its Florentine seat, the monastery of S. Marco, a center of Humanism. Angelico and his successors, the Venetian Domenico Veneziano and, above all, the latter's pupil Piero della Francesca, transformed the Brunelleschi-Masaccio Humanism into a kind of secular religion.

Between the outlook of Angelico and that of Brunelleschi and Masaccio, two interconnected phenomena are significant. Angelico and his followers represent an advance to the extent that they transformed the narrowly subjective orientation of Masaccio's individual viewer, who is rooted to a spot determined by the perspective, to an expanded Humanist conception of a universal viewer whose participation in the action of the picture is not predicated on a specific physical location, but on a moral-intellectual identification with the action. Angelico's work conveys, to this extent, the positive

side of Humanism's conquest of the older religious ideology, assuming the role of mediator of the universal identity of the individual. But it also reflects the Humanist adoption of the alienation in religion: the removal to an abstract ideal plane above and outside human existence. Angelico diminishes the individual's sense of immediate moral necessity to make active his participation in perfection through choice. In this way, the purely passive ideal of contemplation from the older literary Humanism is reintroduced.

The ideologue of this older Humanism, ironically, was the extremely energetic Leon Battista Alberti, who, under the guise of expanding the Humanist mantle to embrace the visual arts, actually reintroduced the ideal of impotent contemplation into the Brunelleschi circle.

Alberti attacked Brunelleschi's outlook as particularist, and proposed the elevation of the humanly oriented perspective not to a universal plane but to an ideal one outside and beyond the realm of being. Thus the subject, the human mind, is reduced to contemplating perfection. Alberti proposed to do this by formalizing Brunelleschi's method so that the point of view will always be the same, perfectly centered and symmetrical.

Angelico and Piero della Francesca rejected any



Commemorative medal of the Pazzi Conspiracy, Sunday, April 26, 1478. The conspiracy was organized by Pope Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere), a flagrant nepotist who carved up the Italian peninsula by giving his nephews positions as cardinals and lords of cities. Lorenzo de' Medici's opposition provoked the Pope's hostility. The Pope conspired with the Pazzi, a rival Florentine banking family, to kill Lorenzo (shown at left) and his brother Giuliano (on the obverse side of the medal, not shown). Hired thugs were successful in murdering Giuliano in the Florence Cathedral; Lorenzo escaped. The incident resulted in the full consolidation of Medici interests under Lorenzo.

such formalization. Instead, they sought to overcome the limits of Brunelleschi's individualism by identifying the human mind with participants within the painting who are in the process of realizing perfection. They expanded on the notion of the Humanist Saint, the intercessor.

Angelico's paintings for the cells of S. Marco exemplify this method. In every case, the miraculous scene of the life of Christ is juxtaposed to a human event that places the divine scene in perspective: the *Annunciation* juxtaposed with the *Expulsion of Adam and Eve* to convey the idea of fall and redemption, for example. This is more directly represented in his *Deposition from the Cross*, where he sets before a town resembling Florence, Florentine citizens who act as witnesses to the Passion. Consciousness is shifted from mere passive contemplation of the Crucifixion to active identification with the process of mentation taking place in the contemporary mediators within the scene, a reflection which in turn leads the viewer to self-reflection.

Angelico and Piero della Francesca located the solution to the problem of the bounded individual unable to resolve unaided the problem of his own connection to universal authority, not within the older notion of priesthood as a self-perpetuating authority, but within the role of perfect and perfecting intercessors, saints and preachers who exemplify the Humanist notion of development in their calling.

The empirical proof of the citizen's moral authority to embody universal values is represented in the lives of Saints Cosmos and Damian, the patron saints of the Medici and one the namesake of Cosimo himself. Angelico illustrated their lives at Cosimo's order in the convent of S. Marco. In the *Passion*, Angelico illustrates the struggle of Cosimo and his faction, to triumph over their enemy, the representatives of the old ideology.

Similarly, in the frescoes of the martyr-preachers Stephen and Lawrence, painted by Angelico for the Humanist Pope Nicholas V, the new Humanism triumphs. (Fig. 4) The Saints are shown preaching to the urban populace before a town hall like that of Florence. The Saints unite the ideals of religion to the Humanist program of education and development. They receive their authority from the Pope in the setting of Humanist architecture. Welcomed by the townspeople and their leaders, they represent the new charge to the preaching orders to enlighten and uplift the people. They are martyred by the priests of the old religion, obviously to be identified with the preaching orders.

Piero della Francesca, in particular, is able to identify within the religious ideal the Humanist notion of perfectibility. For him, the religious event takes place to create new knowledge. The painter is part of

this educative process, manifesting the act of realization. In Piero's *Flagellation*, (Fig. 5) the subject is the realization awakened in the contemporary man by the vision of the flagellation which serves as a moral stimulus. To grasp the subject, however, requires that the viewer also participate by identifying for himself the awakening the subjects are going through. Thus, the subject of the painting becomes the truth that is created in our own minds.

Piero's failure to conceive this truth as active in the social sense ultimately led him into the blind alley of seeking perfection in pure speculation. Thus, he crossed the line between an active contemplation, the kind of speculative skepticism advocated by Ficino, and the morally empty speculation of Pythagorean mysticism. It is the latter which is castigated as vanity by the neo-Platonists, for it falls prey to seeing the mind as involved in its own pursuits under no obligation of necessary development. Ficino makes explicit that this denies the mind's relation to species-being.

This problem is fully embodied in the Albertian ideal of the perfect city, the re-creation of an imaginary ideal past. The utopia lacks any human action to require its further development. For Brunelleschi, the creation of the Humanist city was an everyday life-and-death battle against the decaying medieval world, and his dome is wrested from it as the infant from the womb.

The difference between the two views is reflected in Piero's ideal of philosophic contemplation carried on at the remove of a Humanist court. In contrast to Piero's ideal order and harmony, his leading contemporary in Florence, Paolo Uccello, uses perspective not merely to engage the viewer but to engulf him. In his famous fresco of the *Deluge* (Fig. 6) he extends the lines of recession beyond the frame of the painting so that the observer is completely caught up in the forced flight into depth. With this step, the gap between a real realm of being and the perfected realm within the painting is dissolved. The spectator must now view the painted realm as continuous and necessary to his own.

As Uccello's painting illustrates, Florentine Humanism had reached a juncture where it felt overwhelmed, about to be deluged by onrushing realizations for which there was no enframing conception. The problem, as it was then conceived, admitted of no solution, for Humanism still lacked any positive explicit identification of the human mind as the intercessor. Humanism had bridged the gap between being and perfection, but it had not systematically located for itself what it was that permitted it to do that. This was precisely the task for which Cosimo de' Medici had prepared Marsilio Ficino, and which the latter now undertook to resolve.

## VIII FICINO AND NEO-PLATONISM

The problem which Ficino confronted appeared in the form of the ontological paradox: if God's knowledge was perfect, that is, complete, what room was there for the exercise of human freedom through activity; but if human freedom were possible, how could God possess perfect knowledge?

Ficino, the most outstanding Florentine Humanist genius, had been prepared to treat this fundamental question by that very tradition. Cosimo de' Medici himself had selected Ficino to prepare the synthesis of Christianity and Platonism.

This had been the aim of Florentine Humanism from its very inception. Florentine Platonism begins seriously with the advent of the "new men," the political leaders of the 1370s, particularly with Coluccio Salutati, the Chancellor of the city. Supported by a handful of the leading merchants, Salutati brings the famous Byzantine scholar, Chrysolaris, to lecture at Florence in the 1390s. Florentine hegemony in Platonist philosophy was established shortly thereafter with Bruni's translation of Plato's *Phaedon* and other works.

Cosimo himself had been among the most ardent of the young merchant scions to come under the direct influence of the Humanists. In the 1420s, he visited Salutati's famous pupil Poggio in Rome. But it was in Florence, under the tutelage of Bruni, that Cosimo adopted that particular form of civic Humanism for which Bruni was responsible. He helped support the "Studio," the Florentine University, where he championed Humanist studies.

Then, in the period 1429-1434, Cosimo became increasingly threatened by the anti-Humanist reaction conducted by the leading oligarch Rinaldo degli Albizzi. Albizzi, joining with the magnates of the formerly disbarred, older aristocratic order, sought to blame the Medici faction for the recent defeats of Florentine arms against neighboring Lucca. Finally, in 1433, Cosimo was forced into exile. Within a year, Cosimo was back in power and Albizzi and his bloc were driven out.

From the moment of assuming power, Cosimo sought to identify his rule with the legitimacy of a new world view. In 1439, he brought to Florence the Council of the Eastern and Western Churches, convened the preceding year in Ferrara, Italy. He used every opportunity to expand Florentine first-hand contact with Greek philosophic and scientific sources. He retained in Florence, as lecturer at the University, the greatest Greek scholar of the day, Pletho.

Cosimo was determined to complete the Humanist

task to bring into being a new theology. In 1452, he met Marsilio Ficino. In 1462, he provided him with a modest stipend and a villa to found the Platonic Academy with the understanding that he would devote himself to the interpretation and teaching of Platonic philosophy. Here Ficino met with his small circle to translate the Platonic sources and to train the mind to participate in perfection. Finally, in 1477, Ficino produced his magnum opus, the *Theologica Platonica*. Three years earlier, Ficino had produced the *Five Questions Concerning the Mind*, the foreshadowing of his new philosophy that was to receive exhaustive treatment in the *Theologica*.

Ficino's unique contribution to the Platonist tradition was to demonstrate that the human mind participated in God's perfection and therefore was itself of the order of perfection:

if intellect thus touches on the highest form of perfection, it does so undoubtedly because of a highest affinity between the highest form and itself. (8)

Since, at the same time, the mind belonged to the realm of Being, it alone bridged the gap between universality and existence.

Ficino relocated the question of freedom and necessity within the human mind itself: God's order is perfect; it is the free choice of the human intellect to know it (participate) or deny it. Since it is the nature of all species to aspire to its own highest capacity, so it is the nature of the mind to desire (love) God. To do so is to love itself. To do otherwise is to deny the true nature of the mind.

Divine worship is as natural for men almost as neighing is for horses or barking for dogs...when I say religion, I mean the instinct common and natural to all peoples, by which Providence is always conceived and worshipped everywhere as queen of the World... (9)

The identity of universal order (Providence), is the goal for which the activity of the human mind strives. The mind seeks to know all from the standpoint of universal coherence, and this same activity is self-reflexive (in Ficino's term, self-loving); the intellect is self-perfecting:

This shows the excellency of the mind that it conceives as true what is in a certain sense false in matter...From all this it may be concluded that the intellect...is neither impure nor infected, dispersed, mutable, or corruptible, since by its power it frees from such characteristics even those things that are of like quality. (10)





Pico della Mirandola

Thus, Ficino resolves the problem of God's omnipotence by identifying the motion of the mind as the necessary link between his perfection and mere existence. By contrast, Lorenzo Valla, a typical representative of the literary Humanists denied the mind any active power (hubris) to change the condition of existence. He posed the question

whether the foreknowledge of God stands in the way of free will?

and his answer was clearly that of fatalistic resignation:

that is the way things are. Jupiter as he created the wolf fierce, the hare timid, the lion brave, the ass stupid, the dog savage, the sheep mild, so he fashioned some men hard of heart and others mild...(11)

Valla perpetuates the vicious dichotomy between God's omniscience and man's resignation. The essence of his world view is elementarity. All lawfulness to such a mind seems fatalistic and willful, outside the bounded limits of the individual.

Pico della Mirandola repudiated this dichotomy. His central theme is free will. Why is man truly wondrous? Pico answers,

the nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by us. Thou, constrained by no limit, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hands we have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. (12)

Man and man alone is confronted by the choice — to



Marsilio Ficino

act as an intelligent being and ascend to the status of divinity, or to act as a sensible being and sink to the level of the beast:

for if you see one abandoned to his appetites crawling on the ground, it is a plant you see; if you see one blinded by vain illusions of imagery...and softened by their gnawing allurements delivered over to his senses, it is a beast and not a man you see. (13)

This choice confronts man with the necessity to strive for the divine,

let a certain holy ambition invade our souls, so not content with the mediocre, we shall pant for the highest and toil with all our strength to obtain it. (14)

Mediocrity — mere existence — becomes unbearable. The holy ambition — hubris — is to seek perfection. Man is the key to the universe since he exercises his free will by participating in God's perfection:

if intellect thus touches on the highest form of perfection, it does so undoubtedly because of a highest affinity between the highest form and itself.

For Ficino, the Soul is a concrete universal which depends on the generative universal, God, for its purpose and existence. But once existing the soul depends on its own intelligence to overcome all resistance in its pursuit of perfection. Freedom, the striving to realize the higher potentiality of the mind, is an inherent law of all existence. The mind, by

consciously embracing such striving, knows the fundamental law of existence.

Again, the intellect is prompted by nature to comprehend the whole breadth of being; in its notion it perceives all, and in the notion of all, it contemplates itself; under the concept of the truth it knows all, and under the concept of the good it desires all. (15)

In his *Five Questions*, Ficino demonstrates that the only coherent view of the universe is that the human mind, as the highest expression of the soul, must be of the same order of perfection as God himself. Ficino specifically adopts the scholastic form of proof, the *Questions*, to make evident both to the skeptics of the atheist variety and to the scholastic dogmatists the necessity of his argument.

Ficino achieves his elaboration relying on only one elementary assumption: perfection exists within the universe. His unique realization is that the human mind participates in that perfection and therefore human praxis must correspond naturally (i.e., lawfully) to seeking perfection.

Each of all natural species proceeds according to a certain principle. (16)

This is Ficino's principle of "*appetitus naturalis*". He and Pico are explicit that someone who resists the natural perfection of his soul is not human, in the species sense of human.

Nero was, so to speak, not a man but a monster, being akin to man only by his skin. Had he really been a man he would have loved other men as members of the same body. For as individual men are under one Idea and under one species they are like one man. Therefore, I think, among all the virtues the sages called by the name of man himself, only that virtue that loves and helps all men as brothers deriving in a long series from one father, in other words, humanity. (17)

In his second fundamental principle, "*primum in aliquo genere*," Ficino identifies the general law underlying generation and development in the universe. In it he establishes that the essence of each species is also its cause, and that members of each species in respect to their essence or "*primum*" are predicates whose essential nature or appetite is to seek their perfection in respect to that essence. Here, in primitive but nevertheless clearly discernable form, is the kernel of the notion of the self-subsisting positive.

In this common order of the whole, all things, no matter how diverse, are brought back to unity, according to a single determined harmony and rational plan. (18)

Since each *primum* or species-essence seeks in turn its own source in God, or universal essence, the entire chain of being is animated by its natural tendency (*appetitus naturalis*) to self-perfection. Self-perfection is the invariant of God's universe. Thus, perfectibility of the universe is the law of the universe.

If individual motions are brought to completion according to such a wonderful order, then certainly the universal motion of the cosmos cannot be lacking in perfect order. (19)

From the condition in which the intellect exercises freedom to know its true nature, natural does not mean without effort. It is the exercise of truly human faculties that demands the greatest effort:

if we have concentrated our powers in this most fruitful part of the soul, then without doubt by means of this highest part itself, that is by means of the mind, we shall ourselves have the power of creating mind. (20)

It is clear from such a statement that Ficino has penetrated the activity of his own mind and identified creative mentation, "the highest part," as its characteristic feature.

For Ficino the highest part, the intellect, strives to make the entire universe an object for itself. The intellect strives to know itself as universal:

the intellect strives to bring it about that the universe in a certain manner should become intellect. (21)

Creative mentation, mind creating mind, is the generative principle of the universe itself, by which the intellect, both in substance and in form, realizes the highest form of perfection.

Counterpose to Ficino's notions of universe and intellect the proposed explanation of universal causation espoused by such zero-growth fanatics as the Dominicans, or the literary atheists such as Valla.

The Dominican Way represents a true picture of the reductionist mode of thinking. It assumes a static universe in which each individual is considered from the standpoint of simple self-evidence. God punishes or rewards on the dictates of purely external features. Salvation is a purely mechanical matter. Freedom is the aberration from the path, the merely wild or licentious, as in the secular themes of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Thus, life is reduced either to the chains of external authority or to anarchism. For Valla atheism is secular anarchy.

It was particularly the scientific tendencies typical of advanced thinking that enraged these pathetic "thinkers." The scientific tradition was actually guilty of seeking to achieve man's hegemony over

nature. As in all metaphysical cults, including current zero-growth psychosis, the Dominicans assumed that the ecological holocaust was visited on man to punish him for such hubris, identified by them as greed.

Symptomatic of such pathology is Passavanti's published sermons, *The Mirror of True Penitence*, referred to above. The title is significant for throughout the Middle Ages the reductionist view of science was expressed in the notion "to hold a mirror up to nature..." The mirror reflects the disordered bestiality of man that Passavanti calls penitence.

By contrast, the scientific tendency most fully expressed by Ficino identifies the motion of the mind as penetrating the mere self-evident existence of things to divulge the truth in the underlying order:

Surely the condition natural to our intellect is that it should inquire into the cause of each thing and, in turn, into the cause of the cause (22)

Ficino considers the labor corresponding to creative mentation to be contemplative thought:

The higher soul's contemplation and natural disposition, which is desirous of learning and eager for inquiry...bring it about that, itself completely made into a thing contemplated, it may produce another thing contemplated... (23).

This does not mean he dismisses human activity. Rather, it is the empirical starting point for his contemplation:

the power and excellence of thinking and willing originate from the power of life (24)

The end however lies outside of existence in the true state of rest. Ficino restricts motion to the realm of Being where the soul must strive to attain perfection and therefore experience change. Perfection is identified with rest, changelessness. The realm of Being is surrounded by an ocean of fixed eternity.

Ficino is only able to conceive of an undifferentiated infinity. He can not truly locate development, and must deny value to the sensuous side of man's labor. Instead, he conceives of mental life as necessary only to prepare the soul for its true natural state in which, relieved of its physical imprisonment, it enjoys unending perfection.

Ficino simply can not reconcile the human mind with fixed order. He knows that the intellect can know all and through such knowledge know itself. But it also must exist within the Great Chain of Being whose lawful or logical order it can not change.

Ficino identifies Prometheus with the intellect, with creative powers. But Prometheus is also eternally tormented, and so he represents the psychological state of the soul in its mortal exile. Ficino claims that only when freed to return to its natural abode in infinite perfection does the soul recover bliss, but what he actually draws back from is the hubris to acknowledge that the soul can only be satisfied by *overthrowing* the fixed order of God.

If there is no first and last degree among things, each middle degree will depend on infinite higher degrees and produce infinite lower degrees...Consequently it will be of immense power and full of infinite perfections. Thus all things would be equally infinite, one thing would not be more excellent than another, the cause would not be better than the effect. (25)

## IX THE ACTIVITY OF THE WILL

Ficino recognized that the active human intellect was the mediation between God and Being. He did not view existence "objectively," outside of human action. Only when the intellect, or soul, submitted to the process of moral judgement was it capable of grasping the inner coherence of being. The question remained: in what way did man participate in God's perfection?

Two conceptions of the logos, the perfected soul, coexisted in Humanist circles. Christ, in Piero della Francesca's *Resurrected Christ*, (Fig. 7) accepts his Resurrection. He is not the cause of the action but consciously receives God's perfecting force. In the *Resurrected Christ*, painted by Piero's Florentine contemporary Andrea del Castagno, Christ actively

determines his Resurrection; that is, Christ is the subject of the action. (Fig. 8)

Castagno's representation illustrates just that active will that Ficino identifies as the extension of the intellect into the realm of being and through whose actions the intellect changes (perfects) nature's order. It is this conception in embryo that is attributed to the Humanist Saints Jerome and Augustine. Both Castagno and his successor Botticelli recognize in these men the Humanist struggle to conceive for themselves the perfection Christ embodied.

Jerome is the hubristic soul that risks his very being to pursue perfection. His active pursuit of his love of Christ coheres perfectly with Ficino's and particularly Pico's conception of the soul's progress from

philosophy to theology only to be finally reunited with God through eternal life.

In *St. Augustine*, the Renaissance hero's concern for his place in perfection is even more direct. The content of Augustine's reflection in Botticelli's picture of him is this: **if the mind is truly capable of grasping perfection (Christ) its essence too must be perfectible, for perfection can not be conceived by an imperfect instrument. (Fig. 9)**

The fundamental content of the Humanist conception of man was that he differed from all other species of being precisely because he alone conceived the perfection in God of which he was also capable. This perfectibility, expressed in Ficino's doctrine of the immortality of the individual soul, distinguished Humanism as a whole from the late medieval attitude that God was infinitely distant from man. But was man essentially an observer in a static realm of being, or was he an active participant in a dynamic universe, which implied that God himself was capable of change?

The entire struggle for Humanism to evolve a developed conception of the role of the creative human intellect, the dynamic force within the realm of being, was carried out under the constant threat of the destruction of Humanist urban society. Feudal powers were always ready to revert to military plunder to achieve their aims. Cosimo de' Medici had originally come to power in 1434 in a struggle against the ruling oligarchs who had attempted to revive the power of the discredited aristocratic magnate faction of Florence. In 1478, the very foundations of the government of his descendant, Lorenzo the Magnificent, were shaken by the conspiracy of the Pazzi family with Pope Julius IV to reduce Florence to a fiefdom of the Papacy. Lorenzo survived, but from that time Florence was on the defensive, struggling to carry out a holding action against the encroachments of its opponents. The mood of urban Humanism passed from optimism to ever increasing pessimism.

That is the climate in which Botticelli illustrates the central themes of Ficino's neo-Platonism. He successfully grasps the polemic of the soul's active side, the intellect, against its bestial side, its mere being (*das Sein* — shit) but in the climate of decay he can no longer locate this within the realm of existence, only beyond and outside it. The central irony of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (Fig. 10) is that Venus represents perfected humanity: she is the virtue which attracts the soul. Precisely because she appears in the *form* of a beautiful woman, the undeveloped soul is seduced by the mere surface of things — her carnal beauty. But for the soul that has

**genuinely struggled with the entirety of being, beauty is virtue.**

The weakness of Botticelli's conception is not unintended pornography, but his surrender to an entirely despairing mood, for to embrace the Venus *humanitas* is to abandon existence. Botticelli genuinely embraces neo-Platonism, but only that anti-scientific, mystical side that conceives the soul in flight from existence. The trap Ficino and Botticelli fall into is that if the Chain of Being is conceived as a progression towards the infinite point of perfection, God, then Being as such never attains perfection. However, since the soul through intellect participates in (knows) perfection, it must do so *outside* of Being — in the realm of ideal beauty.

In the climate of intellectual and moral retreat, Ficino views the world exclusively in these terms. His Platonism increasingly relies on the early Christian neo-Platonist mystic Plotinus who conceives perfection as pure immanence. Ficino, who became a priest in 1473, was promoted to canon of the Cathedral of Florence in 1485. His own ascent in the hierarchy conformed to his increasing reliance on mystical hierarchical conceptions of perfection.

Pico's oration, *On the Dignity of Man*, prepared in 1482 for delivery to the assembly of the Pope and Cardinals in Rome, was simultaneously a polemic against the Pope who had plotted the Pazzi conspiracy and against the mystical Plotinian idealism that increasingly infected Ficino's circle. He passionately identifies as unique to man the freedom of will and its active expression through love. In the assembly of Cardinals, his description of a man abandoned to the senses who crawls like a beast would have made more than one man's flesh crawl, and the reigning Pope Innocent IX hastily cancelled the oration.

Pico's emphasis on man's passionate exercise of his will through love was an explicit criticism of Ficino's ideal of Platonic love. But Pico himself was not able to overcome the dependence on the Mother Church. He could not address his love directly to God, but only to mother:

we shall fly up with winged feet...to the embraces of our blessed mother and enjoy that wished for peace, indivisible bond...through which all rational souls...shall in some ineffable way become altogether one (26).

Thus in Pico, too, the overwhelming desire for peace, for dissolution in the ineffable embrace of the Holy Mother, the Holy Church, overcame the passionate struggle to perfect existence.

# Art and Neo-Platonism in the Renaissance

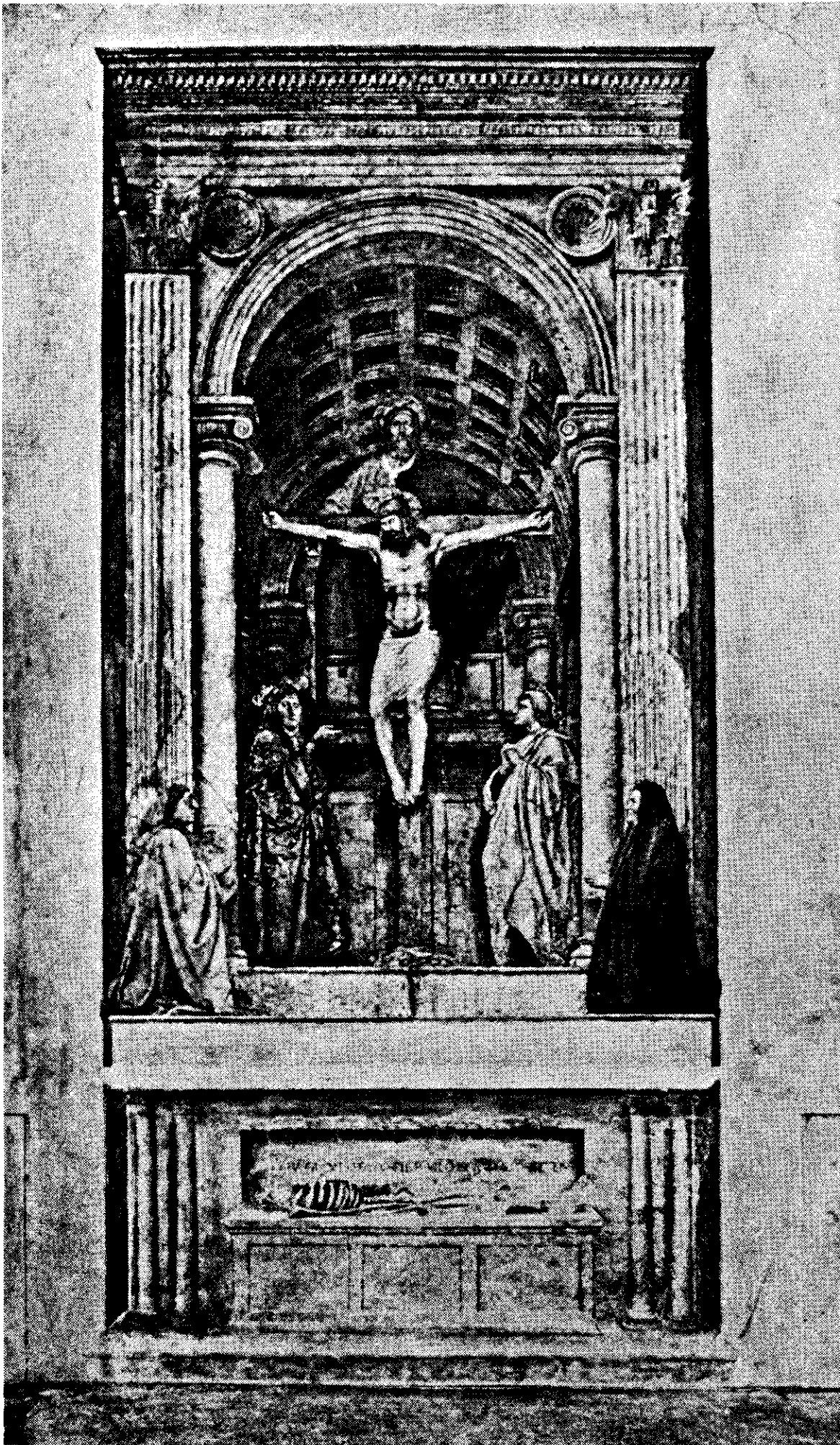


Fig.1 Masaccio. *Trinity*, Florence, S. Maria Novella, circa 1425.

Fig, 1a Masaccio. View of the *Trinity* on the wall of S. Maria Novella.

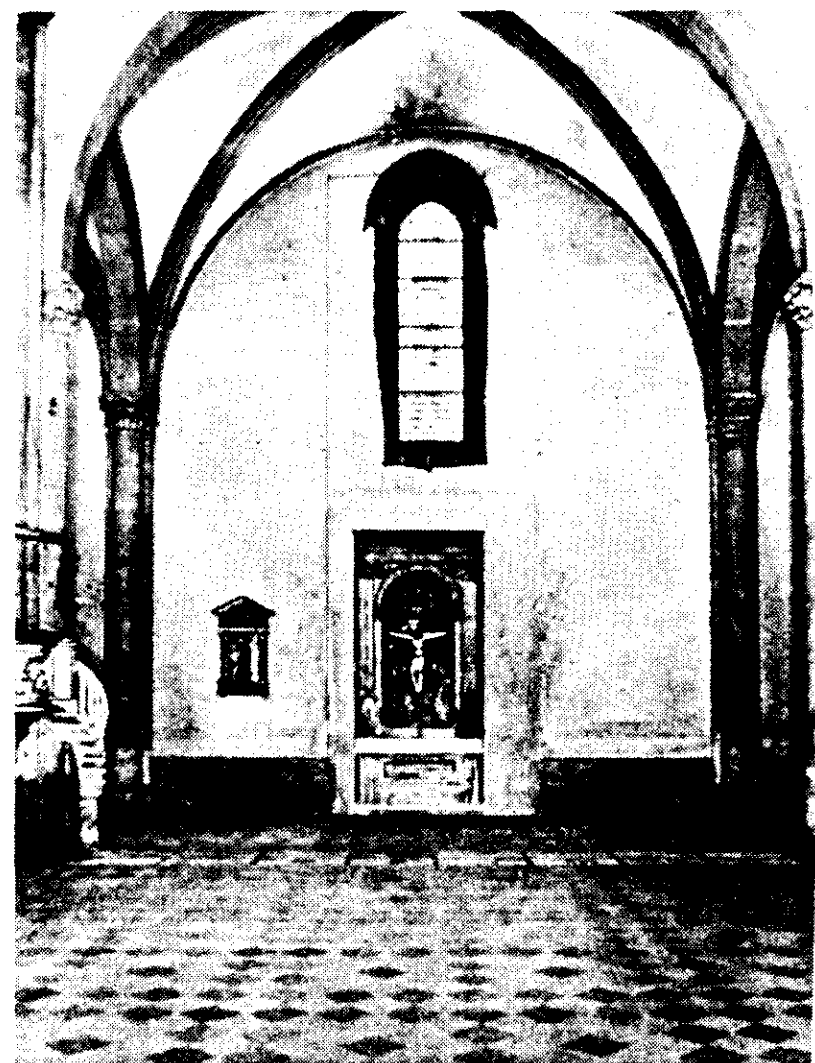




Fig. 2 Masaccio. *The Tribute Money*, Florence, Brancacci Chapel, S. Maria del Carmine, circa 1427.



Fig. 3 Masaccio. *Miracle of the Shadow*, Florence, Brancacci Chapel, S. Maria del Carmine, circa 1427.



Fig. 4 Fra Angelico. *St. Stephen Preaching* (upper left, end wall) view of the chapel of Nicholas V, circa 1455.

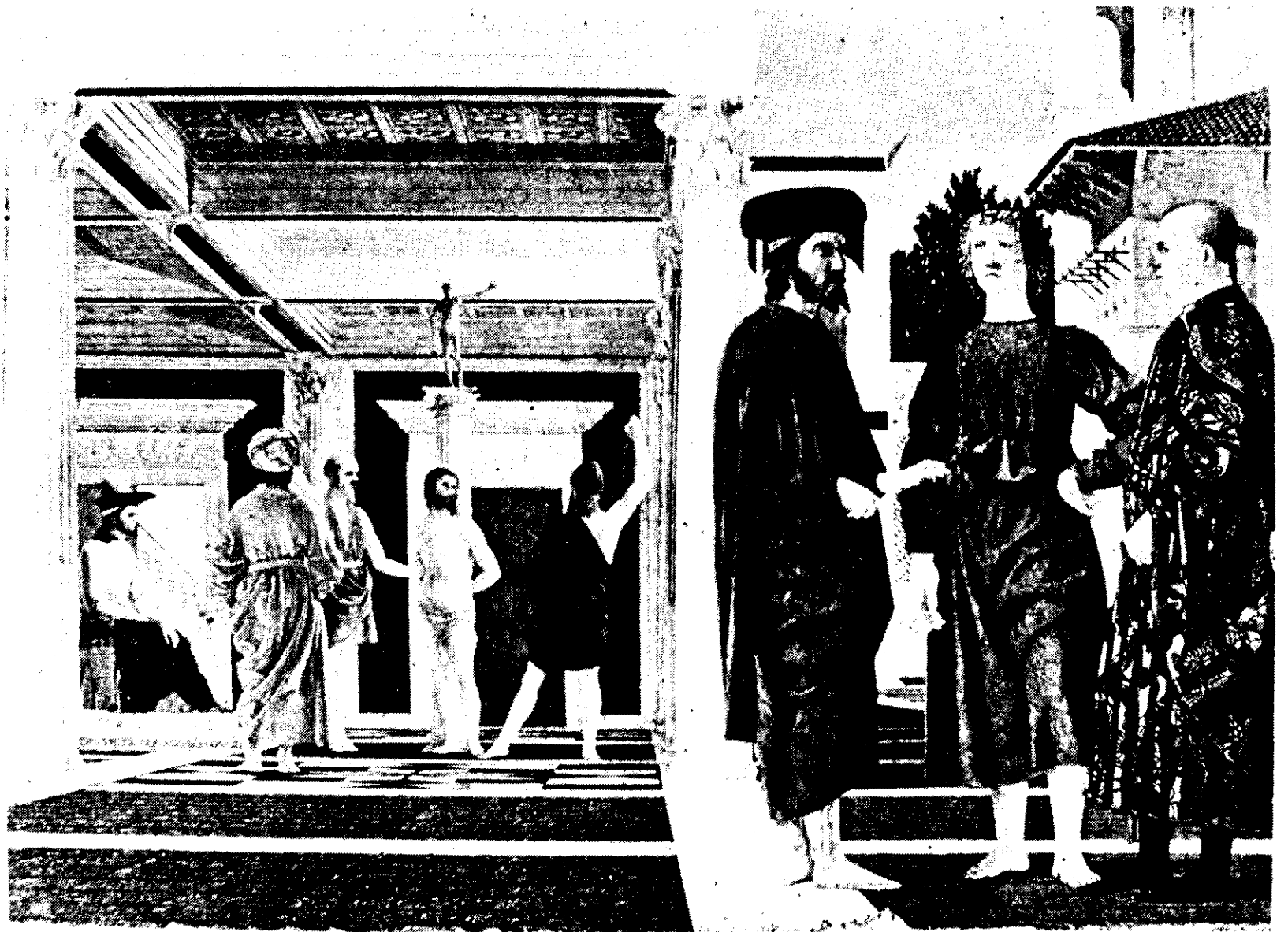


Fig. 5 Piero della Francesca. *Flagellation*, Urbino, National Gallery, circa 1456-57.



Fig. 6 Paolo Uccello. *The Deluge*, Florence, Chiostro Verde, S. Maria Novella, circa 1445.

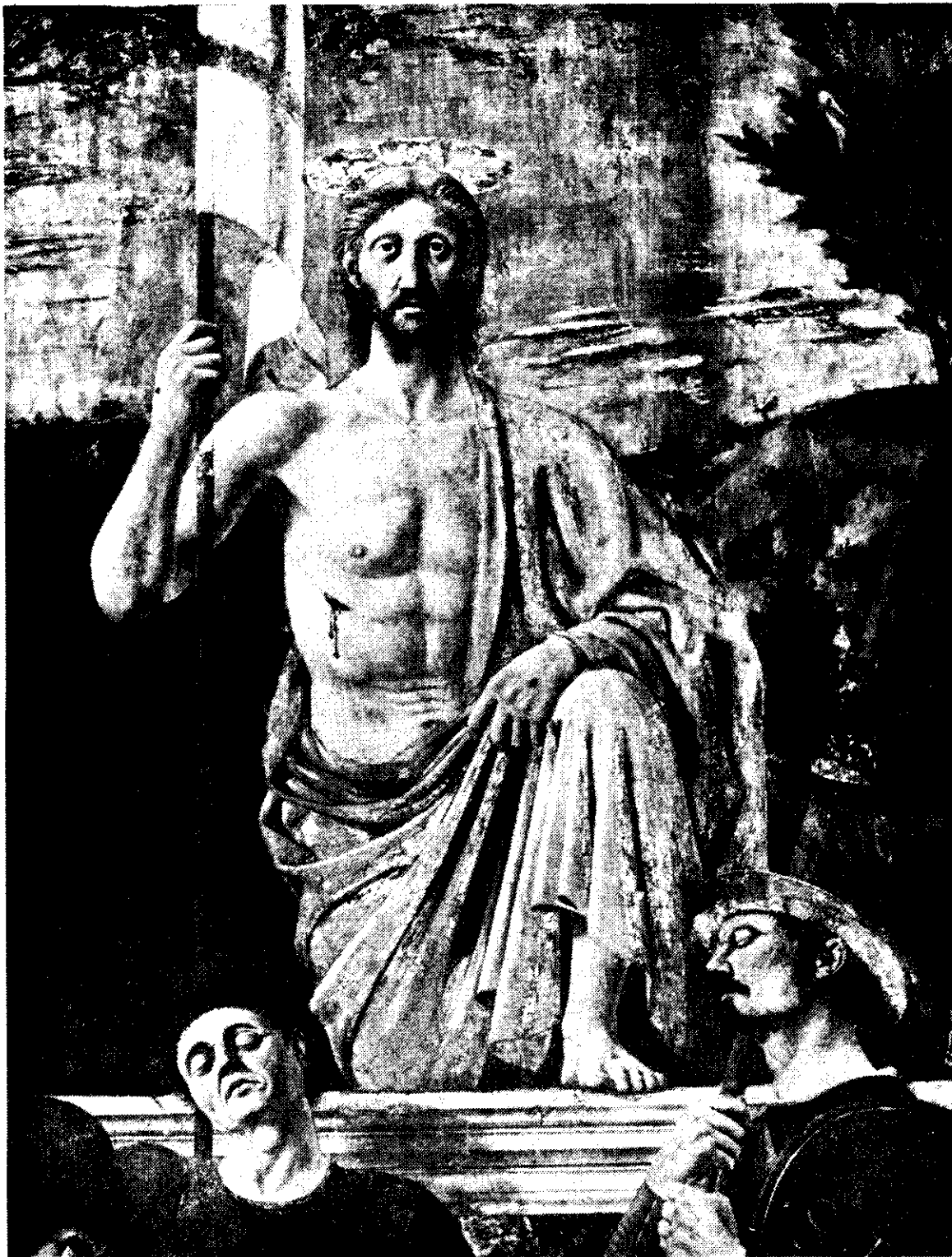


Fig. 7 Piero della Francesca. *Resurrection*, Borgo Sansepolcro, Italy, Communal Palace, circa 1445. (detail)



Fig. 8 Andrea del Castagno. *The Resurrection*, Florence, former refectory of S. Apollonia, circa 1445-50.



Fig. 9 Sandro Botticelli. *St. Augustine in Meditation*, Florence, Church of Ognissanti, 1480.

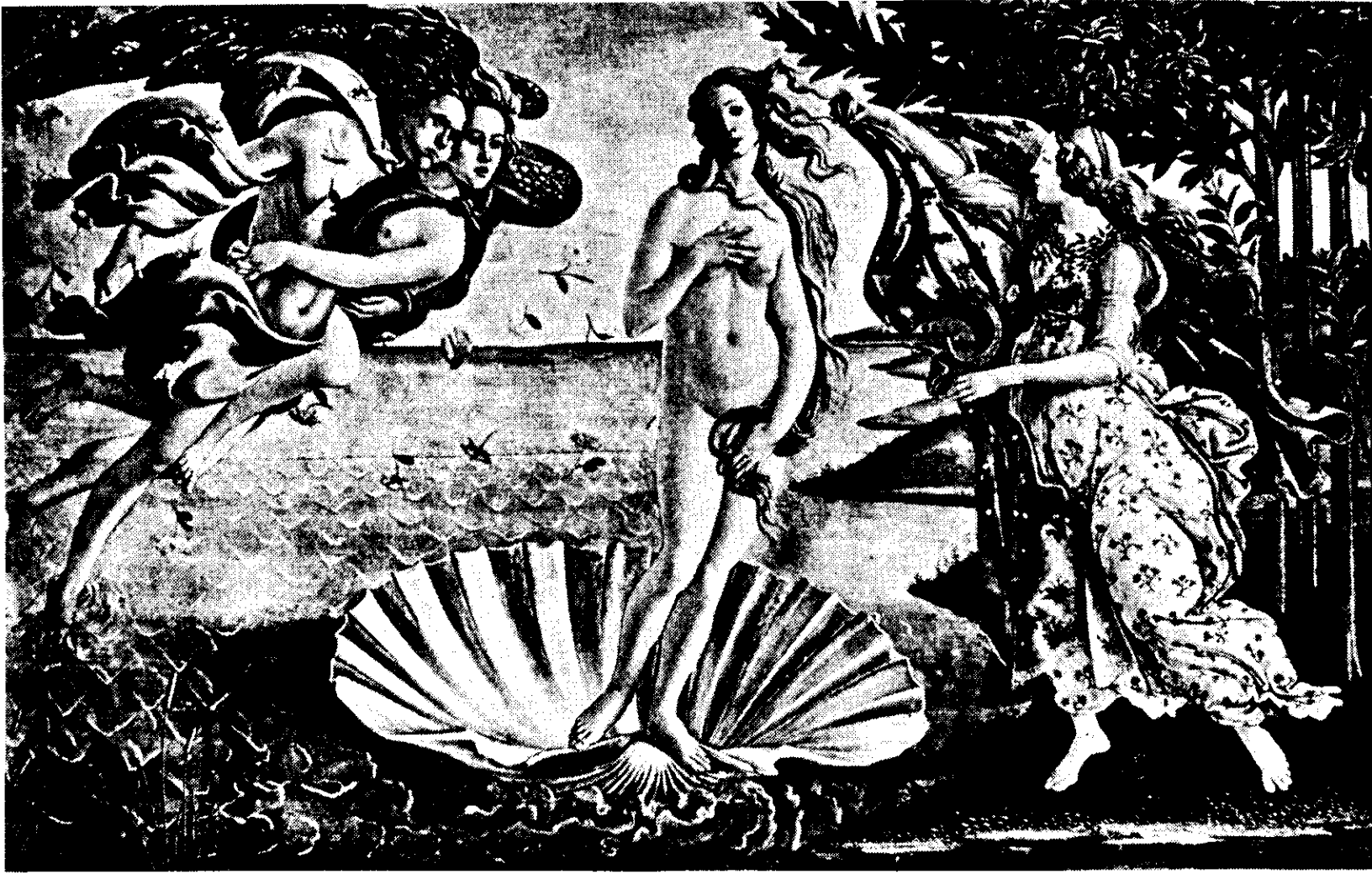


Fig. 10 Sandro Botticelli. *The Birth of Venus*, Florence, Uffizi Gallery, circa 1480.

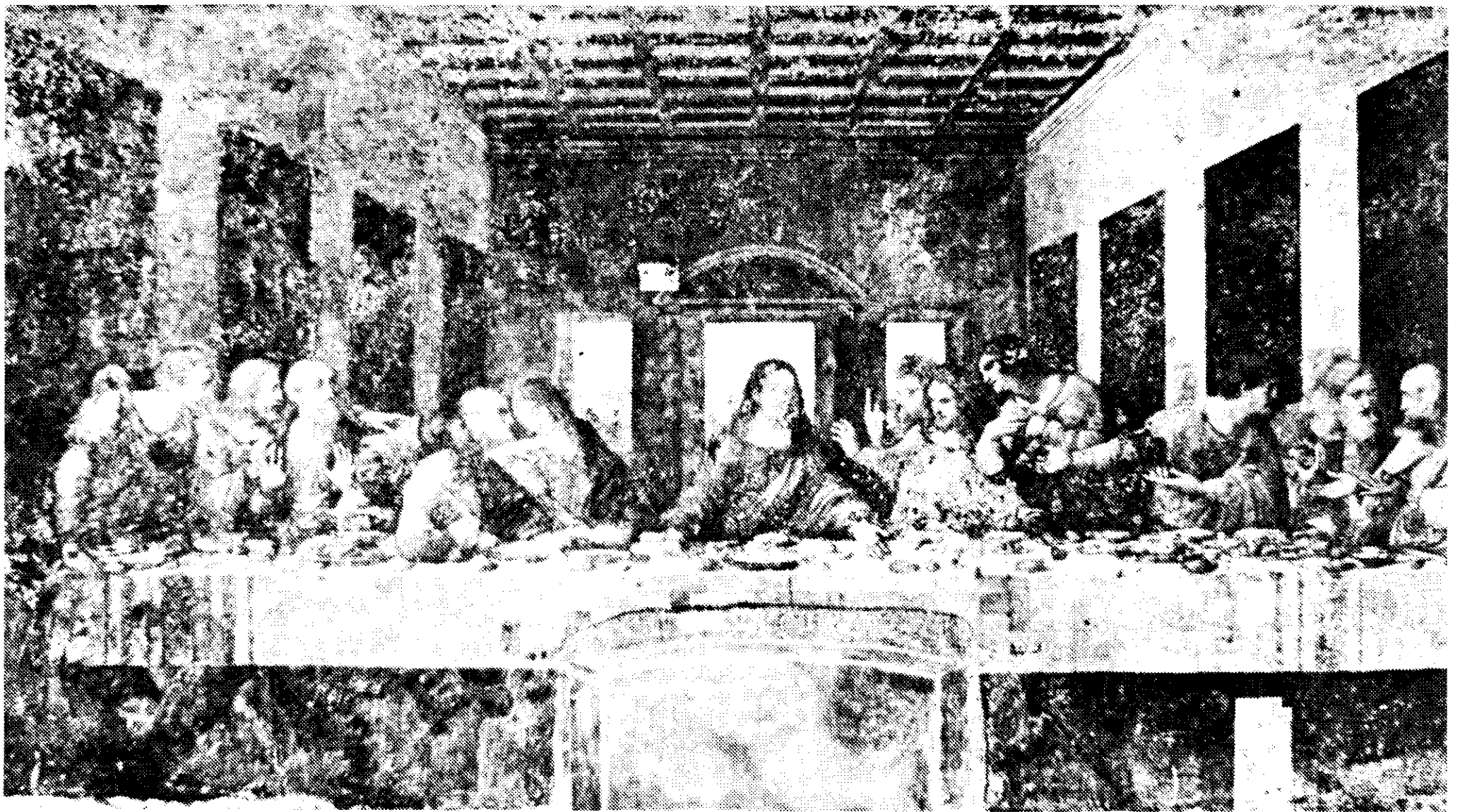


Fig.11 Leonardo da Vinci. *The Last Supper*, Milan, S. Maria delle Grazie, circa 1495-98.



Fig. 12 Andrea del Castagno. *The Last Supper*, Florence, S. Apollonia, circa 1445-50.

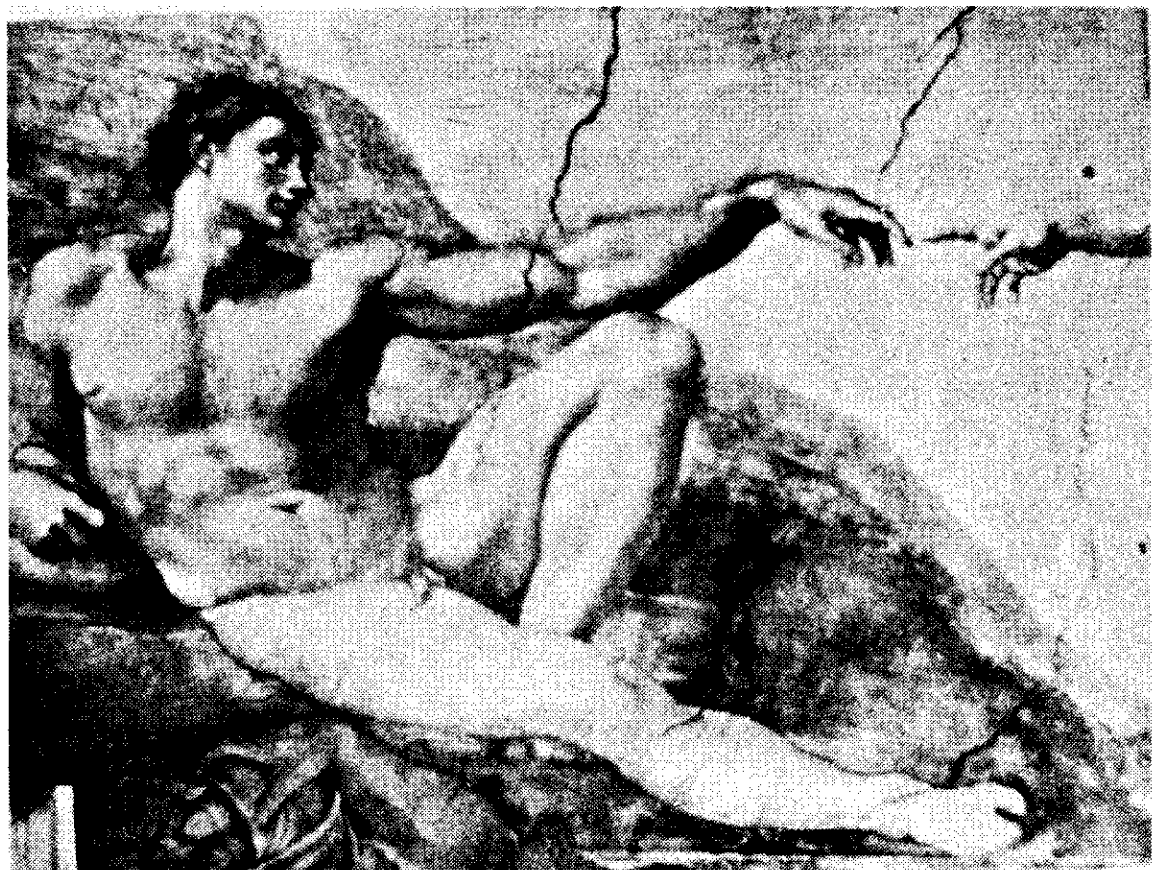


Fig. 13 Michelangelo. *Adam*, detail of Sistine Chapel ceiling, The Vatican, Rome, 1508-22.



Fig. 11a Leonardo da Vinci. View of *The Last Supper* on the wall of S. Maria delle Grazie.

# The Irony of Perspective: Renaissance Art as Political Cartoon

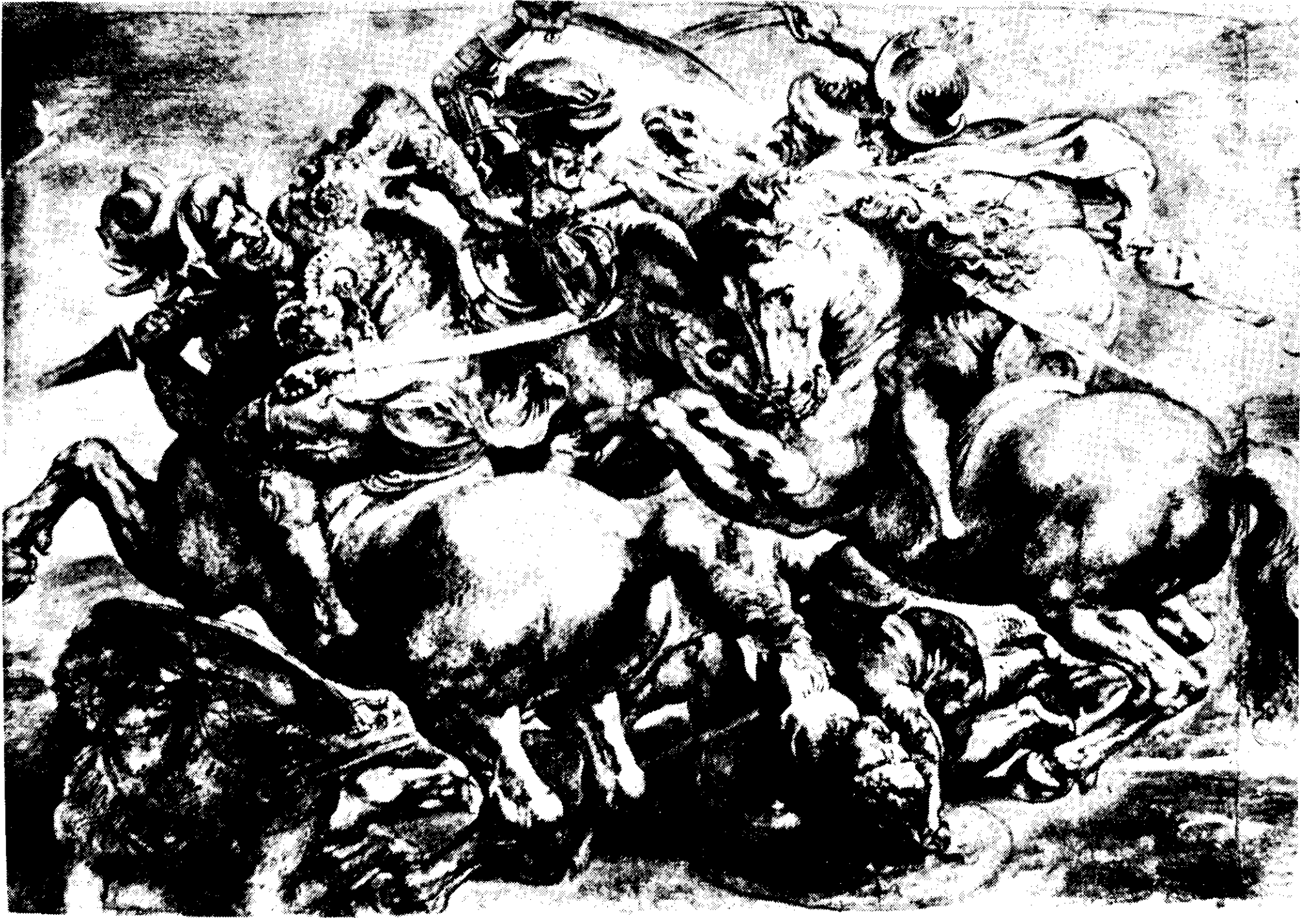


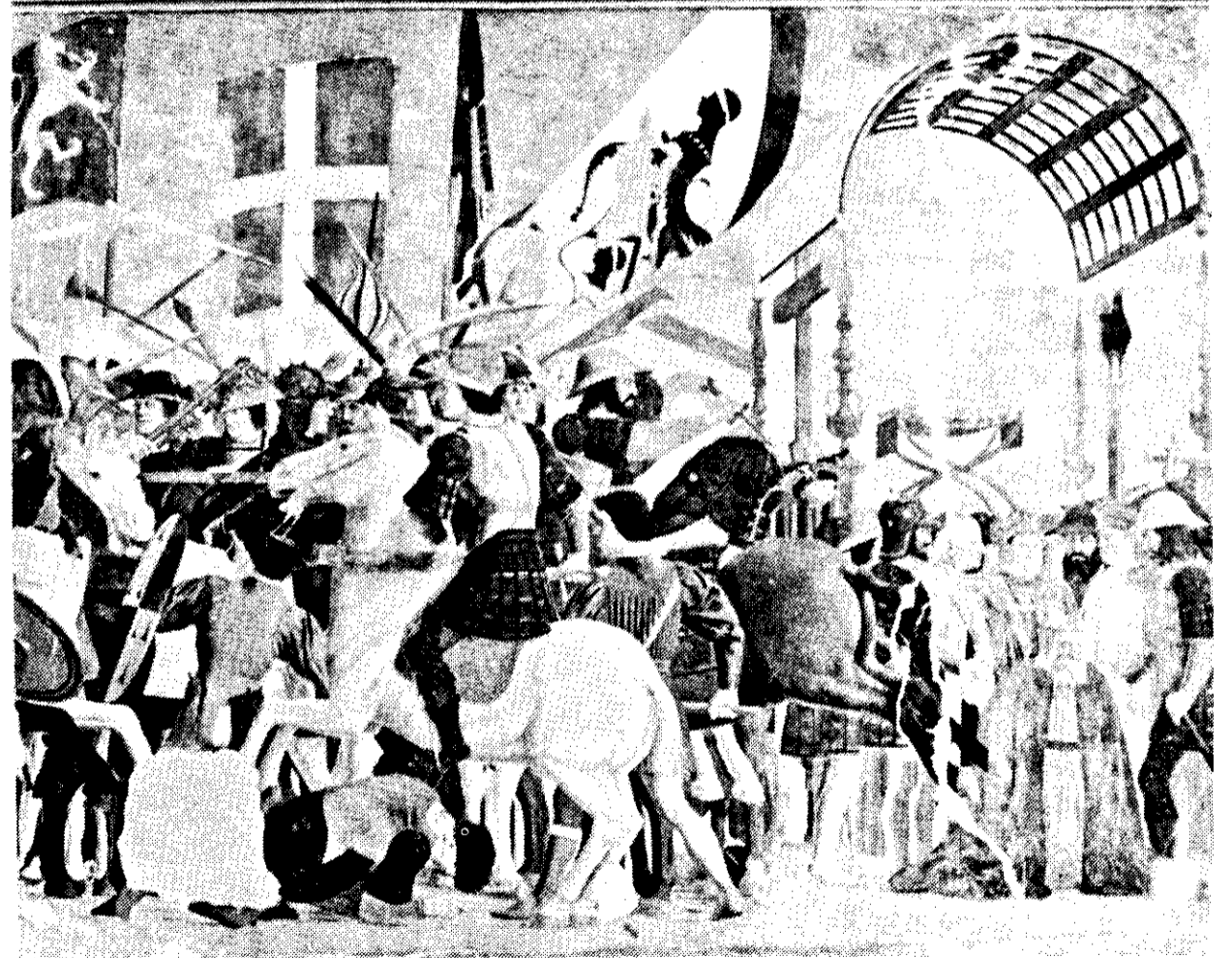
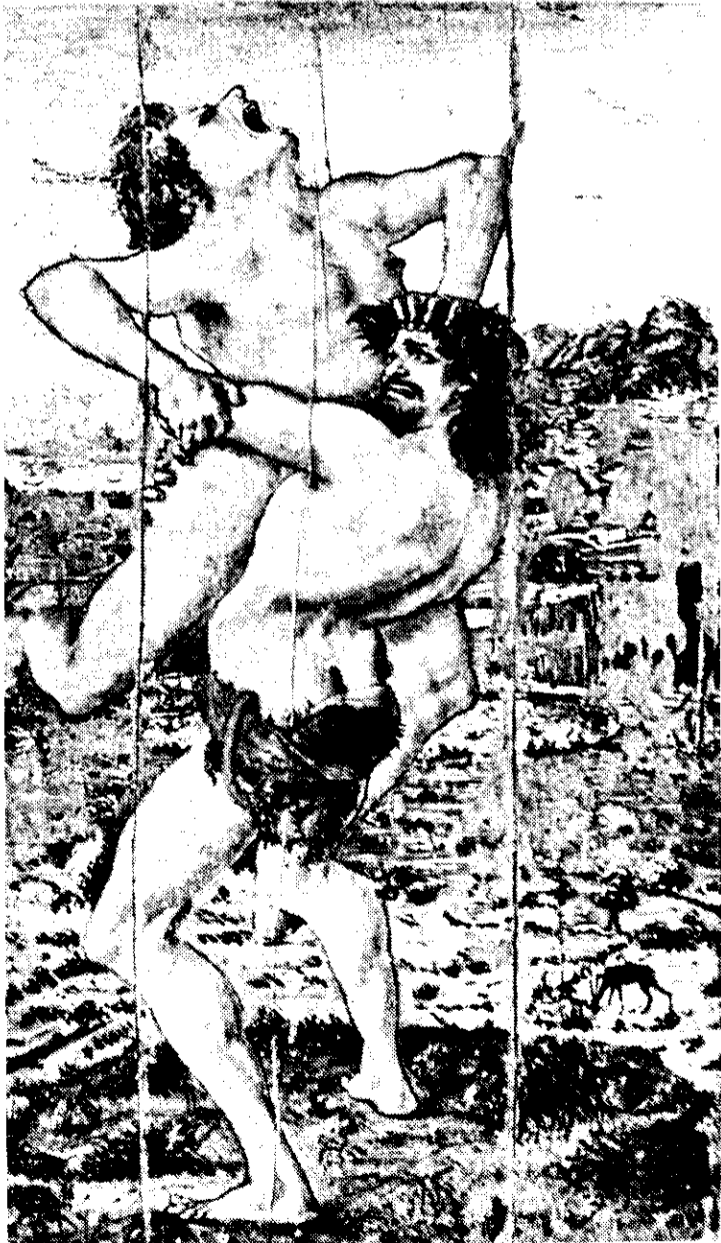
Fig.1  
After Leonardo da Vinci.  
*Battle for the Standard*,  
central portion of the fresco  
*Battle of Anghiari*,  
Florence, circa 1505. (This  
drawing after Leonardo's  
lost work was done done by  
Peter Paul Rubens in the  
early 17th century and is in  
the Louvre, Paris.)



Fig. 2 Leonardo da Vinci. Study of horses,  
*Battle of Anghiari*, Royal Library of Windsor.



Fig. 3 Paolo Uccello. *The Battle of San Romano*, London, National Gallery, circa 1480.



(left)

Fig. 4 Antonio Pollaiuolo. *Hercules and Anteus*, Florence, Uffizi Gallery, circa 1480.

(above)

Fig. 5 Piero della Francesca. *Heraclius Defeating Khosro* (detail), Arezzo Church of S. Francesco, circa, 1460-70. (Heraclius was a Byzantine emperor; Khosro was a Persian emperor.)

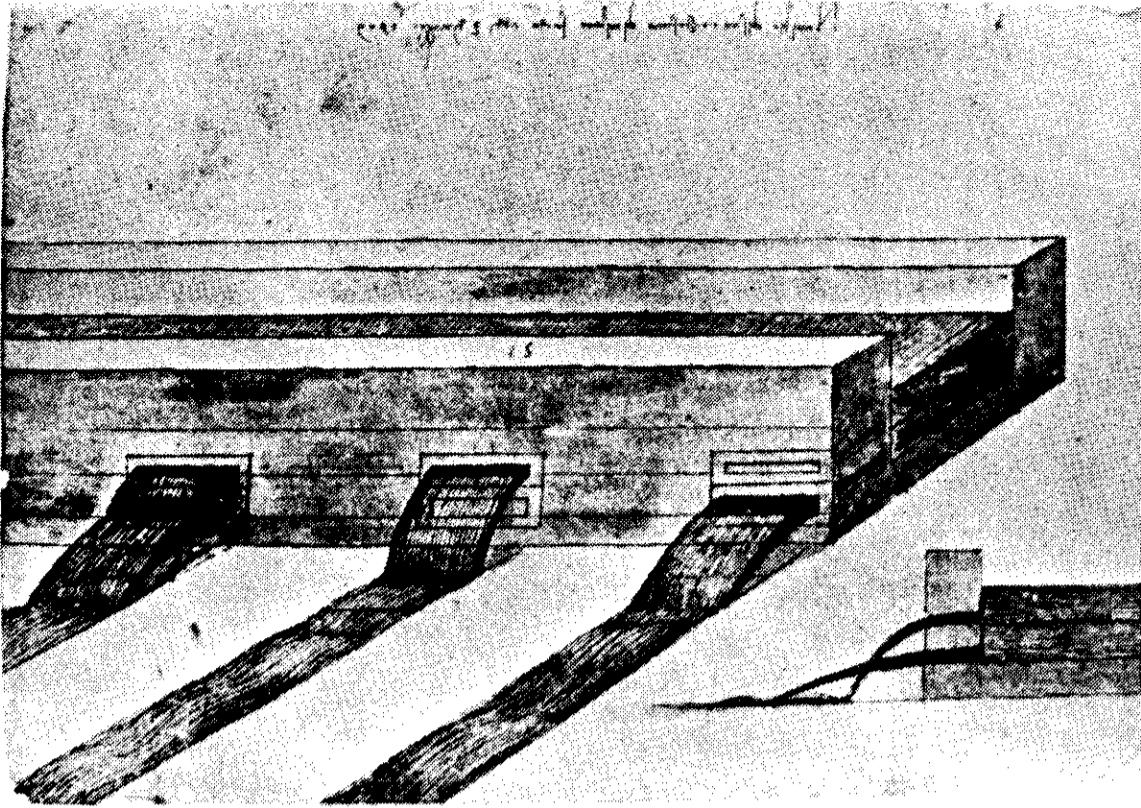


Fig. 6 Leonardo da Vinci. Canal sketch, Codice Atlantico.



Fig. 7 Pietro Lorenzetti. *Birth of the Virgin*, Siena Pinacoteca, circa 1340.



Fig. 9 Piero della Francesca. *Resurrection*, Borgo Sansepolcro, Italy, Communal Palace, circa 1445.



Fig. 8 Robert Campin (Master of Flemalle).  
*The Annunciation (Merode Altarpiece)*. New York, The Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum of Art, circa 1425-28.



Fig. 8c Robert Campin. Detail of the messenger, *The Annunciation* altarpiece.



(center) Fig. 8b Robert Campin. Donor Portraits, detail *The Annunciation* altarpiece.



(right) Fig. 8a Robert Campin. St. Joseph in his shop, detail, *The Annunciation* altarpiece.



Fig. 10 Giotto. *Noli Me Tangere*, Angel at the tomb and Christ appearing to Mary Magdalen, Padua, Arena Chapel, circa 1305.



Fig. 11 Agnolo Bronzino. *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*, London, National Gallery, circa 1524.





Fig. 12  
Sandro Botticelli .  
*Adoration of the Magi*,  
Florence, Uffizi  
Gallery,  
circa 1475-78.



Fig. 13 Leonardo da Vinci.  
*Adoration of the Magi*,  
Florence, Uffizi Gallery,  
1430-83.



Fig. 14 Hugo van der Goes. *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Portinari Altarpiece), Florence, Uffizi Gallery, circa 1477-1482.



Fig. 13a Leonardo da Vinci. Detail of *Adoration of the Magi* (right foreground).



Fig. 14a Hugo van der Goes. Detail of shepherds, *Adoration of the Shepherds*.

Fig.15 Sandro Botticelli.  
*Spring*,  
Florence, Uffizi Gallery,  
circa 1478.



Fig. 16 Domenico Ghirlandaio.  
*Adoration*,  
Florence, S. Trinita,, 1485.

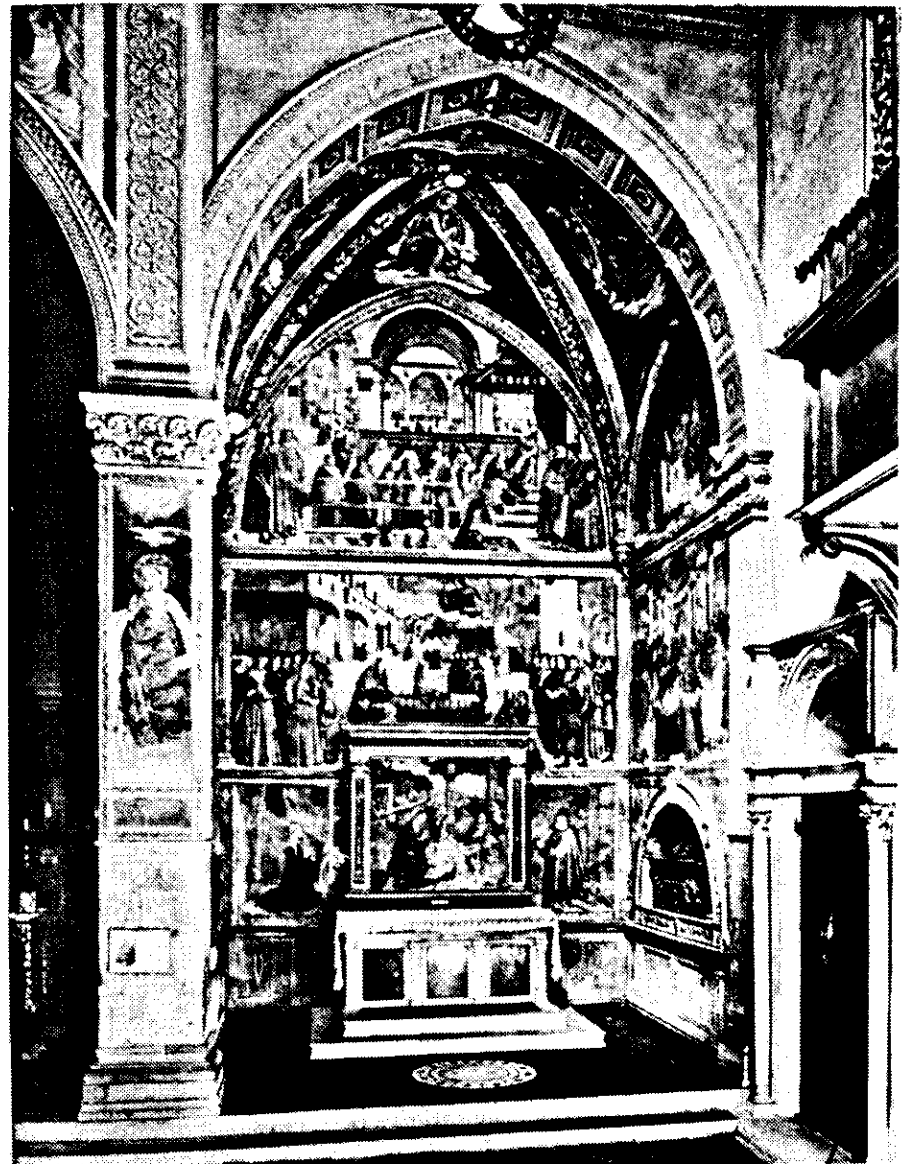


Fig. 17 Domenico Ghirlandaio.  
End wall of Sassetti Chapel, Florence S. Trinita:  
scenes from the *Life of St. Francis*, portrayed in Florentine  
settings, and the *Adoration* altarpiece.



Fig. 18 Leonardo da Vinci. *Deluge*, Windsor Castle, Royal Library, circa 1515.

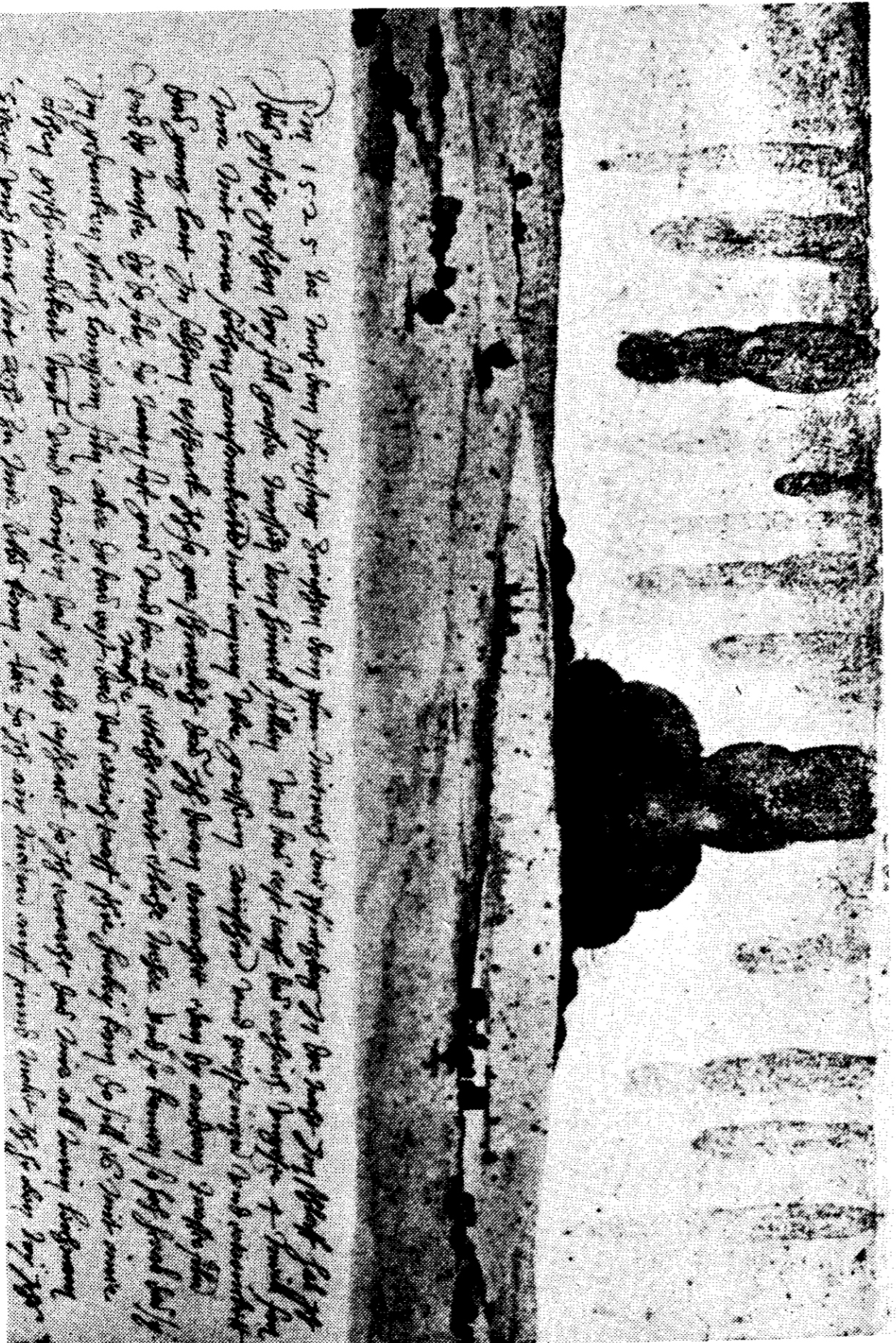


Fig. 19 Albrecht Durer. *Flood*, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1525.

# X LEONARDO

The fundamental antinomy of the Renaissance conception of perfection is this: only if God is capable of being expressed in dynamic terms, himself undergoing the process of development, can his existence cohere with active development taking place in and through real men. As long as God is conceived as a fixed point outside the lawful progress of all existence, then no matter how close we come to reaching perfection, we remain forever infinitely distant from it.

Ficino had confronted just this problem, and in his emphasis on the human soul through the activity of its intellect acting as the mediation between perfection and Being, he opened the path to the resolution of the antinomy; but, in preserving the medieval Aristotelian notion of Being as essentially inanimate, he was forced to locate the creative, active, quality of mind outside of Being, in the realm of the ideal. It is this ideal virtue, the *Venus humanitas*, that Botticelli illustrated.

To avoid the trap that Ficino and Botticelli fell into, required locating perfection in Being. But then one had to dissolve the hierarchical structure of the universe and, in particular, destroy the Mother Church and the Papacy whose ideological power lay entirely in mediating one's fixed and finite relation to God. Pico yearned to do this but ultimately shrank back into the protective embrace of the Church. What lay beneath the attraction of the Church was the terror of the unknown, of a universe in which one would forever lose one's way in an infinity of infinities.

It was precisely this step which Leonardo da Vinci took which made possible the uniting of all scientific inquiry into nature (the realm of Being) with the Ficinian notion of perfection. Rather than representing some empiricist opponent of the neo-Platonists, Leonardo explicitly conceived of himself as the great reformer of their work, one who was able to resituate the problem of perfection within Being. The problem of self-perfection then becomes the process of discovering perfection within Being, the perfection of knowledge. The free activity of the mind is the process by which the mind explicates its own true nature.

To locate perfection within existence, however, posed devastating problems. It meant that perfection must be at once finite and infinite, complete and incomplete. Leonardo's solution to these problems rests on the work of Nicholas Cusanus, and it is here that he surpasses Ficino's formulation.

Ficino had recognized the mind's perfectibility because the mind could conceive of God's existent

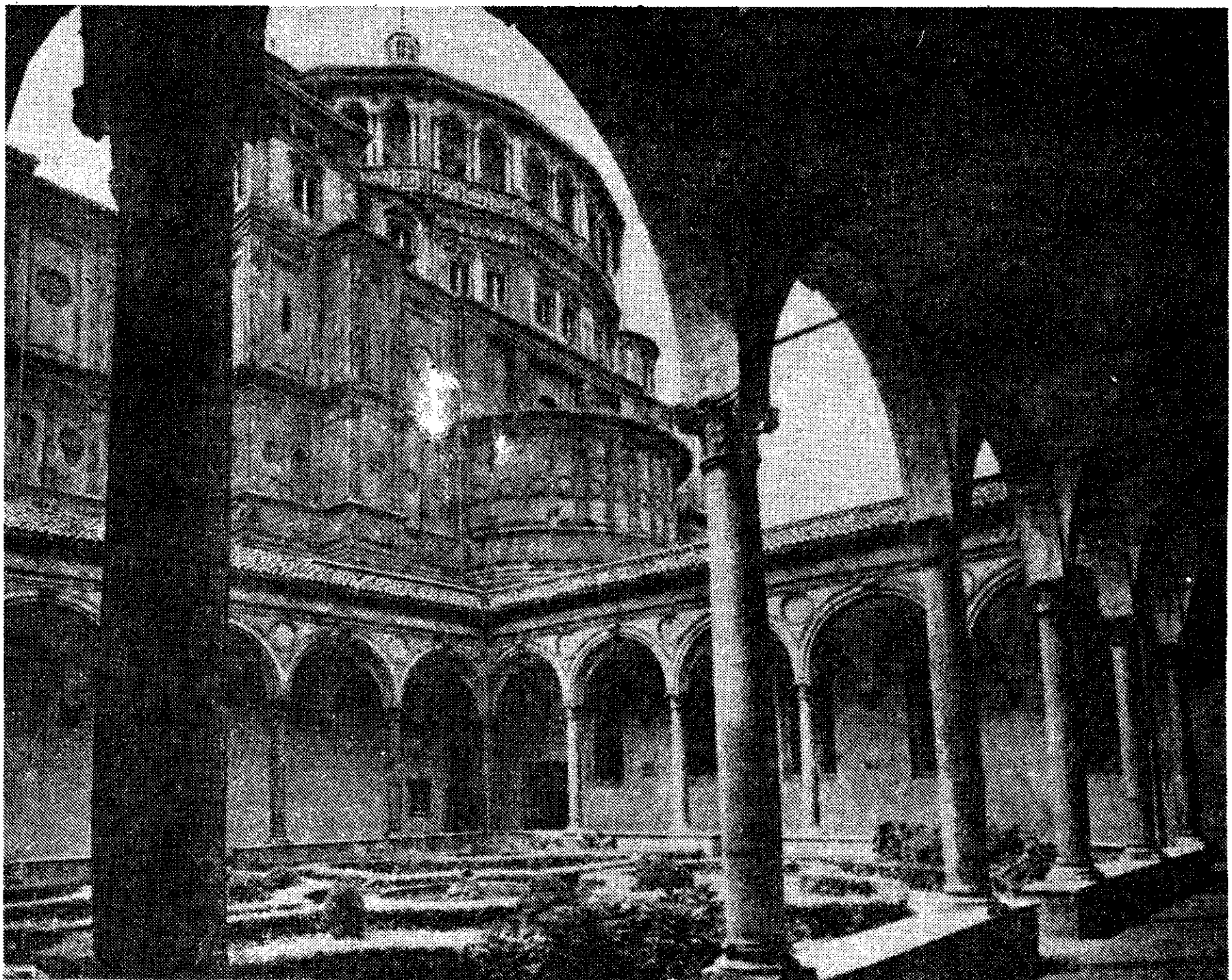
perfection. But, it could never attain perfection as mortal mind. It could only do so when it lost — divested itself of — its most unique quality, its existence. Cusanus posed the problem differently. Mind most genuinely experienced God's perfection through the recognition of its limit with respect to that perfection. Knowledge however can not establish a limit unless it has already transgressed it. The problem can be stated thus: what is it that is known when we know God as the complete other of our knowledge of our own limit?

God must be the essence, the simple idea of existence. But this content can not be known by the finite individual in himself. In place of the human being as an individual, a self-evident particular existence, there must be humanity which possesses universal content. This universal humanity Cusanus identifies with Christ.

Christ is both the integration of all existence because he includes within himself all things, and the differentiation from existence because he is the intensification of things as they truly are, but which they never are in themselves. But, as Pico pointed out, this is precisely what man is: he is all things and that which is distinct from the rest of being because he has no fixed identity. To recognize Christ as *humanitas* is to identify in man's nature both his finite limit and his capacity for infinite existence. It is to render perfection attainable to man within terms of his own nature, whereas to represent *humanitas* as Venus is to express perfection as ineffable, forever unattainable within existence.

Christ *humanitas* is the subject of Leonardo's *Last Supper*. It lays out the content of 80 years of thought. In so doing, it is a complete break with the previous banal treatment of the subject, and it is the high point in the Renaissance polemic against all the obscurantism and anti-Humanism of the medieval worldview still rampant in Dominican theology. (Fig. 11)

The *Last Supper* was painted in the dining hall of the Dominican monastery of S. Maria delle Grazie in Milan. Milan was roughly a half-century behind Florentine development, and, in the 1480s and 1490s, the Renaissance struggle against the Dominicans was just beginning. Imagine, if you will, this Dominican dining room, the monks pledged to the rule of silence, seated at long tables under the baleful eye of their superior. He alone would be seated at the short end of the hall on a raised platform opposite Leonardo's fresco. Each of the silent monks is precisely one of those individual souls withdrawn into himself who, in



The Cloisters of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan.

seeking God for himself, negates his humanity. Outside the walls of the monastery, the secular commercial life of the city quickens and intensifies. It is in this outside, "alien" world that the Renaissance notion of universal takes root.

Like a blow, Leonardo's fresco with its intense and voluble emotion smashes into the silent world of the monks. It is the blow of the lay world where perfection is located in human activity. To drive the point home, Leonardo oriented the perspective so that it appears to be an extension of the room when seen from the slightly elevated height of the seated Prior. And to complete his attack, Leonardo used the features of the Prior, his bitter enemy, for the features of Judas.

Leonardo, however, also deliberately separated his picture from the world of the monks. In the dining hall, the architecture is Gothic; within the fresco, it is the secular Humanist architecture of Brunelleschi and Alberti. This distinguishes the content within the fresco as Humanist in terms.

In previous representations of the *Last Supper* by

such a Humanist as Castagno, (Fig. 12) Christ was undifferentiated from the Apostles. The event was conceived in strictly dramatic terms. In Leonardo's treatment, the emphasis shifts from the narrative to the concept. Christ is differentiated from the Apostles as the conjuncture of the perspective, the perfected center, and is simultaneously integrated into the world of existence by the very lines of perspective which distinguish . . . . The shock of the Apostles is their recognition of Christ's infinite nature, made real to them precisely because he is of their essence, he is of their humanity. That is precisely why he can and will be betrayed by Judas, who must deny his own humanity.

Leonardo's fresco was simultaneously a polemic against the Dominican world, the veil of silence, and the small circle of neo-Platonists around him in Milan who would periodically meet at the "*Accademia Leonardo da Vinci*." With them he polemicized against the mere contemplation of the ideal that had come to be their rule. The *Last Supper* illustrated that perfection that is the essence of one's own existence.

## XII BEYOND THE RENAISSANCE

Florence maintained its leadership of European Humanism because there the conceptions of perfection and progress were constantly advanced, at least through the 1470s. It is precisely at this point, however, that the limit of Florentine development is reached, not primarily for economic or political reasons, at least not in the vulgar sense; rather, it is the ideological limits in which political and economic policies are conceived that determine this limit. To surpass the previous conception of perfection, to arrive at an unambiguous formulation of self-perfection, required the dissolution of the Church-based hierarchy of being. But this is exactly what the Florentines were not prepared to do. They were tied to the Mother Church by the invisible bonds of fictitious wealth. In precisely the period when the Church as an institution had to be overthrown, the Florentine banks were increasing their demand for revenues from Papal tithes. Ironically, the sale of indulgences to raise these revenues established the precondition for the German Renaissance, which simultaneously achieved the break with the Church and put an end forever to Florentine hegemony.

Leonardo, who bitterly hated the Papacy, was sucked into the ideological undertow along with those who propitiated the Church. In the last 20 years of his life he was nothing more than an impotent wizard entertaining gullible feudal lords such as the King of France. In Florence itself, there reappeared that old Humanist taint, withdrawal from the world. The poetry of Lorenzo the Magnificent reeks of such sentiments. Michelangelo, in particular, redefines neo-Platonism as merely the captive soul wandering in exile through mortal existence. He is, however, simultaneously fascinated by the despised flesh.

This state of dissolution is the collapse of any meaningful relation between freedom and necessity. As long as freedom was conceived as the necessity of development, Humanism expressed the essential core of human well-being: the tendency of men to perfect their world through the activity of science and art. For Michelangelo, art becomes the pursuit of perfection as something in itself. *Adam* in the Sistine ceiling betrays a pornographic tendency because his physical beauty is set apart from his possession of a soul. (Fig. 13) *Adam* is pornographic specifically in respect to Botticelli's *Venus*, where physical beauty is not antagonistic to the soul, but is an intentional ironic reference to the soul, which lies beyond mere physical existence.

The source of this fetishism of perfection already

lies in Ficino, for he had only partly emancipated philosophy from theology. By locating perfection beyond human existence, Ficino laid the basis for viewing morality as opposed to immediate necessity. One expression of this is Michelangelo's alienated Platonism. Machiavelli's pragmatism is the other.

Nevertheless, we are fully justified in recognizing in Ficino the architect of those fundamental ideas of cognition from which have evolved in modern times the correct notions of human development. Ficino's reflections upon the interrelatedness of the perfection of the universe and the mind's capacity to know that perfection were practical in content, for Ficino was actually considering in what way real men had overcome the threat to their continued existence caused by the general collapse of the mid-14th century. He concluded that men's minds were the fundamental tool for survival; through mind men knew the order of the universe, and could thereby order their own existence.

To accomplish this resolution, Ficino had to reflect on existence from a broader vantage point than was provided by the experiences of his own immediate culture. Although he never left Florence, Ficino achieved this perspective through his systematic study of philosophy. During the height of his creative period in the 1470s, he was able to distill from his study of Platonism a sufficient grasp of the conception of development in general to identify its fundamental character in his *Five Questions Concerning the Mind*.

Philistine critics have described Ficino and neo-Platonism as mystical and religious in contrast to the more empirical orientation of contemporary Aristotelianism. The opposite is the case. Ficino's thought expresses the essential rigor of real scientific thought in that he attempts to demonstrate the appropriateness of human mentation to universal law, perfection. By contrast, medieval Aristotelianism and its legacy in the work of Ficino's contemporary Pompanazzi, attempts to save the appearances of the medieval cosmos by purporting to find in the discrete finite object the ontology for the entire hierarchy of the great "Chain of Being." From this fundamental blunder arises the entire reductionist construction of the alienated atomized universe whose nature can never be known, but whose appearance can be approximated through formal logic. Contemporary ignoramuses, wild-eyed proponents of reductionism, who slander Ficino by calling him a Mystic, are in fact the progeny of vicious metaphysics.

It is true that Ficino retains critical features of

alienated religious outlook, however, in a wholly different sense than employed by empiricists. Precisely because he rejects human knowledge as determining the laws of the universe, Ficino stops short of correctly identifying the interrelationship between knowledge and existence. Instead, he conceives of the practical side of knowledge as expressed in insuring the soul's immortality after death. Ficino's view of the universe can be described as a place of fixed and predetermined perfection within which man develops his powers. The reign of real perfection is achieved only after all motion has been stilled, when the soul is at eternal rest.

It is perfectly obvious from whence he derives these ideas. Ficino concedes to theology the metaphysical rights to the universe as a whole, and only retains for man the claims upon the time and place of his immediate existence. But, more significantly, Ficino's uncritical acceptance of this dichotomy is consistent with the ideology of mercantile capitalism. For mercantile capitalism, as distinct from real capitalism, considers society's productive power as incidental to the accumulation of tithes and the collection of debt. Only to the extent that the bankruptcies of the mid-14th century required men to consider how such accumulation could be insured was any thought given to expanding productive activity, and particularly to the expansion of trade. Humanism identified the qualities of mind that made possible such expansion, but mercantile capitalism identified the results exclusively with fictitious value. The Florentine historian Guicciardini correctly described the empirical expression of this situation:

...to cloak with a fine word the ugliness of the act, the loan of a sum of money for a fixed time at a certain price and interest....Such transactions would be useful if people would be content with reasonable interest. This however is not the case, and the (credit) business has assumed an arbitrary and unbearable shape. (27)

Ficino's view of cognition reflects the more essential alienation of mercantile capitalism than Guicciardini's description. For him the continuity of existence is only reflected in human knowledge, and God remains the *primum*, the ultimate cause. Likewise, in the ideology of mercantile capitalism, the "miracle" of expanded wealth is identified with the mystique of the bankers' juridical privileges vouchsafed to him by "higher authorities," feudal lords. In the particular case of Florence, the most important feudal authority was the Pope himself, and Ficino's acceptance of the hierarchical rights of theology had a very practical application indeed. The

banking wealth of Florence was insured by the wholly mystical abstract authority of the Pope. Thus, the Florentines consistently defended the Papacy at the same time that they struggled to transform it into an extension of their own urban, Humanist outlook.

The vicious paradox in this situation was that Humanism could only develop by destroying the alienated ties to the universe mediated by the Pope. Only then would it be possible to free the mind to recognize in universal labor the power to change existence. It was the more backward German burghers who recognized in Humanism the very authority to overthrow the claims of the Papal revenue collectors. From them there rapidly spread an embryonic Humanism of technology, as reflected most explicitly by the English Tudors, which directly sought to identify the practical power of science to change existence.

The origins of this scientific Humanism is found in the work of such German Renaissance figures as Albrecht Dürer. In his work on perspective, Dürer introduces the artist and geometrician as active participants in speculative research. He thereby makes a fundamental advance over Brunelleschi's formulation, changing the emphasis from conception of the fixed law to the act of formulating the laws.

The culmination of this process is Descartes' two theorems whereby knowledge, cognition, is identified with the activity of changing knowledge, rather than the fixed and specific predicate of knowledge. Locating mental activity in the *process* of continually improving knowledge, Descartes wipes out the fundamentally intransigent feature of Ficino's epistemology, the fixed state of perfection. Instead of being faced with God's perfection, unattainable within existence, men are faced with the ponderable nature of real existence and the necessity of constantly changing it.

Although Ficino's philosophy is alienated from the advanced standpoint of Descartes, it is nonetheless coherent with it. The practical base of Ficino's outlook is illustrated by the artists and architects around Brunelleschi. The very purpose of their work was to change the cognitive powers of their audience, to illustrate the motion of the mind. While the dome of Florence was raised to the glory of God, it practically celebrated the creative power of its creator — Brunelleschi; not only Brunelleschi, but Grasso and the entire process of social labor that had to be produced to successfully execute the plans for the dome. It was this real practical activity that Ficino used to abstract his notion of the movement of the mind.



## Footnotes

1. Cf., Lyn Marcus, *Dialectical Economics*, D.C. Heath, Lexington, Mass., 1974; Lyn Marcus, "Beyond Psychoanalysis," *The Campaigner*, Sept.-Oct., 1973; Warren Hamerman, "The Self-Development of the Biosphere," *The Campaigner*, Jan.-Feb., 1975; Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. (a.k.a., Lyn Marcus), "Italy Lectures: What Only Communists Know," *The Campaigner*, Dec. 1975.
2. Quoted in M. Miess, *Painting in Siena and Florence After the Black Death*, New York, 1964, pp. 80-88.
3. J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, New York, pp. 31-56.
4. Quoted in H. Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, Princeton, 1966, p. 265.
5. A. Manetti, *Il Burla del Grasso*.
6. P. Sanpaolesi, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, Milan; and G. deSantillana, "The Role of Art in the Scientific Renaissance," *Critical Problems in the History of Science*, M. Clagatt, ed., Madison, Wisc., 1962, pp. 33-65.
7. Quoted in P.O. Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, Gloucester, Mass., 1964, p. 44.
8. M. Ficino, *Five Questions Concerning the Mind*, Josephine Burroughs, translation, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, E. Cassirer, P.O. Kristeller, and J.H. Randall, Jr., eds., Chicago, 1971, p. 204.
9. Quoted in M. Ashton, *The Fifteenth Century, The Prospect of Europe*, New York, 1968, p. 112.
10. P.O. Kristeller, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
11. L. Valla, *Dialogue on Free Will*, C.E. Trinkhaus, Jr., translation, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, *op. cit.*, p. 173.
12. P. della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, P.O. Kristeller, translation, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, p. 225.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
15. Ficino, *Five Questions Concerning the Mind*, p. 199.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
17. Quoted in P.O. Kristeller, *Marsilio Ficino*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
18. Ficino, *Five Questions Concerning the Mind*, p. 195.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 194, no. 1.
25. P.O. Kristeller, *Marsilio Ficino*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
26. Pico, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, *op. cit.*, pp. 231-232.
27. Quoted in R. Eherenberg, *Capital and Finance in the Age of the Renaissance*, New York, p. 246.

---

# The Irony of Perspective: Renaissance Art as Political Cartoon

*by Nora Street Hamerman*

My purpose in making this wonderful journey is not to delude myself, but to discover myself in the objects I see.

Goethe, *Italian Journey*, 1787.

---

## I THE GREAT MAN

The experience of visiting a well-arranged gallery of great Renaissance painting and sculpture, or the even rarer, for most advanced-sector industrial workers, opportunity to view the buildings and fresco paintings of the Italian Renaissance on their original sites, is one which brings an emotion of the very highest order to the viewer — that of joy in his own active connection to the universe. Once one is familiar with the great political, philosophical, and scientific struggles of the Renaissance which accompanied the emergence of mercantile capitalism and anticipated capitalist society itself during the period between the 14th and 16th centuries in Europe, then one is repeatedly struck by the precision with which the great artists of that time chose their themes to illustrate those struggles.

What is not commonly recognized is that this feeling of joy in the forward motion of the human mind, is the same quality of creative mentation ascribed to the Universal Genius of the Renaissance. It is also not commonly understood that this fundamental substance — creative mentation — is precisely what ordinary workers call upon inside themselves to assimilate and realize as progress the innovations of individual “geniuses.” (1)

The mass-strike period which is now beginning in the advanced capitalist sector poses the connection between Renaissance universal genius and the or-

dinary worker in a new way. Only a general upsurge of the human spirit, such as accompanied the relatively small episodes of the European Renaissance and the French Revolution, will be capable of carrying the human race out of the present morass of decaying capitalism into a world socialist economy.

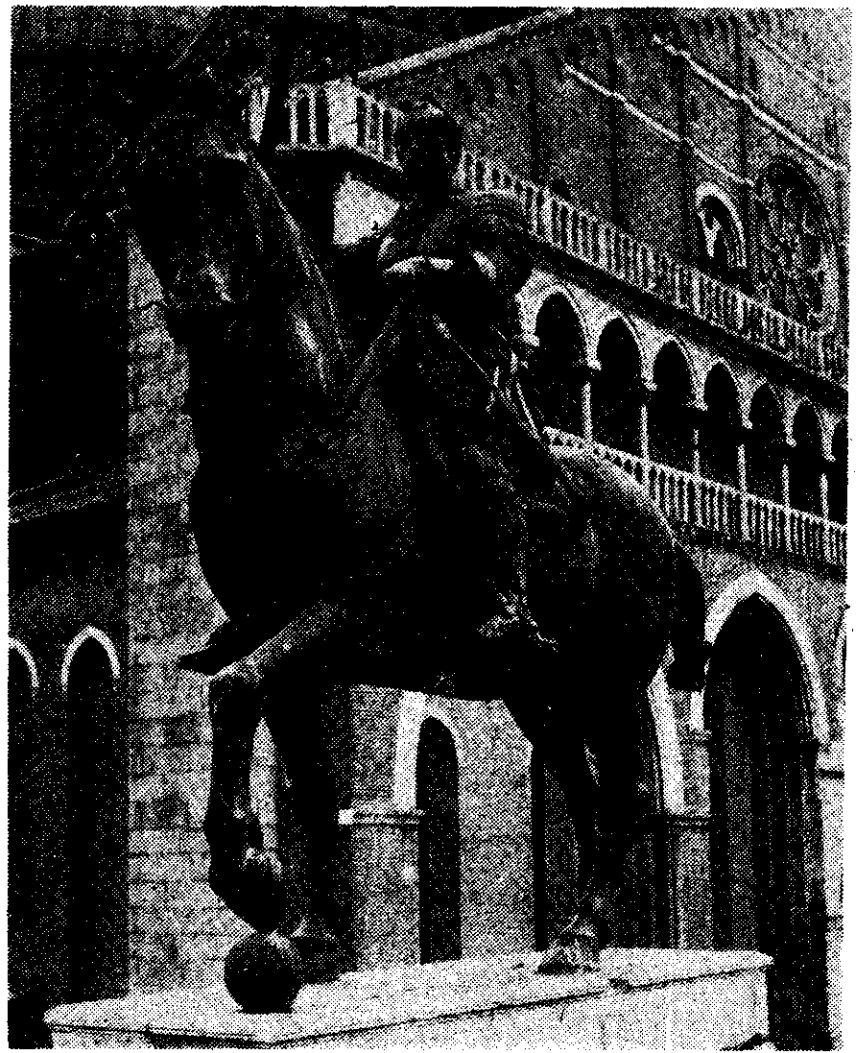
Revolutions require the reproduction of great men. The deliberate actions of gifted, unique individuals to change themselves in order to change history, form the criteria which fundamentally distinguish a revolution from a *jacquerie*, a protest movement — an “anti-fascist resistance.” Not the objective laws of history, but exceptional individuals who act in a crisis to create new universal laws, seminal minds, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Marsilio Ficino, Marx and Rosa Luxemburg, are the indispensable key to progress and the future development of humanity.

The notion of the Great Man who acts to change history was the discovery of the Renaissance. Because the scientists, philosophers, artists and statesmen of the European 15th and 16th century could compare the experience of the great achievements of Greco-Hellenic antiquity to the Dark Ages which followed and then to the struggle for a new height of human civilization in their own time, their conception of the individual’s role in progress was superior to that of antiquity.

It is ironical, although not surprising, that the broad



Equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius, Rome, Campidoglio Second Century, A.D.



Donatello. *Gattamelata*, equestrian monument to Erasmo da Narni, Padua, St. Anthony's Square, 1444-53.

popularization of a disassociated notion of "Renaissance Culture" over approximately the past 150 years has been accompanied with increasingly vehement denials of the notion of progress and of Great Men. One could hardly expect better from a self-proclaimed "small man," necrophiliac and arch-reactionary as the Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt whose books made the "civilization of the Renaissance in Italy" one of the disciplines of bourgeois academia in a period when potentially creative individuals dispaired of actual creative achievement. (2)

More tragic is the general failure of the direct inheritors of the Bolshevik Revolution to acknowledge the implications of the interventions of Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin into their own history. The self-reproductive task of the Labor Committee tendency, as a relatively tiny force uniquely capable of developing the appropriate program which humanity's survival now demands, poses the immediate necessity of re-discovering the Renaissance Great Man. The tremendous educational task which lies ahead of the International Development Bank implies not merely importing the highest level of current technologies, but bringing about the conditions for creative mentation which continually invents necessary new technologies and new social forms.

Simultaneously, nothing more succinctly demonstrates the incompetence of our major opposition — the Atlanticist financiers — in providing for the future

of humanity than in their notion of art. While the U.S. Robber Barons of the turn of the 20th century endowed themselves with a bogus nobility by collecting English ancestor portraits of the Imperial Age, and more reluctantly surrounded themselves with Renaissance artifacts to fantasize the role of a new Lorenzo de' Medici, today the Rockefellers are noted for their sponsorship of only the most bestialized forms of human "culture." (3)

John D. Rockefeller III, whose Zero Population Growth policy provides for the extinction of one billion human beings in the next period, is an avid collector of Chinese artifacts, the product of a civilization which did not progress for 2000 years. His brother Nelson "The Enforcer" Rockefeller is a devotee of so-called Primitive Art. That is, appropriately enough . . . shrunken heads. (4)

### Renaissance vs. Antiquity

Before the Renaissance period, and particularly before its highest phase from approximately 1450 to 1525, the notion of individual eminence was relatively static. Without even descending to the barbaric productions of the Middle Ages or the relatively pathetic images of individuals in the earlier, lower phase of the Renaissance in the period of the Bardi bankers of Florence or their early Medici successors, a direct comparison with antiquity suffices to make the point. An example is the distinction between two

equestrian portrait statues: that of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, from the second century A.D. and Donatello's statue of Erasmo da Narni or *Gattamelata*, the condottiere general-for-hire of the Venetian Republic in the 1430s.

Both statues — Donatello's is explicitly modeled on the antique predecessor — represent the individual as the embodiment of perfection, or universal law. But for the ancient sculptor (probably a Greek), the god-like quality of the Emperor, who was automatically apotheosized as a deity after his death, is fixed and eternal, and shines through the Emperor's individual traits. In fact, Marcus Aurelius, who in this representation commemorates a military triumph of the Roman army, passively embodies Pax Romana, the law of the Roman Empire. For this reason, the magnificent horse conveys more of the dynamic, combative spirit associated with a martial victory than his god-like rider. Marcus Aurelius is a great man kept "clean" of the awful contingencies of history. (5)

Not so *Gattamelata*, whose apotheosis is guaranteed by none, not even the Venetian Republic which allowed this unprecedented monument to be erected by the condottiere's widow. The sculptor Donatello evokes greatness with a frightening image of the grim and tense individual who holds immense emotional and physical forces in check until the right moment for tactical action. His Romanized demeanor, colossal horse and the classical ornaments of his contemporary-style armor imbue the figure with history, yet history is immediate. *Gattamelata* commands an invisible army of mercenaries in the vast St. Anthony's Square in Padua where, since the mid-15th century, this effigy has presided over the traffic of millions of pilgrims. (6)

With such statues, Donatello slightly anticipated the notion of perfection in the individual which the great Florentine neo-Platonic philosophers of the succeeding generation, most notably Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, were to express in rigorous theological guises. The notion is that man is the "maker and molder" of himself, capable of descending to levels of bestiality below that of animals, but also capable of the universalizing behavior appropriate to a god. Because man, unlike God, is not fixed, but constantly yearning towards higher levels of perfection, his perfection is expressed in the "motion of the mind," and above all "by means of mind, creating mind." This was the central concern of Ficino. (7)

### Necessity of Progress

Taken together, the array of subjects which were selected by the great Renaissance artists provide the necessary clues for refuting any delusions that these

men stood apart from history and led a sheltered existence among classical temples and flower gardens. The *Gattamelata*, for example, embodies a specific tactical alliance between the Communes of Florence and Venice whom the deceased soldier served. The wars of looting were an endemic feature of feudal life and reached epidemic proportions as mercantile capitalism superimposed on a feudal social structure approached its ultimate crisis in the 16th-17th centuries. But even in those works which do not directly reference the wars of looting, the presence of life-and-death struggles is never very difficult to detect.

From the Black Death which in the mid-14th century carried off at least half of the European population on the heels of the commercial revolution of the Middle Ages, down to the Thirty Years War in the first half of the 17th century, the recurrence of pestilence, famine, war, inquisition, and ecological disaster formed the persistent backdrop for the sublime productions of the Renaissance.

Broadly, what occurred was the expansion of medieval agriculture on the basis of a few technological innovations — chiefly the heavy plow and the water mill — which had permitted continuous population expansion during the period of rapid urban growth from the 10th century, exhausted marginal land areas and hence the capacity for expansion in that *mode of reproduction* around the end of the 13th century. While the early 14th century saw such towering creative figures as Dante and Giotto, individuals *produced* in the heroic period of the 13th century Italian communes, famine and plague spread through Europe in ever-expanding waves from 1300 onward, peaking in the Black Death of 1348. (8)

The fate of the great drainage and hydraulic systems supporting the most prosperous Italian cities in the preceding period is exemplary. During the last decades of the 14th century, the marshes around Rome and Siena — which only a century before had rivaled Florence as the greatest banking and trading center — lost 80 per cent of their population. As broad stretches of this countryside were turned into winter pasturage for sheep, and the country was simultaneously deforested for wood to build ships and provide fuel for the cities, floods became a perennial danger to the cities. Pisa — once the center of Mediterranean trade — was surrounded by marshes and malaria by the 15th century, an example of how the social crisis worked to reduce once-prosperous urban centers to decay. (9)

The richest intellectual period within the entire trajectory from 1450, when Medici dynastic rule clamped firmly over Florence, until around 1520, when Charles V, the Hapsburg King of Spain, became Holy Roman Emperor, was, ironically, also the period of

general decline for the whole economy of southern Europe, preceding the holocaust which overtook Italy and Spain in the second half of the 16th century.

Thus, the great Renaissance Italians — Ficino, Brunelleschi, Leonardo and others — celebrated a **notion of material and intellectual progress which found its political realization with the Tudors and their Dutch co-thinkers in the capitalist revolution.**

Leonardo da Vinci's intuitive grasp that human creative mentation is the primary substance — an attitude which endows all of his drawings with an extraordinary "anthropomorphic" quality — qualifies him as one of the great scientists of history, irrespective of the specific merits of his many inventions and discoveries. Although recent years' discoveries of Leonardo's notebooks, which were certainly not widely known in his own time, provide precious insights into the workings of this universal genius, it is ultimately to his great public works that we must turn to measure the Florentine artist's contribution to humanity.

### Leonardo's Battle of Anghiari

During the early years of the 16th century, Leonardo painted, on commission from the city fathers of the then-republican Commune of Florence, a giant mural of the victory of the Florentines at the battle of Anghiari, which took place half a century before. Leonardo's last and most important public commission, which was never completed, now survives only in the form of later partial copies complemented by the artist's own written notes and drawings. (10)

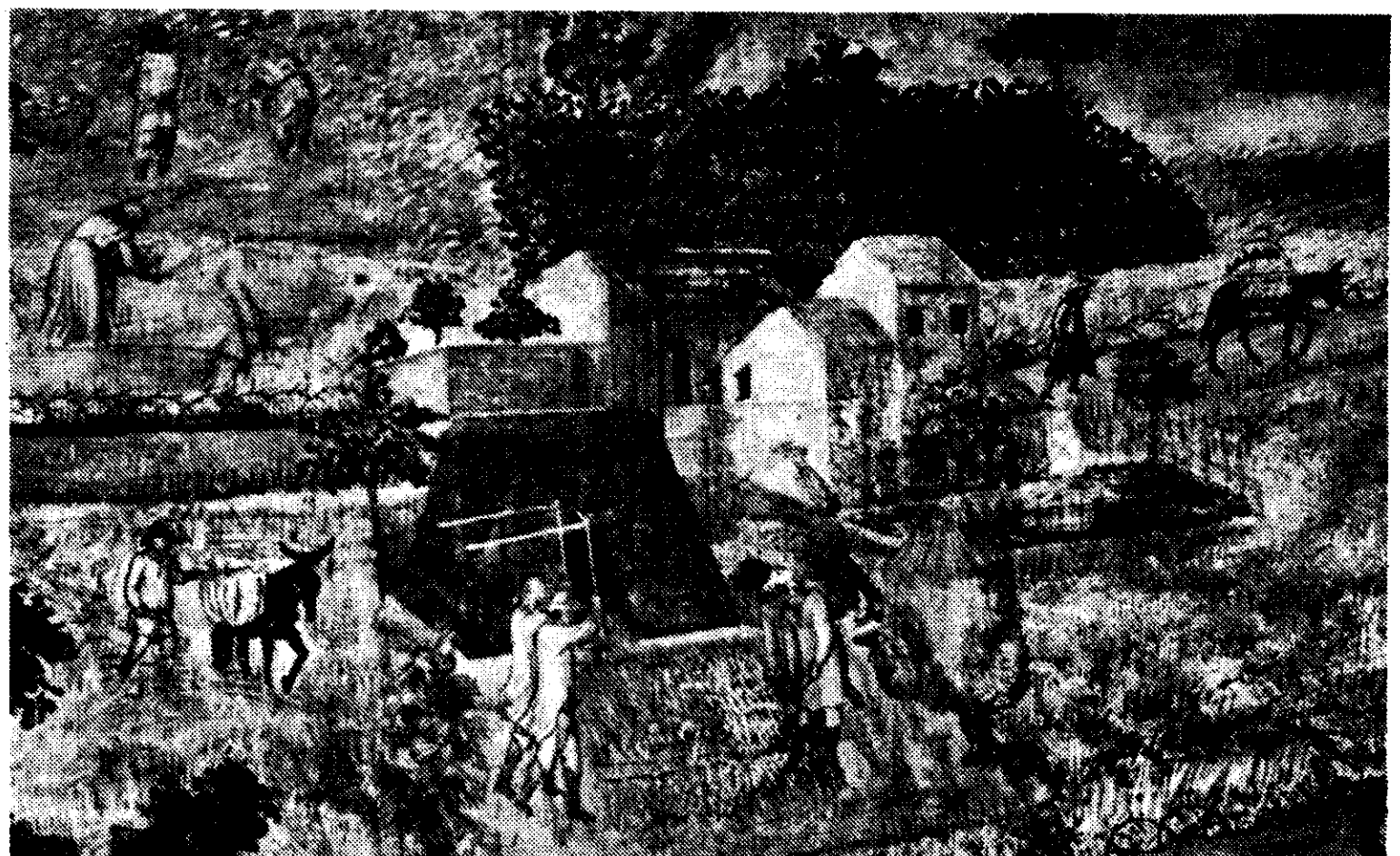
Even from these tantalizingly meager scraps, we can affirm that the lost *Battle of Anghiari* must have

been one of the most horrifying evocations of a battle ever painted. Leonardo, himself a courtier, was certainly familiar with the courtly rituals which surrounded the myth of feudal knighthood particularly in a period when shifts in military technology had transformed war into an atrociously efficient instrument of destruction. In one scene, Leonardo's representation of the battle of Anghiari, which followed his own brief employment as military engineer in the Italian campaigns of the bloodthirsty Caesar Borgia, may have been the last great painting of old-style knightly combat before warfare — and the entire political and social structure of Europe — was transformed through the development of effective artillery. The vast panorama of the fight culminates in a deadly interlock of cavalymen and horses at the center of the mural. Most significantly, the painter leaves the outcome of this clash, the "battle for the standard" which is the turning point in the entire event, **undetermined. (Fig. 1) (11)**

More explicitly than in any other painting, Leonardo depicted here a razor's-edge proximity in appearance between bestiality and divinity, the poles of human potential under conditions of great historical crisis, and raised the polemic of the *Gattamelata* — man's capability of dominating beast, including the beast inside himself — to a new level. It is as though *Gattamelata* had been re-duplicated several times and thrown into the heat of the battle, against himself — **horse and all. (Fig. 2)**

Of all the previous Renaissance battle paintings, none had reached this emotional pitch and universality. Paolo Uccello's encyclopedic *Battle of San Romano* (Fig. 3), painted for the Medici rulers of Florence in the mid-1400s, has the aura of a brilliant

The countryside around Siena — shown here under vigorous cultivation in the pre-1348 fresco of Good Government by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena's town hall — lost 80 per cent of its population and was turned into pastureland following the Black Death.



pageant in which little is at stake; at a later point of development, the battling groups of Antonio Pollaiuolo captured the emotional conjuncture of one-on-one struggle but essentially left the landscape and other figures unaffected by that struggle. (Fig. 4)

In the *Battle of Anghiari*, the entire field of the painting is caught up in the intensity of the battle (Leonardo's notes instruct painters of battles to "paint no level spot of ground that is not trampled with blood"). Of Leonardo's predecessors only Piero della Francesca had approached depicting a battle of world-historical significance through its horrifying sensuous predicates. (Fig. 5) Yet, aside from the fact that Piero's scene shows a legendary episode of distant Christian history, and not an event as loaded with immediate associations as the Anghiari battle is for the Florentines, the crucial difference is that Piero, unlike Leonardo, avoided presenting the battle as a single great conjunctural moment whose outcome is uncertain. Piero discursively portrays the certain victory of the Christian Emperor over the Infidel in a series of interlocking dramas across the broad span of the wall.

Leonardo summed up and re-defined the entire preceding half-century of development in painting under conditions of crisis, in which the survival of the humanistic development which the previous art had illustrated were at stake.

### Florence, 1505

To fully understand the artist's genius, you must imagine yourself in Florence between 1503 and 1505 when this mural was commissioned. The setting is the assembly room in city hall, and the assembly is made up of butchers, bakers and candlestick makers — the petty tradesmen who rose to a heady and transitory rule over the revived Florentine Republic after the Medici were driven from the city in 1494 and after four years of rule by the fiery evangelical monk, Savonarola. To understand Leonardo's painting, you must envision what kind of individual these tradesmen and small property owners had just elevated to a lifetime sojourn in the city's highest office, that of *gonfalonier*.

Piero Soderini was a decent fellow who stuck by burgher virtues and the letter of the constitution — but no leader, as subsequent events were to prove. The sole outstanding figure in the government is the city's chancellor Niccolo Machiavelli. The history of the years from 1502 to 1510 is a history of Machiavelli's tireless efforts to persuade Soderini of the unprecedented nature of the crisis which Florence, and Italy, found themselves in — and Soderini's continual compromises, which led to disaster. (12)

In particular, Machiavelli attempted to develop a national militia to replace the unreliable mercenary armies which Florence had hired since the 14th century. The national militia, he reasoned, would foster the necessary personal heroism of citizens fighting to save Florentine independence from France, Spain and the Papacy — the major contenders then carving up the Italian peninsula for looting. As Machiavelli grasped the shifting political map of Europe and realized that Florence would have to weave a complex diplomatic path between these larger forces, he furiously attempted to force Soderini to abandon the city's traditional alliance with the French. Soderini stuck by "the way we have always done things" — and the Florentine Republic was crushed in 1510.

The reader must imagine the stolid supporters of Soderini sitting in the assembly room weighing the bestial logic of the "good old local traditions" against Machiavelli's pleas for urgent and imaginative measures. Then look up to the fiery battle which sweeps across the wall.

Among other things, Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari* is a polemic against any narrow, bell-tower notions of Florentine patriotism such as the nostalgic attachment to local traditions which was the general mental set of Soderini's constituency. This point becomes obvious in reflection on the nature of the event Leonardo was depicting. The actual historical battle of Anghiari, in 1440, was first of all carried out by the mercenary armies for which Machiavelli — Leonardo's close friend and the probable go-between in arranging the commission — reserved such abundant contempt. Secondly, as was well known, the historical importance of that battle lay in the fact that it ended the threat of Milanese imperial conquest which had hung over Florence during the previous half-century and consolidated the de facto rule of Cosimo de' Medici in Florence. However, the Republic which commissioned Leonardo's mural was premised on undying hatred for the Medici family! (13)

Machiavelli and Leonardo deliberately re-interpreted the historical battle to fulfill a polemical role for 1505. A special memorandum drawn up for the artist's use, possibly by Machiavelli himself, focused on the intense danger to Florence in the period of the battle, the courage of her military leaders, and the fearful slaughter which followed the rout of the enemy. Thus, the specific theme was lifted out of its narrow historical context to celebrate the greatness of Florentine history, which had produced such extraordinary figures as the banker Cosimo de' Medici, and to pose the fight for continued human development as a qualitatively new historical conjuncture far surpassing the crisis of 1440.

Neither Leonardo nor Machiavelli considered war as anything but the last resort in the struggle to

maintain the humanistic culture for which Florence had become famous. At the same time as he was painting the Anghiari mural, Leonardo successfully persuaded the Florentine government to attempt to implement an audacious project for diverting the Arno river to give Florence an independent port and enable the city to avoid war with Pisa. The project (Fig. 6) would tax modern engineering capabilities, let alone those of the early 16th century, and thus ended in failure. (14)

The realization of Leonardo's canals and other

engineering visions awaited the final phase of the Renaissance as it developed outside of Italy in the maritime countries. Within Florence, there could be no more graphic manifestation of the rapid eclipse of Renaissance culture than the fact that by the mid-1550s, when Florence as the capital of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany was part of the Spanish Hapsburg looting operation, Leonardo's fading *Battle of Anghiari* had been painted over with a "grande macchina" of aimless battle scenes — war for its own sake — by the Mannerist court artist Vasari.

## II THE IRONY OF PERSPECTIVE

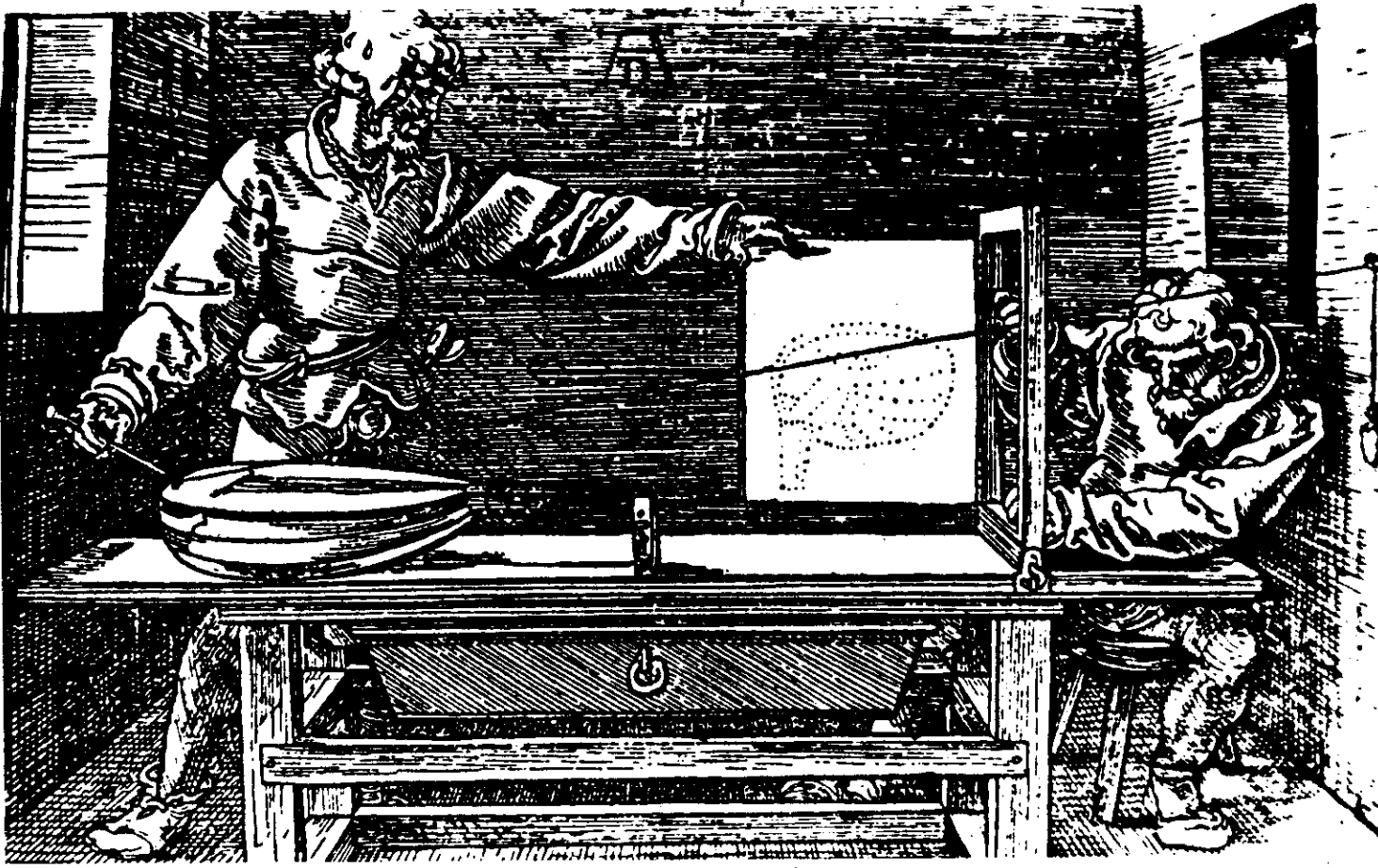
Once such great works of the Renaissance as the *Gattamelata* and the *Battle of Anghiari* are properly understood as "political cartoons," fiercely directed into the universal moral questions of their time and with a savory pinch of immediate tactical application, it is possible to understand why the Early Renaissance invented and perfected the science of perspective.

It is a truism that only the civilization of the Western European Renaissance — the society which developed the notions of scientific method and the Necessity of Progress — ever developed an art based on perspective, the notion of systematically representing three-dimensional relationships on a two-dimensional surface. It is also well known that the notion of rules of perspective as fundamental to art did not collapse as the basis of all Western art until the decades of capitalist decay which immediately preceded World War I. Most ordinary working people are still convinced that painting and drawing which employs perspective is superior to Cubism and Futurism. They are essentially correct — although not for the reasons the man-in-the-street may think! The essence of perspective is not the skill involved in reduplicating space as it appears to the eye; nor is it the ability to accomplish such illusionistic "tricks" for their own sake as one sees in the lurid works of Salvador Dali.

The essence of perspective is *irony*. This is true both for the staggering achievement of Florence, linear mathematical "legitimate construction," and for the differently based, but extremely important, discovery in northern Europe of perspective based on a continuum of light. The potential for irony to be expressed reaches its height in the conceptual discovery of Leonardo da Vinci, who unified linear geometrical construction with the perspective of light under a single principle of relative space.

Before exploring the question of Leonardo's perspective, it is also necessary to dispel the mystifications and flagrant misconceptions surrounding the Renaissance notions of "perspective" and "proportion." As is well known, painting and mathematics in the 15th century were so closely wedded in practical application that the greatest painters and mathematicians were frequently either the same individual or worked in intimate collaboration with each other. This circumstance has resulted recently in reading back the relative impotence and formalism of modern empiricism into 15th century advances in the science of proportion — with such tragicomic results as graduate students in art history "researching" their doctoral dissertations by traveling through Europe taking the *measurements* of paintings to discover the artists' "creative method."

In *general*, the way irony works in Renaissance perspective is the following. The ordinary object of sense-perception — the dishtowel, mousetrap, fishing net, or Florentine porch — is represented not as a thing-in-itself but in a form more or less severely distorted in size, shape, and eventually in color, apparent softness or hardness, and so forth. The distortions are not arbitrary, but governed by mathematical and optical laws which order the changed appearances according to relative distances and angles within the painting with respect to a single "point at infinity" which is both the painter's and the beholder's eye! In the case of perspective determined by light, the unifying invariant, rather than a "point at infinity," is the purely psychological illusion of light — a substance which cannot be represented in paint directly, but only indirectly implied through relative tonal values! In both cases, what occurs is that the invariant is the shared notion of material laws of the



Albrecht Durer's engraving showing a method for executing a perspective drawing of a lute, from his book on perspective, circa 1525.

universe (either the laws of light reflection, etc., or the laws of projective geometry, or a notion of law which subsumes both — Leonardo) between the artist and the viewer. The person looking at the painting is compelled to contemplate the creative mind of the artist, and, in so doing, to recognize his own creative qualities.

The notion of the laws of proportion in the Renaissance is inseparable from the idea — already demonstrated in the works of Donatello and Leonardo — of “political cartoon.” In both Italy and in the corresponding urban centers of northern Europe, innovations in art during the 15th century occurred in the form of critiques of religious belief. Fundamentally distinct from the religious art of the Middle Ages, which often purported to be sacred in itself, the great religious paintings of the Renaissance actually counterposes the all-determining universal law of God to the notion that individuals can — and must — act to change the course of events. This agonizing struggle is carried over to such apparently profane works as the *Gattamelata* and the *Anghiari* cartoon, imparting to them what appears today as a *religious aura*.

The positive basis for religious belief, as opposed to atheism and agnosticism, and to the superstitious, bestialized cults of institutionalized religion, is the notion of the Soul, the notion that human identity is located in creative mentation. Because religious belief has its root in the empirical form of creative mentation, the most scientific approach imaginable to making creative mentation conscious and deliberative is to understand the secrets of religious belief. This is the reason why the great artists and thinkers of the Renaissance posed the questions of knowledge in theological form, anticipating in a rudimentary way the discovery of anthropology through the critique of

religion by Feuerbach and Marx.

The **opposite** of proportion-perspective, that is the evolution of lawfulness in painting, is the notion of “art for art’s sake” — a hermetic view of art which could not survive in a society where creative mentation is continually demanded, and realized in the form of general progress. Even with respect to its most vehement modern proponents, “art for art’s sake” is a self-consoling illusion. The pathetic at best, and downright reactionary at worst productions which pass as modern innovation in the arts are manifestly tailored to suit the pathologies of the wealthy older women and their entourage of kept homosexuals who administer the capitalist art world. This is a fact which needs no illustration for those familiar with the “art world”; for others, suffice it to report that one of the most noted academic specialists in the Northern European Renaissance in the U.S., recently helped to organize and participated in a seminar at New York’s Whitney Museum on the subject of male body-building as an “important, neglected art form.”

Recognition of the tawdriness of modern bourgeois art should not, of course, be taken as a call for the revival of so-called socialist realism. The great art of the Renaissance, as distinct from “socialist realist” efforts, expresses ideas more directly than ordinary forms of literal expression permit. Taking the raw material of literal everyday reality, the great artist juxtaposed this material in some astonishing fashion so as to overturn the viewer’s fixed notion about the world.

In a period of rapid social evolution, such as the European Renaissance, the reality of changing events presents a continuous series of ironies as the fixed laws of normal “good behavior” collide with those actions necessary to historical development on the



large scale. The *ideas* which express the motion of change from one mode of existence to the next are the artist's subject-matter; while his *subject*, the invariant which connects those ideas, is creative mentation, his own mind. This is the reason why a visit to a well-arranged gallery of great art from that period by one who is moderately familiar with its primary historical struggles, communicates an electrifying crescendo of the creative emotion within one's own self.

### Narration to Perspective

In the earlier, lower phase of the Renaissance, art often takes the beguiling form of comic-strip narration, a form which is then superseded by actual political cartoons only with the invention of scientific perspective. The earlier development, whose greatest exponents were the Florentine Giotto and Sieneese artists of the 1300s such as Simone Martini and the Lorenzetti brothers, can be directly likened to the recovery of classical antique rationalism in that period as a weapon against the feudal residue of rural superstition in late medieval urban culture. The second phase, which coincides with the florescence of neo-Platonic thought particularly in Florence under Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici, is concerned with rigorously posing the relationship between the comprehensive laws of the physical universe and cognitive processes.

As the heuristic illustration by Albrecht Dürer shows, linear mathematical perspective as developed by the Florentines involved the principles of projection and section as the key to three-dimensional representation. The *projection* is a collection of converging lines from imagined nodal points on the "extremities" of the object; the *section* is the collection of points on an imaginary glass screen between the object depicted and the eyes, which occurs where the projection intersects the screen. The possibilities for sections are infinite — until the painter selects precise positions of relationship between his own eye, the screen and the painted scene. Thus, the painter by use of perspective not only imposes his own mind's ordering of the infinite universe upon the viewer, but literally brings the viewer into direct primary relationship to his own eye. (While the Renaissance artists considered projective geometry a mere practical application of Euclid, Felix Klein proved in the 19th century that Euclidean geometry is merely a special case of projective geometry, which is more fundamental.)

Contrary to the simplifications presented in art-history textbooks, mathematical linear perspective was not invented in the early 15th century in Florence so that painters and sculptors could depict space as

"objective, precise and rational." The "rational" requirements for spatial representation on two-dimensional surfaces had been essentially solved by the empirical perspective devices (receding floor tiles, diagonally placed porches, and so forth) of, particularly the 14th century artists of Siena. (Fig. 7) Linear perspective was essentially a *subjective* conquest, which was perceived as necessary only when, in the 15th century, God was no longer a simple "given" complete with a fixed cosmology, and the subject of human inquiry became explicitly how man *knows* God, i.e., epistemology. The empirical perspective devices of the 14th century no longer sufficed because painting was now required to *impose* a conception upon the viewer of the determinate relationship between the physical world and consciousness, not merely to report on the world in a way which "looks like real life."

With this breakthrough, the artist-engineer-mathematician-architect of the Middle Ages, whose status had been that of a lowly servant of God below the rank of even the Mechanical Arts, began to claim social equality with the philosopher and poet among the Liberal Arts. He no longer made objects; he expressed *ideas*; and ultimately, in the 16th century, he identified his creative powers with those of God. His task was to share these "divine" powers with his audience by interpreting nature through art: the painter, for Leonardo,

comments with art on the causes of (nature's) demonstrations constrained by its law.

### A Modern Scientific World-Outlook

As Leonardo's formulation suggests, there is no objective basis for the quaint pervasive myth that science grew eclectically out of a mixture of medieval alchemy and astrology, the applied efforts of artist-engineers, and a seasoning of neo-Platonism. There was in fact a pitched battle between the collaborative efforts of the latter two camps and the hocus-pocus tradition embodied in the former. Both Renaissance art and science — understood in that time as two aspects of the same pursuit — grew out of the tremendous battle in the early 1400s to justify the accumulation of material wealth in urban concentrations as the true basis for spiritual progress, *against* the morbid, anti-progress notions of the medieval Church. Furthermore, when material progress collapsed in Italy in the 16th century, Renaissance neo-Platonism fell back into sterile dualism and an increasingly nasty alliance with the old hocus-pocus (witness the tragic fate of Michelangelo).

The invention of perspective, for example, followed immediately after significant progress had been made

throughout Europe in very small-scale metalwork. The obviously burgeoning capacities of artisans were reflected in early 14th century painting, in the form of the powers of naturalistic observation of animals, man-made objects, landscape, and human expression shown in "International Gothic" paintings which appear along all the major trade routes of the period. The discovery of perspective was a tremendous leap towards realizing this technical progress — analogous to the achievement in electronics engineering embodied in Viking II — in the form of building whole cities, whole societies. This meant subsuming the lovingly portrayed individual objects under a vision in which man's city-building, society-building capacities were primary.

This breakthrough coincides historically with the so-called Conciliar movement, the struggle to unify the Christian Church around a notion of international law which would subsume the chaotic intersecting tangle of canon law, civil law, and the customary law of the late feudal period under a new system coherent with the development of mercantile capitalism. Practically speaking, the struggle of the Church Councils of the first half of the 15th century was over who would control the shattered Papacy. As we shall see, the struggle was won — at least for the time being — by the Italian bankers, and particularly the Florentines. Out of the political battles which sprang from the task of organizing heteronomic individuals into a new (not given) unity, the first approximation of scientific perspective was born.

To underline the point for Italy, a color illustration of adequate dimensions of the great Florentine artist Masaccio's *Tribute Money* fresco of circa 1427 (see Fig. 2, p. 34) proves that Masaccio's real theme in his famous painting was quite other than what initially appears. There were, as has been frequently noted, special reasons for the choice of the the unusual theme of Christ commanding St. Peter to "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" as the dominant painting in the family chapel of the Brancacci, one of Florence's leading banking families involved in overseas trading. The commissioning of the chapel corresponded to the passage of history's first-known graduated income tax, the *catasto*, a policy which required no little persuasion among the merchant ruling families of Florence to impose upon themselves.

The marvelous trick of the *Tribute Money* is that Masaccio gives the picture two alternative centers and a third crucial external commentary, such that the viewer is required to locate the painting's real meaning "in between" these successive moments. In the first and central scene, Christ orders his apostles to pay the toll for entering a city which is demanded by a young Roman tax-collector. A stubborn-looking Peter is instructed to obtain a fish from a nearby river

and procure from its mouth the necessary Roman coin, an act which is then shown occurring in the middle distance on the left-hand side. All of this takes place in what would have been a vividly evocative setting for contemporary Florentines: the "civic" gathering of Apostles in the midst of the familiar Florentine hills, and Peter getting his wealth without too much regard for production — a typical mercantilist conception! — from the sea. In the standard, banal interpretations of the painting it is remarked as well that the establishment of the vanishing point of perspective lines at Christ's head clearly marks out Christ as the central focus of the picture.

However, the painter immediately takes the viewer forward to another level of meaning which embraces the apostolic group itself. This is only fully appreciable in the actual work or in a large-scale color reproduction of the whole — as opposed to the wretchedly truncated reproductions which appear in most art books. The key irony of the painting is located in the relationship of the central, Christ-centered and self-contained world, to the realm on the right — the actual city-gate, in front of which stand the repeated figures of Peter and the toll-keeper. Because of the relatively larger scale of the two figures, and the brilliance of the colors in which they are depicted, as well as the hallowing of their interchange by the architecture behind them, it is made clear by the artist that this act — the ability of a universal secular order to collect taxes from even the Holy Church (St. Peter) — is the culminating reality of the painting. Indeed, it was this reality of emerging mercantile-capitalist juridical relations upon which Florence's civic humanism, glorified in the central portion of the painting, was actually based!

Without going into what would have to be a very lengthy discourse on the subject, Michelangelo's celebrated Sistine Chapel ceiling of 1508-15 can only be understood by applying the same approach. Michelangelo builds irony as he passes in review the history of human progress against the infinite (but also relatively small, in scale!) backdrop of God's creation of the world and man. The famous nudes which flank the Creation scenes translate God's acts into a series of human emotional states; these in turn are grounded as a series of architecturally celebrated Great Men and Women — prophets, sybils, heroes and heroines of Old Testament history.

The tremendous, European-wide disaster of the Counter-Reformation — including its Catholic manifestation, which turned Michelangelo into a crank, and its often equally bestial Lutheran and Calvinist Reformation institutions — is reflected in the degeneration of perspective irony into "quadratura" which can be loosely translated as "frame-games." The key to Counter-Reformation art in the south,

exemplified by the gifted and superstitious Bernini, is that visual punning became totally separated from moral significance. Painting was no longer permitted to have any *human* content. Annibale Carracci's Baroque ceiling of the Gallery in the Rome Farnese Palace, which was consciously designed to rival Michelangelo's, stands out for the concentration of the painter's ironical capacities on the strictly *formal* ironies which had been merely a subsumed feature of Michelangelo's great dissertation on the Creation. The thematic material of the Farnese ceiling was perverted to lampooning the "loves of the Olympic gods" above the cornice, and below the cornice — in scenes painted, significantly, right after the Papal Inquisition burned Giordano Bruno at the stake in 1600 — to a heavy, lugubrious handling of "sacred love." Thus, what has been touted in recent decades by hair-splitting scholastics as "anti-Mannerism" and a return to Renaissance values in the Italian late 16th century is revealed as the pitiful and for the most part reactionary productions of a period of profound social decay. (15)

Not accidentally, while the Papal sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini was of fanatical Jesuit inclination in this period, the more personally admirable Rubens and Poussin were devoted *Stoics*. Stoicism — the attempt to maintain personal morality under conditions of political impotence in the external world — was the pervasive form of degenerated humanism in the 17th century.

### Geometry and Diplomacy in the North

While Masaccio's first applications of scientific

perspective are intended to relocate the battle for civic humanism in Florence on the plane of the city's role as a world command-center of mercantile banking, in the north of Europe the trading and manufacturing city-states of the Low Countries were being brutally yanked by these same Italian bankers into the modern epoch as centers of capitalist accumulation from the outside. Hence, political irony was cast in terms of a lawful relationship between the "inside," known world of medieval craft production and the new, external reality of emerging centralizing institutions, and the distinctive new kinds of individuals molded to run them.

This is the "inside-outside" relationship which is presented in the astonishing triptych by Robert Campin ("The Master of Flemalle") of the *Annunciation*, usually called the *Merode Altarpiece*, of the mid-1420s. (Fig. 8) Currently housed in John D. Rockefeller II's Cloisters Museum among the artifacts of the Middle Ages, the painting immediately strikes one for the abundance of objects of early Renaissance trade and manufacture, and even more for the exuberant way in which the painter flings open windows and doors in each of the three panels to bring the light of the external world into domestic interiors. Light represents the continuum of urban development which is the real invariant in the picture.

In the right-hand panel, St. Joseph is shown working in his carpentry shop, making mousetraps (Fig. 8a). In contrast to earlier renditions in which Joseph would play the role of a cuckolded yokel, Campin has invested him with quiet dignity. Outside the large window, there is an unfathomable leap to the bustling city street below. The panel perfectly captures the

St. Peter renders to a young Roman tax collector the toll demanded; detail from Masaccio's *The Tribute Money*, Florence, Brancacci Chapel, S. Maria del Carmine, circa 1427.





Clockwise from left: A carpenter in his workshop in France, circa 1500; cloth dyers in Bruges, Flanders circa 1480; glassmaking in Flanders or Germany in the early 15th century; banking scene with account books in Italy in the late 14th century.



social and material existence of the independent artisans of the late Middle Ages, producing for a local market, belonging to craft guilds, and with a horizon limited to the town in which he lived and worked. The mentality depicted is that of the shop, the guildhall and the parish church — proudly independent, yet conformist and petty.

In contrast, the left-hand panel shows the portrait of the donor of the picture, kneeling in a garden with his wife. (Fig. 8b). The man is dressed in luxurious black, and wears a costume associated with the patricians who allied with the Burgundy dukes who ruled the Netherlands. He is adorned with a conspicuously displayed purse, suggesting his role in trade and banking. Unlike St. Joseph, isolated in his shop with an imprecisely defined relationship to the city, the patrician is permitted to peep through an open door into the Virgin's chamber, where the sacred event of the Annunciation of the Incarnation is taking place. The chamber is filled with objects which reflect not

merely local craft production but the existence of a world market — a vase from northern Italy, decorated with Arabic lettering, a brass kettle from a particular city in the Low Countries, textiles, which might be locally produced or from Italy, but made from the raw wool imported from England. Even the bench against which the Virgin leans is conspicuously of more sophisticated quality than Joseph's carpenter's bench.

Furthermore, the merchant has measurable access to the outside world. It is more than a mere coincidental resemblance to Masaccio's *Tribute Money* that the garden gate also resembles an actual city gate and that just inside it there stands the liveried town herald of the city of Mechlen, (Fig. 8c), the lace-making center near Brussels where the patron's family originated. The herald is the footnote by which the painter comments on the central scene and transforms it from the "mystery" of the incarnation to a celebration of messenger-ness — of the newly created institutions of nuncios, envoys, diplomats and so forth

who formed the indispensable social infrastructure of the emerging world market. Finally, with the blue sky which tops the gate on the left, continues through the windows of the central chamber, and reappears behind the townhouses on the right, the artist provides a real infinite continuum within which to view all of these relationships. (16)

The political cartoon content of the painting comes out only when all of these specific characteristics are traced back to the major political battles taking place in the early 14th century, battles in which the painter Robert Campin played an active personal role. His native city, Tournai, was situated on the border between France and the territories of the Low Countries ruled by the Valois Dukes of Burgundy. Around 1420, Campin was caught up in a local revolution in which the craft guilds overthrew the local aristocracy; as the head of the painters' guild, he held an important public office. The French gave support to this uprising in the hopes of winning Tournai to their side. However, only a few years later, and very likely before the *Merode Altarpiece* was painted, the armies of Burgundy squelched the rebellion, reinstated the patricians as their own bureaucracy, and inflicted on Campin the mild punishment of an enforced pilgrimage to southern France.

It is quite plausible that the *Merode* picture is a pungent commentary on the relationship between two political-economic universes: one, the world of local craft guilds in which Campin had been submerged; the second, the increasingly hegemonic world of the great (Italian) merchant-bankers with whom the House of Burgundy was allied, and its local patrician representatives. The irony is made especially keen when one adds the information that Campin's image of St. Joseph, the humble, paternal craftsman, is lifted wholesale from the doctrines of the Paris University factioneer Jean Gerson, one of the most outstanding advocates of the French cause in the Conciliar battles of the day. It is as if, in the *Merode Altar*, Campin is deliberately lampooning the "local control" notions which the French espoused, notions much akin to the empiricist Paris school methods of inquiry into nature, which the Platonist philosophers were then in the process of completely discrediting. The fact that Campin wanted to show a coherent universe, bound together by mercantile expansion, is underlined by the changes he made in the final version of this triptych. The most significant is painting the three windows of the Virgin's chamber as blue sky instead of the timeless medieval gold-leaf background which he had originally placed there. With the addition of the Mechlen herald as well, the sacred event is fully transformed into a thinly disguised celebration of the immediate continuum of urban progress, and a defense — like the *Tribute Money* fresco — of the

moral value of the accumulation of mercantile wealth. (17)

### Piero della Francesca's Resurrection

Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection of Christ* (Fig. 9) was painted for the town hall in the small Tuscan hill village of Borgo Sansepolcro, probably shortly after 1442 when the artist returned to his native town from Florence as a city councilman. Sansepolcro had come into the hands of the Medici in 1440 as an outcome of the famous battle of Anghiari which occurred nearby. When Piero arrived there, it was as a political and cultural representative of Florence at the taking-off point of the neo-Platonic Renaissance.

There is no single element in the picture, certainly not in a literal reading, which can account for the surge of motion one feels in front of it. Christ stands fore-square in the middle, looking directly out from droopy-lidded and somewhat hypnotic eyes, with one foot still inside the tomb and one firmly planted on the edge, which corresponds exactly with the viewer's eye-level. Between him stretches a landscape exactly like the rolling hills which surround Sansepolcro, and between the left and right sides, the landscape is transformed from winter to spring. In the foreground are four of the local peasants, thinly disguised as Roman soldiers who guard the tomb of Christ (the one facing out is said to be a self-portrait of the artist). Two of these snore on against the tomb in oblivion; the other two begin to respond to the wierd apparition next to them, one by rubbing his eyes as if dazed, and the other tumbles out of the painting backwards with his blinded eyes fixed on the face of Christ. If one followed the painter's own prescription, to stand no further away from the painting than its width (about seven feet), one would be in imminent danger of being knocked over by this falling soldier.

But something much more interesting occurs if you follow Piero's orders as rigorously as he intended. Linear perspective, as it was followed and later codified in a treatise by Piero, involves the projection of a given object at a given distance from the eye onto an imaginary plane suspended between the two. If any one of the three change in position or distance, the proportion of the object as it appears projected on the picture plane changes accordingly (see Dürer's pedagogical engraving of projective geometry).

In the *Resurrection*, all of the figures and the landscape setting accurately obey such geometric projections, with the edge of the tomb representing the fixed eyepoint where the orthogonals converge. Precisely here, on the tomb's edge, Piero places the powerful, voluntaristic left leg of Christ with which he hoists himself out of the tomb.

But the torso and head of Christ do not obey these

rules. Instead of being seen foreshortened from below (i.e., distorted in conformity to the laws of projection), the upper part of Christ is shown frontally. Therefore, the eye and mind of the viewer is forced to take a leap over two incommensurate perspective systems.

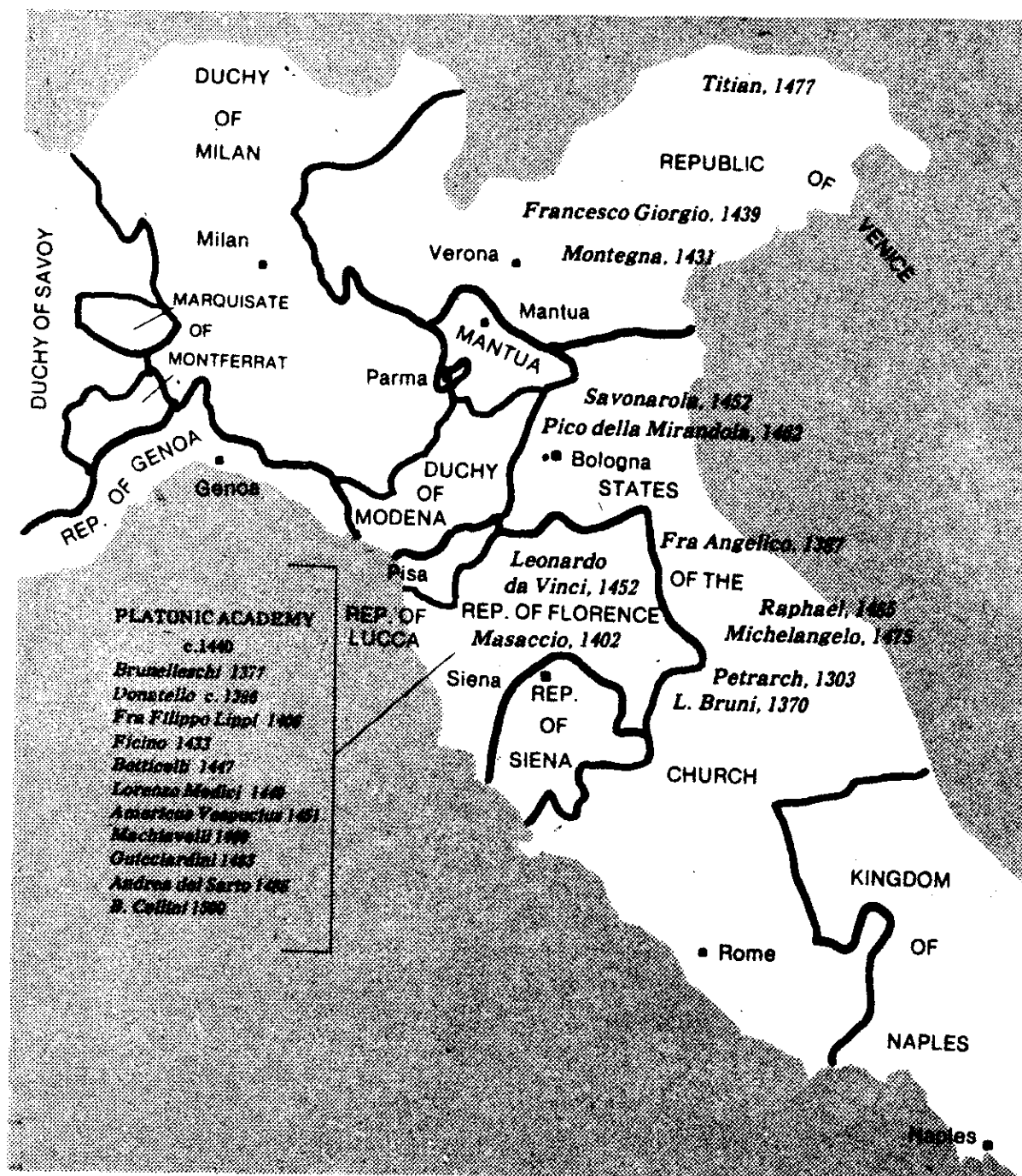
In this way, Piero was deliberately informing the sophisticated and attentive viewer that he was *breaking* the very rules which had been assiduously fought for by the preceding generation — yet not as a return to the amorphous empiricism of the 14th century. Precisely the rigor of Piero's observation of those canons leaves the viewer with no choice than to experience the "in-betweenness" of the two projective sections as the central subject of the painting, and to locate the miracle of the Resurrection in the intellectual leap which must connect Christ's seemingly passive face with his powerfully wilful feet. Once one has understood this leap, it "dawns on" one — as a secondary realization — that none of the painted figures who respond on various levels to the event is placed to share in the viewer's unique consciousness of what is occurring. For this, you must look directly into the painter's eye — which is what he intended you to do. (18)

Such a conception was neither required nor possible in the time of Giotto. Giotto, like all Italian painters of

the 14th century, limited himself to depicting the Resurrection of Christ after the Passion and Crucifixion as a linear sequence of events *around* the actual miracle, which makes it possible to logically induce that the event took place. (Fig. 10) In the same frame, Giotto showed the Roman soldiers sleeping unaffected at Christ's empty tomb, which is guarded by an angel, and then the appearance of the white-robed risen Christ to his follower Mary Magdalen. Northern European artists in the same period would directly depict the event of the Resurrection, but would show it as an explosive event which physically shatters all around it without affecting the intellect. Piero was the first artist to make this central episode in Christian belief the vehicle for expressing the process of knowing itself.

### Cosimo de' Medici

It is not surprising that the young Piero della Francesca began his career in Florence in the years when the ferment of neo-Platonic thought and the rediscovery of Plato's works first spread through Humanist circles there and was adopted by Cosimo de' Medici. The great neo-Platonists treated Christian



## RENAISSANCE ITALY AFTER THE PEACE OF LODI, 1454

For nearly half a century, Cosimo de' Medici's Peace of Lodi set the terms for peaceful coexistence between the five major states in the peninsula: Florence, Milan, Venice, Naples, and the Papal States.

theology in a manner entirely coherent with the way Piero treats the Resurrection and other great themes **from the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ.** For the neo-Platonists of this period, Christ's redemption saved the universe together *with* man, just as the Sansepolcro landscape is transformed by the Easter dawn. When man becomes conscious of his own divinity (creativity), he overcomes his difference towards his own nature, and then his diffidence towards the world also vanishes. Epistemology and psychology are thus the indispensable bases for the development of natural science.

As "political cartoon," the Sansepolcro *Resurrection*, which was made as the city emblem, undeniably celebrates this small town's becoming a part of the most advanced city-state in the world and, on a larger scale, represents the change in conception of what one man can do which was catalyzed by the successes of Cosimo de' Medici. The tomb — the Holy Sepulchre, *Sansepolcro* in Italian — is the fixed reference point around which the painting proclaims the triumph of life over death. Simultaneously in Florence, Cosimo was revolutionizing the content of what had been previously conceived of as foreign policy and what had previously passed for "Humanism." In the former sphere, he immediately began taking steps after the Anghiari victory to lay the basis for an alliance with Milan (the Peace of Lodi, 1454) which would guarantee peace and expanding economic markets on the Italian peninsula for the next 50 years — but which went against the grain of the early 15th century's stubborn "republican" battle by the Florentines against Milanese despotism. In the latter, the hard-headed banker Cosimo brought to Florence Gemisthos Plethon, the most famous Greek of his time, and through his influence determined to finance the education of his physician's son, Marsilio Ficino, to bring all of Plato's works to the Latin West.

The overwhelming reality which determined the diplomatic revolution, however, is not to be located within the Italian peninsula at all. Cosimo was keenly aware that Constantinople was on the verge of falling to the Ottoman Turks, and that the West could — and would — do nothing to stop this calamity. His strategy involved seizing the valuable markets of the East, about to come under Moslem rule, away from what had been Venetian domination. This required, in turn, legitimizing a world-outlook under which Islam could be tolerated. The connection between this necessity and Cosimo's crash program in reviving Greek philosophy — the positive core of both Christian and Islamic theology — can hardly have been accidental.

Cosimo simultaneously used the "new learning" he sponsored in Florence to win intellectual hegemony over the condottiere Francesca Sforza, whom he transformed into a Renaissance prince and helped to

come to power in Milan in 1450. Basing the necessity to launch the "Platonic revolution" on the exigencies of the "diplomatic revolution," and steering the difficult course of the "diplomatic revolution" with the scientific authority of neo-Platonic epistemology, Cosimo de' Medici acted against linear "logic" to create the conditions for the next historical phase of development: the actual emergence of capitalism in the 16th century.

## Medicean Florence

As the hegemonic European center of banking and commerce up through the end of the 15th century, Florence under Cosimo and his descendants necessarily became the crossroads for commodities and ideas. Particularly after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 and the contemporaneous invention of printing in Germany, the Florentines' ability to deliberately foster this cross-penetration, to constantly submit new predicates to the rigor of inquiry from the standpoint of the universal, contributed to the "Florentine genius." In art, each significant advance was marked by the introduction of new contingencies — coming from Venice, from Flanders, from Germany and more far-flung trading partners — which often arrived on the scene through Medici banking associates who sent paintings home from distant branches of the establishment. It was as the acknowledged intellectual center of Europe that landlocked Florence throughout much of the 15th century was the home of the greatest theoretical advances in geography and navigation, as Portuguese specialists sent their manuscripts there for publication in Latin and came themselves for high-level consultations.

It should be emphasized that the pre-eminence of Medicean Florence in the Renaissance generally, like the great formal achievements of Leonardo da Vinci and his contemporaries, did not emerge as a bolt from the blue but arose from historical conditions which made Florence unique. Florence was one of the last of the great Italian medieval communes to flourish in the 13th century — much later than Milan and the other great communes of the Lombard plain. But where Milan, for example, had developed in a number of areas of craft manufacture and retail trade, none of which ever went beyond the scale of the small workshop, Florence almost from the beginning benefited from the communes which had preceded it to operate on the scale of a world market.

The key step in this process was Florence's hubristic creation in 1252 of its own gold coinage for international trade, the gold florin — an act officially forbidden by the Holy Roman Emperor who, however, lacked the political power to enforce his displeasure.

The gold florin was the “transferable ruble” of its day, providing Florentine bankers and merchants in all of Europe with a monetary instrument of established value and prestige, and allowing them to “corner” the market of goods and capital. From this same world-market perspective, Florence concentrated her industry in textiles, the heavy industry of the day, especially woolen cloth. The merchant — who often organized the supply of raw materials and the distribution of the finished product — became the proto-capitalist entrepreneur, regulating production by means of the market by concentrating production in larger ateliers and dividing the stages of production. The breadth of worldly experience and the responsibility for managing complex commercial and financial operations gave the Florentine merchants a self-conscious awareness of their ability to command and of their own resources, within the overall context of a highly urbanized Italian peninsula, only the Florentines — other than the Venetians — developed their own political institutions of direct bourgeois rule, in the late 13th century.

(The paradox of Medici rule in Florence is that the city’s own productive economy declined, relative to the rest of Europe, in the 15th century. It was also true that the republican institutions which had first elevated Cosimo de’ Medici to power became rapidly eroded through the 15th century, especially as Cosimo’s grandson Lorenzo was forced to take more and more autocratic measures to retain his de facto power. This fact sheds light on the apparent preference of Ficino and others for the “contemplative life” — keeping on good terms with both the Medici and their opponents. While Ficino was deeply indebted to Cosimo, he rightly considered his fundamental obligations to humanity and to Florence on a broader plane.)

### Visconti Milan

From the perspective of the strengths and weaknesses of 15th century Florence, Cosimo de’ Medici’s genius in linking the city’s diplomatic fortunes to Milan becomes most evident. Under the Visconti *seigneurial* dynasty which ruled Milan continuously from the late 13th century onward, Milan and its surrounding countryside, the lower Po Valley, became a unique area of agrarian development in all of Italy, a splendid exception to the general decline. (The Viscontis were a family of feudal origin in this commune which never developed independent bourgeois political forms, but a family which nonetheless ruled in close collaboration with merchant-entrepreneurs who copied the Florentine economic model.) Particularly after the mid-14th



Part of the Medici-sponsored “cold coup d’etat” by which the condottiere Francesco Sforza took power in Milan was his marriage to Bianca Maria Visconti in 1441, shown in this miniature.

century crisis, the Milanese Visconti tyrants ensured their rule by a series of great canalization and irrigation works. They introduced rice cultivation, created artificial meadows for the breeding and stabling of cattle far beyond the levels existing in the rest of Italy, where cattle served largely as beasts of burden. These projects of agricultural conversion and transformation were largely carried out by “new men” (*novi homines*) from the urban middle classes or even from the countryside; simultaneously, the scale of the new agrarian systems forced a transformation in the distribution of property as leaseholders were awarded refunds by the owners for making capital improvements in the land. Gradually, much property — including many Church lands — changed hands and came under the control of the state. The superiority of Lower Lombardy in agricultural technology, particularly in the dairy sector, has persisted to this day!

It was in the Milan of the Sforza — the Medici-backed inheritors of the Visconti dukedom — that Leonardo da Vinci developed his great civil engineering projects in the late 15th century.



### III LEONARDO AND UNIFIED PERSPECTIVE

The uniqueness of the period from circa 1450 to circa 1520 can best be understood by comparing the art produced in that period to that of the immediately preceding and succeeding epochs. Compared to the development from Donatello to Leonardo, the painting and sculpture of Giotto for the Bardi banking family and even the works of Masaccio and Fra Angelico in the years when the Medici were coming to power seem relatively flat and motionless. On the other hand, compared to the art of the highest phase of the Renaissance, the art of the Catholic Counter-Reformation period which followed after 1530 reveals a tragic collapse of the fundamental values of the Renaissance; certain *formal* features are retained which return to haunt the viewer in the most unsettling manner.

#### Mannerism in Florence

The most obvious example of this collapse is Bronzino. Agnolo Bronzino had studied with Michelangelo and became court painter to the Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, a distant relative of the great Cosimo, and his wife Eleonora of Toledo, a member of the Spanish royal family.

Bronzino's most famous painting is the *Allegory in the National Gallery in London* (Fig. 11). Using the superb craftsmanship he had learned in Florence, as well as the formal literary culture which was attached to neo-Platonic humanism, Bronzino created a picture which *negates* the entire struggle for perfection embodied in the works of Ficino, Leonardo and others. This denial is immediately obvious on the level of the spatial rendering in the picture, where the notion of lawful perspective and proportion is arbitrarily denied in favor of tension between a stress on the volumes of the bodies and a countervailing flat surface pattern.

The formal paradox thus created cannot be, and is not intended to be, resolved as a leap to a higher level of insight into real processes. Instead, the painting is explicitly designed *against* any notion of coherency between feeling and intellect; in short, against the notion of a potent relationship between states of consciousness and activity in the real world. The thematic material is Truth and Time unveiling a lascivious embrace between Venus (love) and her adolescent son Cupid in the midst of Envy, Folly and Hypocrisy: a moralizing painting which immediately strikes one as pornographic, not because it contains nudes, but because its content is total despair. The artist underlined this content by including two masks

in the lower right corner, one of a bland, smiling young woman, the other of a malevolent old man. (19)

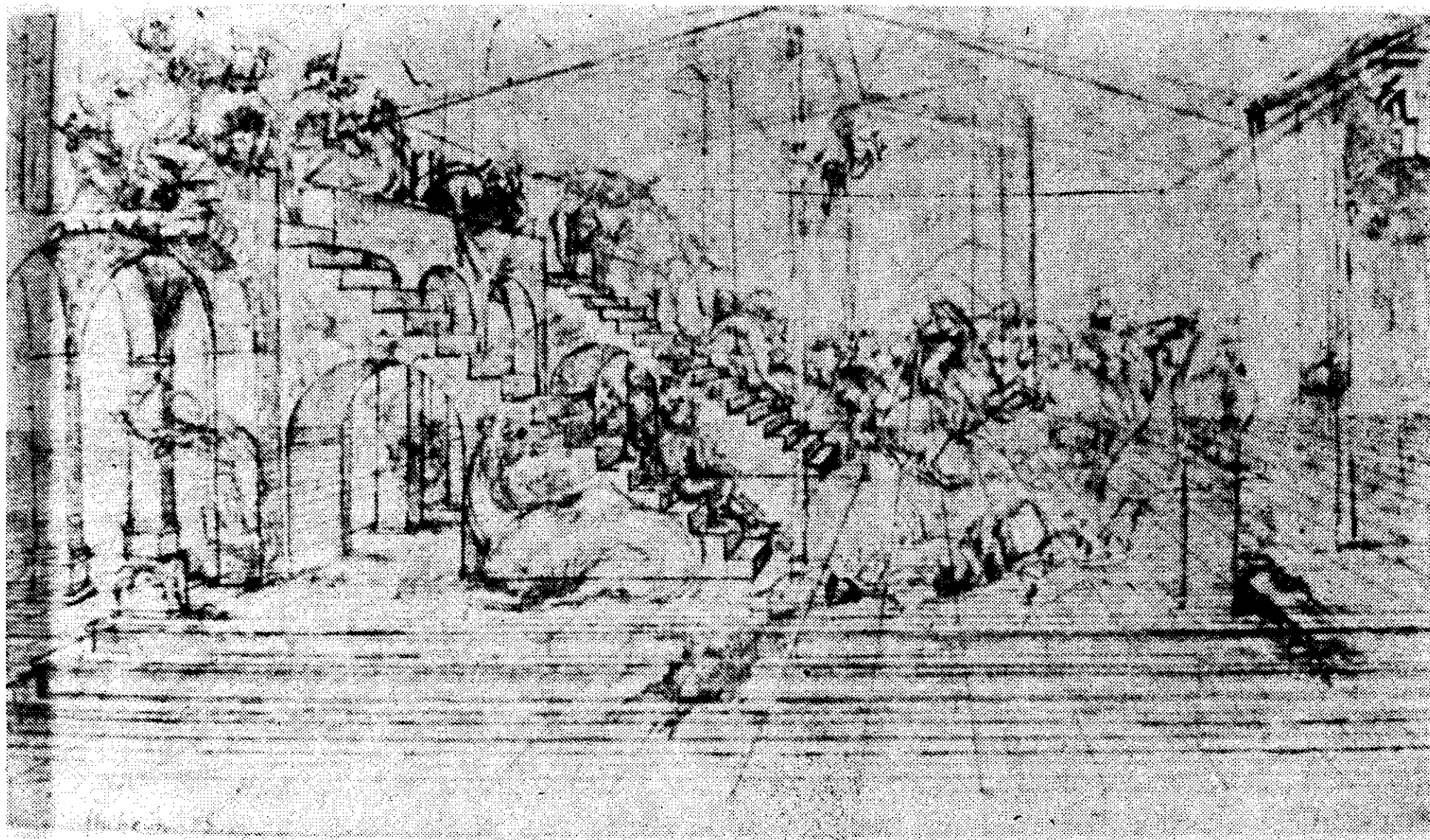
Bronzino's picture was made in 1546, only a quarter of a century after the death of Leonardo. And it was made in Florence — not the Florence of the Commune, of Cosimo de' Medici, or of the Republic, but the Florence of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, a satellite of the idiotic Hapsburg monarchy of Spain. Under Grand Duke Cosimo I, the entire Tuscan territory including Florence was transformed into a short-term, centrally administered looting operation comparable to the more thoroughgoing destruction of the Iberian peninsula and southern Italy under direct Spanish rule in the same period. Along with military rule, the instrument of repression was the dreaded Spanish Inquisition. The pious and frigid Eleonora of Toledo presided over culture. Behind a façade of continuing cloth production and banking activity, Florence was bled and reduced to the stagnant, tourist-ridden mudhole it is today.

The degradation of Italy under Spanish rule, and the pathological resort to belltower chauvinism (*campanilismo*) of which modern-day Florentines are among the most victimized of Italians, stands in the starkest contrast to the historical role of Renaissance Florence, particularly under the rule of the first Cosimo and his immediate descendants.

#### Leonardo vs. Botticelli

We have already seen the close relationship between the "diplomatic revolution" of Cosimo the Elder de' Medici and Piero della Francesca's brilliant use of perspective to express the "in-between" quality of creative mentation. At a later point, approximately 25 years later, Leonardo da Vinci achieved an even more fundamental breakthrough in developing the laws of pictorial space, by psychologically *breaking* with the Medici.

The break is dramatically evident in the comparison between two paintings of the same theme, the *Adoration of the Christ Child by the Three Magi*, which are both in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence — the once-Medici collections — and were painted not more than a decade apart in that city. The first, presumably done around 1475, is by Botticelli, the most famous of the artists who was intimately associated with the Medici court and the Platonic Academy. Botticelli's picture (Fig. 12) is celebrated as a veritable gallery of portraits of members of the Medici dynasty, including at



Leonardo da Vinci. Study in perspective for *Adoration of the Magi*, Florence, Uffizi Gallery.

least two already deceased heads of the Florentine state: Cosimo and his son Piero, the young Lorenzo the Magnificent, the current family head, his brother Giuliano de' Medici, and a host of courtiers. The painting is eminently a "political cartoon," in the sense that depictions of the Kings worshipping the Christ Child were universally recognized as allegories of temporal power.

Painted during a crisis period of the ruling family, Botticelli's colorful costumed display of the banking patriciate of Florence commissioned by a close friend of the Medici family can only have been intended as a pointed reminder of the "legitimacy" of the dynasty and the cultural and material wealth it had brought to Florence. Bracketing the scene, Lorenzo stands in proud vigilance with his sword on the far left, while the artist Botticelli looks out on the far right. With its aura of a gathering of philosophers, the picture epitomizes the unity of Christianity and Greek philosophy under Medici auspices which Ficino had achieved in that period. (Yet, at the same time, the painting is profoundly ironical. Lorenzo, the hero, is shown as a callow fop. Botticelli himself looks somewhat bemused at the spectacle around him. It is as if he did not quite think this gathering worthy of the honor he has bestowed upon it.)

Leonardo's unfinished picture of the same theme begun in 1481 has not a single recognizable portrait

(Fig. 13). Instead of the gaudy fashions, the kings and their attendants are draped in togas. In place of Lorenzo, Leonardo has painted a brooding philosopher on the far left and an angelic-looking youth takes Botticelli's place on the right. The classical ruins which were an indispensable element in Florence Adoration pictures are thrown into the far distance, with great double flights of stairs running up the sides of ruined piers. The Virgin and Child, instead of being relegated to the apex of a triangle, are placed in the very center of the composition, and now, instead of the mother dominating the child, the child dominates the mother, aggressively twisting away from her to accept the gift of a kneeling king with a gesture of blessing. A shadowy Joseph hulks over the Virgin's right shoulder. Around this core group whirls a mass of semi-defined figures — ascetics, wise men, androgynous youths who appear to come from some other planet. (Fig. 13a)

The rigidly defined linear perspective rules to which Botticelli still adhered, and which give the appearance of agitated figures set onto fixed orthogonal tracks, have given way to a space defined by the outpouring of religious fervor around the central vortex. Joking about how this new space *subsumes* the old construction, Leonardo makes the background architecture a veritable display of virtuoso mathematical projection. It is as if Leonardo

deliberately produced a "reply" to Botticelli's broadside heralding the Medici family, informing him that the real content of Ficino's contribution is not located in one particular institution.

Leonardo's painting simultaneously portends a tremendous social upheaval which brings to the surface in man not only unprecedented creative energy but also the fear of madness. Instead of portraying individuals as individuals, he shows types and above all states of consciousness — "man and the intention of the soul," as Leonardo was later to write, are the two chief objects the good painter has to paint.

### Great Men Redefined

It would be a mistake to conclude that Leonardo had suddenly renounced the Florentine tradition of ruling class art in favor of a "mere" exercise in psychology. The unfinished *Adoration of the Magi* comes into its own as a "political cartoon" in the highest sense of the term only when one compares it to Botticelli on the one hand and to Leonardo's own subsequent life-work on the other, within the overall context of the history of the Renaissance. The philosopher, the angelic youth, and the ascetic saint are each distinct permutations of the major expressions of Great Men which had occurred in Florentine art before this time — Donatello's prophets, the statues of the young David, Masaccio's massive Biblical personages.

By putting these Great Men in place of the Medici court personalities, Leonardo is immediately stating a fundamental invariant in the city's ability to generate Great Men which subsumes the particular individuals Botticelli portrayed. Furthermore, when one looks at Leonardo's subsequent work, it becomes obvious that these manifestations of historical greatness are already, in embryo, the precise forms in which Leonardo was to portray the unfolding of his own mind. Where Botticelli counterposed the great political man (Lorenzo) to the universal thinker (himself), Leonardo pointedly transformed each of these into a psychological self-portrait. But the *coulisse* figures merely clues, preludes to the painting as a whole.

### Context of Leonardo's Breakthrough

Contrary to formalist theories of a self-generating history of artistic styles (which reach their *reductio ad absurdum* in the widespread "explanation" that Mannerism followed the High Renaissance because the latter was "too perfect" and could not be improved), the leap from Botticelli's to Leonardo's universe, which everyone recognizes as a fundamental shift, did not occur merely because the Botticellian mode of the third quarter of the 15th century had reached an internal breaking point. In fact, the



Donatello. *Prophet*, Florence, Cathedral Museum, 1423-25.



Donatello. *St. Mark*, Florence, Or San Michele, 1411-13.



Donatello. *David*, Florence, Bargello Museum, 1430-32.

Medici family and the rest of the Florentine patriciate were perfectly content to continue patronizing Botticelli and a number of distinguished contemporaries of his on the same conceptual level right into the 1490s, while the implications of Leonardo's *Adoration* were ignored and Leonardo himself went into exile.

The crux of the matter lay in the ability of artists to respond to a fundamental paradox of Florentine hegemony which was becoming clear to the greatest minds around the outset of the fourth quarter of the 15th century. Precisely the success of the Medici in extending their marginal activities in capitalist manufacturing of textiles to northern Europe — the British Isles and the Low Countries — brought about their downfall and the general collapse of the whole economy of southern Europe which was already underway in the 15th century. Within Italy, these activities were merely large enough in scale to effect the ruin of the system of guild production of the 14th century and to bring under the command of the mercantile capitalists a growing proportion of the proletarianized peasantry and professional soldiery. This is the period when the *condottiere* system of warfare spread through the peninsula, as larger and larger bands of "free lances," largely made up of ex-peasants and the impoverished lower gentry, offered their soldier services to the communes.

But the manufacture of cheap woollens in the north — particularly in England — ruined the Italian trade and is the peculiar way which led to the downfall of the Medici concern. Italian galleys bound northward in the 15th century carried cargoes of silk and other luxury textiles, spices and alum, the essential chemical used in fixing dyes; Flanders had very little to sell to Italy in return, since the market for the cheaper northern textiles which later completely ruined the Italian broadcloth industry's hegemony had not yet fully developed. Consequently, Flanders depended on shipments of raw British wool to Italy to settle the persistent debit towards the south; but the English crown's commitment to foster a native industry cut those supplies to a trickle. The imbalance accumulated as trade collapsed, and Italian bankers went into the risky field of government finance.

Increasingly the Italian ships taking loads of cloth to Netherlandish and English ports were forced to return home with little more than a few tons of feathers. This sequence led to the collapse of the House of Medici and the shift of mercantile power to the Fuggers of Augsburg and to Low Countries bankers by the early 16th century, when the Fugger-sponsored Hapsburg Emperor Charles V took over Medici-style looting practices on a vastly expanded scale. (20)

The Medici's business affairs were in decline from the very moment they consolidated their power around 1450, but this fact became evident for all to see

only after 1475. In a rapid sequence of disasters, the traditional ally of the Medici, the Pope, plotted with the Medici's local enemies in the infamous Pazzi Conspiracy of 1477, an event which the family survived, but emerged profoundly shaken in morale; and, in 1478, Charles the Rash of Burgundy, the appropriately named ruler of the Netherlands, was killed in battle. Charles the Rash was the major debtor in the Medici Bank's key Low Countries-London operation, and his demise, accompanied by bankruptcy, led inexorably to the closing of the Bruges and London branches of the firm some years later.

### The Portinari Altar

With these facts in mind, it is time to confront the reader with one great painting which arrived in Florence from the Netherlands probably around 1478. This was the so-called Portinari Altarpiece, or *Adoration of the Shepherds* with portraits of the family of Tommaso Portinari who was head of the Medici bank in Bruges, by Hugo Van der Goes. (Fig. 14)

By commissioning this magnificent work and shipping it home to Florence, Tommaso Portinari, the scion of one of the city's oldest families, was celebrating his own position in the world — not merely as a partner of the Medici, but as a diplomat and the advisor to the uncrowned king of the Netherlands, Charles the Rash. No more hubristic way of asserting his independent identity and desire for honor could have been found than by hiring the then-leading artist of Bruges to paint this extraordinarily large triptych for the Portinari family chapel in S. Egidio. The Van der Goes altarpiece was situated in the midst of frescoes (now unhappily destroyed) by the greatest artists of the mid-15th century in Florence — including Piero della Francesca — and crowned a program of decoration begun in the days of Cosimo de' Medici. One of the ironies of history is that Portinari's single enduring claim to greatness is his apotheosis in this painting. (21)

Although Netherlandish painting on a small scale was already well-known and much imitated in Italy, the timing of the arrival of the Van der Goes masterpiece and the force with which it expressed a world outlook in many respects opposite to the one predominant in Italian humanist circles made it a bombshell.

The placement of the Portinari altar in the Uffizzi Museum in Florence today actually gives a rather good sense of what the impact must have been. Imagine that you have just strolled through 12 galleries of Italian painting encompassing the 13th and most of the 14th centuries, plus one very small room with modest northern European pictures in it. You have followed the development of Florentine (and Tuscan) art from the fairytale world of the Late Gothic through the rigorous imposition of orthogonal

perspective in the early 15th century, and then seen perspective construction elaborate to higher and higher levels of complexity. You have seen such mid-15th century masters as Piero della Francesca and Domenico Veneziano introduce light variation as a principal vehicle for spatial representation (irony), and then Pollaiuolo, Botticelli and Verrochio during the third quarter of the century experiment with intense movement in the figures.

You will have noticed the shift in thematic material from the more static Madonna and Saints groups and anecdotally presented stories of Saints, to a concentration on the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ and on those Saints who most closely imitate Christ — Francis, Augustine, and Jerome. Side by side with the Passion theme, which poses the question of universalizing behavior to individual men, subjects from classical mythology are selected to convey the same fundamental problem of the individual's relationship to the infinite. Thus, in one room, Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi* commemorating the relationship of the ruling Medici to Mother Church faces the large picture of *Spring*, a complicated neo-Platonic allegory. (Fig. 15) *Spring* commemorates the obedience of the Medici circle to a rival goddess, Venus-Humanitas. All this is conveyed in images which tend to become more and more timeless and dreamlike, more and more wrapt in sinuous outlines. It is from such dreams that Hugo Van der Goes abruptly awakens the viewer.

Rounding a corner, you are suddenly confronted with a three-part panel standing free in the center of the room, over 8 feet high and altogether some 20 feet wide. The central panel shows the adoration of the shepherds, and the two wings depict Tommaso Portinari and his family with their patron saints towering over them in medieval "hieratic scale," i.e., scale determined by a separate divine criteria not susceptible of ordinary perspective laws. Behind these foreground figures there extends a continuous panoramic winter landscape. The landscape encompasses a crucial sampling of the entire known universe in terms of the society of the 15th century Low Countries, unfolding through rustic vignettes the different moments in the Nativity story. On the left, Joseph gently aids Mary down a steep slope while their donkey stumbles behind, and a city peeps through a gap between this mountain and the tidy brick building which represents the manger where Christ was born. In the central panel, behind the kneeling Virgin there is a northern church, and behind the church one glimpses two women who stop to chat by a gate. On a neighboring hill shepherds leap with joy at the "good tidings" announced to them by angels, and the artist shows a detachment of the same heavenly squadrons just reaching the manger at the moment the first shepherds also arrive. In the right

panel, an advance scout for the Three Kings gets directions to the miraculous spot from a kneeling villager while the kings themselves, followed at some distance by their exotic retinue, wind through the hilly winter countryside towards the manger.

The front portion of the painting is made up of a silent, almost mournful ritual like a mass. The Virgin is a pious, introspective adolescent girl; St. Joseph a dignified old man and very much a participant; and in the wings, the four Saints share the scale and air of attentive seriousness of the earthly Holy Family. So, in fact, do the three enraptured shepherds who burst into the scene like the crude peasants they are, confronted with something they can only apprehend emotionally and not intellectually. Dropped into this larger-than-life geometry is an entirely different scale of figures, shared coherently by the angels in ecclesiastical vestments (priests and acolytes at the mass, as it were), the Portinari family, and, apparently, the Christ Child, who doubles as a newborn spindly infant and a premonition of death.

Rather than a simple manifestation of medieval hieratic scale, the two interpenetrating geometries of the figures in the painting, both sets of which co-exist within the same natural world, seem to suggest two simultaneous orderings of reality. One comprises urban humanistic culture, embodied in the Italian banking family and the angels attending the ceremony of the mass. The other is a looming presence of Saints who at first appear to tower out-of-scale within the landscape until one realizes they are commensurate with the proportions of the manger building.

Finally, there are the uncouth shepherds who form the only direct intermediary between the foreground setting and the landscape in the distance. (Fig. 14a) Van der Goes spares no detail in conveying the near-mad frenzy of the shepherds in contrast to the quiet scene before them, building to a climax with the uppermost shepherd who clutches a dangerous-looking hoe and opens his mouth and eyes wide in awe. The material existence of these peasants, rendered through the old man's undershirt and work-worn hands, the hoes, staffs, shepherd's pipes, leather bags and so forth, is as real and concrete as the richness of the angels' robes.

By focusing both the shift in scale and the link between the rich but solemn foreground ceremony and the surrounding landscape on the shepherds, Hugo Van der Goes made the transformation of the mind of these unlikely men from bestial to potentially human the most important subject of his painting. The scale and quantity of detail in the Portinari Altarpiece make it seem like a painting of the entire universe: Van der Goes is saying that the universe is *about* this transformation. And he obviously finds this a profoundly

terrifying message, since for the first time ever in an Adoration painting, he includes a barely visible but unmistakable figure of Lucifer himself leering out of the shadows of the manger, right above the head of the ox.

The immediate impact of this intrusion into the Florentine universe can be imagined by reflecting that the patron Tommaso Portinari presided over the collapse of Medici interests in northern Europe by recklessly attempting to salvage his personal financial affairs through more and more speculative loans to the House of Burgundy. Thus, Portinari played a dramatic role in an otherwise inexorable decline of the Bruges branch as English trade became increasingly cut off by the policies of the English crown. But aside from being a sharp reminder of the issue of English wool, formerly the mainstay of the Florentine banking interests, the Portinari shepherds had the broader significance of reminding the Florentine merchants that the process by which new crops of surplus peasants could be successively looted from the feudal agricultural system and put to urban manufacture was now coming to an end. The religious ecstasy of the shepherds portends the vast social upheavals among peasants which accompanied the Protestant revolution in the early 16th century.

Florentine artists, other than Leonardo, reacted to Hugo's painting by attempting to turn it into a Christmas card. The most clinically interesting response is the altarpiece by Ghirlandaio in the Sassetti Chapel of S. Trinita Church in Florence. (Fig. 16) The Chapel was owned by Francesco Sassetti, the general manager of the Medici Bank. Ghirlandaio directly adopted the Portinari shepherds, cleaned them up and gave them an air of Florentine gentility. He placed them in the midst of classical ruins, with a

traditional Italian Madonna, a roly-poly Christ Child, and a festive procession of Kings. In contrast to the Portinari altar, where the bankers are set in the ambience of universal nature, Ghirlandaio puts the landscape inside Florence, by placing the altarpiece *within* a wall of frescoes which illustrate the plazas and institutions of the city (Fig. 17) What this amounted to was an attempt to pilfer the Portinari painting for new predicates and techniques in which to express old themes, while ignoring the *subject* of Hugo's painting in the most blatant manner.

It is hardly exaggerated to see in the three Portinari shepherds an anticipation of the Protestant revolution which was shortly to sweep through Europe. The Protestant principle, as Hegel noted, is of

placing the intellectual world within one's own mind and heart, and of experiencing and knowing and feeling in one's own self-consciousness all that formerly was conceived as a Beyond.

Hugo in this altarpiece was anticipating Luther's later "justification by faith" on a basis which no Florentine could have readily accepted, particularly at a moment when Italian society was perceptibly contracting and hardening — as the sudden transformation of the mental powers of some lowly peasants! — while the bankers go on quietly praying in their accustomed ritual.

After this painting arrived in Florence, Leonardo painted his *Adoration of the Magi*, the first comprehensive statement of a painted world in which not merely human bodies or even human interactions, but the ecstatic "religious" experience of the fundamental creative emotion is the metric for determining space.

## IV FREE WILL AGAINST 'FORTUNE'

Miserable philistine mentalities attempting to come to terms with the apparent detachment of Leonardo da Vinci's approach to the most horrific catastrophes, have concluded that the artist was lacking in some attribute which they consider central to their own existence: rampant reductionism in the form of sentimentality. Even Freud, otherwise a genius in his own right but notoriously blocked on love and the creative emotion, made this error in his curious effort to plumb the roots of Leonardo's psychology. (22).

The apocalyptic concern with the Deluge which

widely pre-figured the Protestant Reformation in the early 16th century intersected Leonardo's lifetime fascination with the phenomena of water. For Leonardo, who from his earliest years had been preoccupied with discovering the *lawfulness* of motion in water, streams and cascades epitomized the *problem of perfection for man*. (Fig. 18)

On one side, there was the perfection of God — ultimately fixed and at rest, which Leonardo identified with the principles of mathematics. On the other side, there was his own empirical verification of

Leonardo da Vinci.  
*Study of Water and  
Seated Philosopher,*  
Royal Library of  
Winsor, circa  
1495.



continuous, purposeful motion in every aspect of observed nature, both organic and inorganic.

After the 1490s — in fact, precisely after the fall of the Medici in Florence — Leonardo gave up his previous assiduous study of mathematics and, without resolving this fundamental paradox, based his practical activity on a tacit assumption that motion *itself* is the law of the universe. However, this motion in Leonardo's work is always, ultimately, bounded — a boundedness which is formally expressed in the self-contained contour line of Italian art.

From the collapse of the Medici rule until approximately 1525, the entire Italian peninsula was wracked with warfare. At issue was whether the cradle of the Renaissance could emerge from the city-state form of organization to the national form appropriate to then-nascent capitalism, or whether the peninsula would be reduced to a looting ground for other nations. As a painter, and as a military and civil engineer, Leonardo was an active participant in these battles.

By 1513, with the death of the warrior-Pope Julius II who had vowed to drive the "barbarians" out of Italy, and with the ascent to the Holy See of the self-indulgent Giovanni de' Medici as Leo X the possibility of a successful Italian movement for unity was essentially excluded. Fourteen years later, the Sack of Rome by German Protestant mercenaries of His Most Catholic Majesty Charles V (Hapsburg) finalized Italy's downward spiral into ecological and cultural holocaust.

During the second decade of the 16th century and the last years of his life, Leonardo's watery visions became storms which totally destroy humanity and

man's changes in nature. By that time, his earlier audacious schemes of channeling water for peaceful uses — epitomized in the project to divert the Arno river in 1504! — had become politically unrealizable within Italy. As yet, no other part of Europe possessed the technical and social development to realize them.

The selection of the Flood as the quintessential image of political upheaval is hardly accidental. In the 1490s, the fiery monk Savonarola had preached in Florence the coming of a Great Deluge — the Scourge of God to punish men for their sins and bring in its wake peaceful and just governments. The invasion of Italy by the French king Charles VI, invited by Duke of Milan Ludovico il Moro, a descendant of Francesco Sforza, was seen by many as equivalent to such a catastrophe. The last of the original Medici, Lorenzo the Magnificent's son Piero, in two years of disastrously incompetent rule, left Florence in no condition to resist. Furthermore, as we have repeatedly seen, the maintenance and development of hydraulic systems represented in late medieval Italy the difference between social and economic decay — and the constant peril of catastrophic floods — and pockets of real agrarian development.

In the light of this actual historical situation, only an idiot could maintain — as does the major Leonardo "expert" Sir Kenneth Clark — that Leonardo's drawings and writings on the Deluge represent the ill-concealed gall of a misanthrope imagining that the destructive forces of nature might

sweep away the pretentious homunculi who had dared to maintain that man was the measure of all things.

For Leonardo, nature running amok — the Deluge —

is nothing other than man's inner self, unloosed from social moorings, wreaking havoc upon the Universe. Down to his final drawings of this subject, which only at the very end of his life become lifeless and abstract, Leonardo continued to test the power of his mind against the awful potentiality of man's self-destruction and the destructive power of Nature unharnessed by man. (23)

The fundamental break between the highest phase of the Italian Renaissance, as represented by Ficino, Leonardo da Vinci and Machiavelli, and the subsequent developments of the Renaissance in northern Europe, is the break in the cycle of Fortune as the determinant of history. For Leonardo, the Flood is an inevitability against which all of man's heroic striving must ultimately contend. Machiavelli, more explicitly linked to the boom-bust cycles of mercantile capitalism as his social framework, poses history as the struggle of free will against fortune, and consigns "half our actions" to the latter's rule.

I would compare here (fortune) to an impetuous river that, when turbulent, inundates the plains, casts down trees and buildings, removes earth from this side and places it on the other; every one flees before it, and everything yields to its fury without being able to oppose it; and yet though it is of such a kind, still when it is quiet, men can make provisions against it by dykes and banks, so that when it rises it will either go into a canal or its rush will not be so wild and dangerous. So it is with fortune, which shows her power where no measures have been taken to resist her, and directs her fury where she knows that no dykes or barriers have been made to hold her. And if you regard Italy, which has been the seat of these changes, and which has given the impulse to them, you will see her to be a country without dykes or banks of any kind. If she had been protected by proper measures, like Germany, Spain and France, this inundation would not have caused the great changes that it has, or would not have happened at all. (*The Prince*, final chapter.)

The closed circle which delimits man's practical actions is the outmoded institution of the Roman Catholic Church, which continues to depend on feudal superstition for its existence, and after the second decade of the 16th century becomes the firm ally of the reactionary Spanish monarchy. At this moment, the Protestant Reformation burst open the floodgates, swept aside the Catholic thought-police in much of Europe, and turned a bowdlerized understanding of the "new learning" fostered by the Medici and the 15th century Papacy into a powerful weapon against Papal tax collection.

The German artist Dürer, who spent his life translating Italian humanistic culture into a new visual and literary language for northern Europe, perceived the Flood not as a recurrent nightmare which destroys

man's achievements at the close of the each historical cycle but as a specific event:

In the year 1525, after Whitsuntide, in the night between Wednesday and Thursday, I saw this vision in my sleep, how many big waters fell from the firmament, and the first hit the earth about four miles from myself with great violence and with enormous noise, and drowned the whole land. So frightened was I thereby that I woke before the other waters fell. And these were huge. Some of them fell far away, some closer, and they came from such a height that they seemed to fall with equal speed. (24)

Dürer, by that time an enthusiastic Lutheran, not only perceived the Deluge *explicitly* as emanating from his own psychology — a nightmare, which occurred at a specific time — but was able to describe and even to draw it afterwards with the accuracy of scientific observation. (Fig. 19) He advances in this way beyond Machiavelli and Leonardo, who can identify the closed social framework which prevents progress but cannot break it, towards an entirely new level of *freedom*. By comparison to Dürer's rendition of his "flood" dream, Leonardo's *Deluge* drawings appear stylized; they defy on the universal level the process of development which Leonardo persistently identified on the level of particularity.

With Dürer and his great contemporaries, political cartoons in the modern sense come into being. Just as in the period of the Italian Renaissance great public mural paintings and altarpieces for urban churches and palaces had replaced the exquisite miniature paintings in hand-illuminated manuscripts which had constituted the most advanced art form in the preceding period, new prints — woodcuts and engravings accompanying the printed word — became the vanguard medium of great artists. And simultaneous with the spread of these "mass media," the subtle ironies of Italian art are enriched with broad, Rabelaisian laughter. For the first time, great "political cartoons" are flagrantly, wickedly funny.

What is new is the notion that Perfection — the fulfillment of the human *soul* — is not consigned merely to another, unearthly world; but, provided that human nature is changed, can be achieved in actual human society on *this* earth. Only a handful of the most advanced minds actually envisaged a Utopia on earth; but the practical consequences of Calvinist beliefs, for example, were to permit and encourage a successful and productive earthly existence.

Whereas the Italian neo-Platonic thinkers understood that human nature is not fixed, but part of a process of perfection, their great northern successors located perfection in actual human history and saw the link between changing human nature and "nature" as a whole as a *practical* question.



## NOTES

1. Lyn Marcus (a.k.a. Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr.), "Beyond Psychoanalysis," *The Campaigner*, Vol. 6, No. 3-4, Sept.-Oct. 1973, and "The Italy Lectures: What Only Communists Know," *The Campaigner*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Jan. 1976.

2. The case of Jacob Burckhardt is worth reconstructing in some detail because of the enormous direct and indirect influence of the Swiss historian's work on all "scholarly" and popular thinking about the Renaissance during the century-plus since *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* appeared in 1860. Together with his British counterpart (and ideological parent of Cecil Rhodes' Liberal-Imperial Roundtable) John Ruskin, Burckhardt is most properly described as one of the first systematic perpetrators of a "counterculture" in direct opposition to the Humanist tradition and to the culmination of German Critical Philosophy in the work of Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx. Burckhardt, using a veneer of "Hegelian" formulations, twisted the enthusiastic rediscovery of the great men of classical civilization and the Renaissance which occurred during the period of the French Revolution into a static system of esthetic appreciations. Nothing could be more markedly distant from the hubris with which Goethe, journeying to Italy on the eve of the French Revolution, greets his creative precursors in the diary of his *Italian Journey*, than Burckhardt's repeated avowals in his correspondence of his own "unimportant self." The following quotations and information come from *Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*, 1955, introduced and edited by Alexander Dru.

Burckhardt, the scion of an old Basel patrician family, was born in 1818 — the same year as Karl Marx. Early theological discussions during his student years in Basel, led Burckhardt to a lifelong distaste for "Hegelian philosophies of faith" — precisely the scientific critiques of religious belief which were to penetrate the very depths of creative mentation. Abandoning theology, Burckhardt went to Berlin in 1839, where he became a student of the historian Von Ranke and associated with the art historian Kinkel later to be pitilessly ridiculed by Marx for his role in the 1848 revolution. Burckhardt, in 1843, became editor of the conservative newspaper, the *Basler Zeitung* and embroiled in the political struggles between the Radicals and the Catholic cantons over the Jesuit question, a quarrel which heralded the European-wide revolutionary upheaval of 1848. By 1846, Burckhardt could not wait to leave Basel and politics behind. In letters to friends, he wrote (concerning his flight from the impending revolution):

*I can't after all alter things, and before universal barbarism breaks in (and for the moment I can foresee nothing else) I want to debauch myself with a real eyeful of aristocratic culture, so that, when the social revolution has exhausted itself for a moment, I shall be able to take an active part in the inevitable restoration.*

In another letter:

I, on the other hand, have secretly fallen out (with the present age) entirely, for that reason am escaping from it to the beautiful, lazy south, where history is dead, and I, who am so tired of the present, will be refreshed by the thrill of antiquity as by some wonderful and peaceful tomb. Yes, I want to get away from them all, from the radicals, the communists, the industrialists, the intellectuals, the pretentious, the reasoners, the abstract, the absolute, the philosophers, the Sophists, the state fanatics, the idealists, the 'ists' and 'isms' of every kind.... States are not built with men like me.

From this anarchist notion of the individual, the homosexual Burckhardt constructed a skewed notion of history which went deeply against the grain of the belief in progress which had guided studies of the Renaissance in the Enlightenment period. Not only was material progress for Burckhardt unimportant to the Renaissance, but he regarded the technical aspect of change as a specific form of decadence. "History for me, is always ... a series of the most beautiful artistic compositions," he wrote in 1842. "Leave me to experience and feel history on this lower level instead of understanding it from the standpoint of first principles." Burckhardt's "love of Italy" was based on the "tact and humility of its beggars, the total lack of industries, and the complete lack of luxuries" in Rome.

The revolution which led to the Paris Commune in 1871 provoked Burckhardt to make these ideas — heretofore private and generally only implicit in his public writings — into a crusade against the notion

of material — or of any progress. Man's greatness depends on his ability to sacrifice; men were happier in early periods with lower living standards and so forth. "Neither man's spirit, nor his intellect has demonstrably improved in the period known to history." In a later book, *Force and Freedom*, which became understandably popular in Nazi Germany, Burckhardt held up a notion of civic patriotism based on the "particularism of the medieval commune" — exactly the doctrine of corporatism which British agents were then fostering through the Papacy and the British Roundtables.

In *Civilization of the Renaissance*, Burckhardt's viciously anti-Humanistic bent emerges most clearly in those passages where he attempts to "explain" the emergence of the individual in the Renaissance in quasi-Hegelian imagery. Burckhardt ascribes the growth of individual genius to ... political tyranny! He is then left with the dilemma of explaining why the cruel tyrannies and bloody wars of the Renaissance period, which he deceitfully paints as worse than those of the preceding feudal epoch, should have occurred simultaneously with a great outpouring of the creative spirit. His conclusion is epigrammatically summed up by the evil Bertrand Russell thusly:

Outside the sphere of morals, the Renaissance had great merits. In architecture, painting and poetry, it has remained renowned. It produced very great men, such as Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Machiavelli... It made scholars aware that a variety of opinions had been held by reputable authorities on almost every subject... The political conditions of the Renaissance favored individual development, but were unstable; the instability and individualism were closely connected, as in ancient Greece. A stable social system is necessary, but every stable system hitherto devised has hampered the development of exceptional artistic or intellectual merit. How much murder and anarchy are we prepared to endure for the sake of great achievements such as those of the Renaissance? In the past, a great deal; in our own time, much less... (Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, Book Three, Part I, Chapter II, "The Italian Renaissance," New York, 1945).

Russell's interpretation is neatly bolstered by the fact that he mentions neither Ficino nor Pico!

3. S.N. Behrman, *Duveen*, 1951, New York, provides an account of the "brisk market in immortality" conducted by the notorious British-born art dealer Duveen with the Rockefellers, Fricks, Mellons and others.

4. Not to mention the foundation of New York's Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s by Abby Rockefeller, the reptilian wife of John D. Rockefeller II who was meanwhile building a neo-monastery (The Cloisters) in Fort Tryon Park out of pilfered European ecclesiastical buildings. Abby's enterprise, which subsequently became the pet project of Nelson, has played a notorious role in spoonfeeding the public garbage as "avant-garde" art.

5. Hegel's comment on Marcus Aurelius in his *History of Philosophy* is most appropriate to the character of the statue:

In regard to morality and power of willing the good, nothing more excellent can be read than what Marcus Aurelius has written in his *Meditations* on himself; he was Emperor of the whole of the then known civilized world, and likewise bore himself nobly and justly as a private individual. But the condition of the Roman Empire was not altered by this philosophic emperor, and his successor, who was of a different character, was restrained by nothing from inaugurating a condition of things as bad as his own wicked caprice might direct. It is something much higher when the inward principle of the mind, of a rational will, likewise realizes itself, so that there arises a rational constitution, a condition of things in accordance with culture and law." (Volume II, Section II A, "The Philosophy of the Stoics.")

Hegel goes on to note that there is a something "higher than the Stoic notion of freedom" — Freedom-Necessity as the Renaissance understood it.

6. Some traditionalist military historians mark the beginning and end

of the feudal period with the collapse of the disciplined infantry at the end of the Roman Empire and its revival in the Hundred Years War!

7. Pertinent selections from Ficino and Pico — Ficino's works are generally sadly lacking in English translation — are provided in the volume *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, edited by Cassirer, Kristeller, et al., Chicago, 1948. For a summary of Ficino's contribution, see Lyn Marcus, "Italy Lectures," *op. cit.*

8. Roberto S. Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950 - 1350*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971.

9. Summarized by Giuliano Procacci in *History of the Italian People*, where a description of the role of the Dominican and Franciscan orders as the Pope's "hard" and "soft" cops, respectively, can be found.

10. Kenneth Clark, *Leonard da Vinci*, 1939 provides a brief account of the history of the fresco. At the time of this writing, American technology — ultrasonic waves — is being used to probe the wall in Palazzo Vecchio, the Florentine city hall, to locate whatever may remain of the lost Leonardo fresco.

11. The weight of individual responsibility in the undetermined outcome of a great struggle is a recurrent theme in works of the final phase of the Florentine Renaissance. Michelangelo's famous statue of *David*, commissioned as a civic monument during the same period as the *Battle of Anghiari*, in contrast to earlier celebrated renditions of the David theme shows the gangling hero at the moment *before* he hurls his sling at Goliath rather than relaxing with the giant's head at his feet. Thus the "miracle" (the subject) is entirely located in the hero's qualities of will and intellect — especially since the viewer knows the outcome anyway.

12. Ferdinand Shevill, *History of Medieval and Renaissance Florence*, Volume 2, "The Renaissance," Chapter XXVII, New York, 1961; Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Florence*, translated by M. Domandi, New York, 1970 provides a more lively contemporary account.

13. Leonardo's own prescription for how to paint a battle, as well as the documents of instructions for the *Anghiari* mural, are printed in Irma Richter, editor, *Selections from the Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, London, 1952.

14. Clark, *Leonardo*, *op. cit.*, Chapter 7, pp. 1503-1508.

15. By the mid-16th century, what passed as "neo-Platonism" in most European courts was a vicious distortion of what Ficino and his original Medici sponsors had envisioned — a purely self-cannibalistic war between "body" and "spirit" under a complex set of chivalric codes such as those set forth in the widely circulated *Il Cortigiano* of Baldassare Castiglione. The magnificent Titian took delight in lampooning the anti-sensuous doctrines of neo-Platonic love in many of his paintings and laying bare, so to speak, the reality that his Venuses and Madonnas were modeled on Venice's reported 10,000 prostitutes.

16. The painting has been written about a good deal. Earlier articles are summarized in the Dec. 1957 issue of the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, which is entirely dedicated to the *Merode Altarpiece*. Identification of the little man behind the donors as a paid messenger is due to a fascinating bit of sleuthing carried out by Helmut Nickel, curator of arms and armor at the Metropolitan Museum, and published in the *Museum Bulletin* in 1966.

The notion of "geometry and diplomacy" is perfectly exemplified in the famous "Sacred Conversation" paintings which suddenly became common in the early 15th century. The Madonna holds courtly discussions — tailored to descriptions of diplomatic reception ceremonies of that time — with saints and contemporary figures of note in palatial settings.

Under the Tudors, Henry VIII's court painter Hans Holbein carried

this tradition to a pointed and humorous conclusion by substituting the Madonna in his famous picture of the two French envoys to Henry's court (*The Ambassadors*) with an array of objects in the center. The objects represent the highest technical accomplishments of the Renaissance in painting, music, astronomy, and navigation! (Art historians have proven that Holbein's picture is closely modeled on a 15th century Florentine "Sacred Conversation.")

17. Like the *Tribute Money*, the *Merode Altarpiece* is really a glorification of inter-city commerce rather than what (in the tradition of Burckhardt) would be understood as local civic patriotism. The Ingelbrechts, whose arms appear on the window in the central panel, were a patrician family of Mechlen who, according to the records, had investments in Campin's Tournai in 1427. The private messenger who wears the Mechlen livery in the background is typical of the agents who carried commercial messages, news reports and judicial notices from city to city for just such mercantile potentates.

18. As far as I know, the systematic discrepancy of Piero's perspective in this and other works has only been noticed by G. Nicco Fasola, editor of the 1942 Florence edition of Piero della Francesca's book on perspective, *De Prospectiva Pingendi*. Fasola fails to ascribe any ironical significance to this habit of Piero's. Piero has generally fallen victim to art criticism which makes him a precursor of modern formalism and hence misreads his paintings as "static" and his actors as "passive." Such misreadings are simply the product of a refusal to meet Piero's own intellectual standards.

19. The identification of the figures is owed to E. Panofsky in *Studies in Iconology*, Chapter III, New York, 1939. Panofsky is incapable of delivering a value judgement on the work, or really distinguishing it from the actual Renaissance period to which most of his studies are dedicated.

The cult of 16th century Mannerism, formerly regarded as a tremendous backlash against the Renaissance, was revived by circles around the Warburg family and in Vienna early in this century, first as an example of the sort of "creative decadence" the Viennese were discovering in the barbarous works of the late Roman Empire, and subsequently going into high gear around the justifications of German Expressionism. See A. Kiehl, "Fascism as the Destruction of Creativity," *The Campaigner*, Sept.-Oct. 1973.

20. Lyn Marcus, *Dialectical Economics*, Chapter 10, "Feudal to Capitalist Reproduction"; and Raymond de Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank*, Chapter XIII, "Bruges and London."

21. A jaundiced account of the Portinari family, unjustly blamed for causing the fall of the Medici empire, is given by de Roover, *op. cit.*, Chapter XIII, *passim*.

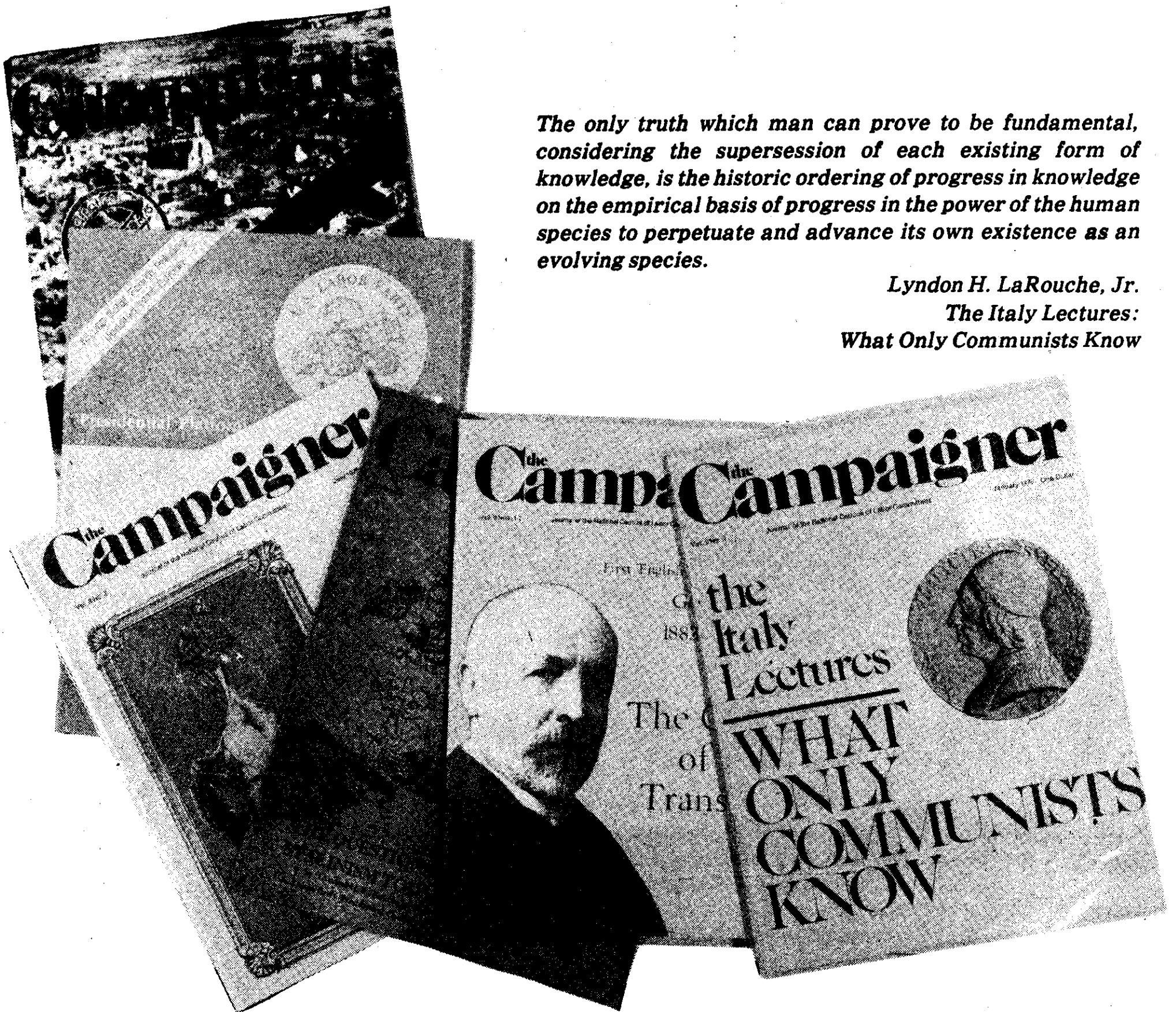
22. Freud's favorite essay, "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood," not only errs factually — the "vulture" around which he builds his argument turns out to be correctly translated "kite" — and methodologically — Freud constructs a chain of literary associations which would be quite irrelevant to the essentially visually minded Leonardo — but begins from a viciously false separation of love and knowledge. The most telling point comes when Freud quotes Leonardo's beautiful assertion that "In truth great love springs from great knowledge of the beloved object, and if you know it but little you will be able to love it only a little or not at all..." Freud comments that this assertion, which is at the core of Leonardo's morality as a scientist and artist, is "obviously false."

23. This interpretation appears in the final chapter of Clark, *Leonardo*, *op. cit.*, in which he deals with essentially the same material I am treating here, from the standpoint of an esthete. For Leonardo's canal studies, see *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, in two volumes, editor J.P. Richter, New York, 1970. Vol. II, Parts XVI (Physical Geography) and XVII (Topographical Notes).

24. This particular translation is given by E. Panofsky in his monograph *Albrecht Dürer*, Princeton, N.J., 1943.

*The only truth which man can prove to be fundamental, considering the supersession of each existing form of knowledge, is the historic ordering of progress in knowledge on the empirical basis of progress in the power of the human species to perpetuate and advance its own existence as an evolving species.*

*Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr.  
The Italy Lectures:  
What Only Communists Know*



**The Italy Lectures: What Only Communists Know \$1.50**

**The Concept of the Transfinite \$2.50**

**Brandt \$1.50**

**The Question of Stalinism Today \$1.50**

**The Miracles and Martyrdom of  
Saint Antonio Gramsci \$1.50**

**The Self-Development of the Biosphere \$1.50**

**The Emergency Employment Act of 1976 \$1.50**

**How the International Development Bank  
Will Work \$1.50**

**Order from: Campaigner Publications P.O. Box 1972 New York N.Y. 10001 (price includes postage)**

Order from: Campaigner Publications Inc., P.O. Box 1972 New York, N.Y. 10001

# NEW SOLIDARITY

Newspaper of the National Caucus of Labor Committees and the U.S. Labor Party

*Your lifeline to the international working class*

*Your lifeline to the future of humanity*

Introductory Offer for New Subscribers

- 26 issues for \$5  
 50 issues for \$12  
 100 issues for \$20  
 check or money order enclosed       Please bill me

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

STREET \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_

STATE \_\_\_\_\_

ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Make checks payable to Campaigner Publications, Inc. Subscription rates apply to the U.S.A. and Canada. For other areas the rate is \$30 for 50 issues.



## *Read to change the world !*

# <sup>the</sup> Campaigner

*Necessary reading for  
any thinking member  
of the human race*

*Every issue takes you  
beyond the previous frontiers  
of human knowledge*

- one year (11 issues) — \$10  
 two years (22 issues) — \$18  
 Check or money order enclosed       Please bill me

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

STREET \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_

STATE \_\_\_\_\_

ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Make checks payable to Campaigner Publications, Inc. Subscription rates apply to the U.S.A. and Canada. For other areas \$18 for 11 issues.



'Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with  
thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee,  
shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.  
We have set thee at the world's center  
that thou mayest from thence more easily observe  
whatever is in the world.'

Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 1486

