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The temporary and the temporal: Suspense in the Strozzi chapel

All funerary chapels operate in a peculiar space-time. They receive the dead in order to safeguard, commemorate and benefit them, but they are also underpinned by expectation. They are waiting rooms to another place that anyone not immediately damned may hope to attain in an indefinite end time.¹ Not all intra-mural burial sites deal with the provisionality of this situation in such a peculiar way as the chapel of Filippo Strozzi in Santa Maria Novella, Florence (painted 1489 and 1493-1502). Extending the potential inherent in the Sistine Chapel frescoes of the early 1480s, the ancient past is merged with present messages. But rather than the one being nested within the other, they sit together on the surface, with the pendant inscriptions in fictive marble being temporally, as well as literally, suspended. Figures from pagan antiquity are presented life-size and as though still in residence, occasionally overlapping or exceeding their frame, while saintly attempts to exorcise the old deities are thematised on the side walls where priests and votaries of their cults flee towards the entrance (fig. 1). Looking ahead (fig. 2), the tall stained glass window is presided over by the device of a lamb resting, from which depends a hanging tablet with the message *MITIS ESTO* – ‘be meek/gentle’ - a somewhat improbable motto for the increasingly conspicuous Strozzi of Florence.² The text speaks to the present beholder but evokes the worship of the sacrificial Lamb at the end of time in the Kingdom of Heaven. This is no placid ‘chapel of rest’; not only is its famed richness of invention and sheer expense the antithesis of meek, the overriding mood is one of present agitation.³ Even the lamb looks under threat from another

¹ For burial chapels in the economy of Christian salvation see H. Colvin, *Architecture and the Afterlife*, New Haven and London 1991, 123-128 and Chapter 10.

² The device with this motto appears for example on the frontispiece of Filippo Strozzi’s own copy of Cristoforo Landino’s Italian translation of Pliny’s *Natural History*, dating to 1476 (Bodleian Library, Oxford, Arch. G b.6, f.5r).

³ For the chapel as Filippo Strozzi’s much planned for and magnificent memorial see E. Borsook, ‘Documents for Filippo Strozzi’s Chapel in Santa Maria Novella and Other Related

Strozzi family emblem, the falcon shedding feathers, which hovers in relief above the window embrasure with the fluttering motto EXPECTO (I look for/await). The contention of this paper is that this state of suspension, which invites alert and extended looking without offering satisfactory resolution, is thematised in the decorative scheme, both intentionally and incidentally. The analysis of the relationship between the pictorial and the temporal draws attention to the Strozzi chapel's challenge to secure Christian messages, as much as to the decorum, of the funerary chapel.

In spite of the confident pomp of the triumphal arch, which arises as an extension of Filippo Strozzi's tomb, or even the abundant narrative wit and visual pleasures of the frescoes, a sense of the unsettled or even the doubtful has been voiced in various terms by writers on the frescoes. Focussing on the chapel's painted architectural frames, Johannes Grave, for instance, articulates how this supposed guarantor of differentiation and stability is, in Filippino's hands, a knowing agent of uncertainty.⁴ Slipping at different places and moments from structural support to stage prop, from framework in the present of the chapel to embedded frieze in the fiction of the historical scene, it sets in question the limits of the pictorial image and its relation to the real. Andrea De Marchi has convincingly reasserted the audacity, to the point of affrontery, of some of the scheme's inventions in a sacred context.⁵ It is well known that the powerful Observant Dominican, Girolamo Savonarola, objected to the great artifice of painted figures that in holy places drew the eyes of devotees to curiosity and diverted them from the 'true' contemplation.⁶ While the frescoes would have been

Papers', *Burlington Magazine*, 112, 1970, 737-745 and 800-804; J. Nelson and P. Zambrano, *Filippino Lippi*, Milan 2004, 532-540.

⁴ J. Grave, 'Grenzerdenkungen zwischen Bild und Architektur. Filippino Lippis parergonale Ästhetik', in A. Beyer, M. Burioni and J. Grave, *Das Auge der Architektur. Zur Frage der Bildlichkeit in der Baukunst*, Munich 2011, 221-249, esp. 235-9 for the unstable frame.

⁵ A. De Marchi " '...ella fa meravigliare chiunque la vede per la novità e varietà delle bizzarrie che vi sono'. Filippino Lippi e Benedetto da Maiano nella cappella Strozzi." in ed. Andrea De Marchi *Santa Maria Novella, la Basilica e il Convento. II. dalla Trinità del Masaccio alla metà del Cinquecento*, Florence 2016, 207-238, esp. 207 and 209.

incomplete at Savonarola's burning in 1498, the tomb was already installed by 1495 and the Prior of San Marco almost certainly had Strozzi's funerary chapel in his sights when he railed against those super-rich 'gran maestri' of this world who usurped the prerogative of saints by having themselves buried beneath the site of the Mass.⁷ For his reforming scourge there was something definitively out of place in this funerary pomp and presumption and it would bring certain damnation. Whereas for Savonarola ornaments that excited curiosity and delight were deadly distractions, Vasari tellingly praised the chapel's abundance of ornaments in terms that have led others to see it as before its time, anticipating later sixteenth-century painting: '[He] was the first to show the moderns the new method of giving variety to clothing, and embellished and adorned his figures with the girt-up garments of antiquity'.⁸ But whether out of place or before its time, it is surprising that the passage of nearly five hundred years fails to reconcile the twenty-first century viewer to its audacity simply by placing the chapel under the Vasarian sign of 'art'. Santa Maria Novella presents itself now as an art museum, but if anything, the frescoes (recently cleaned after the penetration of water through the vault) only intensify the challenge to the visitor in their superabundant vivacity of surface. Take, for example, the distribution of a very particular tone of celestial blue that threads across the whole pictorial field and lifts or animates whatever it defines. On one wall it distinguishes a cloak, on another it highlights a gilded pedestal, dangerously suggesting the sacrality of the

⁶ Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra li Salmi*, Venice 1543, 75 b, Sermon 12 see D. Friedman, 'The Burial Chapel of Filippo Strozzi in Santa Maria Novella in Florence', *L'Arte*, 9, 1970, note 44, 131.

⁷ G. Savonarola, *Prediche italiane ai fiorentini*, ed. F. Cognasso, Perugia and Venice 1930, I, 32 as first noted and cited by Friedman, *op.cit.* (note 6) 122-123 and note 34, 130.

⁸ G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. G. Milanesi, Florence 1878, 3, 461 '[...]che fu il primo, il quale ai moderni mostrasse il nuovo modo di variare gli abiti, e che abellisse ornatamente con veste antiche succinte le sue figure'.

idol Mars, while in the same scene it associates the sash of the stricken boy with the commanding arm of St. Philip who saves him (fig. CH CH).⁹

The altar wall, as the highly charged site of Filippo Strozzi's tomb, is where the challenge starts and it is here that the interplay of the supposedly fixed or monumental with the momentary and the temporary is staged in quite unprecedented fashion (fig. 3). The antique triumphal scenography, which both acknowledges and imposes upon an extant gothic structure, may relate to Filippino Lippi's proposed design for the façade of Florence cathedral, a project strongly backed and influenced by Lorenzo de' Medici in 1490.¹⁰ As a funerary feature, it channels the extravagantly monumental height and expanse of the carved royal wall tombs of Naples, the city in which Filippo Strozzi had been in exile.¹¹ But none of this explains or makes it less disconcerting as a chapel mural. Like a temporary frontage, the extent of its illusory depth is hard to grasp and its upper ornaments are only superficially attached. Hanging tablets with large but abbreviated inscriptions fall free of the wall and are held up with some dynamic effort by pairs of angels (fig. 4). Beholders would have been accustomed to the convention of angelic go-betweens shouldering garlands or supporting coats of arms on tombs. But here the simultaneous action of holding up shields and pulling down on sashes, as though operating some celestial pulley system, brings to mind instead the strenuous operations of a staged performance. Everywhere drapery and sashes are in billowing movement.

Winternitz and others have emphasised the interplay of the Strozzi altar 'façade' with the temporary character of an *apparato* – especially the occasional architecture of festivals

⁹ The main damage to the blues has occurred where they were applied *a secco*, principally in the vault, though the elements described may also have lost some of their earlier nuance.

¹⁰ Those who submitted designs are recorded in a document of the 5 January 1491 published by Milanese (Vasari, *op. cit.* (note 8), 4, 304-9, at 306).

¹¹ See for example that of King Ladislao and his sister Queen Joanna II in S. Giovanni a Carbonara, Naples, c. 1414-1428. Friedman, *op. cit.* (note 6) 112, refers rather to the triumphal arched wall tombs like that of Niccolò Marcello, which Filippino could conceivably have seen in Venice.

and entries that Filippino witnessed in Rome and participated in Florence.¹² Such temporary *edifici*, like the so-called ‘Triumph of Peace’ constructed to passify Charles VIII of France on his entry into the city in 1494, were frequently inhabited by human figures who were less *dramatis personae* than animated ornaments. The *trionfo* that Filippino Lippi had designed for this unsought royal entry included boys dressed as gold-draped nymphs, as well as musicians and singers arrayed around gold and silver emblems.¹³ In the chapel painting, a significant distinction emerges between the angels in the upper reaches, who are fully alive, and the disconcerting allegories that appear as though in high relief teetering between sculpted ornaments and moving bodies that perform a musical accompaniment. They belong to the order of antiquity and to artifice but they also morph into sentient collaborators in the scheme who are intriguingly - even insufficiently - dead. Implied mobility of a different kind belongs equally to the stupendous, shadow-casting, ansate tablets (fig. 5) with their broad and complex ‘marble’ frames somewhere between Judeo-Christian Tablets of the Law and *all’antica* plaques. Their multiple pendant attachments are devised in the manner of grotesques with which Filippino had recently seen at their source in Rome. Unlike the daintily suspended conceits of the Domus Aurea however, these tablets do not hang lightly. Their massive fictional heft and excess of ornament seems to weigh against the possibility of their holding fast. Everywhere on this wall, fictions of permanence in the form of stone relief and gilded bronze are harnessed rather literally to motifs of mobility and change, whether in

¹² E. Winternitz, ‘Muses and Music in a Burial Chapel: An Interpretation of Filippino Lippi’s Window Wall in the Cappella Strozzi’, *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 11, 1963-5, 263-286 at 264; Nelson in, Nelson and Zambrano, *op. cit.* (note 3) 524-526; Helas, *op. cit.* (note 12).

Lebende Bilder in der italienischen Festkultur des 15. Jahrhunderts, Berlin 1999; P. Helas and G. Wolf, ‘The Shadow of the Wolf’, in eds. M.W. Cole and R. Zorach, *The Idol on the Age of Art: Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World*, Farnham and Burlington VT 2009, 146-150.

¹³ As first established by Eve Borsook, (E. Borsook, ‘Décor in Florence for the Entry of Charles VIII of France’, *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 10, 1961, 106-122, esp. 111-114).

the form of winged beings brandishing straps, quasi relief figures that sit proud of the wall or flying bands of ornament.

The ‘carved’ spandrel figures around the tomb, though in earthy grisaille seem no less touched by Filippino’s promethean spark than the frame-defying angels of the upper field. An instructive comparison, in the commemorative context of the altar wall, lies in the *Trinity* fresco with its associated altar in the nave of the same church, painted by Masaccio (fig. 6). This offers a significant precedent both for sepulchral architecture rendered entirely in fresco and for Filippino’s, similarly skeletal, memento mori painted as a *trompe l’oeil* around the tomb/altar.¹⁴ Yet the effect in the Strozzi chapel is entirely different: hyper-active, demonstrative genies hold up and point out skulls for contemplation, while trampling other bones under foot. Whereas in the nave fresco the inscribed address to the viewer is readily accessible in Italian verse: IO FU’ GIA QUEL CHE VOI SETE E QUEL CH’I’ SON VOI ANCO SARETE or ‘As you are, so was I. As I am so shall you be too’, the Strozzi inscription is in Latin and reads cryptically NI HANC DESPEXERIS VIVES ‘If you shall not have despised this, you will live’.¹⁵ What is the not-to-be-despised ‘this’? Winternitz and others make a strong case for ‘this’ as the gift of eternal life referred to, equally cryptically, in the inscription across the two roundels high near the top of the wall ‘SI SCIRES’ ‘DONUM DEI’ (‘if you knew’ ‘the gift of God’).¹⁶ These words are excerpted from Christ’s address

¹⁴ For this altar / tomb relation see also J.R. Sale, *The Strozzi Chapel by Filippino Lippi in Santa Maria Novella*, PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Ann-Arbor and London 1976, 307.

¹⁵ Winternitz, *op. cit.* (note 11), 269; Nelson in Nelson and Zambrano, *op.cit.* (note 3) 551.

¹⁶ Winternitz, *op. cit.* (note 11), 266; Friedman, ‘Burial Chapel’, p. 112; Nelson, in Nelson and Zambrano *op. cit.* (note 3) 551. My special thanks to Caroline Elam for disputing the sense of this text with me. Elam (personal communication and ‘Art and Cultural Identity in Lorenzo de’ Medici’s Florence’, in Francis Ames-Lewis ed., *Florence, Artistic Centers of the Italian Renaissance* series, Cambridge 2011, 226, notes 111 and 112) accords with Winternitz and Nelson (‘hanc aquam’) but also hypothesises that ‘hanc’ could refer to proper burial as essential to the hope of salvation, a theme addressed in a coeval book of sermons.

to the Samaritan woman at the well who had offered him water. But being, here, completely de-contextualised, viewers must work to recognise this unrepresented ‘gift’: all they are shown around the inscription on the tomb is death’s heads lined up in a charnel house (fig. CH CH). In a climate of Savonarolan fear about the unknowable imminence of damnation, might it be the certainty of death - like that signalled by Masaccio’s skeleton - that we should not despise since to do so leads to perdition?¹⁷ The beholder-reader is directly addressed by the inscription but without resolution, suspended between apparently opposing meanings. Whatever this inexplicit referent signals, as a crowning message above the tomb arch, flanked by personifications of Charity and Faith, it seem a less than obvious - or adequate - substitute for Hope.

The visual dynamic of the earlier *Trinity* fresco is one into an architectural depth that reveals and dramatises the source of salvation. The altar wall of the Strozzi chapel presents instead an obsessively layered and projecting surface that, despite the lofty window, defies any attempt to ‘see through’ it metaphorically. In order for the perspective of the thrusting columns flanking the aperture to fall in with a visitor’s optical experience, the beholder has to be standing well inside the chapel directly in front of the altar. But what is encountered from this vantage point, far from producing revelation, pushes it away, deferring understanding. The inscriptions themselves have an absent subject that veils their meaning to all but ‘initiates’ of the kind referred to in the hanging tablet to the left: SACRIS SUPERIS INITIATI CANUNT (‘the initiates sing/make music to the sacred [beings] above’).¹⁸ The inscriptions speak to those who are trained either to complete their half statements uttered from a remote historical moment, or to tune in to the silent music being played to the ‘sacris superis’. As Grave puts it, beholders are caught in the net of possible meanings and must ask themselves ‘whether they count among the initiates or not’.¹⁹

¹⁷ As proposed by Sale, *op. cit.* (note 14) 318, relating this to a longer memento mori tradition on tombs (319-329).

¹⁸ Adapted from Elam’s translation, *op. cit.* (note 14) 226.

¹⁹ Grave, ‘Grenzerdenkungen’, p. 241. Patricia Rubin also sees the text as a disruptive technique but relates this veiling to the challenge of a higher inner vision that alone can offer insight into ‘truth’ (‘Filippino Lippi, “pittore di vaghissima invenzione”’: Christian poetry and

Unlike the demonstrative Virgin Mary of Masaccio's *Trinity*, who gestures towards Christ crucified as the source of salvation (fig. 6), the Virgin and Child and titular saints that Lippi designed for the Strozzi window pay no attention as intercessors. Philip and John are too busy with the prophecies of their books to return the gaze of the beholder and the scripture that Philip opens towards devotees, while citing the biblical gifts of God to the favoured leaders of Israel, are referred not to those old testament figures but to an ambiguous 'him'. For example, 'He tied around him the girdle of glory' would have been legible to the officiating priest before the altar as a passage from Ecclesiasticus referring to the rich priestly garments bestowed on Aaron by God. But here one is led to ask whether the indirect object refers instead prophetically to Christ? to St. Philip himself? proleptically to his protégée, Filippo Strozzi buried below? or potentially to all three.²⁰ In the chapel St. John wears a bright blue girdle but the gorgeously-dressed 'ancient' priest issuing from the side wall (fig. 1) is a deeply ambivalent figure. Either Jewish or pagan he is apparently put to flight by the miracle of Drusiana's resurrection.

What temporal tensions or indeed what contradictions are these inscriptions trying to hold in place? Answering this requires looking closer at non-verbal cues. Though they form a completely different order of sign, a similar question could be asked of the abundant and varied ornaments of the chapel. How do the many girdles, straps, hanging ribbons and winged figures operate in relation to the beholder and what tensions do they materialise or seek to bind together? It helps to start with the contradictions. One of the most apparent for a funerary chapel would inevitably be that between Christian and pagan 'triumph'. In earlier iconography, Christian victory would presuppose the demise of the other, yet here they are both quite strenuously in play. At the time the chapel was decorated, Lorenzo de' Medici, Florence's *de facto* ruler was dead and his family in exile, but he had set the agenda in Florence with his audacious spectacle of the pagan Triumph of the Roman consul Aemilius Paullus, a magnificent procession of fifteen floats showing the spoils of conquest, that he

the significance of style in late fifteenth-century altarpiece design,' in eds. Michel Hochmann, Julian Kliemann, Jérémie Koering, and Philippe Morel, *Programme et invention dans l'art de la Renaissance*, Rome and Paris 2008, 227-46, esp. 231)

²⁰ Friedman ('Burial Chapel', p. 115) plumps emphatically for the 'him' as Filippo Strozzi.

sponsored for the civic - and sacred - Feast of the St John the Baptist in 1491.²¹ The new triumph, ‘cho moltissimi ornamenti’, was partially sanctioned by the old ‘trionfi’ or mobile tableau, while offering an image of victory and endless material riches that temporarily transformed the city into ancient Rome. That the consul was intended to reference Lorenzo himself was hard for Florentines to miss and the still fresh memory of this event would have helped further to politicise the aesthetic of the Strozzi chapel for contemporaries. A wider contemporary fascination with the ornaments of Roman triumph is witnessed in the late-fifteenth century engraving representing a more pastoral *Triumph of Aemilius Paullus* (fig. 7) with its dynamic of ornamental staffs, trophies and wings in movement.²² The repertoire of improvised hangings, pendant tablets and casually strewn piles of armour, as well as the ephemeral architecture that characterise the print all find a place in the Strozzi funerary chapel with its copious material riches in movement and its orchestrated crowds of peoples encompassed under the Roman empire. It is not too fanciful to see in Filippino’s fabulously-clothed figures the impact on his more substantial invention of the kinds of fancy figures – nymphs, soldiers, warrior heroines, complete with suspended or supported shields - that had long been popularised in the ornament of Florentine everyday objects, some of which revived ancient rites in a festive present.²³

²¹ Helas, *op. cit.* (note 11), p. 36 and QXXXIV, p. 200 for the 1491 Triumph with fifteen carts staged by the Compagnia della Stella, as recorded by Tribaldo de’ Rossi (ed. 1787, 270-271).

²² A.M. Hind, *Early Italian Engraving. A Critical Catalogue*, 1, 144-5, B.III.17.1 https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=761496&partId=1&searchText=aemilius&from=ad&fromDate=1400&to=ad&toDate=1500&page=1. The relationship to the Strozzi chapel frescoes is unclear, but the presiding emblematic bird (a phoenix in the print) and circular inscription tablet are specific to both. See also P. Barocchi ed, *Il giardino di San Marco. Maestri e compagni del giovane Michelangelo*, Milan 1992, 28 and note 92.

²³ Hind, *ibid.* I, 85-96, esp. A.IV.5 at 89. See also https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=757012&partId=1&searchText=baccio+baldini+otto&page=1

The side walls at S. Maria Novella are copiously filled by peoples and races of the ancient worlds - Romans, Scythians, Phrygians, Ephesians or Asians (figs. 8 and CH CH). All are elaborately wrapped and knotted with contrasting layers of clothing, feathers, leather and metal. While occasionally the dress derives from antique reliefs, the cosmopolitan combinations of turbaned, swathed and layered 'character'-figures and imaginatively-conceived ornament also tie Filippino's devout pagans to an earlier Florentine print 'source', namely the *Sibyls* and *Prophets* engravings whose elaborate ornamental invention has often been attributed to Baccio Baldini (c. 1470-1480, fig. 9).²⁴ But in the former the tension is of another kind. Whereas the inscriptions of the 'Baldini' Sibyls speak directly of the incarnation through the Virgin Mary and the redemption to come, in the Strozzi chapel, the tablet inscriptions seem to place ancient deities and the Christian God on a par and, at best, in a place and time when Christian victory looks far from assured. In the Strozzi chapel the first disciples seem fully embedded in the ancient world of idolatry, magic and ritual mysteries. In visual terms, they struggle to combat the manifest and lingering power of the pagan gods and their votaries.

This, we should remember, stands in starkest possible contrast to the depiction of the Apostles' power over death in the directly equivalent east end chapel of the basilica of S. Croce in Florence, which was likewise dedicated to St. John the Evangelist. Whereas in the solemn and unambiguous economy of Giotto's cycle for the Bardi chapel, the saint is adored by the widows of Ephesus, Filippino enacts a curious reversal of the expected decorum. John's gesture of command is diminished by the visual noise of everything that surrounds it (fig. 8). Indeed we understand the significance of the Raising of Drusiana far better from its effects than we do from the action of the saint. A palpable visual excitement shudders through the groups that witness the resurrection, and as in Donatello's early stucco roundel of the scene at San Lorenzo, the bearers abandon the bier in shock. The sacerdotal party is so driven by the miracle that they flee out of the visual frame, temporarily drawing the viewer along with them. Meanwhile, among the throng of John's followers, a little child is far more

²⁴ Hind, *ibid.* C.II. 1-12, 163-168 for the Sibyls; J.A. Levenson in J.A Levenson, K. Oberhuber and J.L. Sheehan, *Early Italian Engravings from the National Gallery of Art*, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC 1973, 16, 18, 22-38.

exercised by the puppy pulling at his girdle than by the miracle and, in his fearful distraction, pulls our attention in the other direction.²⁵ Perhaps for reasons of decorum, the beautiful Drusiana on the bier is shown as chastely covered in flowing garments and not ‘unbound’ at St. John’s order, as the Golden Legend’s version of the apocryphal episode recounts.

In the staging of exorcism on the opposite wall, St. Philip’s figure is given greater prominence than John’s (fig. 10). But, unusually for the spiritual protagonist, his face is partially concealed as he commands the monster from under the statue of Mars. The High Priest, the expiring son and his marvellously dressed companions are, by contrast, fully on display. Most tellingly, however, the still living figure of Mars continues to hold the centre of the composition, secure on his pedestal, and shows no sign of succumbing to the command. Mars’ lance may be broken, but the cult site remains impressively intact. On its magnificent storeys the full panoply of military trophies, tributes and treasure continue to do honour to the god, *and* ornament the chapel. The exalted, semi-clad female victories on the entablature carry on exercising their summary punishment and, most disturbingly of all, the votive lamps which, on close inspection are evidently hanging from the frieze, look as though they are lit both within the chapel and before the pagan shrine.²⁶ In relation to this visually commanding scene, the mysteries of the imprinted Holy Face of Christ (Veronica) and the liturgical instruments of Christian sacrament in the monochrome frieze directly above appear fictive and distant.²⁷ The sanctuary lamps are doing a disturbing double service as they hold together, but in tension, uneven and contradictory claims to truth as well as orders of image. Similarly the elegant niche of the Virgin *sub gratia* in the stained glass window, while it echoes the shrine of Mars, hardly offers it any serious competition. It is only at the later moment of the saint’s martyrdom shown in the lunette above, that the pagan order seems to

²⁵ Vasari (*op. cit.* (note 8), 3, 477) was similarly diverted by this group, and claimed, rather rhetorically than accurately, that the child’s fear of the dog seems to mirror that of its mother at the Raising.

²⁶ See also for this illusionistic ambiguity Nelson in Nelson and Zambrano, *op. cit.* (note 3) 524.

²⁷ For the *vera icon* here as commenting on the nature of depiction, Helas and Wolf, *op. cit.* (note 11) 155.

be lapsing into entropy among the marble ruins (fig. 11). Even here though, the now aged saint has yet to triumph. Instead, bound to the cross, Philip is permanently pitching forward towards the transept in a moment of tense irresolution. This sense of the ‘not yet’ is one of a number of troubling deferrals that I take as key to the visual and thematic claims of the chapel.

Vasari offered a lengthy and insightful ekphrasis of the scene of Philip’s martyrdom as a narrative *invenzione* of the highest order and, as the saint teeters on the brink of his death, the contemporary the viewer’s attention is still now absorbed by what amounts to an extended investigation of the process of Crucifixion, its physical labour and mechanics.²⁸ The instructions might read something like: first take a pick and dig a hole, then bind the victim to your crudely hewn cross (for economy you can use the same straps that hold the cross bar in place), now pull from one direction with ropes, push from another with ladders and lever the stake into the hole using whatever comes to hand as a fulcrum. Michael Cole has illuminated this human machinery and the play of its forces in art as characteristic of the later fifteenth-century Florentine *avant-garde* that encompassed both Antonio del Pollaiuolo and Leonardo da Vinci.²⁹ My concern here is with the kind of psychological tension and attention that these mechanics excite and the effect of this on the decorum of the religious image. So visually fascinating is this process and so unresolved and suspended is the moment depicted, that far from looking beyond to Philip’s heavenly reward, the spectator at best anticipates the jarring thud, at worst finds themselves willing the cross to go into the hole.³⁰ At one level Filippino seems to be drawing here, as elsewhere in the chapel, on the inspiration of earlier fresco cycles in the Dominican church and convent. The pictorial drama of pulling at hawsers harks back, surely, to the actions of the disciples holding hard the sail of the *Navicella* against the storm on the sea of Galilee, depicted by Andrea di Bonaiuto in the conventual Chapter House

²⁸ Vasari, *op. cit.* (note 8) 3, 473.

²⁹ M.W. Cole, *Leonardo, Michelangelo and the Art of the Figure*, New Haven and London 2015, 88-133.

³⁰ Friedman (*op. cit.* note 6, 124) stresses rather the viewer’s anticipated recognition of the saint’s suffering through this prior moment.

of the 1360s. But the meaning attaching to the gesture has been turned on its head; the protagonists are now crude and faithless mechanicals doing the bidding of a cruel regime whose banner is flying against the sky.

A similar pictorial delight in the laborious and the provisional is apparent on the opposite lunette too, though the setting is more cultivated - a courtyard presided over by the emperor Domitian, and the artificer's idol, Mercury (fig. 12). Here the instruments turned against St. John are wrought in the refined metal of an age of bronze and steel, but the semi-clad torturers likewise go on doing their effortful work, stoking the fire and shielding themselves from the intense heat as if they were merely assisting in an armourer's forge. Far, then, from opening the upper reaches of the chapel to transcendence, the lunette frescoes present only further variations of material display and spectatorship and add to this mix the intensified labour of the servile and unredeemed. That such an emphasis on labour stands for more than just a dynamic visual effect is made clear by the prominence given to the post-lapsarian figure of Adam clutching his adse, and his son Cain, above the lunettes in the adjacent vault (fig. 13).

Friedman's alignment of the choice of Adam and Jacob as Patriarchs in the vault with Filippo Strozzi's own identification with their labours in exile is persuasive.³¹ But to try to make sense of its broader implications we need to look beyond the patron, and even the internal logic of representation, to the spatial and temporal relations in which the chapel as a funerary site is inserted. Ito Takuma has pointed out that Filippo Strozzi's niche tomb, which is unusually sited 'humbly' at floor level, echoes that of the Trecento prior Alessio Strozzi in relation to the great north transept chapel of Strozzi's ancestors at S. Maria Novella.³² In this relation, the unusual importance of the forefather Adam in the later vault resonates with the salvational scheme of the former, since Adam's burial place was thought to be beneath the cross. Yet just as significant is that, far from emphasising the vision of last things as John the Evangelist 'revealed' them or as is represented by Nardo di Cione, the new chapel programme actually reverses that schema. The Christ child is brought down close to the floor

³¹ Friedman, *Ibid.* 116.

³² I. Takuma, 'A Private Chapel as Burial Space: Filippo Strozzi with Filippino Lippi and Benedetto da Maiano in Santa Maria Novella, Florence', *Bulletin of Death and Life Studies*, 7, 2011, 215-242 esp. 229-234.

in the carved roundel to where Filippo Strozzi is buried in his up-market catacomb, while the fallen Adam is elevated. Of course the salvific Crucifix would have been present as a liturgical object on the altar but in the cycle it is marginalised within the relief frieze. Filippino himself seems, indeed, to recognise a potential problem in this respect when he adjusted the gilded sign of the cross upwards. This gives it better prominence above the cosmic disturbance in the clouds of the *Raising of Drusiana*, which looks forward to Constantine's future vision of the Cross (fig. 8).³³ Christ's revelation from behind the clouds in the *Exorcism* nonetheless is reduced to a tiny and distant place far above the action (fig. 10). Salvation then, but certainly 'not yet'.

We are very familiar with the kind of complex temporal imbrications that characterised the immediate precedents for funerary chapel programmes in Florence. The adjacent Tornabuoni Cappella Maggiore and the chapel, likewise commissioned to Domenico Ghirlandaio, for Francesco Sassetti at S. Trinita have long been seen as offering parallels for the Strozzi chapel's audacious *all'antica* conception and their pliancy to the needs of a paterfamilias eager to display his wealth and humanist credentials. At S. Maria Novella, and still more explicitly under the Sibyls of the Sassetti chapel, the spirit of prophecy and fulfilment are leitmotifs closely tied to the dynastic interests of Florentine elites. Filippo Strozzi would have seen how inscription, ancient prophecy and the riches of the Augustine Golden Age are harnessed to Christ's Nativity in the Sassetti altar wall and thence brought purposefully to bear on the late fifteenth-century present via the inaugural date of the chapel (Christmas 1485, prominently inscribed, for the Sassetti, Christmas 1490 for the Tornabuoni). This collapsing of time via the liturgy allows fathers, sons and daughters directly to witness or partake in scenes of rebirth and renewal. The *mise-en-scène* and prophetic framework of the Tornabuoni chapel certainly leave no room for doubt over the claim that Florence has become God's chosen city, blessed with prosperity and peace.³⁴ In Filippo Strozzi's chapel

³³ The connection is drawn by the inscription on the book below the cross: IN HOC SIGNO VINCES.

³⁴ P.L. Rubin, 'Domenico Ghirlandaio and the Meaning of History in Fifteenth Century Florence', in ed. W. Prinz and M. Seidel, *Domenico Ghirlandaio 1449-1494*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Firenze, 16-18 ottobre 1994, Florence 1996, 97-108.

the temporality of the decorative scheme is completely different. As Friedman has argued, the peregrinations and reversals of fortune that exiled and then elevated Filippo Strozzi are not visible but are indirectly mythologised in the life of St. John.³⁵ One could add that it is this pagan, conflicted and far from peaceful world that pushes itself on to our attention.

Jacob, seated on clouds, presides above the entrance where he declares that ‘this is the house of God and this is the gate of heaven’ (Genesis 28 verse 17, referring to his dream of the Ladder) but, looking around the vault, the message is hardly borne out. We find ourselves not in the realm of the heavenly nor even of christianised prophecy but under the far more ambiguous and exclusive signs of the crescent moons of the Strozzi and the repeated motif of the ancient mask. Whereas the sibyls of the Carafa chapel catch the gaze of the viewer directly and signal skyward, (fig.) Abraham gestures towards his sacrificial altar and wields the instrument with which he would have killed his son. Adam, the only figure who turns heavenward, casts his troubled gaze - as of a Pothos or a Laocöon - straight into the eyes of the female serpent from whom he tries to shelter his terrified, and later murderous, child (fig. 13). We can see the rays of grace, but rather than pointing forward to the era *sub gratia*, these patriarchs seem temporally suspended, trapped in stories of betrayal or reversal that play out into subsequent generations. Thus Noah, though he has gained dry land, is semi-clad, quite possibly half drunk and forced to read ahead for a hope deferred. Compare this, for a moment, to the threshold messages of the mortuary chapel of the Cardinal of Portugal at San Miniato al Monte of the 1460s and early 70s. Here the altarpiece shows the way with its fictions of revelation, window-like prospect and its inscription from St. Mark’s gospel, ‘To you is given to know the Kingdom of Heaven’.³⁶ The saints acknowledge the presence of the visitor, the deceased receives a beatific vision and the tiled vault fulfils the promise, brilliantly coloured and radiant with the revelation of the Holy Spirit.

Of course the Cardinal of Portugal’s chapel, which was indulged and served the cult of two locally-venerated saints, also encodes its messages with prophetic figures and

³⁵ Friedman, *op. cit.* (note 6), 115-116.

³⁶ VOBIS DATUM EST NOSCERE MYSTERIUM REGNI DEI. See A. Wright, *The Pollaiuolo Brothers: The Arts of Florence and Rome*, New Haven and London 2005, p. 196 and 192-200 for the altarpiece within the chapel and church.

quasi-mystic marbles. This too was a space of privileged access, but it was one that allowed the pilgrim's to be pulled up in the Cardinal's train. In the Golden Legend, St John the Evangelist is declared to be gifted with the revelation of profound secrets 'such as the divinity of the Word and the end of the world', but where is the offer of revelation in the Strozzi chapel or the hope of joining the elect? The theme of initiation is bookish and obscure. No more exquisite revelations through the wall here, but meaning that is masked and inscriptions that make no sense at first reading: GLOVIS ('si volge' in reverse) inscribed to the left of the window is a message of turning or return that is itself turned around and only reveals itself to those equipped to recognise and enjoy that reversal, most of all perhaps the returned Strozzi.³⁷

The way to the divine is apparently littered with images that are also obstacles, with idols that fascinate and betray into idolatry again. Reminiscent of the way, elsewhere, Filippino Lippi figures the Golden Calf as an active Egyptian deity, Apis, so here the statue of Mars is clearly animate and, what is more, potent.³⁸ The god of war does not seem to be upon the point of submission, nor the whole edifice about to crumble.³⁹ At one level this begs to be seen as an insufficiently apologetic celebration of what Filippino and the Florentine elite saw in antiquity – a manifestation of a constantly productive historical and visual imaginary that served present needs. One of the painter's 'invenzioni peregrine' at its most assertive, the temple of Mars (fig. 10) is imagined as a structure worthy to grace the piazza in

³⁷ For later Medici use of the riddling 'GLOVIS' see J. Cox-Rearick, *Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art: Pontormo, Leo X and the Two Cosimos*. Princeton 1984, 29 and note 55.

³⁸ Helas and Wolf, *op. cit.* (note 12), 145-146. Helas, *op. cit.* (note 12), 188-189 asks whether the idol, with the exorcism of the demon, has turned into a man or whether the living god requires no demon to be animate. See also G. Wolf, 'Toccar con gli occhi: Zu Konstellationen und Konzeptionen von Bild und Wirklichkeit im Späten Quattrocento', *Künstlerischer Austausch: Artistic Exchange*, II, 437-452, 440-444 for the Strozzi chapel, the Mars statue and the *vera icon*.

³⁹ Grave, 'Grenzerkundungen', 242-3 also emphasises that there is no hint at all of the shrine's demise.

Florence, but even in a city which venerated the Roman ‘temple of Mars’ as its Baptistery, its monumentality is questionable in a chapel setting, since it offers an alternative centre to the altar wall and one that is far more visible from the crossing than the real altar.⁴⁰ At another level, I discern a more programmatic engagement with ambiguity, ambivalence and a temporality of deferral and suspense.

Might this be in any way accounted for within the larger logic of the chapel’s placement? Did the chapel intentionally defer to the positive message of the high altar space? This seems most unlikely given its relationship of competition with, even upstaging of, the mural scheme commissioned by the Tornabuoni family. More obviously, it does defer to the old Strozzi chapel where, in the mid Trecento, the general Resurrection at the end of time had been depicted. The inscription above the window in Filippo’s chapel, as Friedman noted, refers to the familiar passage from the Nicene Creed: ‘Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum’ (‘and I look for the Resurrection of the dead’).⁴¹ So far so uncontroversial. But as Sale and others point out, *Expecto* appears here too as Filippo Strozzi’s motto.⁴² It implies waiting in hope (historically, for Strozzi, for his return from exile) but also the need to ‘look ahead for’. In the old transept chapel there *is* revelation, and advance warning for viewers. In the late-fifteenth-century schema there is only a looking after signs. The verbal ones are abbreviated and, as indicated, deliberately ambiguous: is ‘hanc’ above the tomb the water of life, or death? In the tablet inscription D[IIS] M[ANIBUS] / QUONDAM NUNC/ D[EO] O[TMO] M[AXIMO] CANIMUS (‘once to the gods of the Manes now to the great God we make music’) is the positioning of ‘quondam nunc’ on the same line to be read as a radical opposition, or as aligning Christian rites with the religion of the pagan world. Most striking are the completely contrasting readings that have been hazarded of the abbreviated inscriptions on the temple of Mars (fig. 10): ‘EX H TRI ‘ and ‘D M VICT’. For Sale and others these expand to EX H[OC] TRI[UMPHO] D[EO] M[AXIM]O VIC[TORIA] while Müller Profumo proposed EX[EMPLU] H[ERMETI] TRI[SMEGISTI]; D[IVO] M[ARTI]

⁴⁰ Alexander Nagel (‘Image Magic’) argues nonetheless that, as a painting, the image is able to avoid reproducing the idolatry pictured in it.

⁴¹ Friedman, ‘Burial Chapel’, p. 112.

⁴² Sale, *op. cit.* (note 14), 83-99 for Strozzi *imprese*.

VICT[ORI].⁴³ The second reading is eccentric, but the triumph of the god Mars is certainly implied by the inscriptions' placement; that of the Christian God is brought to the scene by viewers who witness the miracle. The inscription and the image together therefore permit of both readings. While this is clearly not a visual advocacy of image magic - the risk that statues animated by heavenly powers could attract demons is, after all, revealed by the exorcism. But Filippino's art stages ambiguity in a way that leaves the reader-viewer hanging.⁴⁴

De Marchi has argued that, despite the avowed rhetoric of the exorcism of evil power in the programme of the chapel, the dominant key of the frescoes is something more slippery, namely that of eternal metamorphosis. Certainly, if the Medici family's device of the ring with the motto SEMPER, 'always', offered a message of universality and endurance that sought to hold on to the cosmic centre, the Strozzi family image of the crescent moon, which appears repeatedly in the chapel, is literally open-ended and associated with continuous planetary change. But there is, I would argue, an overt invitation in the frescoes to read against the grain of Christian last things in a slightly different way. The Strozzi chapel imagery continues to place a chapel visitor in a state of suspense not just between different eras, the once and the now, antiquity and Strozzi family history, but also between different and unresolved possibilities for interpretation and even different systems of belief. The chain of signifiers opened up by the interplay of texts and images, and their presentation to the viewer leads to a 'transcendent signifier', that is remarkably elusive. There is no way to see

⁴³ Sale, *op. cit.* (note 14), 236. L. Müller Profumo, 'Per la Fortuna di Ermete Trismegisto nel Rinascimento. Filippino Lippi e la Cappella Strozzi', *Athenaeum*, 58, 1980, 429-453.

⁴⁴ Müller Profumo, *ibid.* argues that the painting opposes Ficino's views on image magic, whereas Nelson in Nelson and Zambrano (*op. cit.* at note 3, 548) takes the view that the painting 'is framed in line with Ficino's theories'. Alexander Nagel ('Image Magic', *Cabinet*, 26, Summer 2007) emphasises that these very theories were unstable noting the 'acute ambivalence of Ficino's thinking on the question'. For the tensions in Ficino's writing on the sources of occult power in earthly forms (and especially for his heavy reliance on Thomas Aquinas) see Brian Copenhaver, 'Scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic in the *De Vita* of Marsilio Ficino', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 37, 1984, 523-554, esp. 545-6 and 549-554.

salvation or to be sure of triumph over death standing before the bones of the founder Filippo Strozzi, lying in his perpetual waiting room.

I would like to suggest, albeit speculatively and in conclusion, that one insistent ornamental motif of the chapel, the girdle, ribbon or strap, which is a favourite device of the mature Filippino Lippi, is used to sustain his figures and keep his viewers in a kind of fascinated suspense. It catches and holds the gaze with a pleasing flourish (a rhetorical *floscula*), weaving through and holding together relief ornaments or tying together the disparate and pendant elements of a candelabrum or tablet. The sash also contributes to the adornment and articulation of the body, and, as Vasari noted, it binds the ‘garments of antiquity’.⁴⁵ Finally, Filippino uses the bond as a sign of oppressive power - of the Romans over the early Christians, and of the power of pagan cult to bind and poison. His linking and fluttering bands are at one moment beguiling and free ornaments, at another the bonds of the earthly and supernatural powers. Wherever we look we find them holding up, hanging down or holding together. These strains and movements exist in the marginal ornament as strongly as they do in the narrative and, as such, they provide a kind of commentary on what is shown, as well as suggesting its quality as ‘staged’. They contribute, too, to a pervasive sense of precariousness that is only reinforced by the way that some of the more vulnerable figures clasp, cling, or drop down - like the dead weight of the high priest’s son (fig. 10) or the frightened offspring of Adam (fig. 13).

Just why this should be the case is far from easy to answer. The binding and linking functions performed by grotesque pendant inventions and friezes evidently fascinated the painter, whose pen drawings after antique ornament show his facility for their curling contours and scrolling forms. The flourish of bands and ribbons, or the visual intrigue of knotting, is a signature feature of several other late works by Filippino, including the allegorical panel of the muse *Erato* where active ties divert and bind the gaze of the viewer.⁴⁶ Equally, as has often been remarked, an increasing premium was attached to invention and

⁴⁵ Vasari, *op.cit.* (note 8) . For Lippi’s use of ornament as equivalent to the ornate style in Ciceronian Latin with its love of lexical richness, rarity and original combinations see Nelson and Zambrano, *op. cit.* (note 3). 399; Rubin, *op. cit.* (note 17).

⁴⁶ For the *Erato*, Nelson in Nelson and Zambrano, *op. cit.* (note 3) 439-440 and 602, cat. no. 60.

ornateness by many later fifteenth-century patrons as much as by the painters and sculptors they employed. But that the chapel's strains and occlusions may be in some sense symptomatic of larger social, religious and political conflicts of the 1490s, and even of the dangers inherent in humanist enquiry into the ancient origins of religion, must be recognised too. These frescoes engage a desire, and assume a willingness, on the part of the viewer to be actively involved in the production of meaning. In the process, they intimate that human history and divine will is not fully accessible. In comparison with the adjacent saintly narratives in the Tornabuoni chapel, with their crowds of contemporary witnesses to sacred history, the Strozzi chapel murals could have left fifteenth-century viewers with less ground for confidence in either present good or future prosperity. It is true that the Strozzi probably saw themselves as privileged guardians of a more obscure wisdom and, even in a Dominican setting, were ready to defy the dire predictions coming from Savonarolan Observance against the wealthy elite who flaunted their entitlement to sacred space. But the paintings were produced in the course of a decade of enormous political upheaval characterised by conflicting claims as to the civic and spiritual destiny of Florence, a 'late' republic that was internally riven and externally threatened. Long before the invasion of Italy by Charles VIII and the subsequent ousting of the Medici in 1494, work on the chapel had had to be suspended so that Filippino could be bound in the service of a Roman cardinal by Lorenzo de' Medici, who by then saw his family's political future attached to the papacy.⁴⁷ Filippo Strozzi had to wait - meekly or not - years for this extraordinary work to be restarted and, in the event, he was buried long before its conclusion. What such a scheme surely intimated is that outcomes in this world, as in the next, are far from certain.

⁴⁷ Filippino was 'sent' by Lorenzo to paint the chapel of Cardinal Oliviero Carafa in Rome, in all likelihood to ensure the latter's support for his own son's premature raising to the cardinalate. See C. Elam, 'Art and Diplomacy in Renaissance Florence', *Journal of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts*, 136, 1988, 813-826 at 819-820; Nelson in Nelson and Zambrano, *op. cit.* (note 3) 532-2 and 534.