

## A Florentine fresco masterpiece rejuvenated

by Nora Hamerman

---

### **Anatomy of a Restoration: The Brancacci Chapel**

by Ken Shulman

Walker and Company, New York, 1991

246 pages, hardbound, \$29.95.

---

The Brancacci Chapel in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence was decorated in the mid-1420s at the dawn of Christian civic humanism by two great artists, Masolino and Masaccio. Because of this work in particular, Leonardo da Vinci later credited Masaccio with having singlehandedly revived classical painting. In this delightful book, the ten-year history of the cleaning and conservation of the chapel is recounted by Ken Shulman, an American freelance writer who lives in Florence.

The chapel decoration, commissioned by the Florentine merchant Felice Brancacci, was left unfinished and may have been subjected to vandalism in the turbulent events surrounding the Medici rise to power in the 1430s. It then was finished a half-century later by Filippino Lippi, whose artistic lineage traced back to the same circles as the original masters two generations earlier. Lippi attempted to accommodate his own, quite different, style to blend into a cycle of paintings which had become the major "school" where Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, and others studied. Lippi's success in this pious mission is vindicated by the fact that after the recent cleaning, it became apparent that he is the author of most of the figures in one of the scenes, including those previously believed to have been painted by Masaccio.

The paintings have survived almost miraculously. After

1450, a rededication of the chapel entailed removing the original high altar. In the 1690s, the Renaissance cycle was nearly destroyed to make way for a more up-to-date decoration, but as a compromise, the entire upper part was radically renovated as a baroque chapel, and the original Masolino/Masaccio frescos in the vault disappeared without a trace, except for a pair of *sinopie* (underdrawings) which were discovered in the recent cleaning process. Then the church burned down! Although the chapel suffered only smoke damage then, over the centuries, there were numerous "restorations," which had a long-term deleterious effect, as they coated the pictures with *beverone*, an organic compound used to impart a short-term luster to darkened frescos.

Students of the Italian Renaissance view this chapel, and the genius Masaccio, who died at the age of only 27, with reverence. Masaccio's work, and to a lesser extent that of his older partner Masolino, expressed eloquently in their cycle of stories about man's fall from grace and the life of Peter, the revolutionary ideas about human society and human potential which were to redeem Europe from the dark age after the Black Death. Insofar as Florence is the cradle of the Italian nation, they are great patriotic paintings; insofar as the Council of Florence which took place here in 1439 unified Christendom—including the forerunners of today's Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox—they are great monuments for all Christians. As expressions of the idea of the sacredness of every individual human life, they are universal.

This reviewer has been privileged to know a few of Italy's dedicated fresco restorers, particularly around the Central Institute of Restoration in Rome, and also had the chance to study with Eve Borsook, the American art historian who pioneered the scholarly study of the art of fresco, and who obliged her students to physically replicate the steps of mak-

ing (in our case a small-scale version) a mural painting in this manner. Fresco, as Shulman explains, is the technique of painting on wet plaster such that the color chemically binds with the wall, to become relatively indestructible. As ancient as the Etruscans, this mural technique was revived and raised to its highest glories in the 14th to 16th centuries by their descendants in Tuscany, the region of north-central Italy where Florence is located. As one who has climbed the scaffolds and confronted up close the bewildering problems of rescuing these old masterpieces, assaulted by moisture, vibrations, chemicals in the air, and other multifarious enemies, I have become inspired by the skill, humility, and patience of the teams of artists, scientists, and historians who make this their lifework. Ken Shulman obviously became similarly infected.

### Why restore?

Shulman's is a popular book which re-creates the historical background and technical and artistic aspects of the work, as well as some of the vicissitudes in the 20th-century scholarly history. As he reports, art critics like the late, brilliant Roberto Longhi tried to give fresh solutions to the old problems of distinguishing Masolino and Masaccio's work, by guessing at the chronological sequence of the two painters' respective work in the chapel—including several major, no longer surviving scenes of the life of St. Peter, the apostle to whom the chapel was dedicated.

*Anatomy of a Restoration* offers itself as a kind of layman's handbook for the whole field of fresco restoration. He reports that no restoration is undertaken simply because scholars desire to see the work in its original colors, or are curious about what's underneath, but only when the work is in serious danger of further deterioration. Thus, the Brancacci Chapel restoration, was dreamed of by Ugo Procacci, the dean of Florentine Renaissance scholars, back in 1932 when he led a project that uncovered some long-hidden fragments of the fresco decoration. But it did not begin until the 1980s when it became clear that the world-famous murals were at risk.

Second, modern techniques of restoration, though superior in so many ways to those of the past, can also be more dangerous than the old "unscientific" techniques. Only the long-term health of the art works can really decide what is right. Indeed, the revolution in restoration in the recent decades has been in diagnostics, figuring out exactly what makes paintings decay and hence how to stop it. This science is still in infancy.

Ornella Casazza, who directed the Brancacci restoration, cautions that the actual "original colors" can never be restored, since artworks are not sealed into time capsules, but do undergo fading and exposure to the elements over time. Maurizio Seracini, an engineer who carried out the ultraviolet fluorescence reflectography in the Brancacci Chapel, stressed to Shulman, "no matter how sophisticated our tech-

niques become, it will never be possible to dictate a series of systematic rules which can be applied indiscriminately to all works of art. . . . Restoration is and will remain a manual art, dependent above all on the hands of the restorer. And the degree of subjectivity in his work will increase along with the degree of difficulty of the particular restoration."

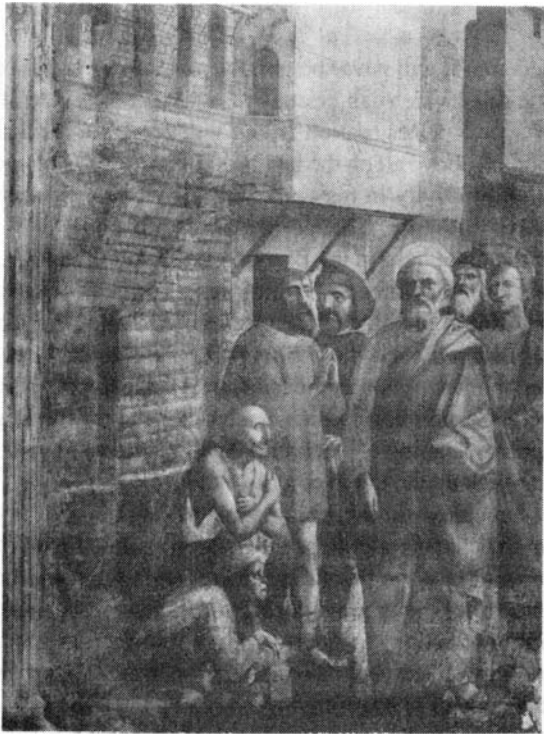
After the first phase of the Brancacci restoration in 1981, the project director Umberto Baldini was transferred to head the Rome Central Institute of Restoration, and a turf dispute broke out that removed the funding to continue the work. Only after an interruption in the Brancacci Chapel work, did the Olivetti Corporation (which is also, I believe, funding the remaining cleaning of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*) move in to pick up the tab to complete the work.

The plan called for detaching some of the 18th-century frescos in the chapel vault to see if traces might be found of the Masaccio/Masolino paintings; and removing parts of the altar erected after the original decoration. These aspects had a scientific motivation, to discover more information about the chronology of Masaccio's collaboration in the project, as well as the hope of uncovering lost works by the two artists. At times, a lengthy laboratory analysis of an unknown substance on the wall had to be undertaken to determine whether it was original and if not, how precisely to remove it.

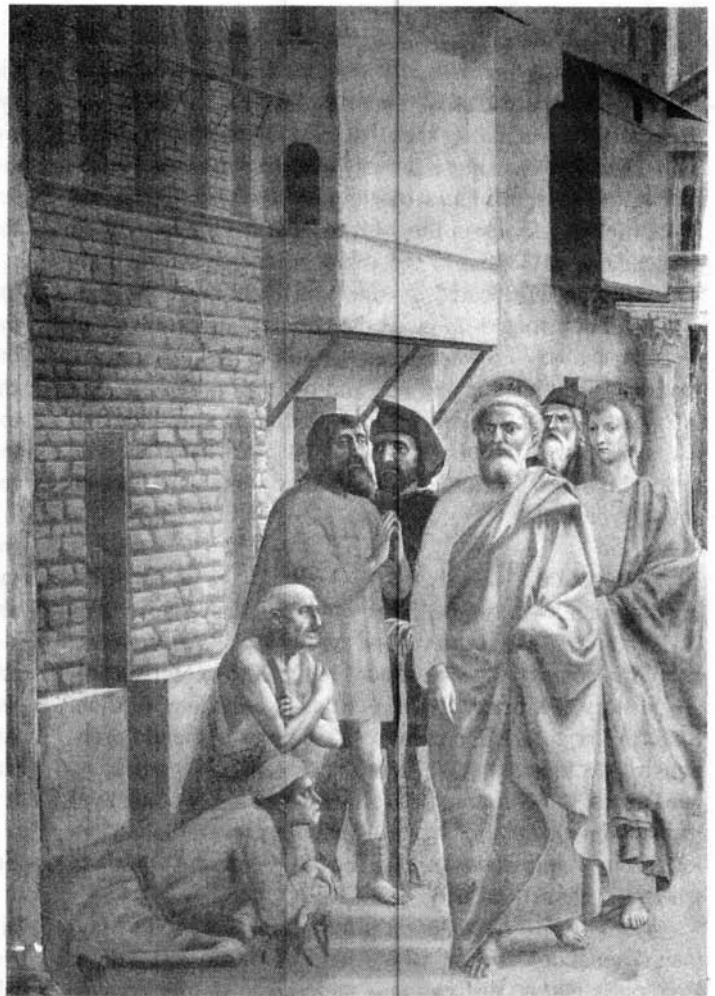
### Scientific advances

Especially absorbing are the chapters which address the discoveries made in Florence after the catastrophe of the November 1966 flood. I vividly recall visiting the restoration laboratories at Florence's Fortezza del Basso the following summer, 1967, and again in 1968. Numerous paintings which had been affected by the flood waters were still being detached from their original supports (panel or canvas, in some cases detached frescos) and lay in large cabinet drawers where they were sprayed with disinfectants to prevent fungus from developing until there would be the time to reline them with new supports. It was like a hospital with a triage system. As soon as one "patient" was stabilized so that it would no longer deteriorate further, the "doctors" went on to the next.

In the chapter entitled "Enzo Ferroni and Dino Dini," author Shulman gives a dramatic account of the discovery by Dr. Ferroni, chairman of the department of physical chemistry at the University of Florence, and the restorer Dino Dini, in solving the tragic problem of the rapid deterioration of the frescos of Taddeo Gaddi, one of Giotto's leading pupils, in the refectory of Santa Croce, after the 1966 flood. Santa Croce, in effect the "national church" of Italy (where many of its heroes are buried), is the huge Franciscan church lying in the lowest area of Florence near the Arno River, where the devastating flood waters rose highest in 1966. As the waters receded, they left exposed the Gaddi fresco, with saline crystals which were rapidly causing the color to fall off the wall. This masterpiece was literally vanishing before the anxious eyes of the experts.



Right, *St. Peter Healing with His Shadow*, fresco by Masaccio, c. 1427, Brancacci Chapel, S. Maria del Carmine, Florence, after cleaning and conservation. Note the three levels of healing: from the prone beggar, to his kneeling counterpart, to the erect citizens, one of whom walks with a cane. The piazza and church facade behind the figures were recently rediscovered. Above, the same fresco, before cleaning and removal of altar frontal which covered the right hand fragment of the fresco.



The decision was taken to remove it from the wall—the most radical surgery ever prescribed for saving frescos. Yet, traditional techniques for detaching frescos were to no avail, as the animal glue normally used as an adhesive to trip the *intonaco* (paint surface) mysteriously refused to gel. The heavy artillery had been hauled out, and it misfired! Ferroni realized that the salts that had formed on the fresco had been left behind by waters that had risen from beneath the room through capillary action in the walls, were nitrates, resulting from the decomposition of the bodies buried under the refectory over many centuries. These nitrates prevented the gelling of the glue. Ferroni proposed use of TBP, a widely used industrial chemical which separates ammonia from water. With the collaboration of the late Dino Dini, a masterful restorer with decades of experience, Ferroni's idea was pioneered with the frescos at Santa Croce, and Ferroni became the first internationally reputed scientist to dedicate himself to the study of fresco. The pair were later invited to be consultants to the Brancacci Chapel project, although it was another team that actually carried it out. It was Dino Dini, even before the breakthroughs of the post-1966 period, who had discovered how to turn the *gesso* (calcium sulfate) that results from chemical deterioration of a fresco, back into *intonaco*,

or calcium carbonate, and had applied this technology in restoring the marvelous frescos of Fra Angelico at the monastery of San Marco in Florence. Dini trained a whole generation of Florentine fresco-restorers.

Other chapters discuss such techniques as infrared reflectography, holograms (applied to fresco for the first time at the Brancacci Chapel), and spectrophotometry, which was used to record permanently the colors of the frescos as they were in 1988. Another chapter is devoted to anionic resins, which the Montedison chemical giant developed especially for absorbing sulfate ions that were buried in fresco or in marble, and which were used as “grime busters” on the Brancacci frescos. Yet another chapter gives an objective account of the debates over how restorers should deal with filling in the gaps in old master paintings where the original paint is irretrievably lost.

### **Peter healing with his shadow**

Shulman reports on the dismaying fight that exploded and delayed the opening of the chapel to the public. This had to do with the decision to put back the 18th-century altar which had covered over important fragments of two of the frescos, especially Masaccio's *St. Peter Healing with His*

*Shadow*. Prof. Federico Zeri, the foremost living authority on Italian art, called this decision a “scandal.” “Enough with this business of history,” the excuse used for retaining the altar, he said with his usual bluntness: “What did they clean the paintings for then? Wasn’t the layer of grime which coated the frescos also history?”

As the comparison between the pre-restoration fresco and the restored scene with the missing fragment shows, what had appeared for centuries to be a scene of two apostles healing on a narrow Florentine alley, is now revealed to be a street which opens into a large piazza in the background with a classical church facade at the back of it. Even in its previous condition, the fresco expressed one of the most powerful concepts in Renaissance art. Masaccio used a minor passage in the Acts of the Apostles, to show the mere *shadow* (a beautiful metaphor for “example”) of Christ’s successors transforming an individual from the lowest, quasi-bestial state of the first beggar, to the half-human individual in a state of being uplifted above him, to the full-fledged productive citizens shown standing behind the beggars. This is intended to show three stages of a process, telescoped into a one scene.

Masaccio’s scene from the Life of St. Peter functions as a kind of programmatic statement for how the dark age can be overcome. If you consider that the Brancacci family, which commissioned this chapel decoration, was very close to the papacy, and that all of Europe was then debating the question of reforming the Church, it is quite obvious how important it is that Masaccio’s painting be seen in its entirety. Indeed the full cycle with its powerful images of a Peter, who is transformed by obedience to the commandments of Christ, and who uplifts others in turn, has to be viewed in the context of a crossroads in world history.

For one thing, during the 1420s and 1430s, there was a trend in the conciliar movement, which held councils at Constance, Siena, and then Basel, and finally Florence itself, to effectively abolish the Pope as the head of the Church and run the Church “democratically”—in that day, by mob rule—under the guise of reforming what were, indeed, serious abuses. Ultimately the greatest thinkers, like Nicolaus of Cusa, rallied to the papal cause, but they also assumed there would be a reformed papacy. The Brancacci Chapel frescos put forward the kind of “Peter” qualified to be the leader of a universal church.

The cycle must also be seen in the light of the political ideal of the Florentine republican fathers of the 1420s, the ambience in which the young Masaccio and his mentor, the great architect Brunelleschi were working. As later formulated by their admirer L.B. Alberti, they believed that the best way to inculcate the qualities of citizenship in the republic, was to carry out conspicuous acts of virtue in public, in suitably beautiful public spaces. Brunelleschi’s buildings, from the dome to the Foundling Hospital to his churches, were all set into the urban context in such a way as to create precisely those kinds of exterior and interior spaces, on a

scale and with a quality of precision and loveliness that would inspire the noblest of civic virtues.

Masaccio’s painting of *St. Peter Healing with His Shadow*, once it is seen in its totality, is a priceless expression of that ideal, in which the civic and religious sides are inextricably interwoven. It is also very similar to his other most famous fresco, the *Trinity* in Santa Maria Novella, where three levels of reality—contemporary portraits, the historical Crucifixion of Christ, and the image of the Holy Trinity—culminate in a magnificent Renaissance chapel, depicted with perfect perspectival illusionism on the frescoed wall by Masaccio.

Cover up the piazza and church in the background, and you have removed a crucial part of the idea. The conspicuous act of virtue remains without the appropriately beautiful setting, and moreover, the religious focus—the church building—has been removed. This is the equivalent of removing Brunelleschi’s dome as the focal point of all the other beautiful buildings and piazzas in Florence. Or, as Shulman remarks in another place, referring to how changes in the medium affect our ability to comprehend a work of art: “Cancel a few key passages of a Mozart concerto and the composer’s intricately fashioned structure crumbles in on itself.”

### Art desacralized

A decade ago, it was still a simple matter of getting to the opposite side of the Arno River from the main part of Florence, and walking into the church of S. Maria del Carmine to view the Brancacci Chapel. A 100-lira coin (then worth about 16¢) sufficed to get the lights turned on for one minute. The frescos were grimy but stable under their dirt. Now, you must pay \$4 for a ticket and stand in line, as only 30 visitors are admitted at a time into the climate-controlled chapel, through—I am informed—an anteroom which publicizes the good works of the Olivetti Corporation.

This is ironic to say the least. Olivetti’s management, beginning with its former chairman Aurelio Peccei, the founder of the Club of Rome, has a policy-commitment to the most rabid anti-human policies of zero population growth and world federalism. Thanks to this crowd’s heavy influence in the Italian government and media, Italy has the lowest birth rate in Europe, and is on its way to becoming a nation of aging yuppie turnkeys for its great artistic monuments.

Ironically, one of the Brancacci scenes painted by Masaccio shows Saints Peter and John distributing alms to the poor, including a touching figure of a young mother with an infant in her arms. In the foreground Ananias, who lied and held back from the common fund the proceeds of a property he had sold, is shown stricken dead by the vengeance of God. The contrast between monetary wealth of the sort so idolatrously worshiped by Olivetti’s executives, and real wealth, which lies in investing in the potential of the population, could not be more clearly depicted. In spite of everything, the Renaissance idea still has a chance of winning.