

Florentine Festivals
from the Middle Ages
to the Modern Age and
their Relationship
with Art

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By

Anita Valentini

and Maria Giulia Cantuti Castelvetri

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To my family
Anita Valentini

To my family
Maria Giulia Cantuti Castelvetri

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INTRODUCTION

ANITA VALENTINI

MARIA GIULIA CANTUTI CASTELVETRI

A person, any person, hardly forgets his childhood and the strong emotions of his youth. We don't forget our first passions, travels, and all what new places, situations or images have offered us, making us curious tourists of the world and of life. At the same time, over the years, even if almost forgotten or apparently distant in space and time, each of us does not forget a place, a tradition or an image that derive from our own territory or city, either to praise them or even to deny them.

And then there is the art. It is rare to forget the reactions in front of a painting or a sculpture. The passion for a work of art, started and developed during the numerous visits at museums, is usually fixed in our memory for the rest of our life. If you carefully observe the images of the Virgin or of a saint painted by a Tuscan primitive artist on a golden background, or, just to mention another Tuscan painter, the frescoes by a great master such as Botticelli, they will leave a lasting impression on your visual memory.

Each place has produced works of art that reflect a cultural and religious sentiment or simply identify a community or represent a political strategy. However, the city of Florence, in particular, owes much to its great history and to its numerous traditions, achieving, over the centuries, its highest expression in art, as it is well known, which has been able to combine religion, power and life.

In this volume, as Florentine citizens, curious about the world and in love with Florence, we aim at retracing the history, art and culture of this city through three particular festivals, that have been considered, over the centuries, as *deus ex machina*: the one of New Year *ab Incarnatione Domini* and those celebrating the figures of Saint Anne and of Saint Reparata. All these festivals with their sacred connotations have been accompanied, since ancient times, by political, civic or secular values.

In this regard, we would like to underline how these latter aspects, particularly evident in the city which has the fertile lily as its symbol, have still continued to be vigorously represented in modern life with new and more modern forms, contributing, above all, to forming the distinctive character of Florence, its *genius loci*.

CHAPTER 1

THE FLORENTINE NEW YEAR'S DAY

A RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL FESTIVAL WITH FASCINATING ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS

Since ancient times the Catholic Church has celebrated the Incarnation of the Word announced to the Virgin Mary by the archangel Gabriel. From the seventh century, this event has been held on 25th March, nine full months before Christmas, the day of the birth of Jesus Christ.

In Florence, from the Middle Ages until 1750, the civil calendar did not begin on 1st January, but on the feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary; the Florentine year started, in fact *ab Incarnatione Domini*, that is at the moment of the announcement of the Virgin's motherhood.

The tradition of the Annunciation was also adopted in other Christian territories, both in Italian and in foreign states: in England, for example, it lasted from the 12th century to 1752. In Italy this event was commemorated in various cities, including Bologna, Piacenza, Parma, Mantua, Padua and Reggio Calabria.¹

¹ In ancient times, in the Christian era and especially in the Middle Ages, different styles were used to calculate the year, that is, there were different ways to start it. In fact, two main styles were in use: the one *a Nativitate Domini*, starting the year on Christmas day and the one *ab Incarnatione Domini*, starting on the day of the Annunciation, on 25th March, as in Florence. Furthermore, some other places calculated the passing of the years with the style *a Resurrectione Domini*, also known as the French style, which established the New Year's Day during the movable feast of Easter. Antonio Zobi, *Storia civile della Toscana dal 1737 al 1848* (Florence: Molini, 1850-1852, vol. 1, 1850), 294-296. Catello Salvati, *Orientamenti archivistici* (Naples: Liguori, 1979), 54. Anita Valentini, ed., *Il capodanno dell'Annunciazione. Artisti contemporanei a confronto sul tema* (Florence: Tuscany Region. Regional Council, 2016), 7.

Particularly strong and lasting, however, the Tuscan style, as it was generally called in a simplified way, developed in several Tuscan cities, from Florence to Prato and Pisa, from Siena to Lucca.

This style consisted in two variants respectively: the tradition of the anticipated Incarnation called ‘in the Pisan way’ and the tradition of the postponed Incarnation called ‘in the Sienese, Lucca, Prato or Florentine way’, whose New Year’s Day was always celebrated on 25th March, but of two different years. The first, set up in Pisa and in western Tuscany, as well as in areas related to it, such as Sardinia and Corsica, was nine months earlier than the modern celebration, starting the new year on 25th March of the previous year. The second, established in the rest of Tuscany, postponed the date of the new year by three months compared to the modern celebration, using 25th March of the current year as New Year’s Day.

Therefore, on 25th March, which also coincided with the beginning of spring, New Year was celebrated in the shadow of Brunelleschi’s dome and in all the lands subject to the dominion of Florence, delaying of two months and twenty-five days the beginning of the year, while in many Italian territories since 1582 the calendar introduced by Pope Gregory XIII had established New Year’s Day on 1st January, according to a style called modern or *ab anno Circumcisionis* from the name of the feast that was celebrated on that day.²

The reform, with its evident benefits for the peoples of the earth, was preceded by an extensive study, ‘linked’ to Florence and encouraged by John de’ Medici who, in 1513, became Pope with the name of Leo X. This Florentine Pope, who aimed above all at achieving balance and reconciliation with the European powers, set up a commission of experts to study a universal calendar that would give order to the civil life of the various states. The intent was to eliminate the confusion of dates and times that had led to discrepancies especially in administrative and commercial matters. Therefore, on 8th July 1516 he sent a *Breve* containing a summary of the question to all the heads of state and inviting them to spread it to all countries. Florence also accompanied the official letter of Pope Leo X with a *Bando*, a decree nailed to the most important corners of the city, to the doors of churches, of the office of the

² The Gregorian reform of the solar calendar, introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 because of a religious and civil need to divide time into equal periods, established that the year universally began on 1st January. This reform was introduced following the advice of a commission of astronomers and theologians and in accordance with a study of celestial bodies drawn up by Luigi Lilio. Zobi, *Storia civile della Toscana dal 1737 al 1848* (vol. 1, 1850), 296. Luciano Artusi and Silvano Gabrielli, *Le Feste di Firenze* (Rome: Newton-Compton, 1991), 67-72.

Captain of the People and of Podestà and to the entrance of castles. In those years, however, one of the most ardent defenders of the style of the Incarnation was the Dominican preacher Giordano da Rivalto from Pisa, but very active in Florence and in the rest of Tuscany. In his *Prediche* (Sermons), at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Dominican defined as 'pagan' the attempt to introduce the new system of calculating the year starting from 1st January.³

Nevertheless, the request of the Florentine Pope had strong effects and consequences throughout the world and certainly paved the way for the establishment of the successive well-known Gregorian calendar, adopted almost everywhere, as already mentioned, from 1582.

Although many scientific contributions had been given by illustrious scholars from Florence, such as friar Antonio Dolciati, a hermit of the convent of San Gallo, the Dominican friar Giovanni Tolosani, the mathematician Basilio Lapi and the famous Antonio Albizzi, the city maintained its traditional calendar in accordance with the Florentine tradition, ignoring the one introduced by the reform and its subsequent benefits for the international relations. As a consequence, New Year's Day in Florence continued to be celebrated as usual on 25th March, delaying it to spring in contrast with the one that had by the time been accepted almost everywhere in the world.⁴

It was only after 168 years that all the Florentines and Tuscans adopted the Gregorian calendar after a decree of the Grand Duke Francis II of Lorraine, dating back to 20th November 1749, imposed from 1st January 1750 to respect the new organisation of time in commercial activities and in public documents. This important decision was also recorded on a marble inscription (Fig. 1.1) – whose text was dictated by Giovanni Lami –, affixed to the Loggia dei Lanzi in Piazza della Signoria, where it is still visible today.⁵

³ Valentini, *Il capodanno dell'Annunciazione. Artisti contemporanei a confronto sul tema*, 8.

⁴ Foresto Niccolai, *Bricciche fiorentine. Parte quinta* (Florence: Coppini, 1997), 73. Valentini, Anita. "Il Capodanno fiorentino. Una festa dalle valenze civili, religiose e artistiche." In *Festività fiorentine*, ed. Luciano Artusi and Eugenio Giani and Anita Valentini (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2003-b), 41.

⁵ Zobi, *Storia civile della Toscana dal 1737 al 1848* (vol. 1, 1850), 295.



Fig. 1.1 *Commemorative plaque for the adoption of the Gregorian calendar in Tuscany; marble, 1750. Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence.*

The day of the Annunciation was, therefore, for the Florentines, until the mid-eighteenth century, a religious, civil and spring festival whose cultural, artistic and traditional aspects deserve further investigation.

The choice of 25th March, as the first day of the civil calendar in Florence, was supported by strong historical and theological motivations.

From an historical point of view, since Florence was founded by Rome, the date of the Incarnation, that is of the Christian New Year's Day, corresponded to the Roman calendar which began a few weeks before the spring equinox and precisely the first of March – *calendae* of March. This lasted until 45 BC when, following the reform of Julius Caesar (Julian calendar), the first day of the year was established on 1st January. Thus, this calendar had the advantage of explaining the original meaning of the names of some months such as September (seventh month), October (eighth month), November (ninth month) and December (tenth month), which bear in their names the reference to the numbering starting from 1st March.

The theological reasons were also very strong: the spring equinox fell⁶ on the same date of the creation of the universe; it was a special moment of life, in which God's love 'worked' for the salvation of man. On that day, in fact – according to the Holy Scriptures – the Word became flesh and on the same day he sacrificed himself to lead man back to God.

The date of the anniversary of the Annunciation and its importance within the solar year is, therefore, closely linked to the festivity of Christmas: it is considered the indispensable condition for the Advent of the Redeemer. Since the early centuries, the celebration of the birth of Christ has, in fact, been established by the Church on 25th December, the pagan feast of *Sol Invictus*: the winter solstice anthropologically and symbolically represents the period of the darkest days of the year, in which people wait for Christ-Sun to "enlighten those who are in darkness and in the shadow of death" (*Benedictus*, Lk. 1,79). The Messiah was born in the middle of the night, in the darkest moment of the year: this makes Christmas an extremely charming and poetic experience. As for the date of the Annunciation, it is worth recalling the words of the text of the Evangelist Luke in which John the Baptist and Jesus are mentioned together: "in the sixth month [of Saint Elizabeth's pregnancy], the angel Gabriel was sent from God" (Lk. 1,26). Since ancient times, the solemnity is universally established on 25th March, exactly nine months before Christmas and six months after the conception of the forerunner, John the Baptist, who was born on 24th June. The relation with John the Baptist is very strong, not only for evangelical and theological reasons, but also because the two cousins 'compete' for the solstices: Saint John was born during the summer solstice, at noon of the brightest day of the year to announce the 'true light', the Nazarene. The temporal harmony that places the two births within six months from each other is confirmed by the angel who comforts Mary with the words: "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail" (Lk. 1,36-37).⁷

The Incarnation hints then at Easter, not only for the complete obedience of the Word and of the Virgin to the Father, but also for that particular astronomical moment, fundamental for the liturgical theology, which represents the beginning of the life of humanity. The Christian liturgy, as well

⁶ According to the Julian calendar; it was already set on 21st March at the time of the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), until it was anticipated on 11th March over the years. In 1582 it was brought back to 21st March by the Gregorian reform. Valentini, *Il capodanno dell'Annunciazione. Artisti contemporanei a confronto sul tema*, 8.

⁷ Morale, Giovanni. "L'Annunciazione italiana." In *Filippino Lippi. L'Annunciazione*, ed. Alessandro Cecchi (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2019), 33-43.

as the Jewish one, is linked to the cycles of the seasons, therefore to both the solar and lunar calendar. The spring equinox was considered by the Latin Fathers as the beginning of history and at the same time, and for the same reason, as the origin of the world.⁸

Being so closely linked to the concept of time and consequently to the beginning of a new period for mankind, the announcement in Nazareth does not only symbolise the rebirth of nature in spring, but also the birth of ‘the new’. This has brought many people to consider, for a long time, their civil New Year on that day, as it happened on the banks of the Arno River.

In Florence, the celebrations of the Annunciation and, therefore, of New Year took place in the Basilica of the Santissima Annunziata (Basilica of the Most Holy Annunciation) (Fig. 1.2), built in 1250 – precisely on 25th March – by the Servants of Mary, an order founded by seven young Florentines, who had already begun the construction of their convent next to it.⁹

⁸ Together with this belief, another one was also confirmed by the rabbinical thought: “The creation of the world during the first equinox fully culminated in the veneration and in the honour of Christ’s Easter.” What happens is an anticipation of the last vernal equinox, that of the end of times. Therefore, the Fathers used to identify the time between the creation of the world and its definitive redemption. According to the lunar calendar, Easter is counted starting from the spring equinox, on the Sunday immediately following the first full moon of spring, to diversify it from the Jewish Easter which falls on the equinox, on the night between the 14th and 15th of the month of Nisan (first month of Israel), that is the night of the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12, 17-18). The most important day of the Christian life is therefore linked to the lunar calendar, with all the difficulties that it entails in establishing the exact calculation of the moon. Lamberto Crociani, “Pasqua festa della Primavera,” *La Santissima Annunziata*, Year 6, No.1 (1986): 2-3.

⁹ The church and the square were located outside the city walls. In 1233, seven Florentine nobles withdrew to this area called Cafaggio, determined to lead a poor and humble life at the service of God and of the others, placing themselves under the protection of the Virgin, of whom they were particularly devoted and who they called ‘Gloriosa nostra Signora’ (our glorious Lady). The seven Florentines, still called today the Seven Founding Saints, wore the black dress of penance and followed the Rule of Saint Augustine. Around 1240, out of a desire for greater solitude, the small community withdrew to Monte Senario, about twenty kilometres from Florence, in Mugello; a few years later, the friars, increased in number, returned to their original location to better serve their city with prayers and works. In 1250 the construction of a small oratory, called Santa Maria di Cafaggio, was begun. It was connected to the nearest gate of the city walls by a road, later called via de’ Servi, because the friars were called by the people the ‘servants of Mary’. In



Fig. 1.2 *Basilica of the Most Holy Annunciation*; since 1250. Florence.

The Florentines and the people from the neighbouring villages and the countryside went to the Basilica on a devout pilgrimage to admire the most famous image of the city, the *Annunciation* (Fig. 1.3). It was painted in fresco on an internal wall of the church by a Florentine artist of the mid-fourteenth century, probably over a more archaic painting, contemporary to the construction of the church, which was attributed to a painter called Bartolomeo. This image was considered miraculous from the very moment of its creation according to a legend recorded in the *Ricordanze* (Memories) of the Servites and reported for the first time around 1465 by the humanist friar Paolo Attavanti of the Servants of Mary in his *Dialogus de origine Ordinis Servorum ad Petrum Cosmae*, a well-known document dedicated to Piero de' Medici.¹⁰ The legend narrates that the devoted artist of the thirteenth century, after some unsuccessful attempts to outline the face of the Virgin, doubting of his own abilities, left his brushes and fell asleep; when he woke up he discovered that the face of the Madonna had been completed by an angelic intervention.¹¹

the 15th century, the Basilica benefited from important architectural interventions by Michelozzo, starting from 1447 – with the small temple of the Virgin and the tribune – and by Leon Battista Alberti, who finished the tribune thirty years later with the construction of the beautiful dome.

¹⁰ Paolo Attavanti, “Dialogus de origine Ordinis Servorum ad Petrum Cosmae ca. 1465,” *M.O.S.*, No. 11 (1910): 88-113.

¹¹ The painting has been attributed to the Evangelist and painter Saint Luke. Michele Poccianti, *Vite de' sette beati fiorentini institutori del sacro Ordine de' serui di santa Maria, et prima un discorso intorno alla diuota, e pietosa religione della città di*



Fig. 1.3 Florentine artist, *Annunciation*; fresco, mid-14th century (based on a more archaic work). Chapel of the Most Holy Annunciation, Basilica of the Most Holy Annunciation, Florence.

This was the first miracle attributed to the Virgin of the Basilica of the Servants. From that moment the fame of the thaumaturgical power of her image spread everywhere, even though the effigy we see today cannot date back to the year 1252, but it is a work, as already explained, of the fourteenth century influenced by Giotto's artistic style.¹²

Firenza, col sommario poi di tutte le chiese, & luoghi pij di quella. El tutto descritto dal r.p.m. Michele fiorentino seruita (Florence: Marescotti, Giorgio, (1575) 1589). Giovanni Angelo Lottini, *Scelta d'alcuni miracoli e grazie della Santissima Nunziata di Firenze* (Florence: Ceccocelli P., 1619). Francesco Bocchi, *Sopra l'immagine miracolosa della Santissima Nunziata di Fiorenza* (Florence. Reprint, Florence: Baracchi, (1592) 1852).

The miracle is not reported by Malispini, Villani and Niccolò da Pistoia; Domenico Maria Manni is also doubtful about it. Eugenio Casalini, *Una icona di famiglia. Nuovi contributi di storia e d'arte sulla SS. Annunziata di Firenze* (Florence: Convent of the Most Holy Annunciation, 1998-a).

¹² As for the identity of the fourteenth-century artist, many names have been mentioned like Giotto, Agnolo and Taddeo Gaddi, as well as other Giotto's

This 'miraculous' fresco then became the heart of the Basilica, which was consequently dedicated to the *Annunciata*, the Virgin of the Annunciation. Among the many admirers of this image, there was Michelangelo Buonarroti, who expressed profound and genuine admiration with the following words:

Se alcun mi dicesse (però ché questa è arte mia) che questa imagine da senno umano fosse stata dipinta, io direi, che e dicesse bugia: perché di vero l'artificio dell'huomo et il suo ingegno non puote, come è questo valore tanto alto arrivare, onde io avviso che miracolosamente sia stato fatto questo divin sembante da Dio e dagli Angeli ... Quivi non è arte di pennelli, onde stato sia fatto quel volto della Vergine, ma cosa divina veramente, la quale come conviene humilmente ammiro.¹³

[If anyone told me (and this is my craft) that this image was painted by a human mind, I would say, that he would be telling a lie: because it cannot have been made by human hand or mind, since it is so precious that I think it was miraculously inspired by the face of God and the Angels ... So, it is not the art of brushes, from which that face of the Virgin was made, but something truly divine, which I humbly admire].

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, between 1413 and 1416, the celebrations of this image at the Basilica of the Servants underwent a brief interruption, when it was decided to transfer the feast to the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore.

On 29th March 1412, a *Provvisione* of the Municipality transferred the celebration of the following 25th March from the Basilica of the Servants to

contemporary artists. In 1444 the painting underwent a pictorial retouching. In that year a religious member of the convent recorded the payment to the "painter Francesco" who had intervened on the fresco and in particular on the "holy head of the Virgin." The non-Florentine friar did not know the patronymic of the painter and in Florence there were a lot of painters with the name of Francesco in those years. Among them was a collaborator of Filippo Lippi, Francesco di Stefano (1422-1457), better known as Pesellino. Florence, State Archives of Florence (hereinafter ASFi). CRSGF 119, No. 688. *Registro di Sagrestia*, 28 February 1444. Casalini, *Una icona di famiglia. Nuovi contributi di storia e d'arte sulla SS. Annunziata di Firenze*, 81-82. Later Alessandro Allori added an olive shade to the face of the Virgin following the written words of the Song of Songs: "I am black, but beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem" (1.5). This retouching was followed by some cleanings, one in the 18th century and other two in the 20th century (after World War II) and at the beginning of the 21st century, which brought the face back to the bright colours appreciated by many over the centuries.

¹³ Michelangelo da Bocchi, *Sopra l'immagine miracolosa della Santissima Nunziata di Fiorenza*, 87-88.

the Cathedral.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the Signoria had to rectify its decree on 19th February 1416 (Florentine style) - 1417 (modern style):

considerando che in quel giorno tutta la gente della città e del contado e forestiera va ai Servi, per le grazie senza numero e miracoli che il Signore, per intercessione di sua Santa Madre, elargisce ai fedeli che pregano devotamente all'immagine ivi dipinta nell'atto dell'Annunziazione [su petizione dei frati e del capitolo di Cafaggio, si riunirono i] Magnifici e potenti signori Priori delle Arti, il Vessillifero di Giustizia del Popolo di Firenze, i Dodici Buonuomini del Comune.

[considering that on that day all the people of the city and of the countryside and the foreigners go to the Basilica of the Servants, for the countless blessings and miracles that the Lord, through the intercession of his Holy Mother, bestows upon the faithful who devotedly pray the painted image representing the Annunciation [at the request of the friars and of the Capitolo di Cafaggio] the Magnifici and powerful Priors of the Arts, the Standard Bearer of Justice of the People of Florence, the Twelve Buonuomini of the Municipality meet today].

During this assembly it was established to bring the feast back to the Servants of Mary and to celebrate instead at the Cathedral the 2nd February, the day of the Purification of the Virgin.¹⁵

The *Provvisione* of the Municipality of Florence of 1417 clearly explained the reasons for the Signoria's choice:

per reverenza alla diletteissima Madre del N.S. Gesù Cristo, Protettrice di tutto il popolo fiorentino, e per aumento della devozione che si ha a quella immagine della SS. Annunziata ... dove nel giorno dell'Annunziazione si ha una

¹⁴ Cesare Guasti, *Santa Maria del Fiore. La costruzione della chiesa e del campanile secondo i documenti tratti dall'archivio dell'Opera Secolare e da quello di Stato a cura di Cesare Guasti* (Florence: Tipografia Ricci, 188), 310-311, doc. 464: year 1412, 29 March. The decree was confirmed by a second *Provvisione* the following month. Guasti, *Santa Maria del Fiore. La costruzione della chiesa e del campanile secondo i documenti tratti dall'archivio dell'Opera Secolare e da quello di Stato a cura di Cesare Guasti*, 311-313, doc. 465: year 1412, 29 April.

¹⁵ Guasti, *Santa Maria del Fiore. La costruzione della chiesa e del campanile secondo i documenti tratti dall'archivio dell'Opera Secolare e da quello di Stato a cura di Cesare Guasti*, 316-318, doc. 476: year 1416 (Florentine style) - 1417 (modern style), 19 February. Raffaele Taucci, *Un Santuario e la sua Città. La SS. Annunziata di Firenze* (Florence: Convent of the Most Holy Annunciation, 1976), 13-15. Casalini, *Una icona di famiglia. Nuovi contributi di storia e d'arte sulla SS. Annunziata di Firenze*, 75-76.

fortissima affluenza di cittadini sia di comitive di forestieri, essendo tale festa famosa non solo a tutto il popolo di Firenze, ma a tutto il mondo.¹⁶

[as an act of reverence to the beloved Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, Protectress of all Florentine people, and to increase the devotion towards this image of the Basilica of the Most Holy Annunciation ... where on the day of the Annunciation, a crowd of citizens and groups of foreigners come to the church, because this festival is not only famous for all the people of Florence, but also all over the world].

The Basilica became, therefore, the official sanctuary of Marian devotion in Florence both at the time of the Signoria and of the Principality.

As enthusiastically recorded in a document of 1417, on the occasion of the festival “famous all over the world,” the celebrations at the Basilica of the Most Holy Annunciation started for all the citizens three days in advance and were honoured by the presence of the bishop. He preached in front of a large crowd of faithful that, together with the nobles, the leaders of the Arts and the Captain of the Guelph Party, offered the “cera bianca” (white wax). When the Medici family later became rulers of Tuscany, they continued the celebrations, already organised by the Signoria since the 13th century, and made them even more impressive.

On the day of the feast, the Basilica was richly decorated with “verzure” (greenery) and precious decorative drapes. Since the early fourteenth century, the “verzure”, chosen to adorn the church with “filze” (garlands) and “festoni” (festoons), mainly consisted in laurel and in “mortina,” the common myrtle with its fragrant leaves. In the sixteenth century other evergreen plants began to be used, such as the ivy, the strawberry tree and the olive tree, which were held together not only by ropes and strings, but also by the “orpello” (a thread or a gold-like sheet) and intertwined with fruits, in clear ‘alla robbiana’ style. These decorations adorned, above all, the entrance and the choir.

¹⁶ Guasti, *Santa Maria del Fiore. La costruzione della chiesa e del campanile secondo i documenti tratti dall'archivio dell'Opera Secolare e da quello di Stato a cura di Cesare Guasti*, 316-318, doc. 476: year 1416 (Florentine style) - 1417 (modern style), 19 February. Taucci, *Un Santuario e la sua Città. La SS. Annunziata di Firenze*, 13-15. Casalini, *Una icona di famiglia. Nuovi contributi di storia e d'arte sulla SS. Annunziata di Firenze*, 75-76.

Furthermore, tapestries, “drappelloni” (long drapes), fabric backrests and “sarge” (strips of cloth) were displayed to make the church look beautiful and rich.¹⁷

This type of decoration continued until the first half of the seventeenth century. Subsequently, the garlands and festoons were no longer made of “verzure” but of “abeto” (fir), while the plants were replaced by cloths and fabrics. The church’s central area was then decorated with canopies, pavilions, “rascie” (woollen cloths) and “setini” (strips of silk) as reported in a text of the mid-seventeenth century:

26 marzo 1647. Addi detto. A spese di sagrestia lire quattro, tanti dati a Francesco festaiolo per haver messo le rascie alla porta, e statoci una notte a guardia secondo il solito per il giorno della nostra festa della Sant.ma Nontziata.¹⁸

[26th March 1647. Today. The sacristan gives four lire to Francesco, event planner, as payment for having put the rascie at the door, and having spent here one night on guard before the day of our feast of the Most Holy Annunciation].

This decoration with cloths lasted, even though not continuously, until the present days, when it was reduced after the second post-war period of the twentieth century.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, on the occasion of 25th March, the entire cornice of the central nave and the tribune were so enlightened as to look like a ‘lumiera’ (chandelier), which made the Basilica sparkling at the eyes of its numerous visitors.

The traditional ‘fair’, still taking place today in front of the church in the square – partly designed by Filippo Brunelleschi –, probably developed from the need to provide food and drinks to the numerous people arriving at the sanctuary to religiously celebrate New Year’s Day, to invoke blessings or to thank the Virgin. In fact, in addition to the stalls and baskets full of typical food, flowers, candles and *ex voto* objects were also sold to be offered to the Madonna for a received grace or to fulfil a promise.¹⁹

¹⁷ Casalini, *Una icona di famiglia. Nuovi contributi di storia e d’arte sulla SS. Annunziata di Firenze*, 249-253.

¹⁸ Casalini, *Una icona di famiglia. Nuovi contributi di storia e d’arte sulla SS. Annunziata di Firenze*, 253.

¹⁹ “MCCLXXXVII, c.6r da Lottieri ispeziale, per IXXX libre di candelotti de la festa di marzo di Sancta Maria, lib. XIII e s. XIII e d. IIII; il di di Sancta Maria de marzo,

The pages of the archive of the Servites reported of numerous gifts donated to the image of the Virgin, visible since 1448 under an elegant marble *Tempietto* (small temple) (Fig. 1.4) designed by Michelozzo – made by Pagno di Lapo Portigiani – at the behest of Piero de' Medici.²⁰

About forty religious Companies, among which – to name a few – those of Santa Maria dell' Antella, San Martino di Montughi, Badia di Fiesole or Santa Maria a Marignolle, arrived every year in procession to the sanctuary of the Servants to offer oil. It perpetually burned in the many lamps – many of which were authentic masterpieces of goldsmithing – which adorned, as still today, the image of the Virgin. The oil was brought to the Basilica by a donkey completely covered with precious fabrics, while the animal's halter was held by a child dressed as an angel.

Already in the first half of the fifteenth century, the small temple of the Virgin,²¹ constantly illuminated by one or more “lampanai” (lamps), attached to the ceiling with a rope, and by iron and brass candlesticks, shone even more on the day of the festival thanks to a larger number of candles and lamps. Display cabinets, standards, friezes and votive images, hung on wooden boards, surrounded the chapel.²² The offering consisted of “*ex voto*,” bundles of candles, wax or plaster figures or images painted on wood; money was also brought to the holy icon of the Virgin together with precious objects such as lamps made of terracotta, of “maiorica” – majolica of the traditional pottery of Montelupo – or of silver from the wealthiest devotees.²³

tra d. offerta e d. danari e per cera ke si rivendeno, lib. VII e d. VI.” Eugenio Casalini, ed., *Registro di Entrate e Uscite di S. Maria di Cafaggio (REU) 1286-1290, Trascrizione, commento, note e glossario* (Florence: Convent of the Most Holy Annunciation, 1998-b), 132. “MCCLXXXIX c.53v al Fede, per banditura de la festa di Sancta Maria, al Fede, s. III. Per portatura e rechatura del legio, quando ci predicò messer lo vescovo, il di di Sancta Maria di Marzo, s. II e d. I.” Casalini, ed., *Registro di Entrate e Uscite di S. Maria di Cafaggio (REU) 1286-1290, Trascrizione, commento, note e glossario*, 246.

²⁰ The pavilion above it was added in the 17th century.

²¹ At the time it was much smaller than the one built by Michelozzo and had lockable doors called “reggiole.” Eugenio Casalini and Maria Grazia Ciardi Duprè Dal Poggetto and Lamberto Crociani and Dora Liscia Bemporad, ed., *Tesori d'arte dell'Annunziata di Firenze* (Florence: Alinari, 1987), 84-85.

²² Florence, Marucelliana Library. B. VIII. 23. *Registro di Entrata e Uscita della Cappella della SS. Annunziata*, 1430-1447; March 1433.

²³ Florence, Marucelliana Library. B. VIII. 23. *Registro di Entrata e Uscita della Cappella della SS. Annunziata*, 1430-1447; March 1437; March 1441.



Fig. 1.4 Michelozzo, Lapo di Pagno Portigiani, *Temple of the Annunciation*; Carrara white marble, 1448. Basilica of the Most Holy Annunciation, Florence.

The gifts continued to be offered to the picture of the *Annunciation* and in the following centuries increased even more in number.



Fig. 1.5 *Crown for the image of the Annunziata*; gold and precious stones, 19th century. Basilica of the Most Holy Annunciation, Florence.

Among the many valuable gifts, it is worth remembering the rich and elegant *Crown* (Fig. 1.5) created for the image of the Virgin to be placed directly on the fresco. The current crown, dating back to 1852, was commissioned by Count Ferdinando Bardi Serzelli and made by the goldsmith Pietro Bensi on the occasion of the celebrations of the sixth centenary of the sacred painting. For the solemn coronation of the icon of the Madonna, held on 8th September of that year at the presence of Pope Pius IX, the crown, now in gold, was redecorated with the enamels, stones and pearls of the previous crown, which had a support in gilded silver, and with the addition of new jewels and pearls offered by the Grand Duke Leopold II of Habsburg Lorraine. The previous crown had been donated on Christmas Eve of the year 1605 by Count Carlo Bardi, a member of the Bardi family, and then in 1687 it had been “redecoration and renovated” by another Carlo Bardi at the behest of the Grand Duke Cosimo II de’ Medici. Despite the nineteenth-century intervention, apparently limited to restoring the ‘support’ of a work of a very different manufacture, the crown has preserved its seventeenth-century characteristics, in particular in the workmanship of the enamels inspired by the Nordic tradition and, as reported in the chronicles referring to the work of Pietro Bensi, in the rearrangement of the elements according to the ancient original drawing.²⁴

²⁴ The *Crown* underwent a restoration in 2020. Lorella Pellis, “Santissima Annunziata a Firenze, rimossi per restauro i gioielli che adornano la Madonna,” *Toscana oggi.it*, accessed February 6, 2020. www.toscanaoggi.it/Arte-Mostre/Santissima-Annunziata-a-Firenze-rimossi-per-restauro-i-gioielli-che-adornano-la-Madonna
In 1852 the coronation took place at the hands of the archbishop of Florence, Ferdinando Minucci, in a solemn atmosphere.

Franz Pesendorfer, ed., *Il Governo di Famiglia in Toscana. Le memorie del Granduca Leopoldo II di Lorena (1824-1859)* (Florence: Sansoni, 1987), 398-399.

Over the centuries it became a custom for every Tuscan sovereign, together with his court and the magistrates, to bow in front of the image of the Madonna,²⁵ that was taken out from its silver reliquary to be solemnly shown on the occasion of the festival of New Year's Day, as well as in other official ceremonies.²⁶ Meanwhile outside the church, the troops, deployed in the square, fired three volleys with their muskets to celebrate the event. "There is no square or public place where magnificent and surprising parties have not taken place on several occasions," was reported in a booklet, dated 1772, that described all the city spaces, Piazza dei Servi (Fig. 1.6) included, used for the Florentine celebrations at the time of the Republic and of the Principality.²⁷

As reported in the *Ricordanze* of the monastery of the Servants of Mary, first the Servites, then the Signoria and later, the Grand Dukes had "beautiful organ music" performed at the conclusion of the New Year celebrations inside the church's central area (Fig. 1.7) for the delight of "a large number of people who came from afar."²⁸

²⁵ In 1852 the Grand Dukes, Leopold II and Maria Antonia, and their family repeatedly visited the "splendidly decorated" Basilica between 5th and 8th September, during the Solemn Triduum. On this occasion, the composers Ferdinando Ceccherini and Teodulo Mabellini wrote melodies and used a choir of 120 musicians. During the ceremony, the troops, lined up in the square in front of the Basilica, fired three musket volleys, while 101 cannon shots were fired from the Fortezza da Basso and Belvedere. The celebration, as the contemporary chronicles recorded, was followed by a procession, escorted by the gendarmerie and followed by bands and fanfares, which went through the streets of Florence, illuminated and decorated with drapes. Luigi Zangheri, *Feste e apparati nella Toscana dei Lorena. 1737-1859* (Florence: Olschki, 1996), 256-257.

²⁶ In the mid-fifteenth century the Signoria established to always keep the image covered, as confirmed by Pope Eugene IV. In 1558 Duke Cosimo I limited this law even more, keeping to himself the permission to uncover the sacred effigy. Tauci, *Un Santuario e la sua Città. La SS. Annunziata di Firenze*, 15. The heavy silver grating, still visible today, not only protects the fresco but it also reminds us of the devotion of the last Grand Duchess of Tuscany Maria Antonia and of her consort, Leopold II.

²⁷ *La vittoria di Tomiri regina dei Massageti riportata sopra di Ciro re di Persia. Battaglia da rappresentarsi in Firenze sulla piazza di S. Croce da un numero di circa 600 giovani cittadini in aggiunta alle grandiose feste solite farsi in questa città per la natività del gloriosissimo protettore S. Giovanni Battista nel cadente anno 1772* (Florence: Cambiagi, 1772), 5-6.

²⁸ Florence, ASFi. CRSGF 119, No.55, secoli XV-XVIII, cc. 52, 143, 187, 198, 224, 242, 254, 271, 298, 311, 333, 359, 363, 377; No. 56, secoli XV-XVIII, cc. 25, 49.



Fig. 1.6 *Square of the Most Holy Annunciation*. Florence.



Fig. 1.7 *Central nave*; 13th century, renovations from 1664-1687. Basilica of the Most Holy Annunciation, Florence.

Since the festival of 25th March was full of significance for the city of Florence, great evidence can be found in the artistic, literary and theatrical production of the city in honour of New Year's Day and of the Virgin who was its symbol.²⁹

²⁹ The sources, which inspired the artists to create the *Annunciation*, were the Gospels of St. Matthew (Mt. 1, 18-25) and of St. Luke (Lk. 1, 26-38) and the Apocryphal Gospels, i.e., the Gospel of Pseudo Matthew (chap. 9) and the Protoevangelium of James (chap. 11), widely read until the Counter-Reformation, even if never recognised as canonical. The Proto-Gospel essentially follows the structure already present in Luke, while in the Gospel of Matthew, that mainly



Fig. 1.8 Donatello, *Annunciation*; high relief in sandstone with gold highlights; putti in terracotta and stucco, 420x274x30 cm, 1433-1435. Basilica di Santa Croce, Florence.

Over the centuries, throughout Christianity, and even more in the Tuscan territory, the iconography of the Annunciation has represented a very important subject to both sculptors and above all, painters because of its countless symbols and possible representations. The artists usually depicted

addresses the Jews converted to Christianity, the angelic announcement to Mary is omitted, but the angel appears in a dream to Joseph, emphasising the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah: “the Virgin shall conceive, and bear a son” (Isa. 7, 14). In addition to the 12th-century *Legenda Aurea*, the reference text remains the Gospel of St. Luke who describes in twelve verses the divine encounter between the heavenly messenger and the Virgin. The verse “Ecce ancilla Domini, fiat mihi secundum Verbum tuum” (Lk 1, 38) solemnly concludes the meeting with Mary’s acceptance of God’s plan and of the Incarnation of the Word through the Holy Spirit. The passage from Saint Luke essentially describes two moments: the angelic announcement and the Incarnation of the Son of God. The fundamental theological moment is the second, that is, the one in which the *Logos* becomes flesh and enters the world and history. While celebrating them together, the Church emphasises the first as the *incipit* of “salvation.” Morale, “*L’Annunciazione italiana*,” 35.