

I2

THE CONQUEST OF REALITY

The early fifteenth century

The word renaissance means rebirth or revival, and the idea of such a rebirth had gained ground in Italy ever since the time of Giotto. When people of the period wanted to praise a poet or an artist, they said that his work was as good as that of the ancients. Giotto had been exalted in this way as a master who had led to a true revival of art; by this, people meant that his art was as good as that of the famous masters whose work they found praised in the ancient writers of Greece and Rome. It is not surprising that this idea became popular in Italy. The Italians were very much aware of the fact that in the distant past Italy, with Rome her capital, had been the centre of the civilized world, and that her power and glory had waned since the Germanic tribes, Goths and Vandals, had invaded the country and broken up the Roman Empire. The idea of a revival was closely connected in the minds of the Italians with the idea of a rebirth of 'the grandeur that was Rome'. The period between the classical age, to which they looked back with pride, and the new era of rebirth for which they hoped was merely a sad interlude, 'the time between'. Thus the idea of a rebirth or renaissance was responsible for the idea that the intervening period was a Middle Age – and we still use this terminology. Since the Italians blamed the Goths for the downfall of the Roman Empire, they began to speak of the art of this intervening period as Gothic, by which they meant barbaric – much as we speak of vandalism when we refer to the useless destruction of beautiful things.

We now know that these ideas of the Italians had little basis in fact. They were, at best, a crude and much simplified picture of the actual course of events. We have seen that some seven hundred years separated the Goths from the rise of the art that we now call Gothic. We also know that the revival of art, after the shock and turmoil of the Dark Ages, came gradually and that the Gothic period itself saw this revival getting into its full stride. Possibly we can understand the reason why the Italians were less aware of this gradual growth and unfolding of art than the people living farther north. We have seen that they lagged behind during part of the Middle Ages, so that the new achievements of Giotto came to them as a tremendous innovation, a rebirth of all that was noble and great in art.

The Italians of the fourteenth century believed that art, science and scholarship had flourished in the classical period, that all these things had been almost destroyed by the northern barbarians and that it was for them to help to revive the glorious past and thus bring about a new era.

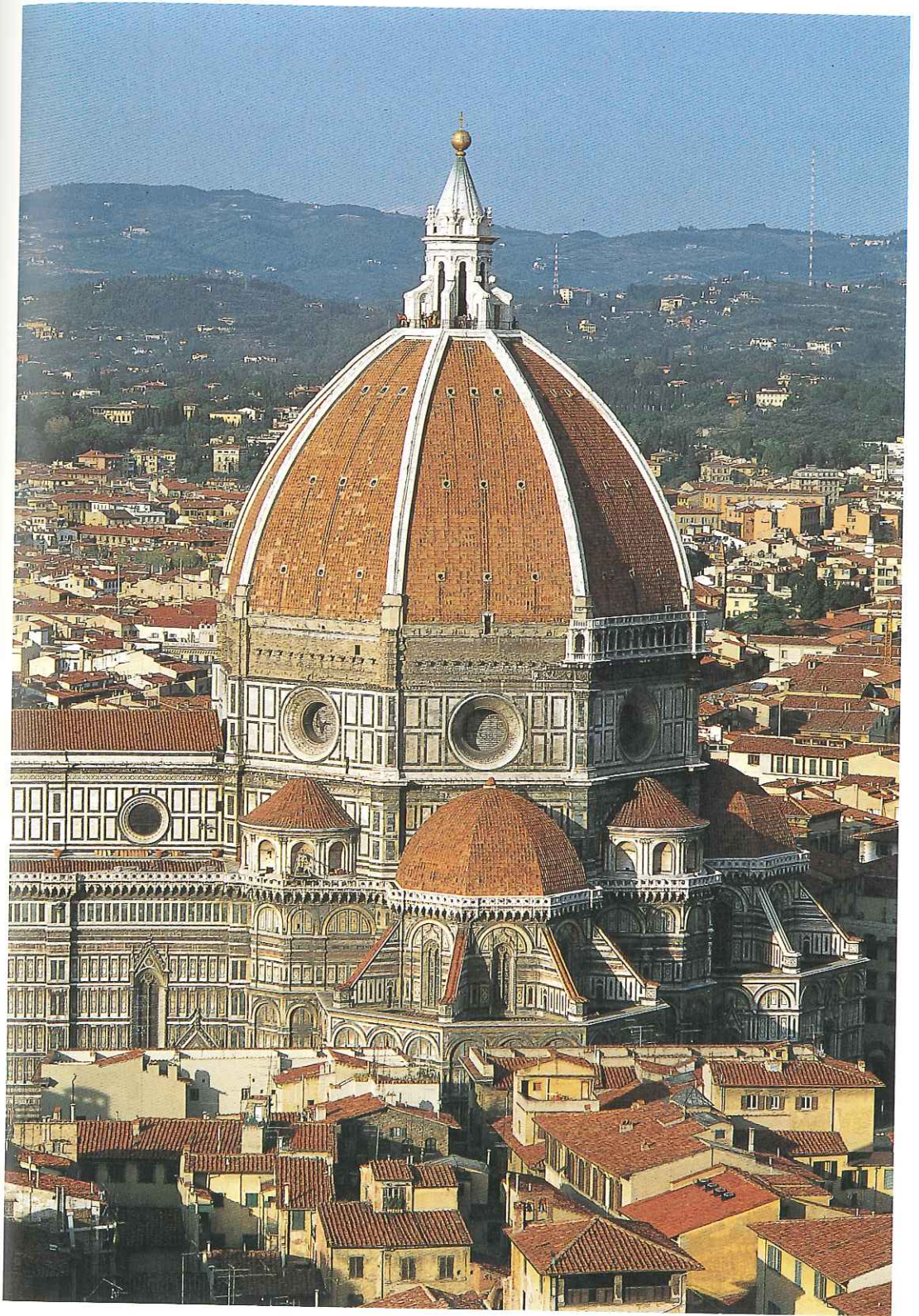
In no city was this feeling of confidence and hope more intense than in the wealthy merchant city of Florence, the city of Dante and of Giotto. It was there, in the first decades of the fifteenth century, that a group of artists deliberately set out to create a new art and to break with the ideas of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

The leader of this group of young Florentine artists was an architect, Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446). Brunelleschi was employed on the completion of the cathedral of Florence. It was a Gothic cathedral, and Brunelleschi had fully mastered the technical inventions which formed part of the Gothic tradition. His fame, in fact, rests partly on an achievement in construction and design which would not have been possible without his knowledge of the Gothic methods of vaulting. The Florentines wished to have their cathedral crowned by a mighty dome, but no artist was able to span the immense space between the pillars on which the dome was to rest, till Brunelleschi devised a method of accomplishing this, *figure 146*. When Brunelleschi was called upon to design new churches or other buildings, he decided to discard the traditional style altogether, and to adopt the programme of those who longed for a revival of Roman grandeur. It is said that he travelled to Rome and measured the ruins of temples and palaces, and made sketches of their forms and ornaments. It was never his intention to copy these ancient buildings outright. They could hardly have been adapted to the needs of fifteenth-century Florence. What he aimed at was the creation of a new way of building, in which the forms of classical architecture were freely used to create new modes of harmony and beauty.

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

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Filippo Brunelleschi
*Dome of Florence
Cathedral, c. 1420–36*





147

Filippo Brunelleschi
Cappella Pazzi,
Florence, c. 1430

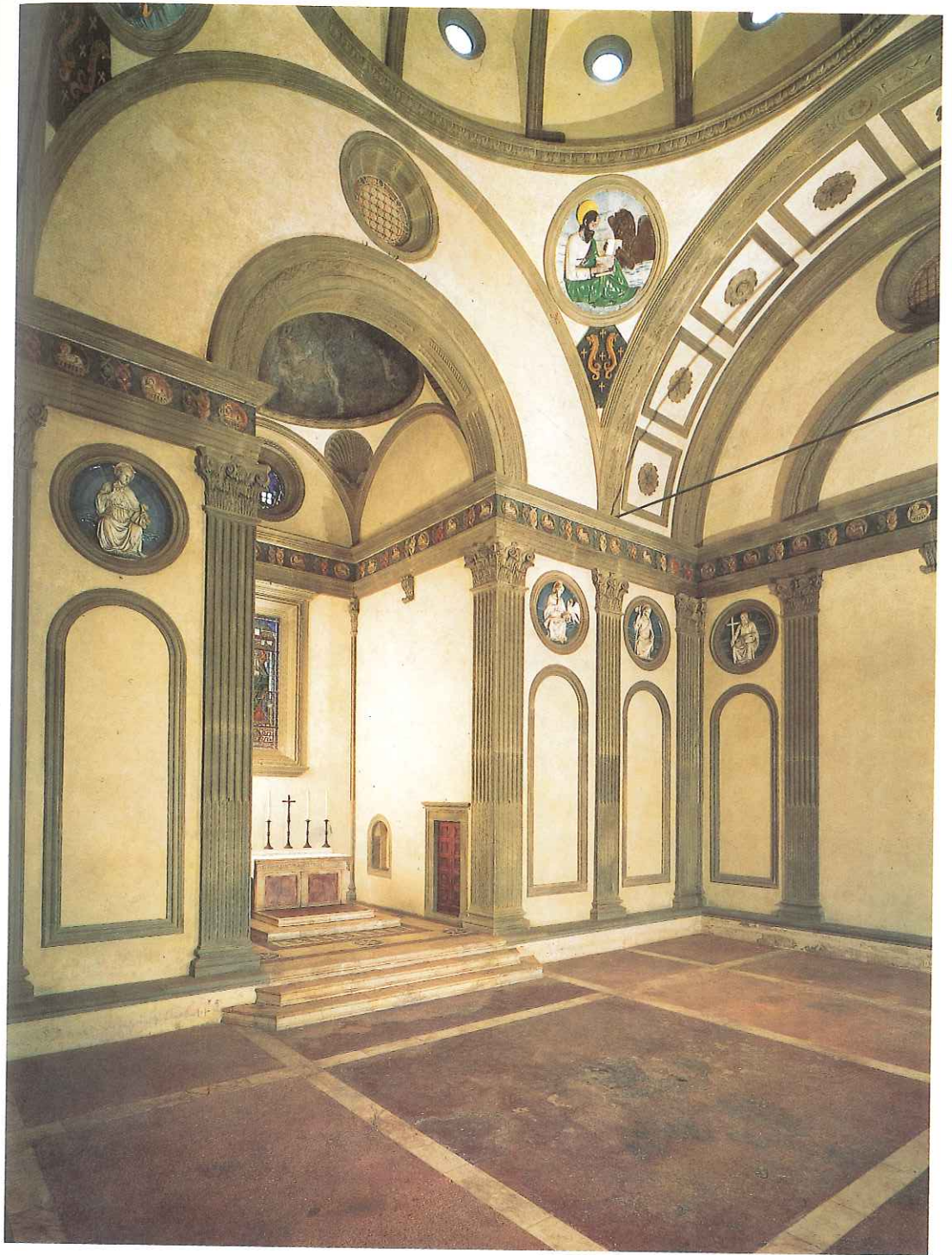
An early Renaissance
church

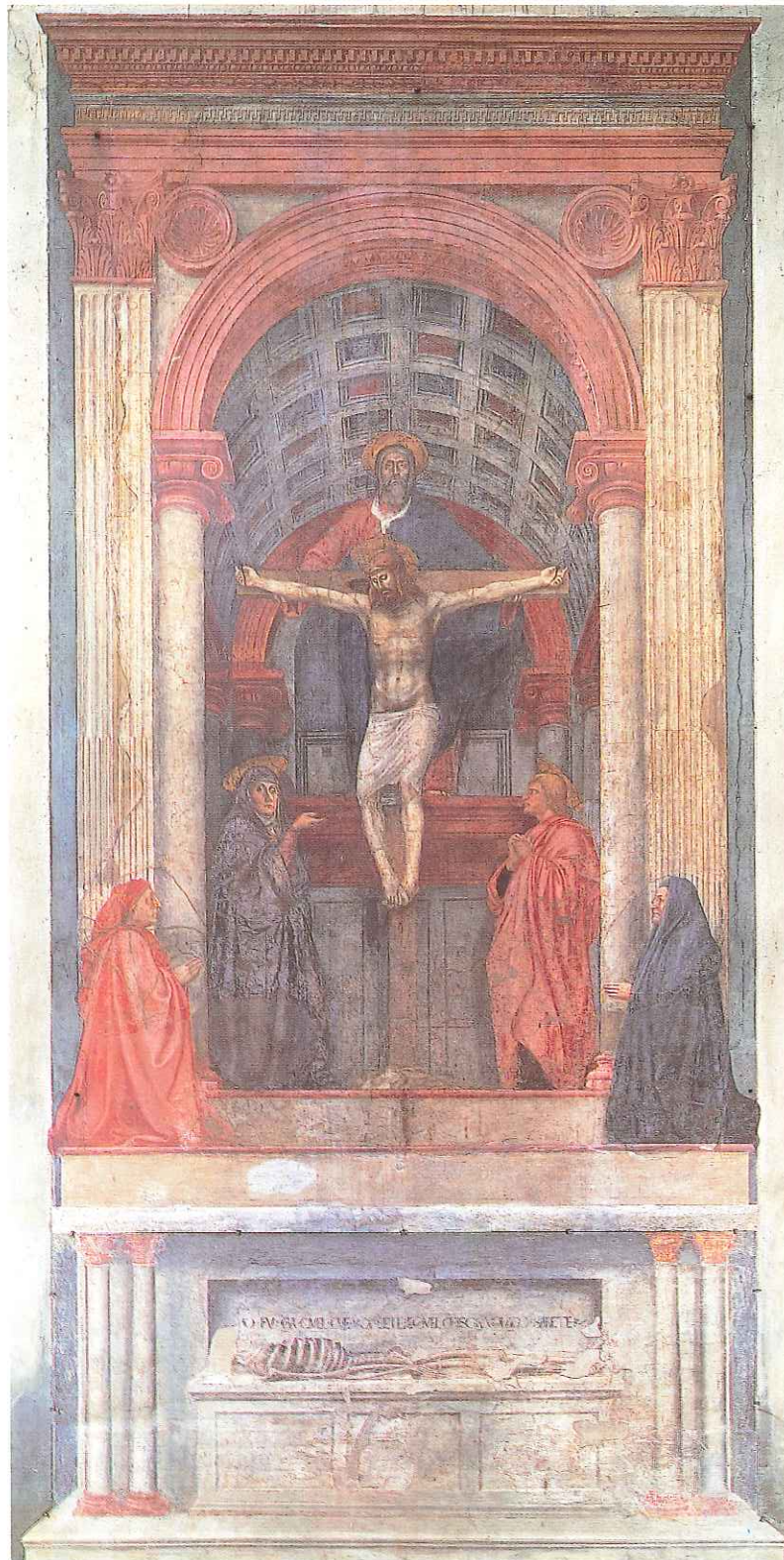
Figure 147 shows the façade of a little church which Brunelleschi built for the powerful family of the Pazzi in Florence. We see at once that it has little in common with any classical temple, but even less with the forms used by Gothic builders. Brunelleschi has combined columns, pilasters and arches in his own way to achieve an effect of lightness and grace which is different from anything that had gone before. Details such as the framing of the door, with its classical gable or pediment, show how carefully Brunelleschi had studied the ancient ruins, and buildings such as the Pantheon, page 120, figure 75. Compare how the arch is formed and how it cuts into the upper storey with its pilasters (flat half-columns). We see his study of Roman forms even more clearly as we enter the church, figure 148. Nothing in this bright and well-proportioned interior has any of the features which Gothic architects valued so highly. There are no high windows, no slim pillars. Instead, the blank white wall is subdivided by grey pilasters, which convey the idea of a classical 'order', although they serve no real function in the construction of the building. Brunelleschi only put them there to emphasize the shape and proportion of the interior.

Brunelleschi was not only the initiator of Renaissance architecture. To him, it seems, is due another momentous discovery in the field of art,

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Filippo Brunelleschi
Interior of the Cappella
Pazzi, Florence,
c. 1430



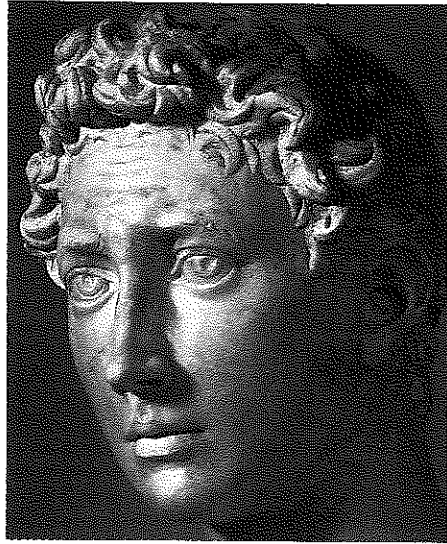


149

Masaccio
*Holy Trinity with the
Virgin, St John and
donors, c. 1425–8*

Fresco, 667 × 317 cm, 263
× 125 in; church of Sta
Maria Novella, Florence

which also dominated the art of subsequent centuries – that of perspective. We have seen that even the Greeks, who understood foreshortening, and the Hellenistic painters, who were skilled in creating the illusion of depth, *page 114, figure 72*, did not know the mathematical laws by which objects appear to diminish in size as they recede from us. We remember that no classical artist could have drawn the famous avenue of trees leading back into the picture until it vanishes on the horizon. It was Brunelleschi who gave artists the mathematical means of solving this problem; and the excitement which this caused among his painter-friends must have been immense. *Figure 149* shows one of the first paintings which were made according to these mathematical rules. It is a wall-painting in a Florentine Church, and represents the Holy Trinity with the Virgin and St John under the cross, and the donors – an elderly merchant and his wife – kneeling outside. The artist who painted this was called Masaccio (1401–28), which means ‘clumsy Thomas’. He must have been an extraordinary genius, for we know that he died when hardly twenty-eight years of age, and that by then he had already brought about a complete revolution in painting. This revolution did not consist only in the technical trick of perspective painting, though that in itself must have been startling enough when it was new. We can imagine how amazed the Florentines must have been when this wall-painting was unveiled and seemed to have made a hole in the wall through which they could look into a new burial chapel in Brunelleschi’s modern style. But perhaps they were even more amazed at the simplicity and grandeur of the figures which were framed by this new architecture. If the Florentines had expected something in the vein of the International style, which was as fashionable in Florence as elsewhere in Europe, they must have been disappointed. Instead of delicate grace, they saw massive heavy figures; instead of easy-flowing curves, solid angular forms; and, instead of dainty details such as flowers and precious stones, a stark tomb with a skeleton placed on it. But if Masaccio’s art was less pleasing to the eye than the paintings they had been accustomed to, it was all the more sincere and moving. We can see that Masaccio admired the dramatic grandeur of Giotto, though he did not imitate him. The simple gesture with which the Holy Virgin points to her crucified Son is so eloquent and impressive because it is the only movement in the whole solemn painting. Its figures, in fact, look like statues. It is this effect, more than anything else, that Masaccio has heightened by the perspective frame in which he placed his figures. We feel we can almost touch them, and this feeling brings them and their message nearer to us. To the great masters of the Renaissance, the new devices and discoveries of art were never an end in themselves. They always used them to bring the meaning of their subject still nearer to our minds.



The greatest sculptor of Brunelleschi's circle was the Florentine master Donatello (1386?–1466). He was older than Masaccio by fifteen years, but he lived much longer. *Figure 151* shows one of his earlier works. It was commissioned by the guild of the armourers, whose patron saint, St George, it represents, and was destined for a niche on the outside of a Florentine church (Or San Michele). If we think back to the Gothic statues outside the great cathedrals, *page 191, figure 127*, we realize how completely

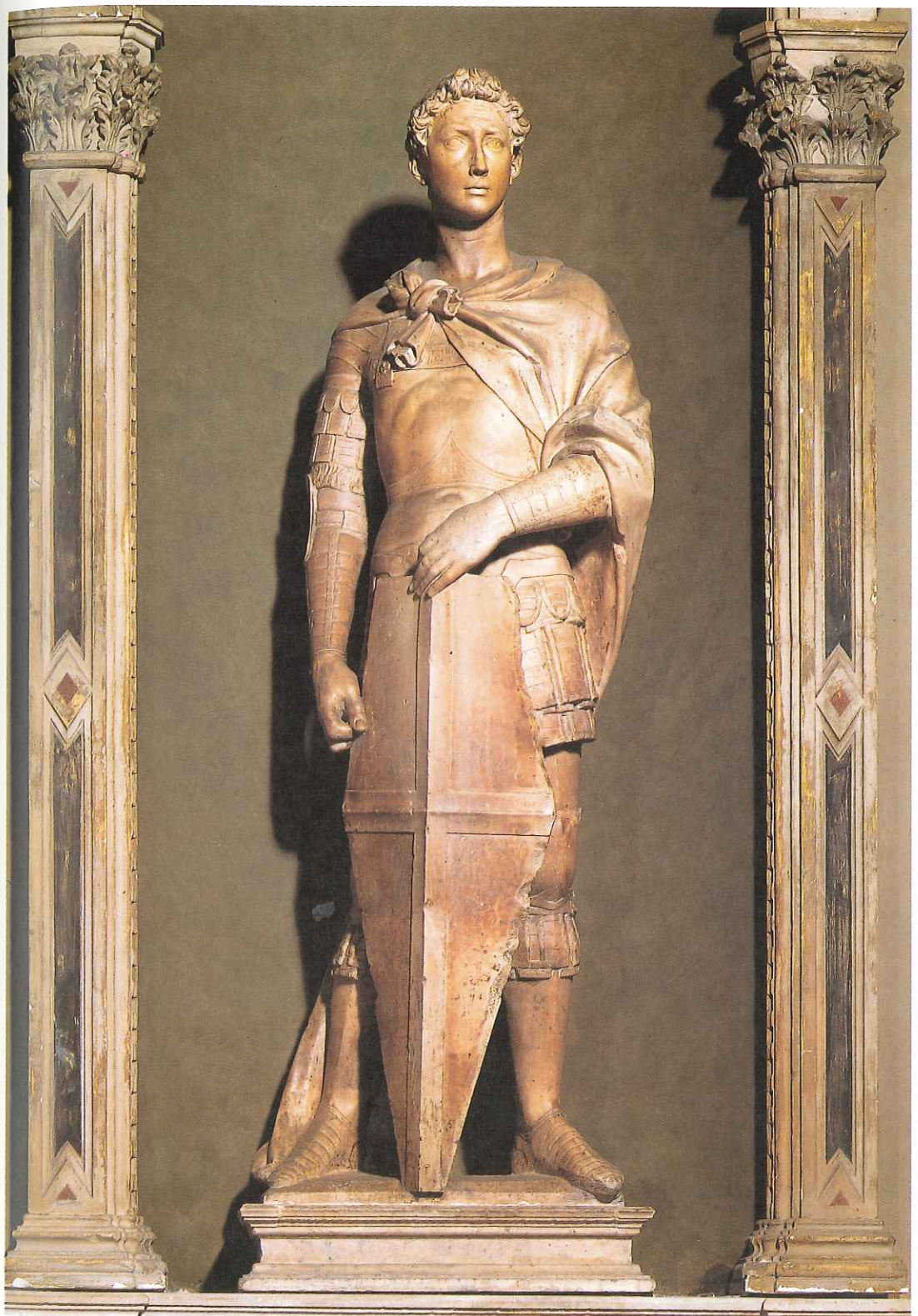
Donatello broke with the past. These Gothic statues hovered at the side of the porches in calm and solemn rows, looking like beings from a different world. Donatello's St George stands firmly on the ground, his feet planted resolutely on the earth as if he were determined not to yield an inch. His face has none of the vague and serene beauty of medieval saints – it is all energy and concentration, *figure 150*. He seems to watch the approach of the enemy and to take its measure, his hands resting on his shield, his whole attitude tense with defiant determination. The statue has remained famous as an unrivalled picture of youthful dash and courage. But it is not only Donatello's imagination which we must admire, his faculty of visualizing the knightly saint in such a fresh and convincing manner; his whole approach to the art of sculpture shows a completely new conception. Despite the impression of life and movement which the statue conveys it remains clear in outline and solid as a rock. Like Masaccio's paintings, it shows us that Donatello wanted to replace the gentle refinement of his predecessors by a new and vigorous observation of nature. Such details as the hands or the brow of the saint show a complete independence from the traditional models. They prove a fresh and determined study of the real features of the human body. For these Florentine masters of the beginning of the fifteenth century were no longer content to repeat the old formulas handed down by medieval artists. Like the Greeks and Romans, whom they admired, they began to study the human body in their studios and workshops by asking models or fellow artists to pose for them in the required attitudes. It is this new method and this new interest which makes Donatello's work look so strikingly convincing.

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Detail of figure 151

151

Donatello
St George, c. 1415–16
 Marble, height 209 cm,
 82¼ in; Museo Nazionale
 del Bargello, Florence





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Donatello
The Feast of Herod,
1423–7

Gilt bronze, 60 × 60 cm,
23 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ in; relief on
the font of the Baptistery,
Siena Cathedral

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Detail of figure 152



Donatello acquired great fame in his lifetime. Like Giotto a century earlier, he was frequently called to other Italian cities to add to their beauty and glory. *Figure 152* shows a bronze relief he made for a font at Siena some ten years after the *St George*. Like the medieval font of *page 179*, *figure 118*, it illustrates a scene from the life of St John the Baptist. It shows the gruesome moment when the princess Salome had asked King Herod for the head of St John as a reward for her dancing, and got it. We look into the royal banqueting hall, and beyond it to the musicians' gallery and a sequence of rooms and stairs behind. The executioner has just entered and knelt down before the king carrying the head of the saint on a charger. The king shrinks back and raises his hands in horror, children cry and run away; Salome's mother, who instigated the crime, is seen talking to the king, trying to explain the deed. There is a great void around her as the guests recoil. One of them covers his eyes with his hand, others crowd round Salome, who seems just to have stopped in her dance. One need not explain at length what features were new in such a work of Donatello's. They all were. To people accustomed to the clear and graceful narratives of Gothic art, Donatello's way of telling a story must have come as a shock. Here there was no desire to form a neat and pleasing pattern, but rather to produce the effect of sudden chaos. Like Masaccio's figures, Donatello's are harsh and angular in their movements. Their gestures are violent, and there is no attempt to mitigate the horror of the story. To his contemporaries, the scene must have looked almost uncannily alive.

The new art of perspective further increases the illusion of reality. Donatello must have begun by asking himself: 'What must it have been



like when the head of the saint was brought into the hall?' He did his best to represent a classical palace, such as the one in which the event might have taken place, and he chose Roman types for the figures in the background, *figure 153*. We can see clearly, in fact, that by this time Donatello, like his friend Brunelleschi, had begun a systematic study of Roman remains to help him bring about the rebirth of art. It is quite wrong, however, to imagine that this study of Greek and Roman art *caused* the rebirth or 'Renaissance'. Almost the opposite is true. The artists round Brunelleschi longed so passionately for a revival of art that they turned to nature, to science and to the remains of antiquity to realize their new aims.

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

Just as Donatello's generation in Florence became tired of the subtleties and refinements of the International Gothic style and longed to create more vigorous, austere figures, so a sculptor beyond the Alps strove for an art more lifelike and more forthright than the delicate works of his predecessors. This sculptor was Claus Sluter, who worked from about 1380 to 1405 at Dijon, at that time the capital of the rich and prosperous Duchy of Burgundy. His most famous work is a group of prophets which once formed the base of a large crucifix marking the fountain of a popular place of pilgrimage, *figure 154*. They are the men whose words were interpreted as the prediction of the Passion. Each of them holds in his hand a large book or scroll, on which these words were inscribed, and seems to be meditating on this coming tragedy. These are no longer the solemn and rigid figures that flanked the porches of Gothic cathedrals, *page 191, figure 127*. They differ from these earlier works just as much as does Donatello's St George. The man with the turban is Daniel, the bare-headed old prophet, Isaiah. As they stand before us, larger than life, still enlivened by gold and colour, they look less like statues than like impressive characters from one of the medieval mystery plays, just about to recite their parts. But with all this striking illusion of lifelikeness we should not forget the artistic sense with which Sluter has created these massive figures with the sweep of their drapery and the dignity of their bearing.

Yet it was not a sculptor who carried out the final conquest of reality in the North. For the artist whose revolutionary discoveries were felt from the beginning to represent something entirely new was the painter Jan van Eyck (1390?-1441). Like Sluter, he was connected with the court of the Dukes of Burgundy, but he mostly worked in the part of the Netherlands that is now Belgium. His most famous work is a huge altarpiece with many scenes

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Claus Sluter
*The prophets Daniel
and Isaiah, 1396-1404*

From the Moses Fountain:
limestone, height
(excluding base) 360 cm,
142 in; Chartreuse de
Champmol, Dijon

in the city of Ghent, *figures 155–6*. It is said to have been begun by Jan's elder brother Hubert, of whom little is known, and was completed by Jan in 1432. Thus it was painted during the very years that saw the completion of the great works of Masaccio and Donatello already described.

For all their obvious differences there are a number of similarities between Masaccio's fresco in Florence, *figure 149*, and this altarpiece painted for a church in distant Flanders. Both show the pious donor and his wife in prayer at the sides, *figure 155*, and both centre on a large symbolic image – that of the Holy Trinity in the fresco, and on the altar the mystic vision of the Adoration of the Lamb, the lamb, of course symbolizing Christ, *figure 156*. The composition is mainly based on a passage in the Revelations of St John (vii. 9), 'And I beheld ... a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and kindred and people and tongues [which] stood before the throne and before the lamb ...', a text that is related by the Church to the Feast of All Saints, to which there are further allusions in the painting. Above, we see God the Father, as majestic as Masaccio's but enthroned in splendour like a Pope, between the Holy Virgin and St John the Baptist, who first called Jesus the Lamb of God.

Like our fold-out, *figure 156*, the altar, with its many images, could be shown open, which happened on feast-days, when its glowing colours would be revealed, or shut (on week-days) when it presented a more sober appearance, *figure 155*. Here the artist represented St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist as statues, much as Giotto had represented the figures of Virtues and Vices in the Arena Chapel, *page 200, figure 134*. Above, we are shown the familiar scene of the Annunciation, and we need only look back again at the wonderful panel by Simone Martini, painted a hundred years earlier, *page 213, figure 141*, to gain a first impression of van Eyck's wholly novel 'down to earth' approach to the sacred story.

His most striking demonstration of his new conception of art, however, he reserved for the inner wings: the figures of Adam and Eve after the Fall. The Bible tells us that it was only after having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge that they 'knew they were naked'. Stark naked indeed they look, despite the fig leaves they hold in their hands. Here there is really no parallel with the masters of the early Renaissance in Italy who never quite abandoned the traditions of Greek and Roman art. We remember that the ancients had 'idealized' the human figure in such works as the Venus of Milo or the Apollo Belvedere, *pages 104–5, figures 64, 65*. Jan van Eyck would have had none of this. He must have placed naked models in front of him and painted them so faithfully that later generations were somewhat shocked by so much honesty. Not that the artist had no eye for beauty. He clearly also enjoyed evoking the splendours of Heaven no less than the master of the Wilton Diptych, *pages 216–17, figure 143*, had done a generation earlier. But

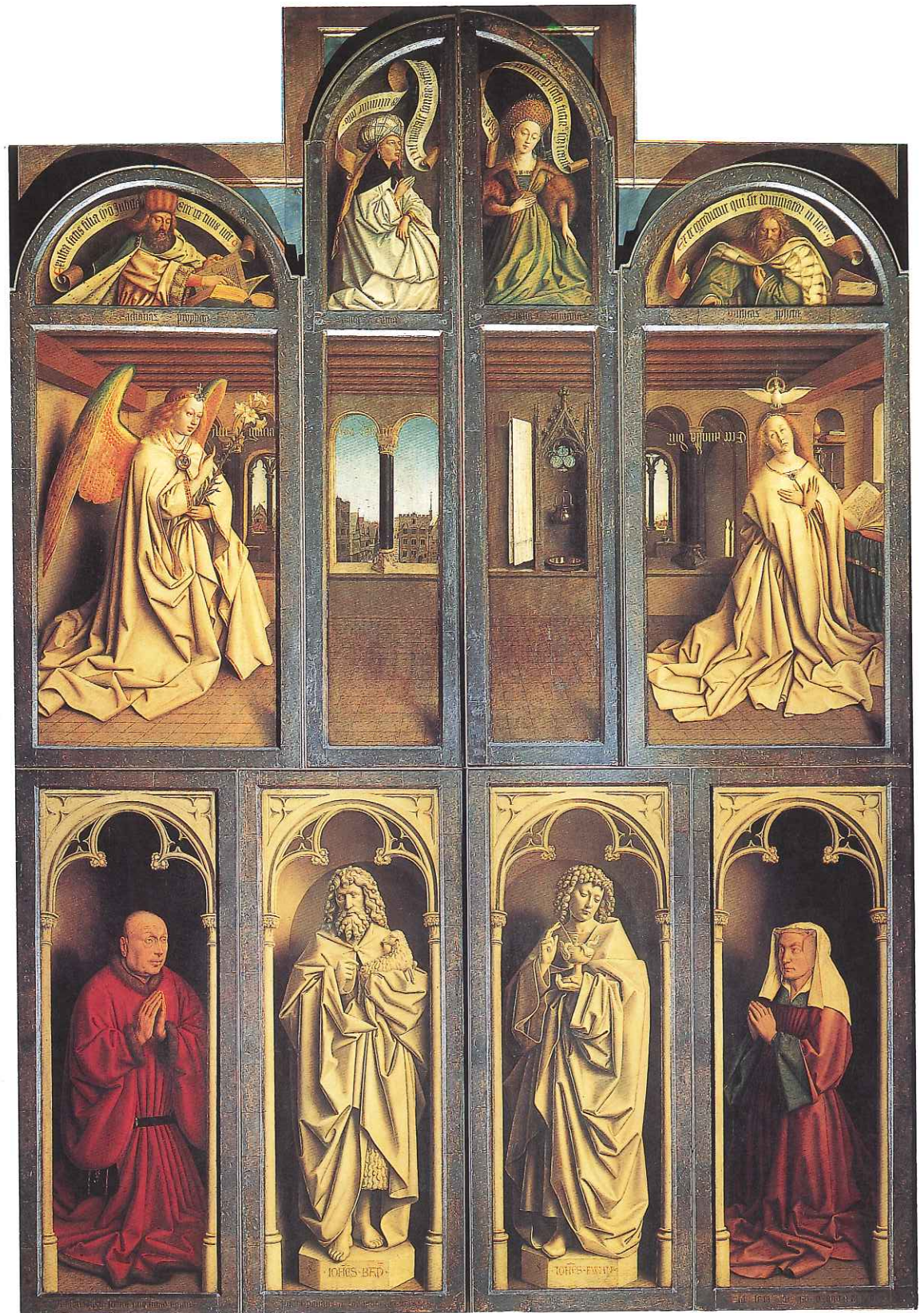
155

Jan van Eyck
*The Ghent altarpiece
with wings folded, 1432*

Oil on panel, each panel
146.2 × 51.4 cm, 57½ ×
20¼ in; cathedral of
St Bavo, Ghent

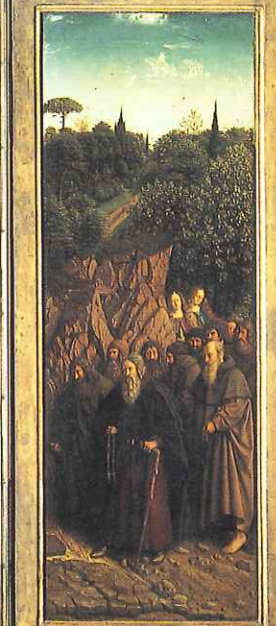
156 FOLD-OUT

*The Ghent altarpiece
with wings open*

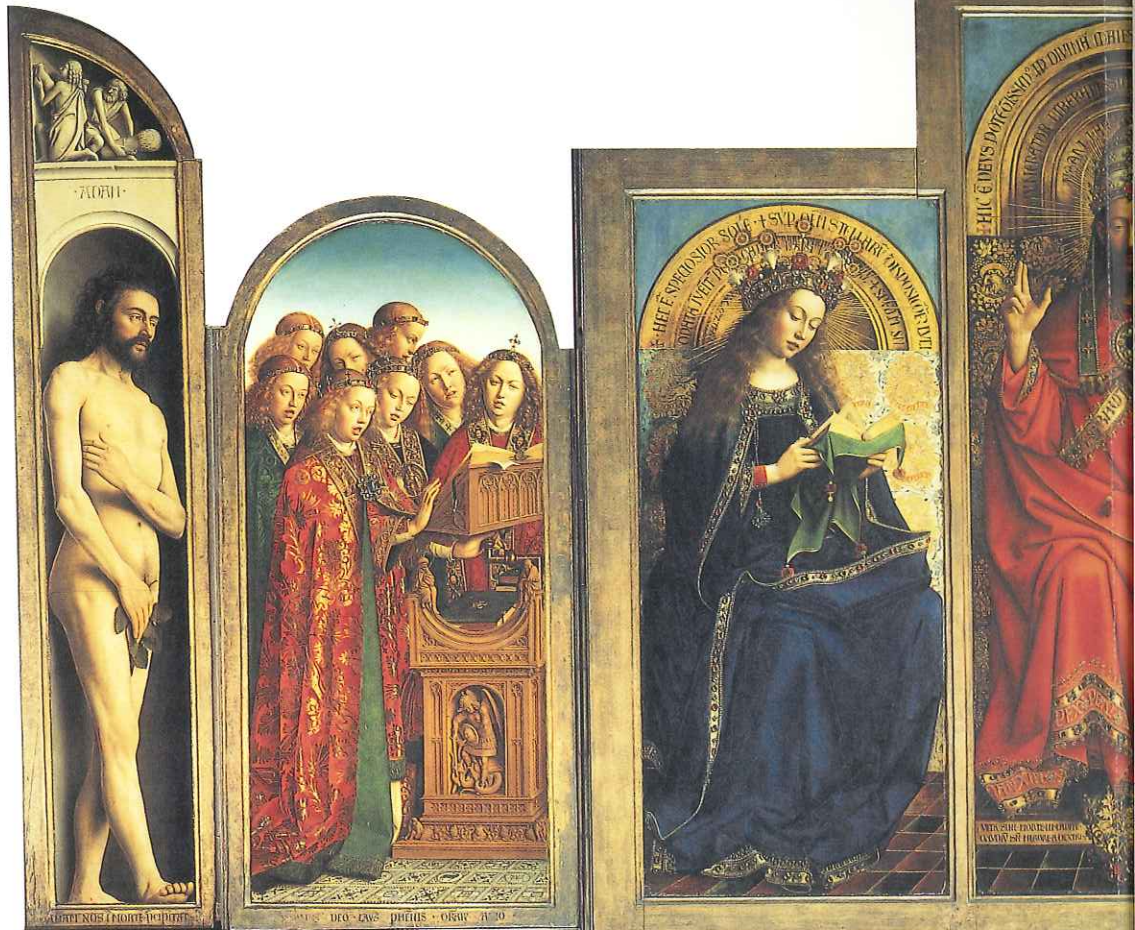




EYCK 1432



Jan van Eyck
The Ghent altarpiece
with wings folded, 1432
Oil on panel, each panel
140.2 x 51.4 cm, 57 1/2 x
20 1/8 in; cathedral of
St Bavo, Ghent



The Ghent altarpiece
with wings open



look again at the difference, at the patience and mastery with which he studied and painted the sheen of the precious brocades worn by the music-making angels and the sparkle of jewellery everywhere. In this respect the Van Eycks did not break as radically with the traditions of the International Style as Masaccio had done. They rather pursued the methods of such artists as the Limbourg brothers and brought them to such a pitch of perfection that they left the ideas of medieval art behind. They, like other Gothic masters of their period, had enjoyed crowding their pictures with charming and delicate details taken from observation. They were proud to show their skill in painting flowers and animals, buildings, gorgeous costumes and jewellery, and to present a delightful feast to the eye. We have seen that they did not concern themselves overmuch with the real appearance of the figures and landscapes, and that their drawing and perspective were therefore not very convincing. One cannot say the same thing of Van Eyck's pictures. His observation of nature is even more patient, his knowledge of details even more exact. The trees and the building in the background show this difference clearly. The trees of the Limbourg brothers, as we remember, were rather schematic and conventional, *page 219, figure 144*. Their landscape looked like a back-cloth or a tapestry rather than actual scenery. All this is quite different in Van Eyck's picture. In the details shown in *figure 157*, we have real trees and a real landscape leading back to the city and castle on the horizon. The infinite patience with which the grass on the rocks and the flowers growing in the crags are painted bears no comparison with the ornamental undergrowth in the Limbourg miniature. What is true of the landscape is true of the figures. Van Eyck seems to have been so intent on reproducing every minute detail on his picture that we almost seem able to count the hairs of the horses' manes, or on the fur trimmings of the riders' costumes. The white horse in the Limbourg miniature looks a little like a rocking-horse. Van Eyck's horse is very similar in shape and posture, but it is alive. We can see the light in its eye, and the creases in its skin, and, while the earlier horse looks almost flat, Van Eyck's horse has rounded limbs which are modelled in light and shade.

It may seem petty to look out for all these small details and to praise a great artist for the patience with which he observed and copied nature. It would certainly be wrong to think less highly of the work of the Limbourg brothers or, for that matter, of any other painting, because it lacked this faithful imitation of nature. But if we want to understand the way in which northern art developed we must appreciate this infinite care and patience of Jan van Eyck. The southern artists of his generation, the Florentine masters of Brunelleschi's circle, had developed a method by which nature could be represented in a picture with almost scientific accuracy. They began with the framework of perspective lines, and they built up the

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Details of figure 156

human body through their knowledge of anatomy and of the laws of foreshortening. Van Eyck took the opposite way. He achieved the illusion of nature by patiently adding detail upon detail till his whole picture became like a mirror of the visible world. This difference between northern and Italian art remained important for many years. It is a fair guess to say that any work which excels in the representation of the beautiful surface of things, of flowers, jewels or fabric, will be by a northern artist, most probably by an artist from the Netherlands; while a painting with bold outlines, clear perspective and a sure mastery of the beautiful human body, will be Italian.

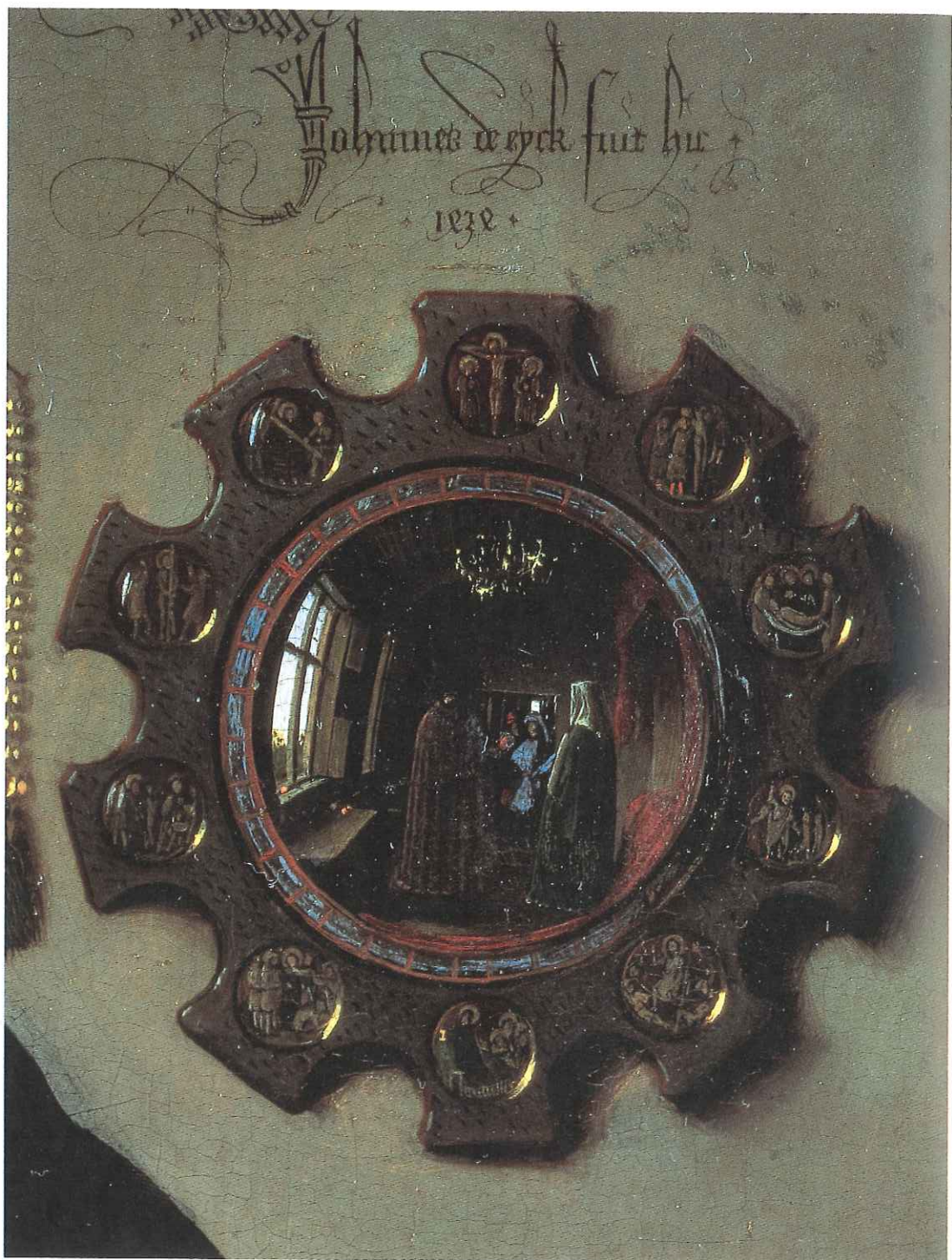
To carry out his intention of holding up a mirror to reality in all its details, Van Eyck had to improve the technique of painting. He was the inventor of oil-painting. There has been much discussion about the exact meaning and truth of this assertion, but the details matter comparatively little. His was not a discovery like that of perspective, which constituted something entirely new. What he achieved was a new prescription for the preparation of paints before they were put on the panel. Painters at that time did not buy ready-made colours in tubes or boxes. They had to prepare their own pigments, mostly from coloured plants and minerals. These they ground to powder between two stones – or let their apprentice grind them – and, before use, they added some liquid to bind the powder into a kind of paste. There were various methods of doing this, but all through the Middle Ages the main ingredient of the liquid had been made of an egg, which was quite suitable except that it dried rather quickly. The method of painting with this type of colour-preparation was called tempera. It seems that Jan van Eyck was dissatisfied with this formula, because it did not allow him to achieve smooth transitions by letting the colours shade off into each other. If he used oil instead of egg, he could work much more slowly and accurately. He could make glossy colours which could be applied in transparent layers or 'glazes', he could put on the glittering highlights with a pointed brush, and achieve those miracles of accuracy which astonished his contemporaries and soon led to a general acceptance of oil-painting as the most suitable medium.

Van Eyck's art reached perhaps its greatest triumph in the painting of portraits. One of his most famous portraits is *figure 158*, which represents an Italian merchant, Giovanni Arnolfini, who had come to the Netherlands on business, with his bride Jeanne de Chenany. In its own way it was as new and as revolutionary as Donatello's or Masaccio's work in Italy. A simple corner of the real world had suddenly been fixed on to a panel as if by magic. Here it all was – the carpet and the slippers, the rosary on the wall, the little brush beside the bed, and the fruit on the window-sill. It is as if we could pay a visit to the Arnolfini in their house. The picture

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Jan van Eyck
*The betrothal of the
 Arnolfini*, 1434
 Oil on wood, 81.8 x 59.7
 cm, 32¼ x 23½ in;
 National Gallery, London





probably represents a solemn moment in their lives – their betrothal. The young woman has just put her right hand into Arnolfini's left and he is about to put his own right hand into hers as a solemn token of their union. Probably the painter was asked to record this important moment as a witness, just as a notary might be asked to declare that he has been present at a similar solemn act. This would explain why the master has put his name in a prominent position on the picture with the Latin words '*Johannes de eyck fuit hic*' (Jan van Eyck was here). In the mirror at the back of the room we see the whole scene reflected from behind, and there, so it seems, we also see the image of the painter and witness, *figure 159*. We do not know whether it was the Italian merchant or the northern artist who conceived the idea of making this use of the new kind of painting, which may be compared to the legal use of a photograph, properly endorsed by a witness. But whoever it was that originated this idea, he had certainly been quick to understand the tremendous possibilities which lay in Van Eyck's new way of painting. For the first time in history the artist became the perfect eye-witness in the truest sense of the term.

In this attempt to render reality as it appeared to the eye, Van Eyck, like Masaccio, had to give up the pleasing patterns and flowing curves of the International Gothic style. To some, his figures may even look stiff and clumsy compared with the exquisite grace of such paintings as the Wilton Diptych, *pages 216-17, figure 143*. But everywhere in Europe artists of that generation, in their passionate search for truth, defied the older ideas of beauty and probably shocked many elderly people. One of the most radical

159, 160
details of figure 158





of these innovators was a Swiss painter called Konrad Witz (1400?–1446?). *Figure 161* is from an altarpiece he painted for Geneva in 1444. It is dedicated to St Peter and represents the saint's encounter with Christ after the Resurrection as it is told in the Gospel of St John (Chapter xxi). Some apostles and their companions had gone to fish in the sea of Tiberias, but had caught nothing. When the morning came Jesus stood on the shore, but they did not recognize Him. He told them to cast the net on the right side of the ship and it was so full of fish that they were unable to pull it in. At that moment one of them said, 'It is the Lord', and when St Peter heard this, 'he girt his fisher's coat unto him (for he was naked) and did cast himself into the sea. And the other disciples came in a little ship', after which they partook of a meal with Jesus. A medieval painter who was

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Konrad Witz
*The Miraculous
 Draught of Fishes,*
 1444

Panel from an altarpiece;
 oil on wood; 132 × 154
 cm, 52 × 60½ in; Musée
 d'Art et d'Histoire,
 Geneva

asked to illustrate this miraculous event would probably have been satisfied with a conventional row of wavy lines to mark the sea of Tiberias. But Witz desired to bring home to the burghers of Geneva what it must have looked like when Christ stood by the waters. Thus he painted not just any lake but a lake they all knew, the lake of Geneva with the broad ridge of Mont Salève in the background. It is a real landscape which everyone could see, which exists today, and still looks very much as it does in the painting. It is perhaps the first exact representation, the first 'portrait' of a real view ever attempted. On this real lake, Witz painted real fishermen: not the dignified apostles of older pictures, but uncouth men of the people, busy with their fishing tackle and struggling rather clumsily to keep the boat steady. St Peter looks somewhat helpless in the water, and so, surely, he ought. Only Christ Himself is standing quietly and firmly. His solid figure recalls those in Masaccio's great fresco, *figure 149*. It must have been a moving experience for the worshippers in Geneva when they looked at their new altar for the first time and saw the apostles as men like themselves, fishing on their own lake, with the risen Christ miraculously appearing to them on its familiar shore to give them help and comfort.

*Stonemason and
sculptors at work,*
c. 1408

Base of a marble sculpture
by Nanni di Banco; Or
San Michele, Florence

