4-2014

Storytelling in Bronze: The Doors of the Baptistery of San Giovanni as Emblems of Florence's Roman History and Artistic Progression

Erin M. Gregory
College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons, Architectural History and Criticism Commons, Christianity Commons, European History Commons, Fine Arts Commons, History of Religion Commons, Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons, Medieval History Commons, Medieval Studies Commons, Other Italian Language and Literature Commons, and the Practical Theology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/31
The three bronze doors of the Baptistery of San Giovanni stand as public expressions of Florence’s imperial history, economic stability, and artistic advances. These commissions can only be understood in their physical context within the Baptistery, the city’s most revered monument. The Baptistery testifies to Florence’s imperial Roman and early Christian history, and it serves vital religious and civic functions within the commune. Each bronze door guards the liminal space between the city’s public sphere and the sacred interior where the baptismal ritual is performed. The bronze medium and the narrative style of the doors further associate Florence with Rome, as well as advertise the commune’s economic stability. Artists Andrea Pisano, the creator of the earliest door, and Lorenzo Ghiberti, the creator of the two later doors, successfully express Florence’s preeminence through their narrative and stylistic approaches. Each artist develops innovative spatial techniques that allow him to create complex narratives. The artistic advancement evidenced by these doors reaffirms Florence’s place among the leading cities of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.
For my brother
Robert Warren
There are things known, and there are things unknown. And in between are the Doors.

- Jim Morrison
# Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 5

Part I The Baptistery of San Giovanni ............................................................... 7

  Origins and History ............................................................................................ 7

  The Civic and Religious Tradition of San Giovanni ................................. 12

  The Fabric of San Giovanni ................................................................. 18

  The Commissions of the Bronze Doors .................................................... 21

Part II The Bronze Doors of San Giovanni ..................................................... 36

  The South Door .............................................................................................. 37

    The Narrative Schema
    Spatial Composition
    Telling the Story

  The New Testament Door ................................................................. 47

    The Narrative Schema
    Spatial Composition
    Telling the Story

  The Old Testament Door ................................................................. 58

    The Narrative Schema
    Spatial Composition
    Telling the Story

Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 70

Figures .............................................................................................................. 73

Appendix ............................................................................................................. 98

Bibliography ...................................................................................................... 101
INTRODUCTION

The three bronze doors of the Baptistery of San Giovanni stand as emblems of Florence’s Roman origin and as expressions of the city’s power and wealth during challenging periods of war, plague, and economic turmoil (fig.1). The bronze medium, the narrative panels, and the location of the doors at the sacred thresholds of San Giovanni testify to Florence’s ancient history and imperial connections. According to Florentine myth, the ancient Romans themselves built San Giovanni, thereby creating a link between the newly established colony of Florence and the imperial city of Rome. To highlight this privileged bond, Florentines throughout the centuries refurbished the Baptistery with the best materials available. The artistic program and decoration of the Baptistery aim to impress by emulating, and even surpassing, the art of ancient Rome and Greece.¹

In particular, the three bronze doors of San Giovanni rival the narrative achievement of ancient Greece and the artistic development of ancient Rome in a metallic medium which was once lost to the West. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, knowledge of bronze casting vanished from the West but survived in the eastern Byzantine half of the empire.² Although eleventh-century Venetian artists revived the technique of bronze casting in the West, the materials were expensive, the casting process was difficult, and knowledgeable craftsmen proved hard to find. Only economically

¹ McGuire, Diane. “The Mosaics of the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence as an Expression of the Political and Economic Relationship between the Papal and Florentine Governments in the Period 1225-1300.” Master of Arts, Wesleyan University, 1991. McGuire argues that the interior of the Baptistery was decorated in the imperial mosaic medium in order to associate Florence with the aristocratic capitals of Rome, Venice, and Constantinople. See page 112.
stable and politically powerful cities in the medieval West boasted bronze doors.\(^3\) Therefore, Florence both intimidated and impressed the surrounding communes with their commission; not one but three bronze doors for the Baptistery of San Giovanni surely flaunted the city’s wealth and technical prowess.

The doors were executed with such skill and mastery that they became the envy of every commune in Italy. The first door, the South door, comes out of the tradition of Giotto, who was widely considered the best painter in Tuscany (fig. 2). The sculptor Andrea Pisano carefully constructed the door’s narrative to echo the South portal’s function within the baptismal rite that occurred at San Giovanni. The eye-level panels, which concern baptism, specifically related to the Florentines who participated in the ritual. Lorenzo Ghiberti executed the second door, called the New Testament door, which exemplifies innovative spatial techniques and a classical revival style (fig. 3). It includes many figures modeled after ancient Roman statues and sarcophagi, which establish a link between Florence and Rome. The technical and narrative elements of these doors culminate in the Baptistery’s third and final door, famously known as the Gates of Paradise. The spatial techniques developed in the previous doors create the depth needed to illustrate a more complex narrative. The panels glitter with polyscenic reliefs that showcase continuous narrative, a device developed by the ancients and perfected in these panels (fig. 4). Together, the three doors of the Baptistery attest to Florence’s superior artistic achievement and impressive history.

Within the commune itself, the doors became complex symbols of religious devotion and civic pride. They stand at the thresholds of the building as sacred guardians to the hallowed space of the inner sanctuary, but they also had a secular significance. Baptism within San Giovanni provided both membership within the Christian community and Florentine citizenship. The doors marked the crucial moment of transition into Florentine civic life, and thereby became an integral part of the baptismal ceremony. Thus, the Baptistery and the baptismal rite provided the foundation of Florentine culture. The doors, therefore, demanded to be glorified with the best possible resources available that would in turn beautify the Baptistery and exhibit the glory of Florence.

PART I: THE BAPTISTERY OF SAN GIOVANNI

The significance of the doors can be appreciated only within the context of the Baptistery’s religious and civic tradition, to which each door responds. The patronage and production of each commission are also crucial for understanding the doors as individual works and as a unity.

Origins and History

Even before the installation of the bronze doors, the city of Florence prided itself on the Baptistery of San Giovanni. As descendants of ancient Rome, Florentines considered the building as tangible proof of their Roman inheritance. Legends of the Baptistery’s Roman foundations, supported by sparse material evidence, became fact when written down in histories of the city. This belief persisted throughout the Middle Ages and into the modern period.
Florence and the rest of the world accepted San Giovanni’s legendary Roman origins until nineteenth-century German scholars argued that the structure of the building clearly adheres to eleventh-century Romanesque architectural types. This assertion sparked a heated debate: one side claims the building as a Romanesque structure, the other insists on an ancient Roman, or at least an early Christian, foundation. Both sides cite valid and convincing architectural and textual evidence in support of their claims. While this issue still remains an impassioned debate today, medieval and Renaissance Florentines considered the Baptistery’s Roman connections irrefutable.

Trecento writers Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, among others, supported San Giovanni’s Roman origins, demonstrating the popularity of this belief. Part of the legend comes from the *Malespini Chronicle*, a late-fourteenth-century document. The *Chronicle* states that shortly after Christ’s crucifixion, Roman architects built the building as a Christian baptistery to convert pagans. The Romans consecrated the Baptistery on June 24th, the Feast Day of Saint John the Baptist. Florentines still cling to this version of history, because they believe that baptism within San Giovanni, built by the early

---

5 Proponents of a Romanesque foundation argue that the Baptistery was completed in 1150 with the insertion of the lantern and cupola, recorded in Giovanni Villani’s *Nuova cronica*. This is bolstered by the fact that Pope Nicolas II consecrated the Baptistery in 1159. See Bloch, Amy R. "Baptism, Movement, and Imagery at the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence." *Movement in Motion; the Meaning of Semantics in Medieval Art* (2011): 131-160, 132, 154, note 8. Furthermore, the Baptistery’s octagonal shape with a domed roof merits the traditional architecture of a Romanesque baptistery or other smaller Christian building. Famous examples include San Vitale in Ravenna and the Constantinian Baptistery of the Lateran in Rome. See McGuire, “The Mosaics of the Baptistery,” 112. Brian E. Roy’s thesis *The Baptistery San Giovanni in Florence and its Placement within the Chronology of Tuscan Romanesque Churches* deals extensively with the Baptistery’s Romanesque dating. See Roy, Brian Elden. "The Baptistery San Giovanni in Florence and its Placement within the Chronology of Tuscan Romanesque Churches." M.A., McGill University (Canada), 1994. Franklin Toker provides a fascinating explanation based on archaeological evidence that suggests the existence of two baptisteries in the same location. See Toker, “A Baptistery Below the Baptistery,” 157-167.
Christians themselves, means induction into this special community of the earliest Florentine Christians.⁸

In the early fourteenth century, the Florentine chronicler Giovanni Villani described even earlier origins for San Giovanni in his history of Florence, *Nuova cronica*. According to Villani, during the reign of Octavianus Augustus, construction masters sent from Rome erected the building as a temple to celebrate the Roman military victory over Fiesole, an ancient city only a few miles from modern-day Florence. As a display of dominance, they built the temple in the middle of the Fiesole market square, now the Florentine Piazza del Duomo and Piazza di San Giovanni. Villani describes the temple’s construction:

> And they caused to be brought white and black marbles and columns from many distant places by sea, and then by the Arno; they brought stone and columns from Fiesole, and founded and built the said temple in the place anciently called Camarti, and where the Fiesolans held their market. Very noble and beautiful they built it with eight sides, and when it had been built with great diligence, they dedicated it to the god Mars, who was the god of the Romans.⁹

Villani emphasizes the spolia from the conquered city of Fiesole and the rest of the known world, along with the building’s dedication to the god of war, to illustrate the reach of Rome’s power. In the fourth century, after Constantine’s Edict of Milan

---

⁸ Ibid., 134.
⁹ Giovanni Villani, Rose E. Selfe, and Philip Henry Wicksteed, *Villani’s Chronicle; being Selections from the First Nine Books of the Croniche Fiorentine*. [2d ed., carefully rev.] ed. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1907, 33. Ancient Roman columns in the interior of the Baptistery and a pavement of black and white Roman mosaics which lie underneath the building’s current floor provide much of the evidence for Villani’s history of the Baptistery (fig. 5). Villani also asserts that the building originally had an oculus “after the fashion of Santa Maria Ritonda of Rome,” also known as the Pantheon, but claims the oculus was closed “in the year of Christ 1150, [with] the cupola [that] was built upon columns, and the ball, and the golden cross which is at the top.” See Giovanni Villani, Rose E. Selfe, and Philip Henry Wicksteed, *Villani’s Chronicle*, 41.
legalized Christianity throughout the Empire, and after the official installation of Pope Sylvester in Rome, the Florentines converted the temple into a baptistery and rededicated it to Saint John the Baptist. From this moment onward, the building became known as Duomo di San Giovanni.\textsuperscript{10}

Florentines eagerly accepted Villani’s story, because the Baptistry’s reputed Roman origins legitimized their own claim of Roman lineage. The building’s supposed Roman foundation created an undeniable tie to the imperial city; moreover, the Florentines’ acceptance of Constantine’s Edict, made evident by the temple’s immediate rededication as a Christian baptistery, placed the city at the fore of the Christian community. The Baptistry then became a symbol of these ancient Roman and early Christian connections, making it the most important building in Florence.

In the early seventh century, the Baptistry of San Giovanni officially assumed its role as the city’s most significant building when it became the new cathedral of Florence. The previous cathedral of the dioceses, San Lorenzo, lay in an unfavorable position outside the city limits, so the bishop of Florence moved the episcopal seat to San Giovanni.\textsuperscript{11} While the bishop likely selected the Baptistry for this honor in part because of its central location within the boundaries of the city, the legends that surround the building certainly played an important role as well. San Giovanni’s Roman history and early Christian ties made it the obvious choice as the new cathedral. Only when the building could no longer physically accommodate the growing Christian community of

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{11} Schevill, Ferdinand. \textit{History of Florence from the Founding of the City through the Renaissance}. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1936, 10. The name of the Florentine bishop who moved the episcopal seat is unknown; he took up his personal residence in the ruins of the Roman baths right behind the west wall of the Baptistry.
Florence did the episcopal seat again relocate next door to the modest church of Santa Reparta, now the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore.

Although San Giovanni no longer housed the episcopal seat, the Bishop of Florence maintained control over the Baptistry for several centuries. Sometime between 1157 and 1193, the bishop released the building to the care of the Arte de Mercanti di Calimala, Florence’s most distinguished guild. At this time, San Giovanni’s status as a monument of the commune’s civic power motivated Florentines to refurbish the building. As was customary with the seven Greater Guilds of the city, the Calimala eagerly supervised San Giovanni’s redecoration efforts.

The Calimala, like the Baptistry, has a rich history. In response to Florence’s budding economy in the twelfth century, members of the biggest businesses of the commune established the Calimala guild in order to create a system of specialized production. They included bankers, foreign cloth dealers, and importers of wool, silk, brocade, and other precious materials. Beginning in the late twelfth century, the guild gradually fractured into specialized organizations. By 1371, the Calimala consisted only

---


13 McGuire, "The Mosaics of the Baptistery," 15-16; Chretien, “The Festival of San Giovanni,” 28; Krautheimer, Lorenzo Ghiberti, 32. The Seven Greater guilds are L’Arte de Mercanti di Calimala (cloth merchants), L’Arte della Lana (wool merchants), L’Arte della Seta or “Por Santa Maria” (silk workers), L’Arte de Giudici e Notai (judges and notaries), L’Arte del Cambio (bankers and money-changers), L’Arte de’ Medici e Degli Speziali (doctors and apothecaries), and L’Arte de’ Vaiai e Pellicciai (furriers and skinners). See Staley, Edgcumbe. *The Guilds of Florence*. New York: B. Blom, [1967], xi.

of importers and refiners of foreign cloth for sale in Near Eastern markets, and it became known as the Guild of the Cloth Finishers.\textsuperscript{15}

Although it splintered, the Calimala maintained its status as one of the oldest and most respected organizations in Florence. The guild viewed its obligation to San Giovanni as both an honor and an opportunity to entwine the authority of the Baptistery with its own reputation. By taking charge of the revered religious and civic monument, the Calimala associated their power with the power of Florence. Diane McGuire points out:

Glorifying the city was a public expression of this power and the restoration and decoration of the Baptistery provided a highly visible example of the guild’s important role in the program of civic patronage.\textsuperscript{16}

The Baptistery’s central civic role in the city aided the Calimala in their desire to be viewed as the commune’s foremost leadership.

The Civic and Religious Tradition of San Giovanni

The Calimala’s sponsorship of San Giovanni testifies to the building’s complex religious function and civic role within Florence. The Baptistery provided a monument around which Florentines celebrated the important events in their daily lives: the crowning of poets, the blessing of departing and returning troops, political ceremonies, and religious celebrations.\textsuperscript{17} In the early days of the Signoria government of Florence, the

\textsuperscript{15} Krautheimer, \textit{Lorenzo Ghiberti}, 32-33; Moskowitz, Anita Fiderer. \textit{The Sculpture of Andrea and Nino Pisano}. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] : Cambridge University Press, 1986, 3. By the end of the twelfth century, the bankers established the \textit{L’Arte del Cambio}; importers of silk, brocade, jewels, and other materials formulated the \textit{L’Arte Por Santa Maria} in 1247; and finally, the wool importers created the \textit{L’Arte della Lana} in 1371.


gonfaloniere and the Priori attended mass at the Baptistry on the day they entered office, by this means seeking divine approval for rulership and setting a precedent that Alessandro de’ Medici would later follow in the sixteenth century. During a period of war in the mid-twelfth century, Florentines placed a captured war wagon and other plundered spoils inside San Giovanni, perhaps as an offering to the city’s patron saint who guided them to victory. These events illustrate the centrality of the Baptistry in all aspects of Florentine culture.

The Baptistry’s religious and civic roles also intersect during the Festi di San Giovanni, which celebrates the Feast Day of Saint John the Baptist, the patron saint of the Baptistry and the city of Florence. It was, as it remains today, the largest and most important festival in Florence. The Festa is both a religious and civic occasion, because it celebrates the Feast of Saint John, but also provides the commune with an opportunity to display their wealth and show their pride in the state. The Festa originally began on the Vigil of the Feast, June 23rd, but expanded in the fifteenth century to start as early as June 21st. Celebrations last through Saint John’s Feast Day on the 24th and last three or four days thereafter.

At the center of these festivities stands San Giovanni. On June 21st, the clergy commences the Festa with a solemn procession of the city’s relics throughout the streets of Florence, beginning and ending at the North door of the Baptistery. This ceremonial march symbolizes the journey each Florentine makes, as his life begins and ends with the

18 Chretien, “The Festival of San Giovanni,” 27.
19 Ibid.
20 The Lombard Queen Teodolinda (d. circa 628) held a special devotion for Saint John the Baptist. She declared him the patron saint of Florence and established the Festival on June 24th. See Ibid., 49.
21 Ibid., 2, 49.
22 Ibid., 64.
Church, specifically San Giovanni. On the Vigil of the Feast, the procession of the *gonfalone*, or the heraldic flag, led by the youngest and oldest representatives from each neighborhood, parades to the Baptistery to give offerings to Saint John. Since the procession was an important show of pride in the commune, medieval and early modern Florentines considered participation in this ritual a civic duty and penalized nonattendance with a hefty fine. On the morning of the Feast day, medieval Florentines performed the most ancient part of their ritual. They brought colossal candles that had “the appearance of golden towers” and tribute from conquered territories in a procession from the Piazza della Signoria to San Giovanni. Though the *Festa* celebrates an important religious holiday, the rituals display the civic order, wealth, and abundance of the commune. Therefore, the Baptistery’s integral role in the *Festa* illustrates its dual function within the commune: to serve as the city’s religious center and to stand as a testament to the value of Florentine citizenship.

Though the *Festa di San Giovanni* marks a significant occasion in Florentine culture, no ritual celebration better demonstrates the role that San Giovanni played in the lives of medieval and Renaissance Florentines than the sacrament of baptism. By 1130, all Florentines received the sacrament at San Giovanni, the city’s only baptistery; only those who lived more than a few kilometers outside the city were baptized in their local parish church.

---

23 Ibid., 57.
24 On the night of the Feast day, Florentines lit *padelle*, or lanterns, made of terra cotta or iron at the Baptistery, the Campanile, and the Bargello. The ritual of the *padelle* is most likely a remnant from the ancient Roman pagan festival *Fors Fortuna*, also celebrated on June 24th, which included bonfires. See Ibid., 65.
Medieval Christians viewed baptism as a ritual of death and rebirth. Amy Bloch notes that “to approach a font and come into contact with the baptismal water…was considered akin to dying and being buried with Christ; to emerge from the water was to be born anew.” Baptisteries in the West were often modeled on the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the site of Christ’s tomb. Eloise M. Angiola points out that “Christ’s tomb, the place of his burial, is also the place of his Resurrection.” As with Christ’s Passion, baptism signified death and rebirth, which coincide in the same place. Florentines, too, viewed this momentous occasion as a transition from death to rebirth: those who entered the Baptistery stained with original sin died in the baptismal waters and emerged from San Giovanni anew to live a life devoted to Christ. To the east of the Baptistery, in the space across from the Cathedral called the paradisus, there existed the cemetery of San Giovanni Evangelista, which indicates that the Florentines viewed San Giovanni itself as a place of both rebirth and final rest in the Lord.

Since the early church believed that baptism signified the death of one’s sinful life, and because the sacrament offered total remission of sins and salvation in the Christ, baptism was usually reserved for adults and given in preparation of death. By the fifth century, however, high infant mortality rates coupled with the writings of Saint Augustine, which introduced the idea of Limbo and urged baptism as soon as possible, prompted the city to perform infant baptisms. As many as eight priests baptized infants in communal ceremonies held on Epiphany, Holy Saturday, and the Vigil of Pentecost.

26 Ibid., 131.
28 Ibid.
They baptized boys first, then girls, either by aspersion, in which the priest sprinkles water on the infant’s forehead, or full immersion.\(^{31}\) In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, Florence shifted from this seasonal baptism to the daily Roman rite, which the city officially adopted in 1310 under the direction of the Florentine bishop Antonio degli Orsi.\(^{32}\)

In order to regulate entrance into the sacred Baptistery, the Roman rite dictated a meticulous and strict ceremony. The father and godparents, holding the child to be baptized, processed through the city wearing elaborate clothing and carrying bright banners while the child’s mother and other women lined the streets.\(^{33}\) The procession stopped at San Giovanni’s South entrance where the participants met the officiating priest (fig. 6).\(^{34}\) At the South door, the \textit{porta battesimale}, the father or godfather stated the newborn’s Christian name, which city officials recorded thereby marking the child’s new citizenship status and transition into Florentine society.\(^{35}\)

Florentines considered this step into the civic sphere so important that it took place during the first part of the ritual. They clearly prized their citizenship, which the holy waters of baptism sanctioned; moreover, only those baptized within San Giovanni were allowed to hold public office and assume leadership roles in the commune.\(^{36}\) This transition occurred outside of the Baptistery’s door, so that it could be publically witnessed. This public ceremony suggested the fellowship that came with citizenship, as well as the order of the commune. Furthermore, Florentines performed the ceremony

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 146.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 134; Dilbeck, “Opening the Gates of Paradise,” 85.
\(^{33}\) Bloch, “Baptism, Movement, and Imagery,” 134.
\(^{34}\) Ibid. The bishop of Florence himself might have been officiating the ceremony during the regular baptismal season.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., 135; Chretien, “The Festival of San Giovanni,” 30.
before the child entered the threshold of the Baptistery, signifying the sanctity of the building which only Florentine citizens were allowed to enter.

After this civic ritual, the priest followed the Roman rite carefully as he prepared the child for entrance into the Baptistery. He breathed on the child, made the sign of the cross on the child’s forehead and chest, and recited the required prayers. He then fed the child salt, a symbol of wisdom and preservation of morality, and performed an exorcism ensuring the child’s readiness to enter the sanctuary.37 With his son or daughter in his arms, the father crossed the threshold of the South door. The door served as a liminal space between the sinful outside world and the spiritual interior of the Baptistery. Physically moving through the doorway, the child’s first act as a Florentine citizen, albeit not voluntarily, symbolized the child’s transition from a state of original sin to his or her place in the Christian community, an outcome accomplished by the baptismal waters.

Once the priest concluded the intricate ceremony inside the Baptistery, the father, godparents, and child exited San Giovanni through the East portal to receive Communion at the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. Angiola points out that “in the Middle Ages, the Baptistery building itself was envisioned as a gateway, a monumental portal leading the baptized Christian into the Heavenly City.”38 Exiting this “monumental portal” through the East door symbolizes the baptismal rite’s power of salvation: when the child exits the world, he or she will enter into the Heavenly Kingdom. Gwynne A. Dilbeck argues that this procession through the East door “is highly symbolic of the initiates’ progression through the gates of Heaven leading to the Church, the emblem of salvation,

their vision of Paradise on earth.” The procession models the child’s salvation by passing through the sacred threshold of the East door, thought to symbolize the Heavenly Gates, crossing the paradisus, and entering the Cathedral, an embodiment of Heaven.

Once inside the Cathedral, the infant encountered Christ for the first time in the sacrament of Holy Communion, just as he or she will meet Christ face-to-face at the time of death.

The Roman ritual regulated the child’s transition into membership in the Florentine commune and the Christian community. The holy baptismal water absolved original sin, but the movement into the Baptistry itself signified the child’s transformation. The physicality of the South door marked this transition from the sinful, outside world to the sacred space of the Baptistery. This important role which the South door played in the baptisms at San Giovanni makes it not only a functional doorway, through which one passes to access the divine, but also a hallowed space symbolic of the sacred transition to Christianity and Florentine citizenship.

The Festa di San Giovanni, daily infant baptisms, and various other rituals and celebrations carried out at the Baptistery characterize the central religious and civic role which San Giovanni played in the daily lives of medieval and Renaissance Florentines. These crucial functions, along with the building’s supposed ancient Roman origins, prompted the city to revitalize the Baptistery from the inside out.

The Fabric of San Giovanni

When the task of refurbishing San Giovanni fell to the Calimala in the mid-twelfth century, the guild established within itself the Officiali del Musaico committee,

---

more often referred to as the *Governatori* or the *Operai*, to serve as a board of works.\(^{40}\)

The *Operai* initiated the Baptistery’s massive redecoration program, which would in turn glorify the city of Florence and the *Calimala* itself. As well-traveled merchants acquainted with the Northern European Gothic tradition, the exotic eastern styles of the Holy Land, and the artwork of ancient and contemporary Rome, the members of the *Calimala* greatly influenced the decorative program of the Baptistery.\(^{41}\)

In the 1220s, the *Operai* commissioned San Giovanni’s interior mosaics, one of the best instances of Byzantine influence in the city. In 1225, mosaic work began on the apse of the *scarsella*, the rectangular addition that housed the altar, and in 1271, the *Operai* documented a resolution to cover the cupola of the Baptistery with mosaics of the Old and New Testament, completed in 1310.\(^{42}\) The choice to decorate the interior with expensive gold-back mosaics made a strong statement regarding Florence’s finances to its neighboring communes. Most importantly, this medium, chosen by the ancient Romans and medieval Byzantines, connected Florence to the imperial and aristocratic cities of Rome, Constantinople, and Venice.\(^{43}\)

The *Operai* also oversaw many projects to be used in the baptismal rite. In 1225, they commissioned a porphyry disk of inlaid marble pavement to be added to the southeastern zone of the building, which was used in the baptismal ritual.\(^{44}\) In the same year, the *Operai* ordered an octagonal white marble font with a round basin and green

\(^{40}\) Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, 33, 37.


\(^{42}\) Bloch, “Baptism, Movement, and Imagery,” 151. The cupola mosaics were part of an “energetic outburst” of interest in beautifying the city during the Second Democracy (1282-1283). The Palazzo Vecchio, Santa Maria Novella, and Santa Croce are all results of this effort. See McGuire, “The Mosaics of the Baptistery,” 16-18.


\(^{44}\) Bloch, “Baptism, Movement, and Imagery,” 144. As part of the Roman rite, once the father moved inside San Giovanni from the South portal, he placed the child on the floor in the middle of this marble disk to signify the infant’s humility and spiritual readiness for baptism.
marble inlay to be placed in the center of the sanctuary. In 1370, the Operai commissioned a third font that could accommodate daily baptisms. The addition of the mosaics, marble pavement, and the baptismal fonts successfully added to San Giovanni’s baptismal function.

To match the building’s impressive interior, the Operai also made many changes to the Baptistery’s exterior. In 1293, the committee added pilasters to the building’s corners and covered the plain sandstone exterior with white Carrara marble inlaid with green marble from Prato. A few years earlier, in 1202, the Operai created the East and North entryways, so that the popular building could better accommodate the heavy flow of traffic. This was one of their first projects, indicating not only a response to the growing Florentine Christian population, but also an emphasis on entrance and exit. With the existence of the three doorways, each portal could now take on its own function: the South portal remained the porta battesimale; the North portal, called the Porta della Croce, became a general exit; and the East portal became an entrance reserved for special occasions, such as Corpus Christi.

In an effort to decorate these newly made entryways, the Operai hired sculptor Tino di Camanio in the 1320s to complete relief groups that would be placed above the doors. Over the South baptismal door, he placed a sculptural group depicting the baptism

---

45 Ibid., 146. This font replaced an earlier font, which could no longer accommodate the growing Christian population. From 1225-1370, all Florentine citizens were baptized in this second font, primarily by immersion, until a third font overshadowed it in 1370. The third font had a hexagonal well, a marble base and marble reliefs on the side, and was placed on the southeastern wall. After the third font’s installation, the second font remained in use only for special occasions or for smaller communal baptisms. In 1577, Grand Duke Francesco I de’ Medici removed the third font to ready the Baptistery for his son Filippo’s baptism.
of Christ. Over the East door, Tino sculpted *Saint John the Baptist and the Theological Virtues*, and over the North door, he placed *Saint John the Baptist’s Sermon*. These groups, each honoring Saint John in some way, welcomed entrants into the interior of the Baptistery and advertised the building’s baptismal function.

Around the same time, the *Operai* decided to replace the existing wooden doors with double bronze doors for all three portals. They had enhanced every surface of the building, except for the doors. In understanding that Florentines viewed these doorways as blessed gateways to the inner sanctity of the Baptistery, it becomes obvious why the *Operai* commissioned these new bronze doors for the Baptistery. They chose the South façade, the oldest and most revered of the Baptistery’s portals, as the first portal to receive a bronze door.

**The Commissions of the Bronze Doors**

In 1322, due to the important functional and symbolic role that the doors of San Giovanni played in the baptismal ritual, the *Operai* initially resolved to cover the wooden doors of the South, East, and North entrances with metal plates. Yet over the next few years, the *Operai’s* plan grew more ambitious, and the committee determined that the doors should be made entirely of metal or brass. Eventually, they decided that all the portals should be fitted with double bronze doors that would feature gilded narrative reliefs from the Bible. It can be no accident that the *Operai*, members of the well-traveled merchant *Calimala* guild, commissioned San Giovanni’s most public project in this extravagant material. As with the interior mosaics, the bronze medium recalls the splendor of the Byzantine Empire. The guild wanted to associate the Baptistery with the

---

imperial cities of Rome and Constantinople, as well as the flourishing mercantile trade center, Venice.

The choice of bronze, especially, demonstrates Florence’s ascendancy since knowledge of bronze casting, which had been lost in the West since 400 C.E., had only recently been recovered. Clearly, the Operai wanted doors that would impress not only by their cost, but also by their technical skill. Many of Florence’s surrounding neighbors, including Pisa and Venice, had erected magnificent doors in this ancient medium as monuments to their own power and wealth, continuing a precedent established by a variety of other doors erected in direct emulation of Byzantium.50

Each door also featured narrative, an image type that has roots in ancient art. E.H. Gombrich argues that truly narrative images had their origins in the Greek Revolution; therefore, the doors, in illustrating an unfolding narrative, would rival this ancient Greco-Roman art.51 A century later, in the 1430s, Leon Battista Alberti wrote, “The greatest work of a painter is not a colossus, but an istoria [narrative]. Istoria gives greater renown to the intellect than any colossus.”52 According to Alberti, the successful narrative work represents the highest form of art achievable. In commissioning a narrative, the Operai aspired to create a work better than any “colossus.” By ordering this narrative to be cast in bronze, the Operai challenged the narrative art of the ancient Greeks in the medium of the medieval Byzantines.

50 Frazer, Margaret English. "Church Doors and the Gates of Paradise: Byzantine Bronze Doors in Italy." _Dumbarton Oaks Papers_ 27, (1973): 145-162, 147. By the first half of the twelfth century, there were at least seven bronze doors commissioned in Italy in imitation of Byzantine doors. They were at Amalfi, Atrani, Monte Cassino, Monte Sant’Angelo, Rome, Salerno, and Venice.


52 Ibid, 51.

22
In 1329, a year after the war against the lord of Lucca, Castruccio Castracani, had subsided, the Operai sent goldsmith Piero di Jacopo to Pisa to sketch the bronze door of the Cathedral of Pisa and to Venice to find a bronze-caster for the commission. Well-known for bronze casting, Venice had mastered the 6,000-year-old lost-wax casting technique as a result of its extensive trade with the Middle East. Although forgotten in Western Europe, it is called the lost-wax technique because the wax model bakes out of the mold when fired. The eastern Byzantine Empire and other areas in the Middle East passed down this technique orally, preserving knowledge of the process until it was revived in the West around 1000 A.D. While in Venice, Piero discovered thirty-year-old goldsmith Andrea Pisano, who would cast the Baptistery’s first set of bronze doors.

Andrea does not appear in any records before his arrival in Florence in 1329; therefore, most of his early life and career remains a mystery. Born in the small town of Pontedera, Andrea likely trained as a goldsmith in nearby Pisa. Around 1320, he travelled to Siena to study sculpture. He later went to Venice where he was influenced by Venetian bronze work. In 1329, Andrea left Venice for Florence, where he accepted the commission for the first bronze door of San Giovanni.

---

55 Ibid., 1.
56 Moskowitz, The Sculpture of Andrea, 7-8. Also known as Andrea da Pontedera, he was not related to the famous sculptors Giovanni or Niccolo Pisano.
57 Ibid., 1. Pontedera was under Pisan control at the time.
58 Ibid., 2.
59 Ibid., 4. Andrea enjoyed a successful career in Florence where he also worked on the Campanile with Giotto. After Giotto’s death in 1337, he was named capomaestro of the Cathedral. He returned to Pontedera circa 1343 and opened a workshop in Pisa with his son, Nino, where he worked until his death in October 1349. In his Lives of the Artists, Giorgio Vasari reports that Andrea was made a citizen and a magistrate of Florence and is buried in Santa Marie del Fiore. See Vasari, Giorgio, Betty Burroughs, and Jonathan Foster. Vasari’s Lives of the Artists: Biographies of the most Eminent Architects, Painters, and Sculptors of Italy. New York: Simon and Schuster, [1946], 25.
In 1330, Andrea officially secured the Operai’s commission to design and cast the bronze door for the South entrance. Some historians argue that the Operai originally commissioned Andrea to cast a door for the East portal; however, the guild more likely chose to enhance the South portal first. Though the East side was considered especially important, because it faced Santa Maria del Fiore, construction on the Cathedral, which began in 1296, blocked the Eastern entrance at the time. Similarly, the North side faced the newly developing Florentine suburbs, whereas the South side faced the Piazza della Signoria, the city’s urbanized center, which provided a more appealing choice to the mercantile men of the Calimala. The Operai also paid for the street in front of the South door to be lowered in 1339, so that the Baptistery’s South façade, and presumably Andrea’s newly hung door, could be viewed more easily. Furthermore, in 1340, they repaved the space in front of the South facade, which suggests that the door was placed there.

Moreover, the South portal was the likely choice, because it was the original and oldest entrance to the Baptistery and played an important role in the Florentine baptismal rite. It was the location where the newly baptized became a Florentine citizen and entered San Giovanni for the first time. In accordance with this baptismal function, the Operai commissioned Andrea to design twenty-eight relief panels of the Life of Saint John the

---

60 Moskowitz, The Sculpture of Andrea, 1.
61 In A Documentary History of Art, Elizabeth Gilmore Holt asserts that Andrea’s door originally hung at the East façade, basing her argument on Vasari’s Lives of the Artists. However, Richard Krautheimer argues that Andrea’s doors always hung at the South portal, based on the Calimala documents compiled by guild member Carlo Strozzi (1587-1670). Moreover, Amy Bloch claims the mosaics and sculptural program above the South door prove that it was the original location for Andrea’s door. See Bloch, “Baptism, Movement, and Imagery,” 135. Gwynne Dilbeck outlines this debate. See Dilbeck, “Opening the Gates of Paradise,” 72-74.
63 Krautheimer, Ghiberti’s Bronze Doors, 3.
64 Bloch, “Sculpture of Lorenzo Ghiberti,” 211.
Baptist: twenty panels depicting scenes from Saint John’s life and eight panels portraying personifications of the Cardinal and Theological Virtues, all set within a quatrefoil frame.65

On January 22, 1330, Andrea began work on the door. By April 2nd of that year, he completed a wax prototype of the door, modeled using wooden quatrefoil frames made by carpenters and cabinetmakers. Two years later, the Opera hired Leonardo quondam Avanzi, a Venetian bell caster, to cast the frame while Andrea designed and modeled the reliefs in wax. By April 27, 1332, Leonardo cast each valve, or individual side of the double door, in one piece using the ancient lost-wax technique.66 He welded the gilded parts onto the frame separately, because they had to be fire gilt, a gilding process in which gold adheres to the bronze inside a furnace. On February 27, 1333, the Opera erected the left valve; however, problems with money, the flooding of the Arno River in November of 1333, and a twisted alignment of the left valve delayed installation of the right valve until June 20, 1336, just in time for the Festa di San Giovanni.67

After the Opera successfully hung Andrea’s door at the South portal, they immediately drew up plans for a second set of doors.68 Multiple catastrophic events, however, delayed the second commission: the looming threat of the dictatorship of the Duke of Athens in 1342, the economic crash which affected Florence from 1339-1346,

65 There are only three Theological Virtues and four Cardinal Virtues, so Andrea depicted Humility, traditionally considered the source of all the virtues. Hugh of Saint Victor created this schema of the eight virtues. See Moskowitz, The Sculpture of Andrea, 27, note 62.
66 Ibid., 177.
67 Ibid., 181-184; Brucker, Renaissance Florence, 210. The left valve was installed slightly crooked. It had to be taken down and readjusted. In May 1334, the project’s foundry was torn down, suggesting that all the casting had been completed by then. The Opera originally estimated the cost of the door at 500 florins; the actual cost of the door totaled 527 florins. To clean, polish, and install one valve cost the Opera 48 florins alone. All the leftover metal debris weighed 3,315 pounds. See Moskowitz, The Sculpture of Andrea, 182.
68 Statutes of the guild dating from 1334-1337 and 1339 state the intention to begin the second door as soon as possible. See Bloch, “Baptism, Movement, and Imagery,” 152, note 28.
the plague which devastated the area in 1348, and the war with Milan that began in 1389.\textsuperscript{69} Not until 1401 did the Operai return to the task of fitting the portals with double bronze doors.

Once they turned their attention back to the doors, the Operai chose the East portal for its next commission. By this time, the East portal acted as the main entrance to the Baptistery and faced the nearly complete West façade of the Cathedral. By 1400, the Cathedral’s nave and the West portal decorations were complete. Construction of the dome was under discussion, and large sculptures for the Cathedral’s Western façade were about to be commissioned.\textsuperscript{70} When compared to the resplendent façade of the looming Cathedral, the wooden East door lacked grandeur.

Prompted by the Cathedral’s rapid construction, the Operai chose the East portal for their next commission. In the winter of 1400-1401, the Operai sent out an open call to all artists of Italy to participate in a competition that would decide the recipient of the prestigious commission for the East façade. To establish the competition’s parameters and act as judges, the Operai created a committee of thirty-four artists and businessmen from Florence and the neighboring locales.\textsuperscript{71} The committee chose seven artists who they allowed to participate in the competition. Each artist received four bronze plaques and one year to complete a sample of their work: a bronze relief of the \textit{Sacrifice of Isaac}, set in a quatrefoil frame.\textsuperscript{72} Giorgio Vasari writes that the committee chose the subject of the sacrifice, because it would enable the artists to showcase the breadth of their talent, as the

\textsuperscript{70}Ibid., 34.  
\textsuperscript{71}David Finn, Kenneth Clark, and George Robinson, \textit{The Florence Baptistery Doors}, 8.  
\textsuperscript{72}Krautheimer, \textit{Lorenzo Ghiberti}, 37-38. At the time of the competition, the narrative program of the doors was the Old Testament, so it was thought that the winning \textit{Sacrifice of Isaac} panel would be incorporated into the door. Later the subject of the doors changed to scenes from the New Testament with the idea that the panel would be saved for use in the third set of doors.
subject “calls for landscape, human figures, both nude and clothed, and animals in three kinds of relief – full, half, and low.” \(^{73}\) The committee also planned for the winning panel to be used in the commission, which would depict narratives from the Old Testament.

While the seven contestants did not come from all over Italy, they did come from various parts of Tuscany and with different artistic backgrounds. Three sculptor-woodcarvers participated: Niccolo di Piero Lamberti from the Areteine; Jacopo della Quercia from Siena, Florence’s rival city; and Francesco di Valdambrino, also from Siena. These seasoned men competed with cannon founder Simone da Colle, from the Florentine territory of Val, and three goldsmiths: Niccolo di Luca Spinelli, also known as Niccolo d’Arezzo; Filippo di Ser Brunelleschi, a young, native Florentine; and, the youngest of the seven competitors, Lorenzo Ghiberti, a painter and goldsmith also from Florence. \(^{74}\)

At the time of the Operai’s call for artists, Ghiberti was in the neighboring town of Pesaro escaping “the corruption of the air and the bad state of the city” of Florence. \(^{75}\) He was helping a fellow artist paint a room commissioned by the Lord Malatesta of Pesaro when he received a letter detailing the East door competition and urging him to participate. Wasting no time, Ghiberti immediately obtained leave of his friend and patron and left for Florence. He arrived in the city in the winter of 1400-1401 and eagerly entered the competition.

\(^{73}\) Giorgio Vasari, Betty Burroughs, and Jonathan Foster. Vasari’s Lives of the Artists, 59.
\(^{74}\) Krauthemer, Lorenzo Ghiberti, 40; Fengler, Christie Knapp, ”Lorenzo Ghiberti’s ‘Second Commentary’: The Translation and Interpretation of a Fundamental Renaissance Treatise on Art.” Ph.D., The University of Wisconsin - Madison, 1974, 57.
\(^{75}\) Ibid., 55. From section 19 of Ghiberti’s Second Commentary. The plague hit Florence in 1348, 1363, 1374, 1383, and 1399-1400. See Brucker, Renaissance Florence, 43.
After working diligently on their panels for a little over a year, the artists submitted their work to the deciding committee, who put the panels on display for all of Florence to view. After much deliberation, the committee announced the winner: Lorenzo Ghiberti, the youngest participant in the competition. In the second book of his *I Commentarii*, Ghiberti describes winning the competition:

The palm of victory was granted to me by all the skilled men and by all those who competed with me. The glory was universally conceded to me, without any exception. To all it appeared that I had surpassed the others at that time without any exception, after very great deliberation and examination by learned men. The Operai of this ruling body wanted their judgment written by their own hands; they were very skilled men.\(^{76}\)

In his account, Ghiberti emphasizes the unanimity of the decision. He perhaps wanted to quash a circulating rumor, which alleged that the committee had actually given the commission to both Ghiberti and Brunelleschi to share. The gossip was that Brunelleschi, in a fit of youthful pride, scorned the settlement and Ghiberti received the full commission.\(^{77}\)

A comparison between Ghiberti and Brunelleschi’s competition panels illuminates the committee’s decision and perhaps stamps out this rumor (fig. 7, 8). Ghiberti cast his relief using the cost-effective lost-wax technique. The technique allowed him to cast a hollow panel, thereby using less of the expensive bronze (fig. 9). The

---

\(^{76}\) Fengler, “Lorenzo Ghiberti’s ‘Second Commentary,’” 57.

\(^{77}\) Antonio Manetti, Filippo Brunelleschi’s first autobiographer writing in the 1480s, claims that the committee originally awarded the commission to both Brunelleschi and Ghiberti. Whether this account is true or not is problematic due to the deep-seated rivalry between the two artists which undoubtedly caused Manetti to portray Ghiberti as unqualified as possible. See Lubbock, Jules. *Storytelling in Christian Art from Giotto to Donatello*. New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2006, 155.
shrewd businessmen of the Operai noted this and calculated that a door made by Ghiberti would cost much less than one by the other contestants. Richard Krautheimer estimates that if the Operai had chosen Brunelleschi as their winner, the door would have cost an additional 600 Florentine pounds of bronze. The hollow panel also weighed less, which would aid in the door’s installation and upkeep.

Ghiberti also cast his relief in three pieces, compared to the seven that comprise Brunelleschi’s panel. The fewer pieces not only meant that Ghiberti used less bronze, but also that he was the more skilled goldsmith. His relief looked cleaner and neater, because the pieces were not welded together in so many places. The competition panel also evidenced Ghiberti’s precision in chasing and finishing bronze. Each figure bears meticulous incisions in the bronze, showing Ghiberti’s strong attention to detail.

Along with his superior casting and finishing ability, Ghiberti’s narrative style appealed to the internationally minded financiers of the Operai. Unlike Brunelleschi’s panel, which shows a single moment of action, Ghiberti’s relief represents a phase in the scene, or a prolonged moment, in which the emotion and plot shifts. He designed the relief in the French goldsmith style, called the international style, which was growing in popularity at the time. This international flavor pleased the guild members who had seen similar works in their travels to France and Germany. The humanists on the committee, too, appreciated the elements of classical antiquity: a statue of a Greek youth provides the model for the nude figure of Isaac, the servants come from a Roman sarcophagus, and the

---

78 Ibid., 46.
head of Abraham strongly resembles the Greek god Zeus. The mercantile men of the 
Operai who had visited Rome noted these similarities with Greek and Roman art and 
believed that Ghiberti’s designs would further associate San Giovanni with Rome.
Krautheimer sums up the committee’s decision, saying, “Ghiberti’s door would satisfy 
everybody: it would be solid and durable; it would please the most sophisticated taste; 
and it would overwhelm the man in the street through its sheer beauty, its narrative 
clarity, and the glitter of its gilding.”

For all of these reasons, the Operai insisted on Ghiberti as their winner; however, 
they took an enormous risk in choosing such a young artist. At the time of the 
competition, Ghiberti was not enrolled as either a painter or a goldsmith in Florence. He 
had not entered the Medici e Spetiali, the guild painters joined, or the Arte della Seta, the 
guild which goldsmiths typically joined. Instead, Ghiberti worked in his stepfather’s 
name, Bartolo di Michele, an established goldsmith enrolled in the Arte della Seta.
Furthermore, since he was in his early twenties, Ghiberti was not a master of the trade, so 
accepting any commission on his own was illegal. It would not be until 1409 when 
Ghiberti finally matriculated into the goldsmith’s guild.

Determined to have Ghiberti as their artist, the Operai skirted these legal issues 
by naming Ghiberti and his stepfather partners in the project and carefully wording the 
commission so that Bartolo assumed the legal responsibility. Outlining the commission

---

82 Krautheimer, Ghiberti’s Bronze Doors, 4.
83 Ibid.
84 Krautheimer, Lorenzo Ghiberti, 4.
85 Ibid., 41. In the eighteenth century, a fire burned down the Calimala guild’s offices and destroyed most 
of their records, including many documents regarding the commissions of the bronze doors. Only excerpts 
from the contracts compiled by seventeenth-century Calimala guild member Senator Carlo Strozzi remain. 
See Ibid., 362.
as a joint-project with Bartolo, who owned a reputable goldsmith workshop, also insured the guild against Ghiberti’s relative inexperience.

The contract stipulated that Ghiberti complete specified parts of the labor himself. Carlo Strozzi, a member of the Calimala who compiled the guild’s documents, lays out these requirements: “[Lorenzo Ghiberti] must work with his own hand the figures, trees and similar things in the reliefs.” Furthermore, the contract gave Ghiberti the power to choose his own assistants, allowing him “to employ for assistance his father Bartolo and other masters, good and true, according to his discretion.” Even though Bartolo was legally considered a partner in the commission, he was Ghiberti’s assistant in actuality.

The Operai required Ghiberti to produce three finished reliefs a year, so that in addition to the expected two years it would take to design the frame, the door might be completed in ten years total. According to Florentine artistic tradition, the Calimala paid for the bronze, wax, clay, and other materials used to make the door. They also paid Ghiberti and Bartolo a yearly salary and paid the other assistants wages for the work they completed.

Although the committee chose Ghiberti as the competition’s winner by early 1403, Bartolo’s workshop did not sign the commission until November 23, 1403. Debate over the program of the door contributed to this delay. Originally, the Operai agreed that the subject would be a scene from the Old Testament, which explains the subject choice of the Sacrifice of Isaac for the competition panels. Curiously, sometime between establishing the subject of the competition panel and signing the contract, the program changed to scenes from the New Testament. Although no records indicate why the Operai altered the narrative subject, Krautheimer suggests that the Operai worried...
about not being able to finance a third set of doors for the Baptistery’s North portal. Since
the narrative of Christ’s life related more closely to the Baptistery itself, the Operai most
likely decided to commission the New Testament narrative before the Old Testament.

Ghiberti, Bartolo, and their eleven assistants began work on the New Testament
door on January 30, 1404. Famous Florentine artists Paolo Uccello, Donatello,
Michelozzo, and even perhaps Masolino all worked in Ghiberti’s workshop early in their
careers, learning the technique of bronze casting from Ghiberti and his stepfather.89 Later
in the period, Ghiberti’s own sons, Vittorio and Tommaso, continued the family tradition
and worked in his shop. While the contract required that Ghiberti style and mold the
reliefs himself, his assistants smoothed the rough casts, modeled a few figures of lesser
importance, and cast a few pieces.90

Despite assistance from such talented artists, Ghiberti failed to meet the
commission’s terms, having completed only a few reliefs by 1407. His slow progress
prompted the Operai to draw up a new contract, signed on June 1, 1407, which revised
expectations for the project. Although Ghiberti still was not a member of the goldsmiths’
guild, the Operai evidently overlooked this technicality. They gave the commission to
Ghiberti alone and officially demoted Bartolo from partner to assistant. Additionally,
they tightened the contract’s terms, so that Ghiberti would meet the expected completion
date. He promised “to work every working day, all day long, with his own hands like any
journeyman.” Furthermore, the contract forbade him to accept other commissions without
the Operai’s approval.

89 Ibid., 108-109.
90 Idem, Ghiberti’s Bronze Doors, 5.
Though this second contract imposed stricter regulations, the work that Ghiberti had completed impressed the Operai, because the emendations to the previous contract further engaged Ghiberti in the door. The Operai reiterated the demand that Ghiberti be the sole artist of the commission. In addition to the figures, trees, and other important elements of the relief, the Operai now required him to work “those parts which require the greatest perfection like hair, nudes, and similar objects” with his own hand. The new contract also greatly raised his salary to equal that of a Medici bank manager.\(^\text{91}\) Though his work required more time than the Calimala anticipated, Ghiberti’s pay raise and his stricter obligation to the design process of the door attests to the fine work he produced.

According to the surviving records of the Calimala and Carlo Strozzi’s personal writings, Ghiberti completed a satisfactory number of reliefs by 1415. Five years later, he most likely completed all the reliefs.\(^\text{92}\) At this time, Ghiberti and his assistants began the time-consuming process of chasing and finishing, which took four years to complete. By March 1423, the gilding process and assembly of the door began, completed in April 1424. Finally, on Easter Sunday, April 19, 1424, the Operai erected Ghiberti’s New Testament door in San Giovanni’s East portal, facing Santa Maria del Fiore’s newly constructed west façade.\(^\text{93}\)

The Calimala and the city of Florence received Ghiberti’s door with such praise that the Operai immediately offered Ghiberti the commission for the third set of doors,

\(^\text{91}\) David Finn, Kenneth Clark, and George Robinson, *The Florence Baptistery Doors*, 12.

\(^\text{92}\) Lubbock, *Storytelling in Christian Art*, 171.

\(^\text{93}\) Krauthheimer, *Ghibertiana*, 68. The door is about 15 feet high and, with both valves together, eight feet wide. The double door, including the skeleton frame, the back plaques, and the lattice framework, weighs about 10 tons. See Idem., *Ghiberti’s Bronze Doors*, 6. The total cost of the door was 22,000 gold florins, more than the Florentine Republic’s annual defense budget. See David Finn, Kenneth Clark, and George Robinson, *The Florence Baptistery Doors*, 12.
and he signed the contract on January 2, 1425.94 The contract originally outlined the door in the same style and format as the previous two projects. In June 1424, the Chancellor of Florence and the city’s most well known humanist, Leonardo Bruni di Arezzo, proposed a narrative program for the door.95 His schema followed the pattern of the earlier two doors with twenty-four 45 x 38 centimeter quatrefoil panels with eight panels depicting prophets and twenty panels depicting scenes from the Old Testament. Unsatisfied with the awkward quatrefoil format, Ghiberti broke with the original commission and changed the program. First, he changed it to twenty 50 x 50 centimeter square panels, and then to the ten 73 x 73 centimeter square panels seen today.96 The ten panels allowed him the space he needed to develop a richer narrative and to perfect the technical innovations that he had been working on a few years previously in the similarly sized 79 x 79 centimeter reliefs for the Siena baptismal font.97 Furthermore, ridding himself of the limiting quatrefoil design enabled him to respond to Donatello’s relief work, which was gaining much fame and attention at the time.98

As with the New Testament door, a variety of complications postponed work on the Old Testament door. In the immediate months after signing the contract, a great financial burden faced both the Calimala and the city of Florence. By 1428, Florence had spent over 3.5 million florins in just four years on the war effort against the Milanese. In 1427, the government instituted the Catasto, a property tax that replenished the government’s resources at the expense of the Calimala and San Giovanni. The heavy tax

94 Krautheimer, Ghiberti’s Bronze Doors, 7; Krautheimer, Lorenzo Ghiberti, 159.
95 Ibid., 159; David Finn, Kenneth Clark, and George Robinson, The Florence Baptistery Doors, 12; Lubbock, Storytelling in Christian Art, 227.
96 Ibid., 228.
97 Ibid. Ghiberti cast the back of the Old Testament door before this change, so the back of the door has twenty-eight blank spaces where the panels were supposed to have been placed.
98 Ibid.
forced the Baptistery’s patrons to withdraw their financial support from the redecoration efforts.  

Ghiberti’s growing fame also delayed work on the third set of doors. The anticipated completion and installation of the New Testament door at the place of honor on San Giovanni’s East façade jumpstarted Ghiberti’s career. Although the 1407 contract prohibited him from accepting other commissions, Ghiberti evidently disregarded this detail. By 1425, numerous unfinished projects overloaded his workshop. They included the two bronze reliefs for the Siena Baptistery’s baptismal font and the bronze Saint Stephen statute commissioned by the Arte della Lana for Or San Michele.

Nonetheless, by the fall of 1428, Ghiberti once again turned his attention to the Operai’s commission and began work on the third door. Unlike his earlier door, Ghiberti modeled and cast the reliefs extremely quickly, completing all ten panels and the entire frieze by April 4, 1436. Though designing and casting the reliefs required only a short eight years, the chasing, finishing, and gilding processes necessitated a labor-intensive fifteen years. When Ghiberti finished the reliefs, they gleamed with such perfection that the Operai wanted to place them on the Baptistery’s East façade. In 1452, the Operai moved the New Testament door to the North façade and installed the Old Testament door at the East portal, facing the beloved Cathedral.

The Old Testament door stands out from the other two doors and came to be known throughout the world as The Gates of Paradise. Florentines attribute this nickname

---

100 Ibid., 164. Because this date indicates such a short period for all panels to have been molded and cast, Krautheimer suggests that the notary mistakenly wrote down 1436 instead of 1437 as, according to the Florentine calendar, April 4th was only ten days into the new year. This is bolstered by inconsistencies in Strozzi’s notebook.
to Michelangelo’s praise of the double doors recorded in Giorgio Vasari’s sixteenth-century *Lives of the Artists*: “They are so beautiful that they might be the gates of paradise.”  

Another theory states that the nickname comes from the door’s location at the top of the *paradisus*, the space between the Cathedral and the Baptistery.  

Angiola, however, asserts that neither of these explications are valid, and instead argues that the nickname comes from Vasari, who refers to both of Ghiberti’s doors as the Gates of Paradise, because they act as gatehouses to the Heavenly City since the Baptistery symbolizes Heavenly Jerusalem. Therefore, the East door, being the primary entrance, acts as the symbolic Golden Gate, or Gate of Paradise.

PART II: THE BRONZE DOORS OF SAN GIOVANNI

Medieval and Renaissance Florentines held San Giovanni in such high esteem that entrance into the inner sanctuary was restricted to Florentine citizens only. Visitors could not view the building’s gorgeous interior, including the glittering mosaics and fascinating marble pavement. The doors of the Baptistery, however, were on display for everyone to view at all times. The commission of the bronze doors became the most important feature of San Giovanni, as they publically displayed the Baptistery’s significance. The doors evolved as a symbol of civic pride not only because citizenship was conferred in front of the Baptistery, but also because they exhibited the abundance of Florence to all non-citizens.

103 Angiola, “‘Gates of Paradise’ and the Florentine Baptistery,” 242.
104 Ibid., 242-243.
In accepting the commissions for the doors, Andrea Pisano and Lorenzo Ghiberti faced the same challenge. The doors needed to display the best craftsmanship, artistic design, and narrative flow that the city had to offer. They also had to be beautiful. The task before these two men was to design individual scenes that together tell a story. The difficulty in this was crafting the narrative with an elegant continuity, so that the scenes flow smoothly and the doors can be easily read. With the commission of the first two doors, Andrea and Ghiberti faced an additional challenge: designing each relief within the limited space of a quatrefoil. Though a popular design for the period, the quatrefoil is an awkward shape in which to place a scene. Its dissimilar bulbous and jutting edges make it difficult for an artist to utilize all the space available. Masters of their craft, Andrea and Ghiberti each, in their own way, design reliefs that overcome these spatial difficulties while creating a graceful narrative that rivals the story-telling art of the ancients. In his second door, Ghiberti demonstrates his best work in reliefs that gracefully unfold narrative by pulling the viewer into the space of each panel. The three doors together show the progression of spatial command and narrative storytelling in Florentine relief sculpture.

The South Door

The South door, or the baptismal portal, acted as a sacred entrance to the salvation found in the interior of the Baptistery. Just as Saint John’s life bridged the Old and New Testaments, so too does the south portal bridge the sinful life of the external world with the redemption of the Baptistery’s internal space. The South door performed both a religious and civic function as the location for the first part of the Florentine baptismal ritual. It was the place where initiates entered into both the Christian community and
Florentine civic life. The double religious and civic function of the door, as well as its location at the threshold of San Giovanni, made the South portal one of the most revered locations in the city.

The Narrative Schema

Andrea Pisano carefully crafted the narrative layout of the door to reflect the South portal’s role in the baptismal rite at San Giovanni. Andrea abandons the conventional Gothic pictorial system for displaying narrative, followed by most doors of the period. The sequence held that Old Testament scenes read across both valves from top to bottom, while New Testament scenes read across both valves from bottom to top. This convention signified a theological principle as the downward reading of Old Testament represents the fall of man into sin, and the upward reading of the New Testament signifies man’s salvation through the coming of Christ. Andrea places the panels on the door chronologically, beginning from the top left to the

105 Krautheimer, Lorenzo Ghiberti, 114.
bottom right with each valve read separately (fig. 10). In this way, the narrative begins on the left valve with scenes from Saint John’s birth and ministry and continues at the top of the right valve with scenes of Saint John’s imprisonment and execution (pl. 1).

Saint John’s role as the link between the two Testaments freed Andrea from these established norms. Christians often regard Saint John as the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New Testament saints. Though the New Testament Gospels record his life’s story, Saint John’s position as the forerunner to Christ gave Andrea leeway in crafting his narrative sequence. No longer tied to the Gothic schema, Andrea devised a format that would best relate to his Florentine audience and the South portal’s function in the baptismal rite.

Andrea looked to both the Gospels and popular literary sources when creating the narrative program. The Gospel of Luke contains the first five episodes depicted on the door: *the Annunciation to Zacharias, Zacharias Struck Dumb, the Visitation, the Birth of the Baptist, and the Naming of the Baptist*.107 All four Gospels include Saint John’s preaching and mission, the Gospels of Mark and Matthew record the Passion of John, and the Gospel of Luke details his imprisonment. Andrea also looked to popular sources for descriptions of the scenes: Jacopo de Voragine’s *Golden Legend*, Pseudo Bonaventura’s *Meditation on the Life of Christ*, and the anonymous fourteenth-century *Vita di San Giovambatista*.108

Along with these literary sources, Andrea studied earlier artistic depictions of the Baptist’s life. Four of the panels on the South door have precedents in San Giovanni’s interior mosaics and the Pisani pulpits. Giotto’s frescoes at the Peruzzi Chapel in Santa

---

108 The *Vita* of John the Baptist was thought to be the work of Fra Domenico Cavalca (ca. 1260-1342), but that theory has since been disproven, and the author of the work remains unknown. See Ibid., 19, note 35.
Croce and the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua also heavily influenced Andrea’s work.\textsuperscript{109} Many of Andrea’s reliefs so strongly resemble Giotto’s frescoes that in the \textit{Lives of the Artists}, Vasari asserts that Giotto designed the scenes on the South door, and Andrea simply executed the models for the reliefs.\textsuperscript{110} Vasari’s claim, however, remains unconfirmed.

Andrea organized the panels on the door in a way that could be clearly read and understood by his Florentine audience. He divided the narrative in half, so that the door could be read while open. Had he followed the traditional sequence that reads across the both valves, the story would have been disrupted when the two valves parted.\textsuperscript{111} Given that Florentines used this portal daily, Andrea knew that at least one valve would remain open throughout most of the day. By creating a schema that reads each door separately, Andrea maintains the integrity of the narrative while the door is open.

Furthermore, the lion heads, which protrude from every corner of the panels, indicate that Andrea kept the valve’s open position in mind when designing the door (fig. 11). The lions placed on the outer edge of each valve twist their heads to look at the frame. Similarly, those lions at the inner seam where the two valves meet turn their heads inward as if looking at each other. When closed, these positions look strange, because the lions do not look at the viewer. But when the valves open, the lions on the outer edge greet the entrant, and the lions at the center peer into the inner sanctuary of San Giovanni.

\textsuperscript{109} These panels are: \textit{Annunciation to Zacharias}, the \textit{Visitation}, the \textit{Birth of the Baptist}, and the \textit{Naming of the Baptist}. For more information on how these reliefs relate to the Baptistry’s interior mosaics and the Peruzzi Chapel, see Falk, I., and J. Lanyi. “The Genesis of Andrea Pisano’s Bronze Doors.” \textit{Art Bulletin} 25 (1943): 132-53.

\textsuperscript{110} This is not a far-fetched notion considering Andrea immediately set to work modeling the reliefs after signing the commission and the doors were completed in a short span of only six years. In the editor’s note, however, Betty Burroughs suggests that while it is possible that Giotto made the plan for the South door, the reliefs were fully designed by Andrea. See Giorgio Vasari, Betty Burroughs, and Jonathan Foster, \textit{Vasari’s Lives of the Artists}, 24.

\textsuperscript{111} Krautheimer, \textit{Lorenzo Ghiberti}, 114.
This simple detail proves that Andrea acknowledged that the South door remained open throughout most of the day, so he purposefully designed the narrative to be read on each valve separately, preserving the continuity of the story.

Changing the narrative schema in this way enabled Andrea to place the *Baptism of Christ* panel at eye-level. This episode directly relates to the baptismal purpose of the portal, so Andrea ensured its position at a visible height. When participants in the baptismal rite stopped at the South door for the first part of the ceremony, they would have seen this panel and been reminded of the importance of baptism. If Andrea had followed the traditional narrative sequence, the *Baptism of Christ* panel would have been situated two rows higher in a position difficult to view when standing at the base of the door.

In constructing his narrative sequence, Andrea changed the chronology of the gospels to emphasize again the South door’s function in the baptismal rite. According to the Gospels, Saint John baptizes a crowd before he witnesses the coming of Christ, called the Ecce Agnus Dei episode. On the door, however, Andrea switches these scenes, so that *The Baptism of the Multitude* comes after the *Ecce Agnus Dei* panel. In doing this, the *Multitude* relief hangs next to *The Baptism of Christ* panel at eye-level (fig. 12). Now the participants in the baptismal rite could see the panel and reflect on this precedent set by Christ and his first followers, the very same Christians who supposedly built San Giovanni. Andrea’s manipulation of the Gospel’s chronology proves that he was not preoccupied with the accuracy of his narrative, but rather, wished to tell the story of Saint John the Baptist in a way that would best relate to his Florentine audience.

---

The other two eye-level panels, *The Funeral of the Baptist* and *The Entombment of the Baptist*, also relate to the door’s function in the baptismal ritual (fig. 13). As previously discussed, Christians in this period viewed baptism as a ritual of death and rebirth. These two panels echo this concept. In *The Funeral* relief, Saint John’s disciples carry the saint’s lifeless body through the space of the panel, just as the father, accompanied by the child’s godparents and other participants, carry the exorcised initiate through the South door, which marks the death of the child’s life in original sin. In *The Entombment* panel, the disciples gather together to bury Saint John in his tomb of rock. The Florentines imitate this inside the Baptistery when they cluster around the marble baptismal font and symbolically bury the child in the waters of baptism. These four eye-level panels particularly related to the Florentines and enhanced the sanctity of the sacrament by demonstrating the ritual performed by Saint John himself.

*Spatial Composition*

The quatrefoil shape of these panels provided a particular challenge in telling a cohesive narrative, because it limited Andrea’s ability to portray a complex story within a believable space. On the one hand, the quatrefoil served as a transition from the monumentality of the door to the smaller, intimate reliefs by reducing the dominating rectangularity of the panels. The quatrefoil also enhanced the decorative unity of the work as a whole. On the other hand, the quatrefoil shape limited the pictorial field within which the action takes place.¹¹³

The first relief Andrea designed for the door, *The Birth of the Baptist*, shows the difficulties of adapting the quatrefoil design to a narrative (fig. 14). Andrea attempts to work out the action within the provided space, but his efforts result in a strange and

¹¹³ Ibid., 9.
implausible scene. Because of the constraining space, Andrea arranges that panel “in the antiquated manner of superimposed layers that have no coherent spatial relationship to each other.”

He creates three layers of action seen from different perspectives. He crafts the four servants frontally, while he models the reclining Elizabeth from a birdseye view. Additionally, the two servants behind the bed are the same size and relief height as the two in the foreground. The odd composition and handling of this scene demonstrates the difficulties of the quatrefoil format, which forced Andrea to adapt his designs to fit the confined space.

In order to better manage the quatrefoil design, Andrea employed a number of techniques to portray a more realistic setting. To create a space in which he could comfortably craft the relief, Andrea worked solely within an imaginary rectangular space inside the quatrefoil. A projecting platform on which the action of each scene plays out delineates the bottom line of the rectangle. The ledge generates a physical, stage-like area where the figures stand, providing a base on which Andrea models the main characters in each scene.

While useful for the goldsmith who feels more comfortable working in a higher relief, the ledge protrudes out from the panel and often blocks the view of the work itself, particularly those panels placed higher up on the door. Despite this drawback, the platform proved invaluable to Andrea who relied on the device to frame a simpler space for his relief.

Within this imaginary rectangle, Andrea employed architectural settings to create a believable space. He looked to the frescoes in the Peruzzi Chapel in Santa Croce in

---

114 Ibid., 12-13.
115 Ibid., 14.
which Giotto used architecture to create spatial recession.\textsuperscript{116} It is generally accepted among art historians that Giotto’s work “mark[s] the transition from the medieval to the Renaissance concept of space.”\textsuperscript{117} In these frescoes, Giotto often uses a small house or portico to depict an interior setting: “The screen or the partially boxed interior used by Giotto and other artists of the Trecento may be considered a transitional form of setting in the development from the generalized two-dimensional picture plane to the localized tridimensional background.”\textsuperscript{118} By including these architectural structures that have three dimensions, Giotto creates depth in his paintings. He often angles the structures on a rotated axis to generate a place in which to put figures.\textsuperscript{119} Here, in relief sculpture, Andrea duplicates the effect of Giotto’s oblique perspective. This adaption is particularly evident in \textit{The Visitation} panel in which Andrea designs a small, angled portico in the corner of the relief. The portico creates a pocket of defined space in which to place Mary and Elizabeth (fig. 15). Andrea does not use a rotated architectural structure in all his panels, but for those reliefs in which he does, the Renaissance concept of space, pioneered by Giotto, is evident.

With the exception of these structures and a few trees in the landscape panels, Andrea maintains a blank background throughout his reliefs, leaving much of the scenery to the imagination of the viewer. By keeping the backgrounds clean and simple, Andrea avoids designing further details within the complicated quatrefoil shape. Anita Moskowitz argues that these bare backgrounds actually help to create a setting, though imaginary, because the “undefined area suggest[s] expansion into depth and to either side

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{118} Bunim, \textit{Space in Medieval Painting}, 141.
\textsuperscript{119} Moskowitz, \textit{The Sculpture of Andrea}, 14.
of the frame.”\textsuperscript{120} By keeping the background plain, Andrea indicates a setting that must be imagined. From a stylistic viewpoint as well, the clean backgrounds complement the somewhat busy quatrefoil outline.

Andrea also suggests a spatial setting by designing figures with realistic gesticulations. Moskowitz describes Andrea’s figures as having “a weight and presence that both demand and create spatial scope” and that their “poignant and expressive gestures are often isolated against the flat ground so that the stance of a body, the movement of arms and hands, or the tilt of a head are saturated with significance.”\textsuperscript{121} As with the plain backgrounds, the figures’ movements and gesticulations prompt the imagination to provide a setting. The figures seem to interact with their environment, thereby creating a believable reality. Instead of designing an explicit setting that would clutter the panel within the quatrefoil space, Andrea allows the implicit to create the scene.

\textit{Telling the Story}

Andrea’s anticipation of an active audience manifests in his desire to present a clear narrative. Andrea designs the panels, so that the action of the story continues throughout the door. This steady presentation of the narrative makes his door easy to read. In \textit{The Funeral} relief, Saint John’s disciples transport his body to his final resting place. Their forward stances and onward-looking gazes make them look like they are transferring his body from their panel to the next. In this next panel, \textit{The Entombment}, the same figures appear, creating a simple continuation of \textit{The Funeral} relief. Andrea designs all the reliefs on the South door with this same flow, so that each scene relates to the ones

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 10.
before and after it, generating seamless action. Even when the characters do not replicate from panel to panel, often the architectural structure repeats, so the reader of the narrative can understand clearly the scene’s setting. This artful crafting makes the narrative easy to follow and would have engaged the typical Florentine passerby.

The *Visit of the Disciples* panel on the right valve of the South door demonstrates the range of Andrea’s storytelling ability (fig. 16). In order to situate the reader within the narrative, Andrea duplicates the tower structure from the previous panel, *The Baptist Led to Prison* (fig. 17). The platform and the tower demarcate the rectangular space, which simplifies the area of the quatrefoil and confines the action. Andrea rotates the tower slightly to generate a space in which the disciples stand. One figure bends over, placing his hands on the grate, and peers into the darkness of the prison. Behind him, a younger man motions to the tower, communicating with an older figure who points sternly at the dungeon. Their gestures indicate a space within the tower where presumably Saint John is imprisoned.

These naturalistic gestures also add to the narrative of the relief. The two younger men seem to be discussing a plan to rescue Saint John from his imprisonment, but the older men maintain a grim visage. The elder man calls attention to the iron bars which he knows will prevent the Baptist from ever escaping. The flat background releases the rest of the setting to the imagination. The lack of trees, rocks, clouds, architectural structures, and extraneous figures focuses attention on the main action of the panel and guides the viewer through the door’s narrative as a whole. In comparison with the *Birth of the Baptist* panel, this scene confirms Andrea’s fully developed command of the quatrefoil space, which exemplifies the spatial advancement of the Renaissance. His humanizing
elements, as well, enhance the unfolding story and establish a strong tradition of narrative seen throughout the next two doors.

Andrew Pisano’s narrative schema and reliefs complement the South portal’s baptismal function and its importance to the Florentine community. He chose scenes that would be easily recognizable, either from the Baptistery’s interior mosaics or from Giotto’s well-known frescoes. He ordered these scenes in a sequence that could be read chronologically, but also would enable the panels most relevant to baptism to be placed at a viewable height. In crafting each relief, Andrea continued the action into the preceding panels, either by repeating figures or duplicating the defining spatial feature, so that viewers can easily follow the narrative. Within the complicated quatrefoil, Andrea simplified the space and created depth to better illustrate each scene. A projecting ledge and a defined rectangular area helped to clarify the space, while rotated architectural structures and blank backgrounds created depth. These spatial techniques and Andrea’s emphasis on narrative brought the Gothic tradition to an end in Florence and provided the city with a bronze door that ushered in the Renaissance.

The New Testament Door

Lorenzo Ghiberti’s first door for the Baptistery has a complex history. Although it currently stands at the Baptistery’s North side, Ghiberti originally designed the New Testament door for San Giovanni’s East façade. Florentines exalted this first position, because the East side faced Florence’s Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, the seat of the archbishop of the city. The door also bridged the holy space between the Baptistery and the Cathedral, called the paradisus. Florentines used the door as an entrance on special occasions and as an exit after the baptismal ritual. After the sacrament of baptism,
Florentines departed from the Baptistery through the East portal to receive communion in the Cathedral. When Ghiberti received the commission for the Baptistery’s East bronze door, he was determined to create an everlasting work that showed both Florence’s close historical ties to Rome and its ability to compete in the world of fifteenth-century Italy.

As with Andrea’s South door, the Operei’s commission for the Baptistery’s second set of bronze doors challenged Ghiberti to complete a narrative cycle of the New Testament within the restrictive space of the quatrefoil. Although not always recognized by scholars and critics, the New Testament door already demonstrates the elements of Ghiberti’s classical styling, innovative narrative, and spatial techniques that make his later door, known as the Gates of Paradise, so famous. Though the required quatrefoil format must at first seem like a restraint, Ghiberti embraced the medieval design as a challenge. He improved on the techniques Andrea used in the South door and developed a number of innovative methods to create space and depth, all while presenting a unified narrative.

*The Narrative Schema*

Unlike Andrea’s South door, Ghiberti organized the New Testament door according to the traditional narrative schema. The scenes read from bottom to top and left to right across both valves in the usual Gothic manner (fig. 18). The lower panels depict scenes of the beginnings of Christ’s life, followed by scenes from Christ’s young adulthood and ministry. Underneath this narrative cycle sit the Four Evangelists and the Four Fathers of the Church. The scenes of the cycle of Christ’s life were fairly established by this time, so Ghiberti did not need to consult popular literature for inspiration, unlike Andrea’s narrative of Saint John.
While the narrative sequence of the South door forced Andrea to manipulate the chronology of the Gospels, the story of the life of Christ fits well into the Gothic schema. Ghiberti’s chronological narrative reflects the theological reasoning behind the reading of the New Testament scenes, because the schema symbolically reenacts Christ’s divine ascension from his birth on earth to assuming his place in Heaven. Furthermore, Christ’s divine nature emerges as the panels progress upward. The reliefs with the most earthly subjects are situated at the base of the door. The bottom row depicts the Four Fathers of the Church. They belong on the earth, because they are wholly human. Above them sit the Four Evangelists, some of whom knew Christ or his disciples personally. They recorded Christ’s teachings, while the Church Fathers teach and explain those writings. These eight men spread the Good News and make available the stories above them.

In this way, these men provide the foundation for the narrative of Christ’s life, which begins directly above in the third row. The panels illustrate Christ’s earthly beginnings, such as *The Nativity* and *The Adoration of the Magi*. Christ’s birth from a human woman, shown in the narrative row closest to the earth, establishes his humanity. Moving up the door, the divine nature of Christ emerges as he moves out of childhood and into his ministry. He performs increasingly impressive miracles, such as raising Lazarus from the dead, a miracle of which only the divine is capable. At the top of the door, Christ fully assumes his divinity in his Passion. In the *Resurrection* panel, he comes down to Earth from heaven above. The last panel, *Pentecost*, ends the narrative with a meeting between Christ’s twelve apostles and the Holy Spirit, which has also descended to Earth from heaven.
In addition to providing a theological framework, the traditional narrative schema allowed Ghiberti to place scenes of Christ’s birth at eye-level, thereby elegantly completing San Giovanni’s theme of death and resurrection through baptism. On the South door, *The Baptism of Christ* and *The Baptism of the Multitude* illustrate the baptismal precedent established by Saint John and Christ himself, while *The Funeral* and *The Entombment* panels remind Florentines that death of one’s sinful life is a necessary part of the baptismal ritual. In the same way, the eye-level scenes on the New Testament door represent one’s rebirth after baptism, because they portray Christ’s birth and childhood. They represent the initiate’s new life and provide a reminder to live in emulation of Christ.\(^{122}\) While Ghiberti did not manipulate the traditional narrative schema or the chronology of the Gospels, his eye-level panels achieve a conclusion to Andrea’s panels that is befitting of San Giovanni’s baptismal function.

Although the South and New Testament doors share the baptismal theme, they differ in the way in which the narrative unfolds. While Andrea transfers the action of scenes from panel to panel in order to tell a smooth narrative, Ghiberti limits each scene to one panel. David Finn states, “Ghiberti [does not] attempt to relate the scenes to each other. Each one is a complete and self-sufficient image of the episode it portrays.”\(^{123}\) This does not signify that Ghiberti aspired to downplay the narrative, or that the panels did not transition well. Rather, Ghiberti’s containment of each scene demonstrates his superior ability to convey the important elements of an episode within a single panel. He did this

---

\(^{122}\) Certainly, Ghiberti knew that the eye-level panels would be the ones most looked at, and so he placed a self-portrait at eye-level in the middle of the doors, found at the right-hand corner of the *Baptism of Christ* panel.

by portraying the moment just before the main action occurs, typically considered the
more classical choice, a detail the Operaï appreciated.

*The Raising of Lazarus* panel demonstrates Ghiberti’s choice portrayal of the
classical moment (fig. 19). In the relief, Christ stands calmly and slightly lifts his hand,
signifying the miracle that revives Lazarus. Mary Magdalene and Martha, however, are
too distraught in their pleadings to notice the miracle at work. On her knees, Martha begs
Christ to save Lazarus, her hands extended in a prayer-like plea. Mary Magdalene throws
herself at Christ’s feet, apparently giving up hope in what Krautheimer calls “swooning
submission.” Only two figures have seen Lazarus step from his grave, signified by the
fold of cloth that has spilled out at his feet. One, the bearded man, looks aghast at the
sight; he stands wide-eyed with his body pressed forward in disbelief. The other, a veiled
woman, throws her head back with her hand outstretched in incredulity. Both remain
speechless at the presented moment. The drama created by the raw emotions of Mary
Magdalene and Martha and the tension created by the two figures who have seen Lazarus
exemplify Ghiberti’s ingenuity. At any moment, undeniable chaos will surely burst the
panel when the crowd finally realizes what has happened. The tense moment before the
main action highlights the emotional intensity of the episode. Ghiberti’s depiction of the
apex moment of the scene and his ability to convey human emotion enables him to create
tension, so that he can sufficiently portray the essential elements of the episode in one
panel.

Spatial Composition

Ghiberti’s decision to limit each scene to one panel meant that he needed to develop more depth and space within the limiting quatrefoil design. Without the aid of previous panels to add context, as in the South door, Ghiberti added landscape and architectural settings as well as multiple figures to create cohesive and recognizable scenes. These elements required that he maximize the spatial area provided by the frame, which he achieved by working with all the space provided by the quatrefoil design and incorporating pictorial techniques into his relief.

Ghiberti, instead of confining the quatrefoil to an imaginary square as in Andrea’s panels, exploits all the space provided by the limiting design. The landscape reliefs, especially, display this ability to take advantage of all available space. Often the abundant rocks and foliage threaten to fall out of the boundary of the frame itself. In lieu of Andrea’s flat platform which blocks the view of the relief from below, the ground of the landscape scenes conform to the quatrefoil edge, integrating the frame into the relief. At other times, Ghiberti capitalizes on the quatrefoil design, using it to emphasize significant elements of the story. For example, the cross in the Crucifixion panel perfectly fits in the peak of the quatrefoil, making full use of the space while highlighting the beam on which Christ suffers (fig. 20). Ghiberti again uses the quatrefoil peak in the Resurrection and Transfiguration reliefs to accentuate Christ (fig. 21, 22).

Ghiberti also achieved space and depth by employing oblique perspective, taken from Andrea’s rotated structure method, and by varying the height of the relief and overlapping figures. He borrows and improves the rotated structures from Andrea’s South

---

126 David Finn, Kenneth Clark, and George Robinson, The Florence Baptistery Doors, 11.
127 Ibid.
door, influenced by Giotto’s frescoes. In both Ghiberti’s *Annunciation* panel and Andrea’s *Visitation* panel, a rotated arched portico delineates space and suggests a setting, possibly the side of a house (fig. 23, 15). In the *Annunciation*, Ghiberti slightly shrinks the portico to fit the quatrefoil frame. He adds an additional sidewall on the left, which indicates that the arch is part of a larger building that expands backward into space. This small detail enhances the setting, so that Mary becomes part of a more realistic space.

The portico also plays a theological role in the scene. While Andrea uses the portico in the *Visitation* to create a space in front of the structure where his figures stand, Ghiberti places the Virgin within the threshold of the portico. More than simply creating space and setting, Ghiberti’s portico houses Mary in her own, designated place. This serves two functions. First, the portico frames the Virgin’s figure, denoting her important role in the biblical story. Second, by separating Mary from the sinful outside world, Ghiberti highlights her chastity, and thus, emphasizes the miraculous conception taking place. This theological element improves Andrea’s technique, because the architectural structure enhances the narrative, not only adding depth to the relief, but also depth to the story itself.

Ghiberti further improves upon the South door’s reliefs by varying the height of his reliefs, a practice that Andrea failed to capitalize on and which will later contribute to the fame of Ghiberti’s Old Testament door. To create depth and a more realistic space, Ghiberti changes the height of the relief of his figures according to their distance to the viewer. He sculpts figures in the foreground in high relief, so that they are almost in the round. As the figures and objects recede deeper into the background, their relief
diminishes until Ghiberti works in such low relief that the furthest objects are simply delicate incisions in the bronze made with a tracer punch.\textsuperscript{128}

While receding the relief mimics reality well, Ghiberti’s last spatial technique, overlapping, or superposition, often fails to properly illustrate depth. In this overlapping method, Ghiberti clumps figures together and elevates the group as if they stand on a ramp. He uplifts the group to show the number of heads in the crowd, which suggests the depth of the space in which they stand. This technique can be seen in the \textit{Miracle on the Water} panel (fig. 24). Judging by the mast of the ship, which offers a relative length of the vessel, and by the number of heads in the crowd, there are clearly far more men on the ship than possible. Ghiberti crowds the disciples, except for the near-drowning Peter, inside the bow of the ship. The overlapping technique fosters a sense of chaos among the figures that suits the scene of the sea-tossed ship; however, the device fails to create realistic depth. Despite this, Ghiberti does achieve the impression of depth. L.R. Rogers asserts that the desired effect of overlapping is what matters,

The important point…is that it is the visual effect of superposition which counts in a relief, and that what is found by experience to be visually effective has no necessary connection with an abstract scheme which satisfies an intellectual desire for order and logical procedure.\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{128} A tracer punch is a type of chasing tool. Chasing is the process of hammering, carving, detailing, and polishing bronze after the material has been cast. The tracer punch is a specific type of chasing tool, which allows the artist to trace lines of different lengths and depths. This use of the tracer punch tool can be seen on Ghiberti’s later Gates of Paradise. He uses it on the palms and feathers of the angels in the \textit{Adam and Eve} panel and on the armor of a soldier and flower petals in his \textit{David} panel, as well as various other panels of the Gates of Paradise. See Ghiberti, Lorenzo, Gary M. Radke, and Andrew Butterfield. \textit{The Gates of Paradise : Lorenzo Ghiberti’s Renaissance Masterpiece}. Atlanta, Ga.: High Museum of Art ; 2007, 199, 121.

\textsuperscript{129} Rogers, L. R. \textit{Relief Sculpture}. Appreciation of the Arts. London : Oxford University Press, 1974, 34.
While the figures stand in an unrealistic and awkward cluster, Ghiberti successfully conveys the idea of depth, which allows him to place more figures within the restrictive quatrefoil format.

*Telling the Story*

Ghiberti, like Andrea, overcame the quatrefoil design by using methods that increase the space and depth of the panel. *The Adoration of the Magi* relief exhibits all of the spatial techniques used in the New Testament door: the rotation of architecture, relief variation, and overlapping (fig. 25). The Holy Family sits underneath an architectural group of columns, turned on its axis toward the left to create a space in which to place figures. Ghiberti omits the column furthest in the foreground so as not to cut off the Virgin from view. He then models the figure of Joseph in a combination of reliefs. Joseph pokes his head out from around a column to view the child. His body is in low relief, set behind the column and back in space. His head, however, is in a higher relief as it protrudes past the column into the foreground. The varied relief shows the space and position in which Joseph stands. As with the portico in the *Annunciation*, this spatial device plays a theological role. David Finn suggests that Ghiberti hides Joseph behind this column, half in the background and half in the foreground, to suggest his secondary role in the life of the Christ child. Ghiberti conveys depth by overlapping the Magi and various shepherds. While he achieves some sense of depth by means of receding the relief, this superposition effectively places each figure in the same plane. The men form a solid mass that confuses the senses. It seems that each figure occupies the same zone of space. Nonetheless, the technique successfully creates the effect of recession and enables

---

Ghiberti to show the men’s individual faces, which contributes to the narrative power of the scene.

Ghiberti’s conscientiousness of the observer’s point of view further enhances these spatial techniques. He designs each relief according to where it will be placed on the door. For instance, the narrative sequence dictates that the Crucifixion panel be placed in the highest row (fig. 20). Ghiberti crafts the figure of Christ so that he hangs outward from the cross with his head protruding farther out into space than his legs, which stay pinned to the beam. This angle allows Christ’s face to be visible from below. Similarly, Ghiberti modeled the Virgin and John looking downward in their lament, as opposed to the more typical depiction of them looking upward at Christ, so that their faces can be seen from below.

The emotional facial expressions portrayed in the Crucifixion panel convey the humanism inherent in Ghiberti’s work, a quality that so impressed the Operai. The naturalistic figures and classicizing style of Ghiberti’s Gates of Paradise often receive credit for sparking the Renaissance, but his earlier New Testament door already showed this new emphasis on human nature and the human form. The figures on this door communicate with one another through their expressive body language and eye contact. The Christ Among the Doctors panel best displays the humanizing interaction between Ghiberti’s figures (fig. 26). Mary and Joseph find the twelve-year-old Christ, who had been missing for three days, among the priests and other wise men in the Temple. Ghiberti conveys the emotion of the moment. Mary stands with one hand on her chest in relief, the other pulling back her skirt in indignation. She purses her lips as she

---

gives Christ an angry, reproachful stare. He returns her glare with an innocent look, his eyebrows raised in slight confusion. Jules Lubbock argues that Christ sits on the throne-like chair opposite his mother, because Ghiberti wanted to show that the child is growing up and about to assume his divinity. Lubbock suggests that the men are annoyed by Mary who interrupts their lively discussion with the child. The bearded man at Mary’s feet scowls at her as he turns to see who has disturbed them. David Finn, however, suggests that maybe the man is eager to see the mother of such an impressive child. These communications between the figures add humanity and psychology to the panels, which greatly impressed the Operai and showcased Florence’s artistic advancement.

The Operai especially admired the classical influences in Ghiberti’s work. In adding elements of classical relief to the door, Ghiberti drew connections between Florentine and ancient Roman art. In his third book of I Commentarii, Ghiberti admires an ancient statue of a hermaphrodite, remarking, “it is impossible for the tongue to tell the perfection and the knowledge, art and skill of that statue.” Ludwig Goldscheider argues that this passion for the classics can be seen in the New Testament door: “there are innumerable female figures which in nobility of their heads and bodies, in the simplicity and the quiet lines of their prose, produce the same effect as Athenian

132 Lubbock, Storytelling in Christian Art, 83.
133 David Finn, Kenneth Clark, and George Robinson, The Florence Baptistery Doors,127.
134 Holt, Elizabeth Basye Gilmore. Literary Sources of Art History: an Anthology of Texts from Theophilus to Goethe. Princeton, N.J.;: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947, 92. Written around 1445, Ghiberti’s I Commentarii is composed of three books. The first book is a history of ancient art that relies heavily on Vitruvius’ De Architectura and Pliny the Elder’s Naturalis historia. The second book deals with artists from Giotto to his present day and includes the first autobiography by an artist. The third book deals with the theoretical aspects of art, including optics, taken from Arabian scholars Alhazen and Avicenna. See Holt, Literary Sources, 83-94; Hurd, Janice L. "Lorenzo Ghiberti’s Treatise on Sculpture: The Second Commentary." Ph.D., Bryn Mawr College, 1970.
masterpieces." Goldscheider praises the architecture, drapery and positions of the figures in the New Testament door, all influenced by ancient Greece. Krautheimer points out that the classical figures so highly praised in Ghiberti’s Gates of Paradise were seen as early as 1401 in his Sacrifice of Isaac panel for the competition. Abraham’s head is reminiscent of Zeus, the body of Isaac is modeled after a traditional Greek youth, and a Roman sarcophagus inspired the servants. Many ancient works on which Ghiberti modeled his reliefs can be identified. They include Roman monuments, triumphal arches, and ancient sarcophagi.

Elements of ancient Roman and Greek art permeate the frame and decorative borders of the New Testament door. The border between the panels consists of forty-eight prophet’s heads, each set within their own quatrefoil. Ghiberti designed many of these from ancient sarcophagi. The features and pose of an elderly prophetess strikingly resemble the head of a nurse from the Phaedra sarcophagus in Pisa (fig. 27, 28). A barbarian battle sarcophagus provided the model for many of the bearded prophets, and Ghiberti even inserted the head of Julius Caesar into the border (fig. 29, 30). He carved the prophets’ hair with curls and swirls to recall antique sculptures. Ghiberti also alludes to antiquity by adding ivy leaves and bunches of grapes to the foliage of the frame.

In his second book of I Commentarii, Ghiberti recalls the commission for the New Testament door: “with great love the door was diligently made, together with frames of ivy leaves, and the door jambs with a very magnificent frame of many kinds of leaves...It

136 Krautheimer, Ghiberti’s Bronze Doors, 4.
137 Krautheimer has created an exhaustive list of ancient sources upon which it is likely Ghiberti drew inspiration. See ibid., Appendix A.
138 Ibid., 340.
was executed with the greatest skill and care.” His ability to create depth and space within the strict quatrefoil format firmly places him outside of the Gothic tradition. Furthermore, the naturalistic elements of Ghiberti’s reliefs found in classical art and so admired by humanists represent the beginning of the rebirth of ancient art in Florence.

With Ghiberti’s bronze door, the Calimala and the Baptistery of San Giovanni firmly advanced the Golden Age of Florence and the period of classical revival that characterized fifteenth-century Italy. Moreover the New Testament door provided the foundation for Ghiberti’s even more famous Old Testament door. The variety of spatial techniques used in his first door create the depth and space he needed to develop more complex narratives in his second door that would rival all existing bronze doors and set the standard for those to come.

The Old Testament Door

Shortly after the successful installation of the New Testament door, the Operai commissioned its final bronze door for the Baptistery’s North façade. The North portal faced the suburbs of Florence, the least prestigious position of the three doorways. Florentines used the door as a general exit, except when it acted as a departure point for the clerical procession during the Festa di San Giovanni. Despite the portal’s ordinary function relative to the other two thresholds, Ghiberti labored intensely over this final door. He spent fifteen years chasing, finishing, and gilding the panels to perfection. When he finally completed the door twenty-seven years later, it exhibited such beauty and excellence that the Operai installed it at the place of honor on the East façade, and the door quickly became known as the Gates of Paradise. Through the centuries, this door has won praise for its sophisticated narratives and visually pleasing spatial compositions.

139 Holt, Literary Sources, 88.
Ghiberti used techniques from the earlier South and New Testament doors to create space in which the story of each panel unfolds. The highly developed space and narrative of the Old Testament door show the progression of Florentine relief work since Andrea’s time.

The Narrative Schema

In the spirit of the 1401 competition, the Operai entertained several proposals for the door’s narrative schema. They selected the program of Leonardo Bruni, the city’s most famous humanist scholar. Bruni organized the door in the same format as the first two: twenty quatrefoil panels illustrating Old Testament scenes and eight quatrefoils depicting prophets. Bruni’s scenes adhered to typical medieval Old Testament programs by emphasizing the Creation and the miracle stories of Joseph and Moses. The order of the panels followed the Gothic narrative sequence that read scenes from the upper left to the lower right of the doors. Krautheimer, who describes Bruni’s program as “far from exciting,” suggests that the humanist scholar simply revived an older outline. He argues that, “Bruni’s program is so steeped in medieval tradition, in its sequence, selection of events and emphasis, that one is led to wonder whether by chance he based it on an old program outlined for Ghiberti’s first door in 1401 and then discarded.” Despite being old-fashioned according Florentine standards in 1424, the committee accepted Bruni’s narrative plan.

The Operai then formally extended the commission for the door’s execution to Ghiberti, who signed the contract on January 2, 1425. He cast the back of the door according to Bruni’s twenty-eight-panel schema; however, he soon voiced qualms over the plan. He encouraged the Operai to abandon the quatrefoil in lieu of a simpler design.

140 Krautheimer, Lorenzo Ghiberti, 169.
141 Ibid., 169, 171.
He and other Florentine artists of the period viewed the medieval design as a hindrance to the progress of art. Ghiberti previously completed two large, rectangular reliefs for the Siena baptismal font. The space provided by these bigger panels enabled him to further develop the spatial techniques he used in the New Testament door. Returning to the quatrefoil format after the Siena reliefs would have limited Ghiberti’s artistic advancements. The quatrefoil similarly hindered Ghiberti’s ability to respond to Donatello’s work, which was rapidly gaining prominence in Florence and the surrounding communes.142

Not only did Ghiberti convince the Operai to rethink the narrative, but he also convinced them to reduce the number of panels and adopt a layout that would better fit the subject of the doors. Unlike the previous commissions which illustrate the continuous story of the life of Saint John and Christ, these doors were to depict multiple narratives. Though the panels would be arranged chronologically, the stories would not transition smoothly. Ghiberti advocated for ten large panels that would accommodate each Old Testament story individually and would allow him to “tell the rich story of the Old Testament at leisure.”143 Ghiberti had his way. Possibly realizing the outdated nature of Bruni’s program, or perhaps simply deferring to Ghiberti’s expertise on bronze doors, the Operai accepted the change to ten square panels and gave Ghiberti “permission to carry it out in that manner which [he] believed would turn out most perfectly and most ornate and rich.”144 Ghiberti, with the Operai’s full approval, completely reconstructed the Old Testament door. He chose the traditional narrative schema in which Old Testament

142 Lubbock, Storytelling in Christian Art, 228. Donatello, a former assistant of Ghiberti’s, also worked on a relief for the Siena baptismal font.
143 Krautheimer, Ghiberti’s Bronze Doors, 7.
144 Fengler, “Lorenzo Ghiberti’s ‘Second Commentary,’” 66.
scenes read from top to bottom, left to right, across the valves (fig. 31). He had no reason to rework the sequence, because the chronology of the stories provided the strongest link between each panel.

Ghiberti confined each Old Testament story within one panel. In this way, the door as a whole illustrates the Old Testament, while the panels tell an individual narrative. Gwynne Dilbeck acknowledges that viewers often see the door as a collection of self-contained narratives.145 Yet she argues that Ghiberti intended for the doors to be viewed as a unified whole whose individual panels together create a cohesive narrative. However, while the theme of the door connects the panels, each relief acts as its own separate masterpiece that portrays an individual episode from the Old Testament.

*Spatial Composition*

In order to create a complex narrative within the relief, Ghiberti creates space and depth by composing a fixed sequence of planes, or levels.146 These planes provide a highly developed space in which the action of the narrative unfolds. They also create depth, which allows Ghiberti to portray a more realistic scene. In these reliefs, the height of the figures determines the height of the spatial zones.147 The planes are stacked horizontally over each other and do not have the same height; however, the size of the figures within an individual plane remains constant. In the *Cain and Abel* panel, the figure of Cain in the right foreground delineates the height of the spatial plain (fig. 32). The oxen and their plow master on the left, modeled in the equivalent scale, stand in the

---

146 Rogers, *Relief Sculpture*, 54.
147 Bloom, Kathryn. "Lorenzo Ghiberti's Space in Relief: Method and Theory." *The Art Bulletin* 51, no. 2 (Jun., 1969): 164-169. 166. Kathryn Bloom details Ghiberti's empirical approach to determining these spatial planes. Although the method is not distinctly mathematical, each panel adheres to its own system of proportions.
same plane. The top of Cain’s head begins the second spatial plane, which contains three slightly smaller figures. Above Cain’s club, the figures of Adam and Eve mark the next plane, shorter than the previous two zones. Finally, the kneeling figures of Cain and Abel begin the uppermost spatial area, which is higher than the zone that Adam and Eve occupy. This panel shows that Ghiberti did not create these spatial zones equally or in an ordered diminution, rather he followed an intuitive perspective system. Within these spatial planes, Ghiberti employs the techniques developed in the previous doors to compose narrative.

Where the structures in the earlier doors simply produced pockets of space, the architecture in the Old Testament door defines layers of space throughout the entire panel. No longer modest porticos, the buildings in this final door are grand and impressive. In many of the reliefs, the architecture spans the entire panel to unify the space as well as distinguish the foreground, middle ground, and background. Rogers writes that the scenes “exist within a continuous coherent picture space and their spatial relations are most precisely determined within the architectural setting.”148 The expansive buildings present a distinct and believable space in which figures occupy.

To naturally show the figures that stand in the fore or background of these architectural structures, Ghiberti adjusts the relief, as done in the New Testament door. He models the figures and objects in the foreground in a rounded relief and gradually decreases the height of the sculpture as the picture recesses into the background. The details farthest in the background are in a shallow relief and delicately incised with a chasing tool. This variation of relief imitates nature by creating the effects of a movement parallax, in which objects in the foreground and distance move relative to one another

148 Rogers, Relief Sculpture, 48.
when the observer moves. In Ghiberti’s panels, the low relief background objects do not move while those in higher relief in the foreground do. The difference between the low and high relief also helps the viewer distinguish distance between objects.\(^{149}\)

Ghiberti’s relief variation also serves a narrative purpose. Episodes cast in low or high relief can have a variety of meanings. The relief can construct time, as in the *Cain and Abel* panel, or it can reveal the voice of the narrative, demonstrated by the *Genesis* panel. In the *Cain and Abel* panel, the height of the relief suggests time (fig. 32). Lubbock declares, “distance in space is distance in time,” so that the episodes cast in low relief occurred in the past, while those in high relief represent the present.\(^{150}\) The lower relief episode depicting Cain slaughtering Abel acts as a flashback that explains why God confronts Cain in the foreground, which occurs in the present. The lowest relief sections, which illustrate Adam and Eve on the left and Cain and Abel’s sacrifice on the right, also serve as memories contextualizing the narrative. Lubbock writes,

> the faintness of Ghiberti’s very low cameo relief enhances this effect and acts as a metaphorical suggestion of memory, fainter and less immediate than the three-dimensionality and solidity of here and now.\(^{151}\)

The episodes in the *Cain and Abel* panel line up behind one another to establish the cause of the crime, the progression of time, and the sequence of the narrative.

The relief in the *Genesis* panel, however, does not indicate past time, but rather adds commentary to the episode (fig. 33).\(^{152}\) The very low relief that comprises the scene of Adam and Eve succumbing to the serpent’s temptations “is used to give emphasis to

\(^{150}\) Ibid., 231. Giovanni Pisano provides the first instance of this temporal use of relief in his Pistoia pulpit.
\(^{151}\) Ibid.
\(^{152}\) The *Genesis* relief is the only panel that does not employ spatial planes.
the furtiveness of their act.” Ghiberti tucks the scene under high relief trees and uses the low relief to hide the figures slightly, just as Adam and Eve wanted to conceal their disobedience.

As he changes the height of the relief, Ghiberti alters the size of the figures to better represent nature. He writes, “those that are near appear large, those in the distance small, as they do in reality.” The limited space of the New Testament panels did not necessitate this modification; however, the depth of the Old Testament panels demand that Ghiberti change the size of figures and details to portray a realistic scene. As previously discussed, the size of the figures also determines the height of the spatial planes.

Ghiberti places multiple groups of figures within these spatial planes in a way that is reminiscent of the overlapping technique used in his New Testament door. In the second book of his I Commentarii, Ghiberti proudly writes, “I began the work…which had numerous figures in them…I could produce (to have) excellent compositions rich with man figures. In some scenes I placed about a hundred figures, in some less, and in some more.” Unlike the New Testament door, Ghiberti does not bunch crowds together and upward into space. He executes the overlapping technique with a greater sophistication that better imitates nature. The men in each of the three groups in the foreground of the Joseph relief gently recede in a line into the panel’s depth (fig. 34). Like the New Testament panel, the group retains the clustered effect and all their faces remain visible. The slight diminution of the size and relief of the figures, however, creates realistic depth unachieved in the New Testament panels. Ghiberti follows the

---

153 Ibid.
154 Holt, Literary Sources, 90.
155 Ibid.
Roman tradition of overlapping when designing the low-relief group of Joseph’s brothers at the top of the panel. Since the boys stand in the same plane, Ghiberti leaves space between those in the first row, so that the heads in the second row peer over the shoulders of the others. Roman processional friezes often exhibit this technique.\textsuperscript{156}

In addition to the spatial devices used in his earlier door, Ghiberti employs linear perspective, a pictorial technique not used in the New Testament doors. Although only used in the \textit{Joseph, Isaac, and The Meeting of King Solomon and Queen Sheba} reliefs, scholarship often emphasizes Ghiberti’s employment of linear perspective (fig. 34, 35, 36).\textsuperscript{157} Linear perspective is a pictorial perspective technique that assumes a fixed viewer. It relies on architecture to create a measurable space proportional to the natural world.\textsuperscript{158}

Leon Battista Alberti provides the first written explanation of this method in his artistic treatise \textit{De Pictura}, written in 1435.\textsuperscript{159} Krautheimer claims that Ghiberti knew about Alberti’s description of linear perspective and “applied verbatim the perspective construction which Alberti had expounded” in the \textit{Isaac} and \textit{Joseph} panels.\textsuperscript{160} Ghiberti’s \textit{Isaac} panel has become an exemplar of linear perspective in art historical literature.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{156} Rogers, \textit{Relief Sculpture}, 36. The Cancellaria reliefs and the friezes on the Ara Pacis Augustae exemplify this Roman overlapping technique.
\textsuperscript{157} The \textit{Isaac} relief is also commonly referred to as the \textit{Jacob and Esau} panel. Linear perspective is also called one-point or mathematical perspective.
\textsuperscript{158} Key elements of linear perspective include a base line, orthogonals, and transversals. The base line delineates the foreground and provides the viewer with a line to measure the distance of the transversals. The transversals are lines that converge at the central vanishing point and are evenly placed left to right across the picture plane. The orthogonals are lines that run perpendicular to the transversals and diminish in width as they progress toward the vanishing point. Often pavement, or sometimes ceiling panels, act as transversals and orthogonals.
\textsuperscript{159} Andrews, \textit{Story and Space}, 1.
\textsuperscript{160} Krautheimer, \textit{Lorenzo Ghiberti}, 251. Jules Lubbock disagrees and argues that Ghiberti cast most of the panels by 1435. He cites Ghiberti’s inability to foreshorten circles and semicircular arches, outlined in Alberti’s \textit{De Pictura}, as evidence that Ghiberti did not learn linear perspective from Alberti. See Lubbock, \textit{Storytelling in Christian Art}, 229, note 4. A Calimala guild document excerpted by Strozzi records that all ten Old Testament panels had been cast by April 4, 1436. Unless Ghiberti had knowledge of Alberti’s treatise prior to its publication, he would have had only one year to design both the \textit{Isaac} and \textit{Joseph} panels according to Alberti’s perspective theory. See Krautheimer, \textit{Lorenzo Ghiberti}, 368, doc. 23.
\end{footnotesize}
architectural setting and pavement provide the base line, orthogonals, and transversals needed to measure the space. These lines converge at the vanishing point located within the middle arch in the center of the panel. Ghiberti, however, places the vanishing point higher than Alberti recommends. Though Krautheimer and Lubbock argue that this demonstrates Ghiberti’s misunderstanding of Alberti’s theory, Ghiberti likely placed the vanishing point in the center of the panel to better draw in the viewer. Nevertheless, Ghiberti succeeds in creating an expansive and organized space.

_Telling the Story_

Space and narrative work together in Ghiberti’s Old Testament doors. Eight of the reliefs epitomize continuous narrative, a pictorial technique in which the many events of one story are told within a single picture frame. The spatial methods which Ghiberti appropriates from his earlier door enable him to use this technique to create complex and nuanced polyscenic reliefs. Andrews writes, “the deeper and more expansive [the space] seems, the more readily that space can encompass an extended series of moments or scenes, in short, the more easily it can accommodate a continuous narrative.” The first instance of continuous narrative occurred in Hellenistic art and the method developed throughout Roman times. In this period, the method grew in popularity because of an increased command of pictorial space and a development of spatial realism. This newly developed space also advanced narrative, because it provided a realistic setting for the story to unfold.

161 Ibid., 251.
162 The two exceptions are the Joseph and Solomon panels. See Lubbock, _Storytelling in Christian Art_, 129.
163 Andrews, _Story and Space_, 18.
164 Ibid., 102. Assyrian sculptors also often employed continuous narrative. Rogers, _Relief Sculpture_, 48.
165 Andrews, _Story and Space_, 103. Arguably the most impressive execution of continuous narrative in relief can be seen in Trajan’s column.
Continuous narrative reached a high point in the ancient Roman period, but subsequently fell into a decline. In the early-fourteenth century, when Andrea was working on the South doors, continuous narrative was uncommon. When spatial techniques, such as linear perspective, developed in the mid-fifteenth century, the polyscenic method reemerged. By the end of the fifteenth century, continuous narrative was relatively common in all mediums, including frescos, panel painting, and reliefs. Though the development of space enabled this resurgence, continuous narrative only became popular in this period in part because artists viewed it as a revered, ancient technique. Andrews argues, that the continuous method was obviously sanctioned by ancient practice undoubtedly contributed to its renewed vitality in the fifteenth century, when so many aspects of the classical world were being energetically revived. Indeed, the widespread appeal of continuous narration over the course of the quattrocento is perhaps best understood as an integral part of the Humanist culture of the period – not as an aberration or a leftover, but as intrinsic to the Renaissance spirit, in even the most literal sense of the term.

More than simply an illustration of a moment, continuous narrative guides the viewer along a journey, creating an experience that appealed to the humanists of the time. No doubt Ghiberti was among these artists of the quattrocento who looked to the continuous narrative of the ancients as a model.

In reading the narratives of the Old Testament door, Lew Andrews explains that rather than simply reading the story across the panel, the reliefs should be read “more in

166 Ibid. 8.
167 Ibid. 104.
terms of an interplay or exchange between two and three dimensions, between the two-dimensional design and the illusion it creates. The episodes within each panel are dispersed in a variety of reliefs, planes, heights, and positions. This variation engages the viewer, who must decipher the narrative after examining each illustrated moment. In fifteenth-century continuous narratives, the action commonly begins at the center of the panel. The continuation of the story then relies on the three-dimensional space in which figures are placed.

The *Cain and Abel* panel beautifully demonstrates Ghiberti’s use of continuous narrative within a deep and ordered space (fig. 32). Ghiberti describes the relief in his *I Commentarii*,

In the second panel, Adam and Eve beget Cain and Abel, who appear as small children. Then there is (shown) how Cain and Abel offered (their) sacrifices. Cain sacrificed the worst and vilest thing he had. Abel sacrificed the best and noblest. Abel’s sacrifice was very acceptable to God, and that of Cain was entirely the opposite. There was (shown) how Cain slew Abel in envy. In that scene Abel was watching the animals and Cain was tilling the soil. Also there was (shown) how God appeared to Cain and demanded of him the brother he had slain. Thus in each panel are scenes of four stories.

Ghiberti’s emphasis on the number of stories he depicts reveals his pride in the continuous narrative technique. Even without his description of the relief, the story can be easily discerned. The main action of the scene, the slaughter of Abel by his brother Cain, occurs a little to the right of the center. The episode on the mountain behind them

\footnotesize

168 Ibid., 79.
169 Ibid., 80.
170 Holt, *Literary Sources*, 90.
explicates Cain’s action by showing God’s acceptance of Abel’s sacrifice. Similarly, the episode of Abel’s murder explains why God confronts Cain. The carefully constructed landscape provides plenty of contours in which Ghiberti places these scenes. The height of the relief and the size of the figures successfully create the depth needed to understand which figures are in the background or foreground. The spatial planes, as well, organize the narrative by placing figures of the same size and relief on the same level, according to nature.

Ghiberti’s highly advanced use of space allows him to approach narrative differently in his Old Testament door. The ingenuity of Ghiberti’s previous New Testament door lies in its single, cohesive narrative throughout the work. The Old Testament door, however, portrays complex narratives with each panel. The panels then come together as a whole to illustrate the Old Testament. In this way, the narrative does not unify the door, as in Ghiberti’s earlier work, but rather the door unifies the narratives. Each panel relies on the overarching theme of the Old Testament to connect the separate works into one.

The individual panels which comprise the Old Testament door make it beautiful. Andrews argues, “to be recognized as beautiful, an object first must be seen as a whole per aspectus…, and then every property it possesses must be analyzed individually and in detail.” When viewed at a distance, Ghiberti’s final door indeed exudes magnificence; however, close examination of the panels reveals the door’s true splendor. Alhazen, a scholar often quoted by Ghiberti in the third book of his *I Commentarii*, describes beauty as the collection of parts,

---

And if one considers the beautiful properties, which are made up of individual properties joined together, one will find that the beauty which appears as a result of their conjunction would not appear if not for the proportionality of these conjunctions joined together among one another.\textsuperscript{172}

The Old Testament door owes its perfection to Ghiberti’s careful attention to proportion, relief, and other details within each of the ten panels.

**CONCLUSION**

The Florentines praise the Baptistery of San Giovanni as their tangible link to the imperial city of Rome and the earliest Christians. Throughout the centuries, the building has been renovated and redecorated to affirm these supposed connections. The greatest of all these efforts are the three bronze doors. They are cast in a medium which recalls both the material splendor and the technical skill of the ancients from whom Florence originates. They outwardly display the wealth and superior artistry of the city.

Furthermore, the bronze doors enhance the civic and religious role of the Baptistery within Florence itself, standing as sacred gateways to the interior of the Baptistery. The South door, in particular, heightens the sanctity and personal meaning of baptism through its narrative sequence. The parallels which the eye-level panels draw to the baptismal rite remind participants of the significance of the divinely consecrated sacrament.

Andrea achieved this narrative by manipulating the space available to him. His rotated structures, blank backgrounds, and figures with realistic gestures all provide a spatial setting in which the story is told. Ghiberti then evolves Andrea’s storytelling

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
efforts by creating a deeper space within his panels. The New Testament door first expresses these methods which permit the Old Testament door to unfold multiple complex narratives. Looking to Andrea’s South door, Ghiberti reuses the oblique perspective provided by the architectural structure to both create space and add a theological element to the narrative. He also varies the height of the relief and overlaps figures to deepen each panel’s field of space. Finally, Ghiberti heightens Andrea’s naturalism by adding classical references to his reliefs. These efforts result in the New Testament door, on which expertly designed panels pull viewers across a cohesive narrative.

The Old Testament door similarly borrows from the previous doors to develop the most sophisticated narrative of all three works. The larger panels allow Ghiberti to use linear perspective, which creates a deeper space. Architectural devices, relief variation, and overlapping culminate in this space, so that the narrative can be read in and out of the depth of the panel. Although the Old Testament door does not create a single uninterrupted story, it presents the best-known episodes of the Old Testament in continuous narratives themselves. The classicizing and natural elements added to these polyscenic reliefs further enhance the narratives. With the installation of this last door, the Calimala and the whole of Florence must have stood back in amazement and pride of their own achievement. Their beloved Baptistry, which symbolized the lineage and ascendancy of Florence, was now complete with bronze doors that then and now stand as a monument to their city.
Figure 1 – The Baptistery of San Giovanni Battista
Figure 2 – The South Door, Andrea Pisano, 1336
Figure 3 – The New Testament Door, Lorenzo Ghiberti, 1424
Figure 4 – The Old Testament Door, or The Gates of Paradise, Lorenzo Ghiberti, 1452
Figure 5 – black and white Roman floor mosaics underneath the Baptistery

Figure 6 – The south façade of the Baptistery of San Giovanni
Figure 7 – *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Lorenzo Ghiberti, 1401

Figure 8 – *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Filippo Brunelleschi, 1401
Figure 9 – reverse of the competition panels; Ghiberti (left), Brunelleschi (right)

<p>| | | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10 – the narrative schema of the South Door
Figure 11 – lion heads, detail from the left valve, South Door, Andrea Pisano, 1336

Figure 12 – *The Baptism of the Multitude* and *The Baptism of Christ*, Andrea Pisano, South Door, 1336
Figure 13 – *The Funeral of the Baptist* and *The Entombment of the Baptist*, Andrea Pisano, South Door, 1336

Figure 14 – *The Birth of the Baptist*, Andrea Pisano, South Door, 1336
Figure 15 – *The Visitation*, Andrea Pisano, South Door, 1336

Figure 16 – *The Visit of the Disciples*, Andrea Pisano, South Door, 1336
Figure 17 – The Baptist Led to Prison, Andrea Pisano, South Door, 1336

Figure 18 – The narrative schema of the New Testament Door
Figure 19 – *The Raising of Lazarus*, Lorenzo Ghiberti, New Testament Door, 1424

Figure 20 – *The Crucifixion*, Lorenzo Ghiberti, New Testament Door, 1424
Figure 21 – *The Resurrection*, Lorenzo Ghiberti, New Testament Door, 1424

Figure 22 – *The Transfiguration*, Lorenzo Ghiberti, New Testament Door, 1424
Figure 23 – The Annunciation, Lorenzo Ghiberti, New Testament Door, 1424
Figure 24 – *Miracle on the Water*, Lorenzo Ghiberti, New Testament Door, 1424
Figure 25 – *The Adoration of the Magi*, Lorenzo Ghiberti, New Testament Door, 1424
Figure 26 – Christ Among the Doctors, Lorenzo Ghiberti, New Testament Door, 1424
Figure 27 – Head of a prophetess, Lorenzo Ghiberti, New Testament Door, 1424

Figure 28 – Head of a nurse, from the Phaedra sarcophagus, Pisa
Figure 29 – barbarian head, Lorenzo Ghiberti, New Testament Door, 1424

Figure 30 – head of Julius Caesar, New Testament Door, 1424
Figure 31 – The narrative scheme of the Old Testament Door
Figure 32 – *Cain and Abel*, Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Old Testament Door*, 1452
Figure 33 – *Genesis*, Lorenzo Ghiberti, Old Testament Door, 1452
Figure 34 – Joseph, Lorenzo Ghiberti, Old Testament Door, 1452
Figure 35 – *Isaac*, Lorenzo Ghiberti, Old Testament Door, 1452
Figure 36 – *The Meeting of King Solomon and Queen Sheba*, Lorenzo Ghiberti, Old Testament Door, 1452
APPENDIX

Plate 1 – The South Door, Andrea Pisano, 1330-1336

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Annunciation to Zacharias</th>
<th>Zacharias and the Elders</th>
<th>Baptist Before Herod</th>
<th>Baptist Led to Prison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Visitation</td>
<td>Birth of the Baptist</td>
<td>Visit of the Disciples</td>
<td>Christ Cures the Infirm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naming of the Baptist</td>
<td>Young John in the Wilderness</td>
<td>Dance of Salome</td>
<td>Beheading of the Baptist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preaching of the Baptist</td>
<td>Ecce Agnus Dei</td>
<td>Baptist’s Head Brought to Herod</td>
<td>Presentation of the Baptist’s Head to Herodias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptism of the Multitude</td>
<td>Baptism of Christ</td>
<td>Funeral of the Baptist</td>
<td>Entombment of the Baptist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>Charity</td>
<td>Humility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortitude</td>
<td>Temperance</td>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Prudence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Way to Calvary</td>
<td>The Crucifixion</td>
<td>The Resurrection</td>
<td>Pentecost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Agony in the Garden</td>
<td>Christ is Arrested</td>
<td>The Flagellation</td>
<td>Christ Before Pilate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Transfiguration</td>
<td>The Raising of Lazarus</td>
<td>The Entry into Jerusalem</td>
<td>The Last Supper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Baptism of Christ</td>
<td>The Temptation in the Wilderness</td>
<td>The Expulsion of the Money-Changers</td>
<td>Miracle on the Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Annunciation</td>
<td>The Nativity</td>
<td>The Adoration of the Magi</td>
<td>Christ Among the Doctors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint John the Evangelist</td>
<td>Saint Matthew</td>
<td>Saint Luke</td>
<td>Saint Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Augustine</td>
<td>Saint Jerome</td>
<td>Gregory the Great</td>
<td>Saint Ambrose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Plate 3 – The Old Testament Door, Lorenzo Ghiberti, 1452

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genesis</th>
<th>Cain and Abel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>Abraham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>Joshua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Solomon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BIBLIOGRAPHY


