

DONATELLO AND THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE

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Richard Rubens

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LIST OF FIGURES

1. Brunelleschi: Plan of S. Lorenzo, begun 1421, Florence.
2. Perspective sketch of the Feast of Herod.
3. Comparison of the heads of the Beardless Prophet and the Bearded Prophet.
4. Comparison of the scrolls of the Beardless Prophet and Il Popolano.
5. Comparison of the right arms of Il Popolano and Lo Zuccone.

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	v
LIST OF PLATES	vi
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE	5
3. TRAGEDY AND RENAISSANCE THOUGHT	15
<u>The Mainstream of Humanist Thought</u>	16
<u>The Mainstream of Theological Thought</u>	25
<u>Mainstream Thought: Conclusions</u>	29
<u>Renaissance Thought: Tragic Variants</u>	32
<u>The Mood of the Early Quattrocento</u>	38
4. THE SPACE OF DONATELLO	42
<u>Early Trends in Donatello</u>	42
<u>Brunelleschi and Donatello: Linear</u>	
<u>Perspective in Two Different Views</u>	
<u>of the World</u>	45
<u>Later Works</u>	53
<u>A Tragic View of the World</u>	58

5. A TRAGIC VIEW OF MAN	61
<u>The Tragic and the A-Tragic in Donatello</u>	61
<u>Tragic Potential Realized</u>	66
6. MAN "ON THE WAY"	80
<u>The Nature of Human Activity in Donatello</u>	80
<u>Conclusions</u>	86
<u>The Tragic Human Predicament</u>	88
NOTES	91
BIBLIOGRAPHY	101
THE PLATES	

LIST OF PLATES

- I. (A) St. George and the Dragon, ca. 1417, Or San Michele, Florence.
(B) St. George and the Dragon, detail.
- II. St. George and the Dragon, detail.
- III. Brunelleschi: Foundling Hospital, begun 1419, Florence.
- IV. Brunelleschi: S. Lorenzo, begun 1421, Florence.
- V. Feast of Herod, 1423-7, Baptistery, Siena.
- VI. Feast of Herod, detail.
- VII. Donation of the Keys to St. Peter, ca. 1425-30, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
- VIII. Donation of the Keys to St. Peter, detail.
- IX. Apotheosis of St. John, ca. 1435-40, Old Sacristy, S. Lorenzo, Florence.
- X. The Ass of Rimini, 1446-50, High Altar, S. Antonio, Padua.
- XI. The Speaking Babe, 1446-50, High Altar, S. Antonio, Padua.
- XII. The Heart of the Miser, 1446-50, High Altar, S. Antonio, Padua.
- XIII. The Angry Son, 1446-50, High Altar, S. Antonio, Padua.
- XIV. St. George, Niche of the Armourers' Guild, 1415-17, Or San Michele, Florence.
- XV. St. Louis of Toulouse, ca. 1423, Or San Michele, Florence.
- XVI. Beardless Prophet, 1416-18, for the campanile of the Duomo, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence.
- XVII. Bearded Prophet, 1418-20, for the campanile of the Duomo, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence.
- XVIII. Donatello assisted by Rosso: Abraham and Isaac, 1421, for the campanile of the Duomo, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence.

- XIX. Donatello assisted by Rosso: Abraham and Isaac, detail.
- XX. Il Popolano, (1423-5?), for the campanile of the Duomo, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence.
- XXI. Il Popolano.
- XXII. Il Popolano.
- XXIII. Il Popolano.
- XXIV. Lo Zuccone, (1427-35?), for the campanile of the Duomo, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence.
- XXV. Lo Zuccone, detail.
- XXVI. Lo Zuccone.
- XXVII. Lo Zuccone.
- XXVIII. Masaccio: The Tribute Money, ca. 1427, Brancacci Chapel, Sta. Maria del Carmine, Florence.
- XXIX. Castagno: Last Supper, Castagno Museum, S. Apollonia, Florence.
- XXX. Castagno: St. Jerome with the Holy Women and the Trinity, SS. Annunziata, Florence.
- XXXI. Castagno: St. Jerome with the Holy Women and the Trinity, detail.
- XXXII. Resurrection, 1460-6, South Pulpit, S. Lorenzo, Florence.
- XXXIII. Castagno: Resurrection, Frick Collection, New York.
- XXXIV. Resurrection, South Pulpit, S. Lorenzo, detail.
- XXXV. Christ before Pilate, 1460-6, North Pulpit, S. Lorenzo, Florence.
- XXXVI. Christ before Pilate, detail.

1. INTRODUCTION

Donatello lived and worked during the formative years of the early Renaissance. This was a time in Italy marked not only by a new interest in the classical liberal arts, but also by a vibrant new artistic productivity. Lorenzo Valla, a philosophical contemporary of Donatello, declared that

those arts which are most closely related to the liberal arts, the arts of painting, sculpture, modelling, and architecture, had degenerated for so long and so greatly and had almost died with letters themselves, and that in this age they have been aroused and come to life again, so greatly increased is the number of good artists and men of letters who now flourish...¹

The early years of the quattrocento had more than their share of artistic geniuses.

Yet Donatello stands apart from his talented contemporaries. There is something in his artistic vision--in his way of viewing life--that distinguishes his creations from the other art of his day. His works have a power and boldness unparalleled in his time.

It is Donatello's ideas about man that characterize his different approach. He had a set of attitudes toward man which enabled him to imbue his figures with a powerful sense of human activity and drama. There is an individuality and a psychological complexity in figures such as the Campanile Prophets. Moreover, there appears to be, in his art, a recog-

dition of the capabilities and limitations inherent in the human situation. These attitudes imply that the artist had a particular way of viewing life, and it will be the object of this work to determine the precise nature of this mode of vision.

The very aspects of Donatello's vision that distinguish him from his contemporaries bear a marked resemblance to the components of a view of tragedy developed by recent literary critics. These critics approach the problem of tragedy not from the point of view of the stylistic components that go to make up its form, but rather from that of the philosophical components of the 'sense of life' that enable an individual to realize the tragic potential of certain situations. These critics go beyond the requirements of literary form, and thus discover the prerequisites for tragic vision. This tragic vision can be the principle by which any artist--not only an author--views reality, and I shall attempt to show that Donatello created in accordance with this particular mode of vision.

There is little historic documentation that is of significance in this endeavor. He had no contemporary biographer, he left no autobiographical material, and virtually none of whatever writing he may have done has come down to us.² As Janson notes,

Comments on his character by those who had direct contact with him are as few as they are contradictory--he could be described at one time as a man of simple tastes whose demands are easily satisfied, at another as difficult and stubborn.³

Thus there is virtually no information as to the nature of the artist's

character.

This lack of character information may not be entirely detrimental to this understanding, however. Many art historians, particularly those of the nineteenth century, have become embroiled in difficulties because they made the unfounded assumption that an artist's work always reflects his personality. This assumption is always tenuous at best, as there are too many examples which plainly contradict it. In this work we shall not be concerned with Donatello's personality or his character, but rather with his mode of vision.

The way an artist sees reality governs the nature of the art which he creates. An artist creates spaces that are roughly analogous to the way he views the world in which he lives. Thus by examining the artistic 'world' Donatello creates in his art, we shall be able to arrive at an understanding of his mode of viewing the real world.

I shall be attempting to demonstrate that Donatello's mode of vision was tragic. Since none of Donatello's writings are in existence, there is no direct way of determining whether such an assumption is warranted. It will thus be necessary to examine the philosophical writings of Donatello's age to see that his period was at least open to such a mode of vision, and further that there were individuals at that time who were actually thinking in these terms. Once this has been done, we can turn to an actual examination of Donatello's art, and find, by comparison with the art of his contemporaries, the precise components of his mode of vision.

To show that Donatello's mode of vision was tragic, it will be necessary to examine the nature of the pictorial world he creates as well as that of his human figures, for both are essential to the tragic sense of

life. The character of his created spaces can best be determined from the way he treats the space of his relief panels. Here the sculptor, like the painter, is forced to create his spaces explicitly, and by examining how Donatello handles this problem it is possible to gain insight into the way he viewed the world itself. For his tragic treatment of human form, however, it will be best to turn to the form of art where the figure most forcibly asserts itself--free standing sculpture. Finally, by observing how Donatello treats the action of such figures in these spaces, we will demonstrate his awareness of the tragic potential of human action in the world.

The recognition of the tragic aspect of Donatello's artistic vision adds a new dimension of understanding to his art. In these terms one can understand the origin of the powerful human drama one finds embodied there, one can feel the real depth of the artist's understanding of the human predicament, and thus one can better appreciate the full meaning of his art.

2. THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, man has attempted to arrive at a comprehensive definition of tragedy. Nevertheless, he has met with only a limited degree of success in this endeavor. Recently, critics have begun to develop an entirely new approach to this problem, and already they have been able to come considerably closer to the goal of explaining tragedy than any of those who preceded them.

Traditionally critics attempted to define tragedy by delineating formal components of the archetypes of literary tragedy. Perhaps the most ambitious of these attempts was made in the fourth century B.C., by the greatest of all categorizers, Aristotle. The definition of tragedy in his Poetics is based primarily on the tragedy of Sophocles, which Aristotle took as his model. The definition is workable when applied to the tragedies of Sophocles, but there are many difficulties which arise when one attempts to apply it to Aeschylus or Euripides. Moreover, this definition often becomes meaningless when applied to the tragedies produced by other ages and by other cultures. This is the problem with any formalist definition of tragedy: stylistic practices—even within a single genre—do change from century to century, and even more from culture to culture. Yet people have continued to labor under one such formalist definition or another for millennia. They have attempted to reduce all the rich and varied aspects of the numerous forms of tragedy to a single formula, so as to remain true to some formal definition.

In recent years, however, we have begun to realize that it is not absolutely necessary to conceptualize everything. New trends, particularly

those in the philosophies of existentialism and phenomenology, have made men willing to accept things as they are, without imposing reductivist definitions upon everything. Thus many critics have begun to approach the phenomenon of tragedy as a whole--to discover precisely what it is, in its own terms. The result of this new approach to tragic criticism is reflected in the titles of the recent works it has produced: Unamuno's The Tragic Sense of Life, H. A. Myers' Tragedy: A View of Life, Muller's The Spirit of Tragedy, Sewall's The Vision of Tragedy, and many others. A view of tragedy has emerged which treats it in the broadest terms of artistic expression; tragedy is seen as a particular mode of looking at life itself.

Tragedy is thus more than a mere set of formal stylistic principles; it is, in the words of the Spanish tragedian, Unamuno, "a sense of life." For Unamuno tragedy is not so much a literary form as it is a mode of existence. This "sense of life" is not a conceptualized, systematic philosophy, but rather an unstructured set of attitudes, feelings, and responses. It is what Unamuno calls a pre-philosophy, only "more or less formulated, more or less conscious,"¹ the emphasis being placed on feeling rather than on analytical powers.

The tragic is but one mode of viewing existence. Injustice, the sense of being overburdened, put upon--the raw ingredients for tragedy are always present in society; yet only certain men will see the situation as tragic. A given situation is only potentially tragic. It is the mode of vision of the observer which determines whether it will be viewed as such.

Tragedy can be defined not merely as a literary form, but rather as a mode of seeing certain life situations, and thus one may expect to find the tragic sense of life embodied in certain examples of any form of artistic

creation. The process of artistic creation consists in producing an artifact in accordance with the artist's mode of seeing reality. Thus tragic potential may be realized in the creation of any artist--be he an author, a painter, a musician, a sculptor, or whatever--if he is fundamentally disposed to view life tragically.

Although the tragic sense of life is essentially unsusceptible to philosophical systematization, there are certain basic component feelings and attitudes into which it can be subdivided. These components are views of the world, of man, and of the implications of man's action in that world which together comprise the tragic vision.

The tragic world is one in which there is at least some degree of order. Man's strivings must exist in a context in which they make some sense; there must be a faith that in some way the entire human enterprise is worthwhile. The nature of the world is such that human inquiry into its secrets must seem to be justified--at least in principle. Thus recognition is made of man's natural striving for rationality.

On the other hand, the tragic world is neither completely rational nor completely open to man's questioning. There is a frightening, 'primitive' irrationality that underlies the order imposed by man's logical systems and which threatens continually to force its way to the surface. It is a world "secure only to those who do not question too far."² Those who view the world tragically are forced to accept the fact that many of their most fundamental questions cannot be answered. The tragic sense

is not for those who cannot live with unresolved questions or unresolved doubts, whose bent of mind would reduce the fact of evil into something

else or resolve it into some larger whole.³

Thus the world becomes a place where man feels that values and rationality are justifiably sought, but not necessarily found. The Greek tragedians "affirmed the absolutes like justice and order, but revealed a universe which promised neither and often dealt out the reverse."⁴

Man is the most important component of the tragic sense of life, for he is the vehicle for tragedy. It is in man that the tragic sense is realized, for it is through him that the fundamental questions of existence are raised. These questions, posed in terms of man himself, are the essence of tragedy. Tragedy is Job's asking, "What is man?" It is Oedipus' "Who am I?"—a query which entails, beyond a mere question of identity, an existential questioning of 'what is this thing that I am.' It is important to note that this question is never completely personal; it is asked by the tragic figure not only for himself but implicitly for all the members of his race. It is always infused with the desire to know what it in fact means to exist.

The tragic sense views man in his activity. Tragic man cannot passively accept the world. Even if man recognizes the unresolved questions and irrationality of the universe, he is not capable of tragedy if his reaction is to accept them without protest. Only through human action can the tragic sense of life come to any understanding of existence:

Only man in action, man "on the way," begins to reveal the possibilities of his nature for good and bad and for both at once. And only in the most pressing kinds of action, action that in-

volves the ultimate risk and pushes him to the very limits, are the fullest possibilities realized.⁵

It is by observing man in this condition, in what Karl Jaspers called a "boundary situation,"⁶ that the tragic sense gains its real insight into the meaning of human existence. Paul Tillich writes,

The human boundary-situation is encountered when human possibility reaches its limit, when human existence is confronted by an ultimate threat.⁷

It is man stripped of all his defense mechanisms, devoid of all his surface pretensions. It is Job on the dung heap, Orestes confronted by the horror of the deed he must commit. It is man seen 'in the raw.'

Critics of tragedy from Aristotle on have realized that to be tragic a man must have stature. He must possess a certain degree of 'nobility.' The modern concept of tragedy, however, does not require the nobility of lineage that Aristotle implied. To be equal to the demands placed upon him man must have stature, but he does not have to be highly born. Tragic man may be a 'commoner,' but he may not be 'common.'

Tragic man must have the courage to exist in the tragic mode. He must have the courage to see his actions through to their ultimate conclusion, despite the suffering he may bring upon himself in so doing. He must be willing to say, with Job, "Though he slay me, yet will I maintain my own ways before him."⁸ It is interesting to note that Melville underlined

this particular verse in his Bible just a week before he began work on the book that was to be one of the great landmarks in American tragedy, Moby Dick.⁹ It is this stature, this courage, that keeps the tragic man from acquiescing to his condition--as lesser, 'average' men most certainly would.

The tragic sense therefore implies the loftiest possible conception of the heights to which man is capable of rising. Few men ever rise to such heights, but that some do proves that humanity at its best is capable of true greatness. The man who has the necessary stature to "maintain his ways" and see a tragic situation through to its conclusion

does more than prove man's capacity to endure and to perceive the ambiguity in his own nature and in the world about him. The Greeks and the Poet of Job saw the suffering endured by these men of heroic mold to be positive and creative and to lead to a reordering of old values and the establishing of new.

[Suffering] could lead under certain circumstances not only to growth in the standard virtues of courage, loyalty, and love as they operate on a traditional level, but also to the discovery of a higher level of being undreamt of by the standard mentality.¹⁰

Despite this exalted sense of human capability, however, tragedy recognizes that man often gains this awareness at the cost of his complete destruction. Man can act contrary to those irrational forces of the universe, but he cannot be free from them. The noblest of men, through tragic

confrontation, can gain insight into the nature of these forces; but he cannot hope to overcome them. The average man can avoid a confrontation with these forces if he is content not to question too far the mysteries of existence and to act only within the narrow confines of what current social norms have declared to be 'safe.' Jocasta, who feels it is "Best to live lightly, as one can, unthinkingly,"¹¹ wanted Oedipus to opt for this alternative: "I beg you--do not hunt this out--I beg you, if you have any care for your own life."¹² But Oedipus, the tragic figure, "will not be persuaded to let be the chance of finding out the whole thing clearly,"¹³ no matter what the consequences. The tragic man insists on a confrontation with truth.

Tragic action of this sort is entered in upon only by free choice.

And this choice must be of a particular kind:

The choice is not that of clear good or of clear evil; it involves both, in unclear mixture, and presents a dilemma.¹⁴

This is a dilemma which can never quite be answered, which can never quite be resolved. It is generated by the fact that the tragic figure does not operate completely within the framework of any traditional value system. He has no authority to which he can turn for moral standards, save his own conscience; and outside the world of religious, philosophical, and political value systems--in the realm of purely existential, moral judgments--man finds that absolute distinctions between right and wrong dissolve, and he is faced with conflict. He is faced with what Jung called "the terrible ambiguity of immediate experience."¹⁵ Tragic man, like

Antigone, must decide between two conflicting goods; he must choose one and reject the other, although he owes allegiance to both. The tragic figure must choose one of these goods, and he must on the other hand be guilty of violating the good he rejects. In the words of Paul Tillich:

Tragedy combines Guilt and Necessity, and the response of the hero is neither to yield to fatalism nor humble himself in total guilt, but to press on in his action to find by experience the truth of his own nature and of the nature of man.¹⁶

Like Kierkegaard's "knight of faith," tragic man faces the decision alone. He has no one to whom he can turn for help; he has nothing to which he can look for guidance. "Suddenly the original terror looms close, and the old formulations cannot dispel it."¹⁷ Man is brought face to face with the underlying irrationality of the universe.

In the context of this new view of tragedy, the old Aristotelian idea of hubris as synonymous with sin is no longer applicable. Hubris becomes

the mysterious dynamic of all tragic action, dangerous because it involves a challenge to the powers that be, but not (in the tragic view) morally good or bad. It may lead to destruction--indeed, it so often has that the folk will have none of it; but without it, no man acts, suffers, or learns. And it is the distinctive mark of the hero.¹⁸

The tragic hero rejects the claim to complete validity of the existing order, yet he does not completely reject that order itself. He sees the system as imperfect, but not as invalid.

Historically, therefore, tragic sensibility is most likely to appear at moments when existing systems begin to lose their absolute validity. Tragedy does not appear when men are completely confident that all the manifold facets of experience can be convincingly reduced and explained in the terms of a rational order; nor does it appear at times of disillusionment or nihilism, when men feel that there is no rational order at all to experience. It occurs only in the mid-ground between these extremes--when there is a rational order in which men wish to believe, but which they recognize does not satisfactorily account for all of the actualities of experience. For it is faith in the principles of a system in the face of contradictory experience which lies at the heart of tragedy. It is this unresolvable tension which causes the suffering of the tragic hero.

The suffering experienced by the tragic figure is productive, since both he and the world learn through it. To one who views life tragically, real knowledge is not gleaned from rational inquiry. It comes only from action in the face of adversity--man bringing suffering upon himself in the course of acting in accordance with what he believes he must do. In this boundary situation, stripped of all his defense mechanisms and beyond assistance from the moral formulas of his society, man discovers his true nature. It is only through this suffering that man learns the answer to Job's question, "What is man?"

This discovery is the ultimate aim of those who see the tragic potential of life. This is the end for which the tragic figure is willing to sacrifice

his happiness and even his life. Those who have a tragic sense of life see this process as the only means to a true understanding of the mysteries of existence.

With this fact in mind one can begin to understand what the great tragic artists meant: when Aeschylus wrote, "Wisdom comes through suffering alone,"¹⁹ and when Dostoevski wrote, "Suffering is the sole origin of consciousness."²⁰

3. TRAGEDY AND RENAISSANCE THOUGHT

No man is completely free from the influence of his age. By virtue of their genius, some men are able to transcend orthodoxy and add an element of innovation to the course of history; yet even these men are thoroughly molded and shaped by the times in which they live.

It is thus always necessary to examine the general outlook of an age before daring to speculate as to the particular perspective of any individual in that age. It would be ludicrous to attempt to attribute to Donatello a tragic sense of life if that mode of vision were completely inimical to the thought of the quattrocento. It is imperative, therefore, that the nature of the thinking that went on in Florence during the critical period of Donatello's development--primarily the early years of the quattrocento--be examined with respect to the components of the tragic vision.

There are two main philosophical traditions that dominate the thought of this period of the Renaissance--the humanist and the theological. The word humanist, as it is applied to the Renaissance, specifically refers to a devotee of the studia humanitatis. Thus Renaissance humanism has a more exact connotation than it usually receives in modern parlance, where it has come to suggest a general emphasis on human values:

When historians speak of Renaissance humanism... they are referring to a broad class of Renaissance intellectuals who...left to posterity, along with the record of their lives and activities, vast writings that may be roughly classified as literature, historical and philological scholarship, and

moral thought, but which often deal with such diverse subjects as philosophy and the sciences, literary and art criticism, education, government, and religion.¹

It was thus the literary men of the day, whose sphere of activity was in the secular world, that comprised this first tradition. The authors of the second important body of thinking of the period, the theological tradition, were of course men of the church.

It will be essential to arrive at some understanding of the general thrust, the 'mainstream' of the thought which is representative of this period; but it will be equally important to examine in even more detail some particular variants of this thought. There are some isolated individuals--and even some isolated facets of individual philosophies--that have a particular bearing on the tragic sense of life, and that will thus deserve special attention once the general outlines of the thought of the early quattrocento have been investigated.

The Mainstream of Humanist Thought

In an examination of the humanism that must have had particular relevance to the development of Donatello's thinking, the works of Leon Battista Alberti have special importance. Chronologically, Alberti's ideas occupy the same position as those of Donatello: the careers of both men span the time between the humanists of the early quattrocento, such as Salutati, and the later humanists, such as Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, of the time of the Platonic Academy; the major portion of both careers lies in the region of relatively unsettled philosophical production between

these two times. Moreover, John R. Spencer notes of Alberti's philosophy:

His energies were rarely directed towards uncovering new knowledge for a restricted group of fellow humanists, but rather towards making the knowledge acquired by the humanists available to a wider audience...He was a popularizer.²

This is not to say his works were meant for 'popular consumption,' however. His treatises, nearly all written in Latin, were certainly not directed toward the man in the street. Nevertheless, the nature of his writings was aimed at a far more diverse group than that of the more specifically philosophic works of earlier humanists like Salutati. The 'popularized' humanism of Alberti--which represents a generalized summation of the humanist thinking of the time--is most representative of the kind of philosophical interest that Donatello, who was, after all, an artist, and not, to the best of modern knowledge, a man with any formal philosophical pretensions, was likely to have had. The added fact of Alberti's strong interest in the arts would seem to justify the assumption that the two would have had fundamentally similar perspectives on the thought of humanism. Finally, the friendship between Donatello and Alberti which the latter mentions in his On Painting³ makes certain Donatello's exposure to these ideas. Thus it would seem reasonable to give particular attention to the ideas of Alberti in tracing the mainstream of humanist thought.

To understand the profound change that occurred in philosophy with the coming of the Renaissance, one must view it in contrast to the Medieval

thought which preceded it.

Medieval philosophy had posited an unyielding hierarchy of substances, in which man was inextricably bound. As Ernst Cassirer points out, the system was derived from a bastardized Platonic theory of participation, which had come down to the Middle Ages by way of Plotinus.⁴ The series of "emanations" from the One resulted in a graduated mediation of being--giving rise to a hierarchical ranking based on 'closeness' to the source of emanation. Man was viewed merely as one stage in the infinite gradation, unable to wrest himself free from his predetermined position, and thus, from the very basis of Medieval thought, was denied the overriding importance he commands in a tragic view of life.

Not only did this idea of a central, divine order which pervades all being lock man in his place, it also meant that he was to be viewed as but one small, insignificant element in the great "logico-theological systematization"⁵ that this order created. Within this divine order, even great men--men such as Charlemagne, Frederick II, and those others who rose so far above the level of the common man--were seen as relatively insignificant in the overall scheme of the universe. That such men were more significant than the average man was not attributed to their personal achievements, but rather their accomplishments were seen as attributable to their relatively higher position in the divine order.

This systematization, called by Garin the "cathedral of ideas,"⁶ so thoroughly ordered man's way of viewing the cosmos that it left him no possibility of experiencing the irrationality of the universe, so much a part of the tragic world. Suffering and fear were still facts of everyday existence, but they were facts that were felt to be absorbed and explained

by the prevailing order. All was secure, and the "primitive terror" which pervades the world of tragedy was shackled and controlled--absorbed by the prevailing order and converted into the harmless gargoyles and monsters which decorated the churches. The terror felt by Medieval man in the face of the plagues and other natural disasters was real, but it was not inexplicable; Medieval Christianity saw even man's suffering and anxiety as part of God's benevolent plan. Within the great "cathedral of ideas" every problem was dealt with, and every possibility delimited. Good and bad were clearly defined. Within this theoretical structure there could be no conflict; and man felt that it was both impossible and undesirable to move outside of this structure. Certainly, man could fall prey to evil, but even evil itself was a part of the all-pervading order--a far cry from the irreducible Evil of the tragic sense of life.

Medieval man was philosophically denied the very capability for meaningful action. The determinism demanded by belief in divine predestination meant that even when man did act he was not given ultimate credit for his 'action.' Thus even man's activity was imbued with strong overtones of passivity. Within this system he was doomed to face the world passively, experiencing the forces which acted upon him, but taking no active part in the struggle.

Thus Medieval thought was patently antithetical to the tragic sense of life. It obliterated the possibility of experiencing the irrationality of the world as irrational, it precluded any possible recognition of moral conflict, and it even destroyed the conceptual basis for action in the world--so much so that it led directly to an otherworldliness and a rejection of earthly existence. As if this were not enough, it further denied man the

importance and stature which are the prerequisites of tragedy. It is difficult to conceive of a set of beliefs that would be more anti-tragic.

The great shift in emphasis that came about with the Renaissance was primarily in the direction of tragedy, for without exception the humanists of the quattrocento had, at the foundation of their philosophies, an exaltation of the excellence and dignity of man. Man regained in the Renaissance the stature which had been denied him in the Middle Ages. The importance of this world and of man's actions in it again became paramount. Salutati wrote, "Man's vocation lies on this earth,"⁸ and Alberti similarly believed that "the dignity of man is to be sought in work--and only in work."⁹

The humanists still felt the universe to be highly ordered, but in their view this was not so as to trap man within the system, but rather so that the system could be comprehended by him.

The humanists believed in a rational, rather than divine, ordering of the universe. To them, the universe was seen as homogeneous and mathematically regular. This attitude is indicative of the humanists' faith in the basic rationality of the world and in the value of human inquiry. The upshot of Alberti's epistemology is that since

Nature is homogeneous, the whole world is knowable from its observable parts. Since man, nature, and mathematics are parts of the same whole, man has only to use mathematics to understand and control nature.¹⁰

The humanists attempted to introduce this form of rational systematization into every field: as Roland Bainton writes, "War becomes strategy, business

is bookkeeping, statecraft is diplomacy, art is perspective."¹¹ Even astrology came under this desire to control man's environment. Alberti used it "not to meddle in the world of dark forces, but to underline the world's perfect regularity."¹²

Although the order the humanists saw in the universe was rational and in terms of man, rather than being supra-rational and divine as was the Medieval order, it was still systematized enough to preclude the kind of ambiguities necessary in the tragic idea of the world. The "dark, unresolved mysteries"¹³ of which Nietzsche wrote simply could not exist in a world that was so highly ordered and completely understandable by human reason.

Even within the confines of this rational order, however, one sees that the seeds of tragedy have already been sown. Man stands in a much more important relation to the cosmos than he had in the Medieval schematization. He is no longer completely immersed in its order. As Niebuhr says, "The concept of individuality, rooted in the idea of the greatness and uniqueness of man, implies his freedom."¹⁴ Moreover, this new order is one which he can comprehend, and thus he is viewed philosophically as playing a greater and more active role in it. In the writings of Ficino, man's soul places him in a critical central position in this universal order:

This is the greatest of all miracles in nature.
All other things beneath God are always one
single being, but the soul is all things to-
gether...Therefore it may be rightly called
the center of nature, the middle term of all
things, the series of the world, the face of
all, the bond and juncture of the universe.¹⁵

Thus man becomes the fulcrum between time and eternity, ennobled and given stature within the system of which he is a part.

The Medieval and Renaissance views of Fortune are diametrically opposed. Medieval philosophy held the anti-tragic view that man was at the complete mercy of forces beyond his control. It was the conception of the 'Wheel of Fortune,' which "sometimes raises man up, sometimes plunges him into the abyss."¹⁶ In the Renaissance, opinions on Fortune swung to the other extreme, making man the master of his destiny. The humanists were well aware of the inexplicable events that can change the whole course of a man's life, and they recognized, in their view of Fate, that these facts were largely beyond the control of man. Nevertheless, most humanists insisted on man's ability to defend himself in the face of Fate. In the Albertian view, "The current of Fortune will not drag away any man who, trusting in his own strength, makes his way in the current as an able swimmer."¹⁷ The Albertian principle of "virtu vince fortuna" looks upon Fortune as an obstacle in the path of human achievement. It is a factor with which man must contend if he is to accomplish his ends; yet it is a factor which man can always overcome providing his cause is just and his actions are virtuous. In swinging from the Medieval view of man helplessly at the mercy of Fortune, to that of man as the conquerer and master of Fortune, the humanists exchanged one anti-tragic position for another. The tragic sense of life requires a concept of Fortune that is delicately balanced between these opposite poles. Man must be able to act in the face of Fortune, if tragedy is to be possible; but the idea that a virtuous man may be confident in his ability to be victorious over Fortune robs man's actions of any potential tragic implication. In passing from

one extremity of opinion to the other, the quattrocento humanists passed over the tragic view which is poised somewhere in between.

In similar fashion, the humanists over-reacted to the pessimism and asceticism of the Middle Ages. This fundamentally anti-tragic mood was replaced by an equally anti-tragic, all-pervading mood of confidence.

In the Preface to Alberti's Della Famiglia, "all pessimism and asceticism are banished and replaced by assurance of the value of human work."¹⁸

It is not difficult to understand this Albertian confidence that the virtuous man will triumph, when one recognizes the perfect regularity and rationality of the world. Alberti envisioned a world "that was organized as harmoniously as one of his palaces."¹⁹ In such a world, where man can discover the answers to all of life's questions through rational inquiry alone, suffering--in the tragic sense--has no intrinsic value. Suffering can still retain the otherworldly importance which Christianity assigns to it; it can remain a mark of the pious resignation to the vicissitudes of life which leads to reward in the world to come. But tragedy is interested in a different sort of suffering--suffering that can have meaning within the realm of immediate experience. Such suffering depends on earthly action, questioning, and resistance and is a means to human understanding of existence. There is no room for such a process in a rationally knowable world like that of Alberti. Moreover, in such a world tragic conflict is not even possible. The ambiguities that accompany every moral choice in the tragic world, could, in the world of the humanist, be resolved through the application of man's analytical powers. Man could always determine logically, in a perfectly regular world, which alternative he should choose. He could ascertain which alternative was good, and which was bad; in a per-

fectly regular world there could never be conflicting goods. There can be no tragedy when man is faced with a decision between alternatives which he sees as clearly right and wrong. It is only when he is put face to face with conflict--when he is caught between guilt and necessity--that the primitive terror, the underlying irrationality, can come to the surface and make the situation tragic. There is no room for irrationality in a perfectly rational, Albertian world; and it is not surprising to note, with Garin, that there is no idea of real conflict in his writings.²⁰

In the view of the humanists, the virtuous man was no longer the poor, self-effacing, solely religious man of the Middle Ages, but rather the well-rounded uomo universale. The ideal in the Renaissance is that of the balanced man, in whom "All virtues should be combined in a harmonious whole conducive to dignified actions and behavior."²¹ In general this change represents a move toward the tragic view, in so far as it affirms the importance of man and his earthly actions. Nevertheless, the stature it affirms is not in any sense synonymous with the 'nobility' of the tragic figure. Tragic nobility is that strength of character which allows the hero to act outside the conventions of his society; it is what supports him in his probing of the unanswered questions which lie outside the accepted systematized view of the world. There is no such sense of nobility in Alberti.²² In the humanist conception, the virtuous man acts within the order of the world; there is no sense of man needing to question the presuppositions of that order. The humanists held a much more mundane view of the whole moral process, in which "excellence of character and good works are the aims of morality."²³ The relation between virtue and expediency was not at all clearly defined, and they usually concluded,

Church, where the weight of tradition provided a substantial obstacle to the acceptance of new ideas. Nevertheless, one sees in the writings of Antonino, the Archbishop of Florence, and Dominici, his teacher, the profound changes that actually did take place in the theological thought of the early quattrocento. The writings of these two men, both of whom were very much a part of the Church establishment, provide a good index of the mainstream of contemporary theological thought.

In general, religious thinking was moving in the same directions as the humanist thought of the time, if not as far. Compared with the theology of the Middle Ages, this new religious thought showed a marked recognition of the importance of man and his earthly vocation. Theology became more concerned with man's ethical behavior in the performance of his everyday tasks. Dominici's Regola de governo di cura familiare and Antonino's Summa Theologica deal with the problems of ethical behavior in everyday life--in a manner not unlike that of the Isgogicon moralis disciplinae of the humanist, Leonardo Bruni.²⁷ In so far as this new approach places more emphasis on man and his activities, it is drawing nearer to the tragic conception of life.

Yet all this new interest still takes place in a strongly religious context. Despite an increasing belief in man's importance, God's supreme position still rendered human endeavor of slight significance by comparison. This fact restricted what in humanist circles became a complete swing toward the importance of man and his works. In some ways this restriction might have made the theological view more compatible with tragedy: it avoided the anti-tragic overconfidence of the humanists. This restriction was too total, and too selective, however, to be in accordance with the

tragic sense of life: it was like admitting that Job could indeed "maintain his ways," but then adding that this, of course, could not be done before God.

To the theologian, man remained firmly entrenched in the hierarchy of substances. There was some new emphasis placed on the intermediate position of man--his soul placing him in contact with the immaterial and his body placing him in contact with the corporeal--but for the most part his contact with the corporeal was viewed, in the tradition of Augustine, as a factor which denied man the possibility of direct apprehension of the intelligible, rather than as anything positive.

The religious thinkers of the quattrocento naturally did not adopt a view of Fate similar to that of the humanists. In lieu of such a view, they continued to adhere to the traditionally Christian view of Divine Providence.²⁸ But Divine Providence, unlike the Albertian view of Fate, is not something which can or should be conquered. When a righteous God, in His wisdom, preordains earthly events, it is only proper that man accept these events as being ultimately justified. Such an acceptance of all that the world holds in store for man, however, denies to man the right of tragically objecting to his lot. One feels that these theologians would be theoretically incapable of comprehending the tragic implications in a situation such as that of Job. In accordance with their philosophical beliefs, they would see Job as having only two possible responses: that suggested by the Counselors, to admit guilt and pray for redemption, or that of Job's wife, to "Curse God and die." They would have recognized his ability to accept his fate as having been ordained by God in his ultimate wisdom, and thus to acquiesce; and they even would have recognized the possibility that he

might refuse God's merciful justice, renounce God, and lose his soul.

These theologians would not, however, have seen as a possibility the tragic, middle course that Job actually took--affirming his faith in God, but refusing to accept the justice of his fate. Such a possibility did not exist for one who firmly believed in Divine Providence.

Nevertheless, despite their adherence to the idea of Divine Providence, these theologians left some area for human freedom--and this was in the sphere of morality. This freedom was strictly limited in its scope, however. To these theologians, morality reduces to the problem of choosing the correct alternative. Moral acts are deliberate, human acts--that is, they are rational acts, acts taken with their ends in view. For two reasons, the quattrocento theologians came to the anti-tragic conclusion that these moral acts were never neutral, but rather that they were always either good or bad: first, they adopted the Thomist view that the moral law originated ultimately from God, and that it was, therefore, absolutely correct;²⁹ and second, they felt that man could not fail to know this law because it was natural law, being based upon human nature itself.³⁰ Under such assumptions, man's not acting in accordance with morality can result only from his failure to apply the moral law which he knows is correct. Any act contrary to accepted moral norms is attributable to man's falling prey to his passions and not willing in accordance with his reason. As in Alberti, there is no sense of conflicting goods--man has only to follow the dictates of his reason to be morally correct. As in Aristotle, moral virtue reduces to mere habit--derived from repeated right actions, and thus the product of proper upbringing. The religious view holds that man has only to overcome his lowly passions in order to live correctly. There is no room in this

system for real conflict, no room for authentic moral dilemma--and thus no room for tragedy.

Mainstream Thought: Conclusions

In general, both the humanist and the theological thought of the early quattrocento was moving away from the anti-tragic world of the Middle Ages and toward a world in which tragedy was possible. In both traditions, there was a fundamental recognition of the stature and importance of man and of the significance of his actions. This recognition is crucial, for in a world in which the importance of man in his earthly activities is denied, as in the Middle Ages, there is no possibility of man seeing his situation as tragic. He can see the pathos of his suffering, but without a firm belief in the intrinsic, immediate value of that suffering he can never see it as having tragic proportions. By again focusing on the significance of human endeavor, the quattrocento had taken the first, essential step toward restoring the possibility of tragedy.

The "cathedral of ideas," the Medieval synthesis of which man had been so insignificant a part, was at last beginning to break down. Theologians, while still accepting the basic ordering principle behind this systematization, were now emphasizing the importance of man's position within the system. The humanists replaced the idea of an unintelligible divine order imposed from without with a conception of a mathematically rational, natural order which could be comprehended from within. As man gained significance within his system, the system began to lose the ultimate authority it had once appeared to have. It was no longer an

inscrutable, divine system which was beyond human understanding; and as man became more confident in his belief that he understood this order, he became more aware of facts that did not seem to be accounted for by it. In the Middle Ages it was simply assumed that these aberrations must have been reducible to part of the order, even if man could not understand how this was done. In the Renaissance, with its new faith in human capability, this assumption could no longer so easily be accepted. The suffering and ills of society posed a great problem for the thinkers of the Renaissance, for they were not harmonizable with their 'rational system.' With the exception of certain men who will later be discussed, however, the common response to the opposition between what was and what philosophically should have been was that of Alberti--to ignore those facets of experience that were not in harmony with his theoretical thought. Yet the seeds were planted, and the unquestioned, all-encompassing validity of the philosophical order was not long to remain unchallenged.

The humanists also moved in the direction of tragedy in crediting man with the ability to oppose Fate. Although they went too far by concluding that man could conquer Fate, they had succeeded in opening the way for more truly tragic approaches.

Although the mainstreams of early Renaissance thought had moved substantially closer to a tragic view of life, they still remained anti-tragic in several important respects. They both still firmly held to the Medieval belief in an all-pervading order which would exclude the unresolved questions and doubts that are so essential to tragedy. They believed the world to be too rational and systematic to admit any irrationality.

Neither humanism nor theology had any sense of tragic conflict or

moral dilemma. To the humanist, the world was perfectly regular and completely knowable, and thus man had only to apply his analytic powers to determine what was right. To the theologian, the knowledge of what was right was innate in the very nature of man, and thus man just had to will in accordance with his reason. In such systems, man could not be forced into the tragic situation of being caught between the guilt and necessity of having to choose between conflicting goods.

Religious thought adhered too closely to the essentially Medieval concept of Divine Providence. This concept tended to reduce all the problems that befall man into justified facets of some benevolently pre-ordained divine plan, and thus denied man the right to question the very aspects of existence that the tragic man refuses to accept.

Humanist thought, on the other hand, was too confident in its belief in the ultimate victory of man over these problems. It had no sense of the fact that man can indeed be swept away by Fate, as so many of the greatest tragic heroes eventually are. This belief, since it denies the magnitude of the tragic plight of man, is just as antithetical to a tragic conception as the Medieval view of man being totally at the mercy of Fate.

The early quattrocento was certainly not a time that was inimical to the tragic sense of life, as was the Middle Ages. A tragic sense of life simply could not have existed in the Middle Ages. Not even the most individual Medieval genius could have viewed the world in such a fashion, for the basic, mainstream mode of vision of that time was too antithetical to the prerequisites of tragedy.

In the quattrocento, the mainstream of thought, despite the many anti-tragic elements that were still present, had moved close enough to

philosophy; it is only since Kierkegaard and the existentialists that the tragic sense of life has found any real philosophical expression. To demonstrate that there was a tragic sensibility alive in Donatello's day it will suffice to show that all the prerequisite elements were present in one form or another.

One tragic element that was more prominent in the years just before the period of Donatello's prime, but that was most certainly still present throughout the period was the idea of active involvement in the world. The mainstream of Renaissance thought placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of man's earthly works, but never were the elements of activity and involvement stressed more insistently than in the writings of Salutati. For him, "political life and intellectual activity were...brought together."³¹ In Salutati one sees the complete rejection of the monkish asceticism and passivity that are so antithetical to tragedy. He wrote in a letter: "Do not imagine that one can seek perfection by fleeing from the crowd..."³² That this tragic emphasis on activity existed during the actual time of Donatello is attested by its presence in the works of Alberti and by the reappearance of this theme after his time in the writings of Pico della Mirandola, who believed that "the dignity of man resides not in his being, but in his doing."³³ Nor was this theme found only in the humanist thought of the time. S. Bernardino, a popular preacher of the time, not only "agreed with the humanist emphasis on the dignity of man,"³⁴ but he also professed a deep mistrust of the solitude and passivity of the monastery.³⁵ He, like Salutati and Pico, insisted on a life of activity.

Despite the general desire for systematization, there was a marked sentiment against allowing man to be confined or his freedom curtailed by

such systems. The seeds out of which this sentiment grew were probably planted by the systems themselves--in their assigning so much importance to the position man was to inhabit within them. It is in Pico, however, that man is finally able to free himself from this hierarchy altogether. Pico envisions God having created man with no predetermined nature, but rather with the ultimate freedom to be able to create this nature for himself:

We have given thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift particularly thine, that...thou mayest...possess as thine own seat, the form, the gifts which thou thyself shalt desire...In conformity with thy free judgment in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bonds, and thou wilt fix the limits of thy nature for thyself...Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou... art the moulder and maker of thyself...Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from the mind's reason into the higher natures which are divine.³⁶

Here is the real essence of tragedy: man with the freedom to carve his own nature out of existence; man unbridled by social norms and preconceptions about his position in the universal order. As Albert Camus recognized in The Myth of Sisyphus, however, absolute freedom of this variety is not merely a privilege--it is a great burden. The man who is free to determine his own nature becomes responsible for that which he is. He has

no one whom he can blame for his shortcomings except himself. He cannot pass this blame on to society, the church, or even God. He is "confined by no bonds," and thus he can appeal to no system. If he chooses he can, like the tragic hero, go beyond the limits of all rational systems--where he will be face to face in tragic confrontation with the underlying irrationality of the world, the "primitive terror." Pico's man is not far from knowing the "terrible ambiguity of immediate experience."

There is a philosophic controversy in the thought of the quattrocento that has a great bearing on the possibility of the tragic sense of life. It centers about a disagreement over which is the primary human faculty--the reason or the will.

In general, the mainstream of Renaissance thought, and particularly theological thought, believed that reason was primary. This belief led to the idea that man rationally 'knows' what is right, and that the will has only the secondary function of willing in accordance with the reason. As has been seen above, this idea reduces the moral process to a mere overcoming of man's lower passions, and, most important, precludes any possibility of conflicting goods.

In such a framework, the possibility of conflict can only exist when the will is primary. There can be no moral dilemma as long as morality is merely acting in accordance with reason. It is only when the reason cannot ascertain which alternative is the right one--when man must act in accordance with his will and not his reason--that he can be faced with a tragic conflict. For it is in the situation where man must will something without the comfort of 'knowing' that he is right, that he is caught up in the tragic opposition of guilt and necessity.

As one might expect, it is men like Salutati--men who are more generally disposed to see the tragic potential of life--who hold to the principle of the primacy of the will. S. Bernardino, a churchman who has already been cited for some of the "tragic" features of his thought, was one of the few theologians who was able to break with the Thomist belief in the primacy of reason that was so widely held in the church. S. Bernardino wrote:

The will is the empress of all the powers
of the soul and of all our emotions; the
will rules over our mind...

Good will is the empress of the whole universe.³⁷

It is in Salutati that these thoughts have their origin--S. Bernardino was the student of one of Salutati's pupils, Giovanni da Spoleto;³⁸ and it is in his writings that they find perhaps their best expression. He recognized that "Man is free through a free act of the will, whereas reliance on reason would prove to him that freedom is impossible."³⁹ He also realized the tragic stature man gains through this freedom when he wrote that a good will "makes us fellow workers with God."⁴⁰

The man who comes the closest to actually recognizing in his writings the existence of the "unresolved questions" and underlying irrationality of the universe is Nicolas of Cusa. Although Nicolas was not a Florentine and had little influence on the main course of philosophical thought there, there is evidence that his ideas were at least known in the city.⁴¹ Etienne Gilson claims that Nicolas recognized

The thickness of a reality whose very essence, since it is permeated with the presence of the infinite, is the coincidence of opposites.⁴²

In the divine order these opposites may be reducible and may be made to coincide harmoniously, but in the realm of immediate experience--the world in which the tragic figure must operate--they stand in unresolvable conflict. Moreover, Nicolas admitted the limitations inherent within the human reason. As Cassirer points out, Nicolas realized that there could be "no progression from rational or empirical truths [which man could know] to absolute truths [which were forever beyond man's knowledge]."⁴³ He still remained true to the idea that absolute truths existed in the world of spirit, but he rejected the belief that these truths could be known in the material world. Nicolas thus denied the Albertian idea of a world whose secrets were entirely open to human understanding, and substituted in its place the tragic view of a world in which there may exist "dark, unresolved mysteries" that the mind can simply never rationally comprehend.

These variants demonstrate that in addition to a general trend of thought that was open to the tragic sense of life, there were particular sets of philosophic beliefs that seem incipiently tragic. Salutati, Nicolas of Cusa, S. Bernardino, and Pico--all these men believed strongly in the principle of active participation in the world, and all that this principle implies. They were far more open than the mainstream thought of the day to the idea of conflict, because they were not convinced that the intellect was either primary or perfectable. Lastly, one finds in their writings more recognition of the possibility of experiencing the underlying irrationality of the world, because they were less confident in the all-encompassing

nature of the rational order that their contemporaries felt so sure was all-pervading. These elements, though not carried to their full tragic conclusion in the works of these men, provide the basis of a fundamentally tragic sense of life.

The Mood of the Early Quattrocento

There is an historic mood which is associated with the tragic sense of life. Tragedy does not appear in periods of ideological stability, when a socially accepted order of the universe provides man with "a coherent and sustaining way of life."⁴⁴ When man is confident that he can understand and control the forces of the world, there can be no tragedy. It is only "when for reasons internal and external, spiritual and sociological, the questions of ultimate justice and human destiny seem suddenly to have been jarred loose again"⁴⁵ that the world can be viewed tragically.

Roland Bainton points out that although the mood of the Renaissance is "commonly represented as exuberant, unconcerned, blithe, without twinges of conscience, pangs of remorse, or tremors of anxiety,"⁴⁶ it is equally as true that there was "at the same time a strain of melancholy"⁴⁷ running through the period. As Bainton notes:

The exuberance of the Renaissance is not to be exaggerated...Renaissance man was not so sure of his knowledge. Nicolaus of Cusa pushed to the upper limits the reach of human understanding and eventuated in learned ignorance, docta ignorantia...Some even made a virtue of necessity and acquiesced in ignorance on the ground that

knowledge puffed one up. Neither did Renaissance man feel so certain that he was the master of his fate...

Expressions of despondency were not uncommon.⁴⁸

Many Renaissance men became aware of the discrepancies between existing conditions and the conditions that were envisioned as following naturally from their philosophical systems. To them it was becoming undeniably clear that the 'system' was not so comprehensive. There were facets of experience that simply did not reduce to the rational explanations of the systems which claimed to contain them, and Renaissance man could not say, with his Medieval counterpart, that the paradox was attributable only to his lack of understanding. There were those who, like Alberti, attempted to salvage the validity of their theoretical systems by ignoring those facets of experience that seemed to call them into doubt: Leonardo Bruni, for example, wished to see Florence's victory over Milan as attributable to the city's virtue, disregarding the fact that the city would have fallen to its enemy had it not been for the plague that killed Gian Galeazzo Visconti and immobilized his attacking force.⁴⁹ Yet not everyone could close these facts out of their consciousness. The above discussed variants of Renaissance philosophy reflect a growing recognition of the reality of these problems; and once these problems are recognized, the claim to all-encompassing validity of the theoretical order begins to crumble.

There would certainly seem to have been another side to the mood of the Renaissance than that of the Albertian exuberance. As J.H. Plumb notes, "The contradiction of poverty, suffering and pain amid a world of profusion,

extravagance and delight stirred the consciences of sensitive men."⁵⁰
Even at the beginning of the period, the doubts and uncertainties in the minds of some men make one aware, with Cassirer, that the shadow of Savonarola was on the horizon long before he appeared on the scene.⁵¹

Savonarola represents the complete reaction away from the confidence and exuberance of Alberti. His ascetic mysticism involves a negation and contempt of the world. Although he burned for heresy in 1498, he had received a great deal of popular support.⁵²

Despite its diametric opposition to the spirit of humanist thought, one finds distinct traces of Savonarola in the philosophies of certain humanists. Cassirer notes that there were "many episodes in the life of Ficino that foreshadow this sort of thing."⁵³ The clearest case of Savonarola's actual influence on humanist thought comes in the life of Pico. Though at first Pico was filled with a typically humanist, unlimited faith in the capability of human rationality and belief in the ideals of culture, later a high degree of asceticism and negation worked its way into his thought, until finally "Pico was won over by Savonarola at the end of his life."⁵⁴

In the mid-ground between the extreme moods of Savonarola's asceticism and the humanists' exuberance, there existed a mood which was conducive to the tragic sense of life. It should not be surprising that the men one finds inhabiting this mid-ground are the same ones whose philosophic variants on the mainstream thought of the time have already been cited for their tragic import. Men such as Salutati, S. Bernardino, Nicolas of Cusa, and Pico, could never participate fully in either the blind confidence of Alberti or the ascetic denial of Savonarola. Their mood was somewhere in between--

affirming the validity of human endeavor, yet recognizing the limits of human capability and the existence of real suffering that results from them. It is in this sort of mood that tragedy exists.

4. THE SPACE OF DONATELLO

The artist creates the space in which his figures are to act. Architect, painter, and sculptor are all involved in the creation of inhabitable spaces. The sculptor and painter have the advantage of actually populating these spaces themselves, however, while the architect must make his spaces 'generally populatable.' Nevertheless, all are involved in the production of spaces for habitation in one way or another.

Since the artist creates in accordance with his mode of vision, the nature of his space--of the world he creates--will be analogous to the way he views the world in which he lives. The potential for action in his artistic world will be the same as the potential he sees in his own world. Thus it should be possible, through an analysis of the space created by a given artist, to arrive at an idea of that artist's mode of viewing the world itself.

In the case of a sculptor, the nature of the created space is more easily determined from reliefs than from statuary. The sculptor does create the space around even free-standing sculpture, but he does so only implicitly. In reliefs the sculptor, like the painter, is required to do so explicitly. Thus there can be less doubt as to the implications of a sculptor's space in his reliefs than in any other manifestation of his art.

Early Trends in Donatello

The St. George and the Dragon (Plate IA) is almost certainly the earliest example of Donatello's relief sculpture that is known. The

documents place the date of the sale to the armorers' and swordsmiths' guild of the marble relief slab in February, 1417.¹ And, as Janson notes, "The style of the St. George relief seems fully compatible [with this date]." ²

In this panel, the earliest of all Donatello's reliefs, one already finds much the same feeling for space that is to be characteristic of his more mature style. The nature of the "deep, continuous space"³ that so astounded Janson contains, if only in seminal form, the same elements that are to distinguish the treatment of space in Donatello's later works.

The St. George panel, and especially the building at the right of the scene, represents an early use of linear perspective by Donatello (Plate II). Nevertheless, this relief is not completely governed by a scientifically accurate perspective representation: the orthogonals only tend to converge, but do not do so in any strict sense. Instead Donatello is freely applying the general principles of linear perspective to create a space to contain his figures. The orthogonals of the side wall and of the incised pattern of the floor, although they do not move toward a single vanishing point, at least converge on a general area.

It is difficult to determine from the St. George relief just how much Donatello did know about the theoretical principles of linear perspective. As Janson observes,

the entire building is not "constructed" with ruler and compass but sketched freehand, so that it defies any test of accuracy in the mechanical sense.⁴

extend the illusion of depth to the farthest horizon.⁶

One finds such an atmospheric creation of depth in the hilly landscape of the background of the St. George relief (Plate IB).

Schiacciato relief results in a more pictorially created space, in which the picture plane is not as broken as in normal relief. Schiacciato respects the integrity of the relief surface in a way that the high relief of someone such as Ghiberti cannot; and it is in the integrity of this surface that one first finds the tension between surface and depth that becomes so important in Donatello's later reliefs.

Brunelleschi and Donatello: Linear Perspective
in Two Different Views of the World

Filippo Brunelleschi was, according to John Pope-Hennessy, "The greatest architect of the early Renaissance, the discoverer of linear perspective, and one of the prime influences on the development of Renaissance style."⁷ He provides an enlightening foil for the development of Donatello, for his use of linear perspective and the nature of the spaces he creates with it are very much different in feeling from that of Donatello, although they are based on the same fundamental theoretical principles. Moreover, one should not be misled into the assumption that this difference arises from any theoretical information one or the other may have been lacking: not only were these two men contemporaries (Brunelleschi lived from 1377 to 1446), but it is also a well documented fact that they were friends.⁸

Although Brunelleschi was the first Renaissance artist to achieve a scientifically accurate systematization of the laws of perspective, to claim that he was the inventor of perspective would be an overstatement. The beginning of the quattrocento was marked by a general increase in classical learning; and one of the sciences which aroused interest on the part of Renaissance scholars was that of optics. This interest led early in the period to some elementary treatises on perspective.⁹ What is even more significant, however, is that there were other artists--particularly Donatello and the painter, Masaccio--who were also beginning to employ perspective techniques in their works at the same time as Brunelleschi.

Brunelleschi does deserve credit for his systematization of perspective. In 1417, in connection with his plans for the dome of the Cathedral of Florence, he constructed two perspective panels--unfortunately now lost--which embodied his formulation of the laws of perspective construction. His system was a one point linear perspective of the type that was to become typical of the Renaissance. The perspective of the panels represents a systematic way of controlling space according to a mathematically regular diminution towards a single vanishing point. Brunelleschi thus achieved a coherent, logical representation of space that could be rationally comprehended through mathematical proportion.

This system, and the feeling of man's stable centrality which derives from his being logically integrated into the larger whole of the space it creates, are substantially the same as that of the perspective system which was later worked out by Alberti. In both systems mathematics serves as a means by which space is created and controlled. Such space is naturally homogeneous, continuous, and rationally understandable throughout--both to

those who act within it and to those who observe it from without.

It must be remembered that the primary reason for Brunelleschi's use of perspective was to create an environment which man could grasp in terms of himself. The world Brunelleschi sought to create was quite different from that of the Gothic cathedral, in which man stood in awe amid the incomprehensible wonders of the image of the divine order. Medieval man was supposed to recognize his insignificance in the face of an all-pervading order which was beyond his comprehension; In general, Renaissance man wanted to recognize his importance in a world which was in harmony with his rational faculties and which could thus be totally known and controlled by him. To men such as Brunelleschi, a Renaissance building had to be one in which man could feel confident and secure amid a comprehensible order that was rational and in terms of himself. Adherence to the laws of perspective makes a space rationally coherent in scale, but this alone is not sufficient to satisfy the desires of Renaissance rationality. To enable man to understand a space in terms of himself is to require that the space be in some way related to human proportions--and Brunelleschi accomplished this through the use of a module based upon the height of man. The measure of this module was the braccio, a unit equal to one-third the height of a man. The construction of a space through the geometric representation of such a module makes of that space a comprehensible, coherent whole.

One finds this concept of space in even the earliest of Brunelleschi's structures. His design of 1419 for the façade of the Foundling Hospital in Florence, for example, demonstrates this principle of spatial construction. Looking at this building (Plate III), the quattrocento Florentine would certainly have been amazed by the way he was able immediately to grasp the

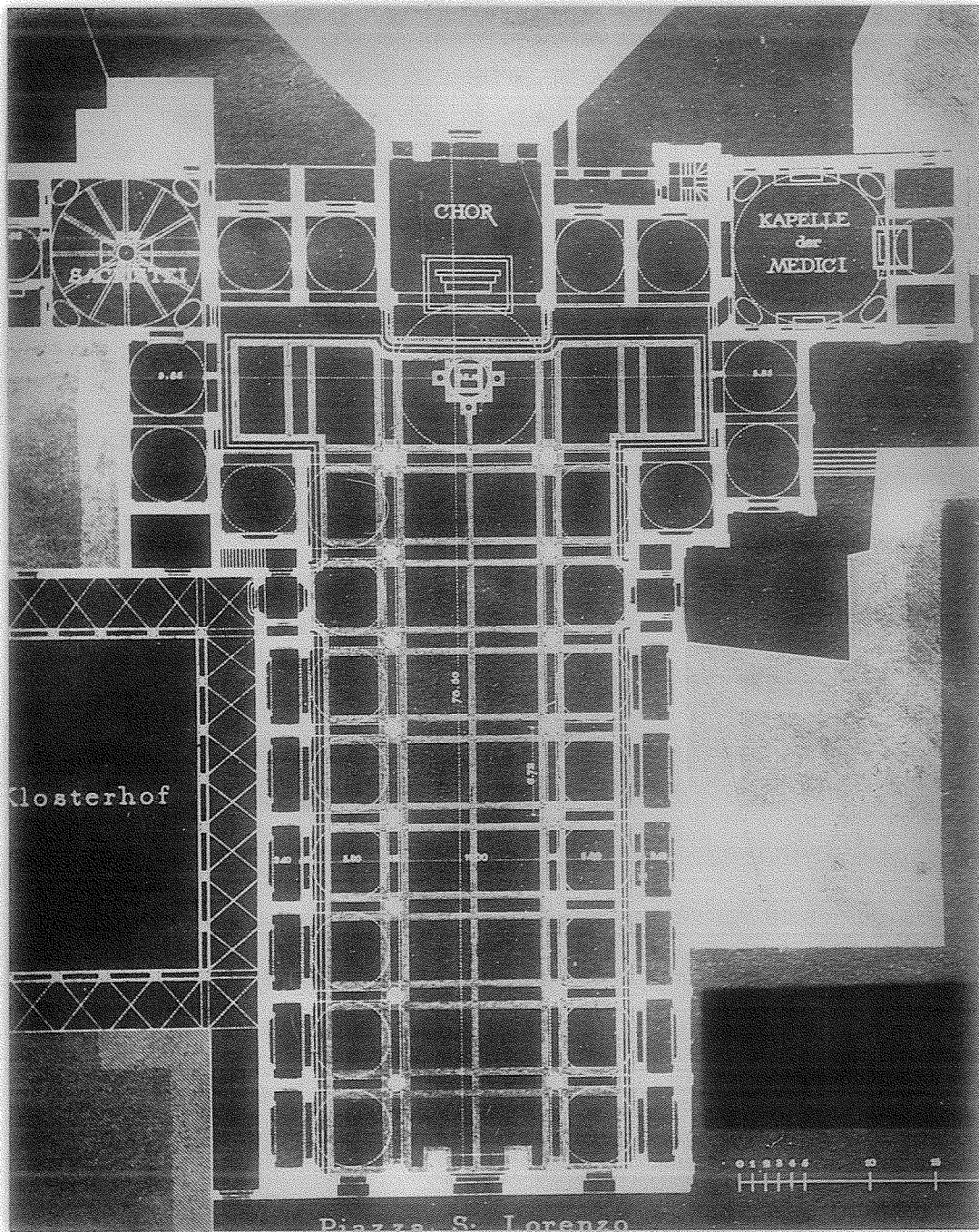
plan and order of the structure. As Bates Lowry points out,

the architectonic rigor with which Brunelleschi handled ornamental details, the uniform scaling of each part of the building, as well as their consistently clear and precise delineation, sharpened the impact already made by the sight of a building composed of a series of identical units. The spectator had the sense of comprehending the whole of its building because its appearance encouraged him to believe that he could see, beneath the surface, the design that was responsible both for its form and for his own experience of it.¹⁰

In the facade of the Foundling Hospital one feels the perfectly regular, rationally comprehensible order that controls the entire space.

In S. Lorenzo, one of Brunelleschi's churches in Florence, one sees how he made use of geometric repetition to control the space of an entire building. In S. Lorenzo Brunelleschi took an established building type--a basilica of the Latin cross variety--and subjected it to his characteristically rigorous mathematical discipline (Figure 1). Taking the square of the crossing for his module, he exactly repeated it in the transept and choir. The nave, which is comprised of four of these units, he subdivided into eight rectangular bays--the width of each being equal to the side of the module, and the length equal to one-half of this. The aisle bays are squares, the sides of which are one-half those of the module; the chapels of the transept are squares of the same size as the aisle bays. Thus, as Peter Murray notes,

FIGURE 1



BRUNELLESCHI; PLAN OF S. LORENZO, BEGUN 1421, FLORENCE.

The spectator standing in one of the aisles looks across the transept to the opening of a chapel which is related in size to the nave and the aisles.¹¹

This rational construction helps to locate the observer within the harmonious, homogeneous space it creates.

S. Lorenzo exemplifies 'perspectival' space (Plate IV). It is totally comprehensible from a fixed point. There is no need to wander around the building to understand it: all its parts logically follow from each other. Furthermore, the linear articulation created by the gray trim against the white walls is indicative of the architect's desire carefully to delineate his forms and to control the spaces they create.

One feels in his creation of perfectly regular, rational, controllable spaces, that Brunelleschi is exhibiting a mode of vision related to the same kind of philosophical tendencies as those of Alberti. It would seem that he, like Alberti, sees the world as being entirely ordered by some rational principle--as a place in which man, through his rational powers, can understand and conquer all. This assumption would seem to be borne out in a comparison of the actual architecture which Alberti designed with that of Brunelleschi. As Murray demonstrates, the common ground of the styles of these two architects is precisely in the way their confidence in the mathematical rationality and homogeneity of the world conditions the spaces they create.¹²

At approximately the same time Brunelleschi was working on S. Lorenzo, Donatello was at work on a bronze relief of the Feast of Herod for the Font of the Baptistry of Siena (Plate V).¹³ In this work Donatello demonstrates

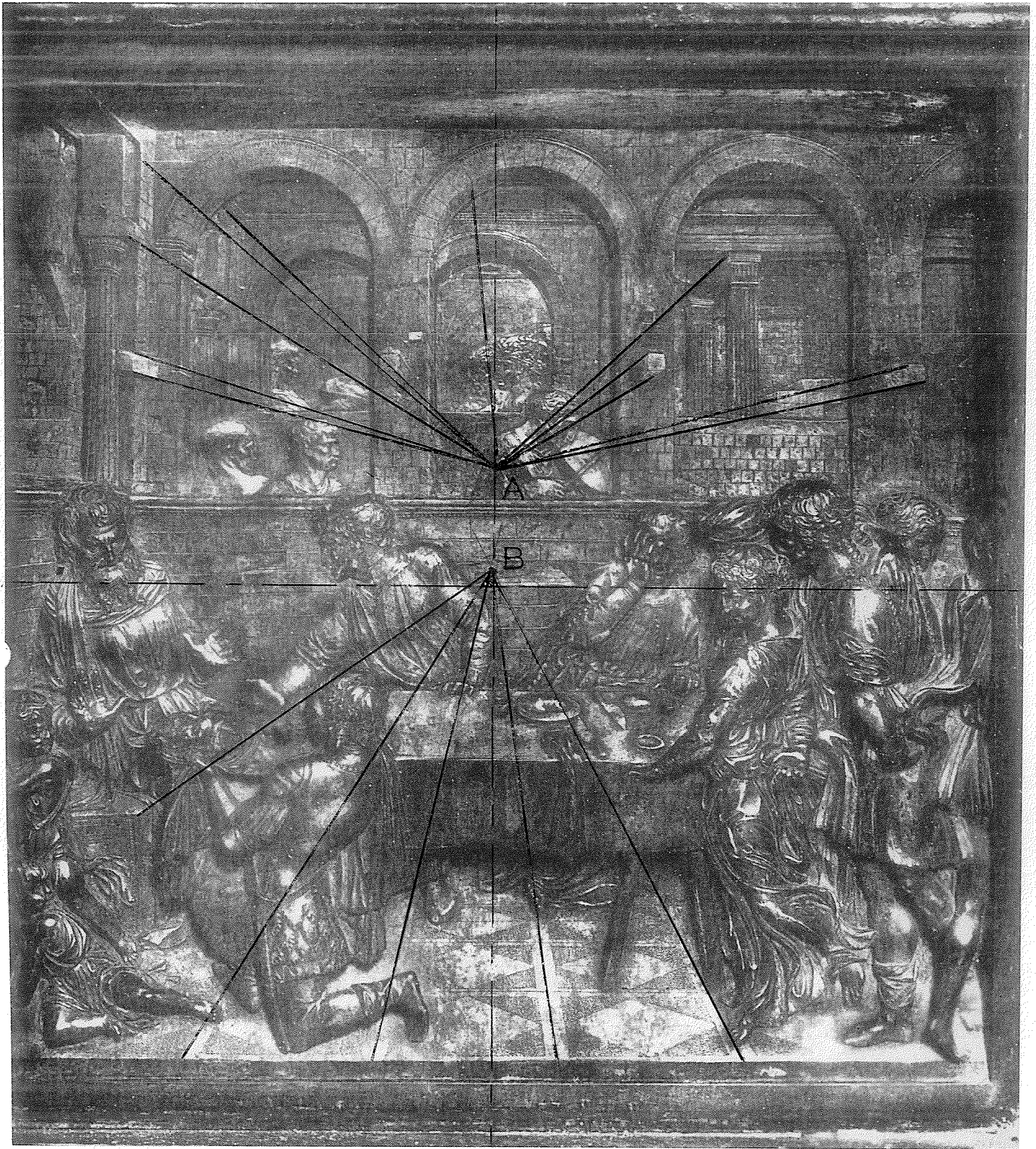
that his knowledge of the laws of perspective has developed considerably since the rather rudimentary use he made of perspective in the St. George panel. It is obvious that here Donatello's use of perspective is based on a theoretical understanding of the optical principles involved.

It is generally agreed that Donatello created in the pictorial architecture of the Herod relief a quite convincing space; yet it must be noted that this space is not the same as the simple, mathematically measurable space of Brunelleschi. Instead of the single vanishing point of Brunelleschian perspective, there are two distinctly separate points toward which the orthogonals converge (Figure 2). Below the wall which isolates the foreground of the relief is a point at which the orthogonals of the incised floor and other elements of the foreground converge. Above this same wall is the vanishing point for the orthogonals of the background elements. Both of these points lie on the vertical line which bisects the relief plane. It is also worth noting that both points lie well above the horizontal center of the relief--most certainly to compensate for the low position the panel was to occupy on the Font.

The effect of these two distinct vanishing points is to render the space discontinuous: background and foreground are not seen as part of a single, homogeneous space. Charles Seymour concludes that Donatello purposely created such a space to obtain

an effect of conflict which might arise because of the divergence of perspective points precisely where, in a 'normal' view of the harmony of nature, they would coincide at one centric point.¹⁴

FIGURE 2



PERSPECTIVE SKETCH OF THE FEAST OF HEROD.

That this is not a 'normal' view of nature is not surprising, however, for the event that is being portrayed is in no way normal. In the Biblical account of the story¹⁵, Herod's daughter, Salome, dances before her father at a banquet in his honor. To show his gratitude, Herod offers to grant her any favor that she may request. The girl, at the suggestion of her mother, asks for the head of St. John on a platter; and Herod grants the sadistic request.

Seymour observes that an "unnatural event" of this type simply would not fit with "a benign world-view of human existence predicated on a logical sequence of cause and effect in the realms both of nature and of theology."¹⁶ An evil of this magnitude cannot be absorbed into a rationally coherent system. This is the type of irreducible Evil which shakes such systems at their very foundations. It is the kind of Evil that justifiably results in space being 'out of joint'--in much the same way that "time is out of joint"¹⁷ due to the Evil present in the world Shakespeare created for Hamlet. That Donatello could see this potential in the situation which he was depicting--and that he altered his space to accommodate this potential--indicates that he must have had a view of life that would allow for the presence in the world of such Evil and injustice.

Not only did Donatello adjust his space to accommodate the potential he saw in this event, but he also altered the traditional iconography of the theme accordingly.¹⁸ At the right of the panel he adds two extra servants who turn to leave the scene of the gory event; and, more importantly, he adds two small boys at the lower left (Plate VI). These children flee from the terrifying sight of the severed head which is being presented to Herod. The one has stumbled in his haste. Yet their glance is back toward

the main action, and their eyes remain riveted on the source of their fright. The guests at the banquet, and even Herod himself, draw back in horror from the physical evidence of the evil deed which has been perpetrated.

Donatello must have recognized in the theme he was portraying "the collapse of natural law and divine goodness,"¹⁹ as Seymour claims; and, in recognition of this collapse, he must have created a pictorial world in which such things could happen. The potential of such an event could not have been realized within the rational, regular space of Brunelleschi. The realization of such potential requires the recognition of the tension and irrationality that lie hidden beneath the surface of such a system--and this can never be comprehended rationally.

The feeling of tension generated by the discontinuous space is intensified by the strong opposition within the relief between a sense of surface and of depth. The architecture consists of a series of planes parallel to the picture surface. These planes, while creating the deep pictorial space of the relief, at the same time emphasize the integrity of the actual surface. The surface of the relief asserts itself even more strongly due to the incised patterning which covers the frontal planes.²⁰

Seymour concludes that the result of the tension created within the space of the relief is that "we are left with choices that we cannot articulate and reactions that we cannot rearrange into normal patterns of experience."²¹ Donatello has thus created a world which is full of the irrationality and ambiguity that Brunelleschi and Alberti sought so rigorously to exclude. He has infused the space of the relief with possibilities that a man such as Brunelleschi not only would not have created within his art, but could not have recognized in his world. The artist who created the

Herod relief had a sense of life that was open to the idea of ambiguity and unresolved questions, of tension and irrationality, of Evil and conflict-- which is to say, the idea of tragedy.

Later Works

In the reliefs done after the Feast of Herod, one finds the same reluctance on the part of Donatello to be bound by the logically systematic space of Brunelleschian linear perspective. The space he creates is rational only to a certain point--beyond this point there can exist uncertainties and irrationalities. Donatello was willing to infuse his space with emotion as well as with reason.

The tension between surface and depth that was so evident in the Herod relief reaches its height in the schiacciato relief of the Donation of the Keys to St. Peter (Plate VII). Here the schiacciato is so extreme that there is virtually no real depth in the relief. Nevertheless, the subtly executed atmospheric perspective creates a sense of great pictorial depth (Plate VIII). This is not, however, the mathematically measurable space of Brunelleschi: "The atmosphere tends to produce an unlimited, but also indefinite sense of space."²² The tension between the integrity of the relief surface and the strong impression of depth is echoed in the nervous energy that the subtle articulation imparts to the surface.

In the Donation relief, Donatello uses the technique of perspective foreshortening to achieve illusionistic ends--even though this is a technique more commonly used to achieve realistic representation. Unlike the other figures in the marble panel, Christ is not foreshortened. The result

is that one is impressed more strongly by the fact that Christ is hovering in mid-air above the Apostles. The absence of foreshortening in the figure of Christ thus results in an unrealistic representation--but one feels that Donatello desired this result, for he realized he was dealing with an 'un-real' event.

Not only did Donatello sometimes allow emotional factors to impinge upon the rationality of his space, he at times allowed them to condition the entire nature of his space. Such cases, where the emotional impact of the dramatic action represented was responsible for the nature of the space created to contain this action, are found in Donatello's roundels in the Old Sacristy of S. Lorenzo in Florence.

It is said that Brunelleschi was displeased with Donatello on account of his work in the Old Sacristy--which Brunelleschi had designed. It is conceivable that this dissatisfaction was due to Donatello's roundels. These eight round reliefs employ architecture and perspective to create a space that is radically different from that of Brunelleschi. As John White demonstrates, these elements are used by the sculptor "to give direct emotional expression to the narrative."²³

In the relief of the Apotheosis of St. John (Plate IX)

The three pillars of the forward parapet converge, and the buildings overhead lean in towards each other in strong vertical foreshortening...These upwards accelerating lines, running together, sweeping the eye with them, give movement also to the doll-like figure of St. John, and the zig-zag architecture cutting across the scene is like a springboard for the body leaping into space.²⁴

The space of this roundel is not conditioned by man's rationality but by the emotional nature of the event that is taking place. The architecture conforms not to the rules of reason, but to the motion generated by the Saint's rise into heaven. Not even an event as remarkable as this could have convinced Brunelleschi to transgress the rules of rational space. Such a concession requires the willingness to admit that the rational order is not, after all, all-encompassing--and Donatello could readily admit this into his view of the world whereas Brunelleschi never could.

In Donatello's reliefs for the High Altar for S. Antonio in Padua, one finds the sculptor combining the concept of emotionally conditioned space that he developed in the roundels of the Old Sacristy with the idea of space conditioned by the tension between depth and surface. In these mid-century reliefs, Donatello creates rather deep, complex spaces²⁵ to contain the portrayed actions; yet, at the same time, he so strongly patterns and decoratively gilds²⁵ the frontal surfaces of the pictorial architecture that the actual relief surface is strongly evident. The spaces created in the architecture form compartments in which respective facets of the action take place. In the reliefs of The Ass of Rimini and The Speaking Babe, these compartments not only contain segments of the action, but they also are conditioned by the emotional impact of the particular actions they contain--not unlike the way in which the painted architecture of Giotto was conditioned by the action it contained. In The Ass of Rimini (Plate X), the central volume opens up to throw into sharp relief the miraculous event of an ass partaking of the Host which occurs within it. The crowd of amazed onlookers observes the event from the volumes at the sides. In The Speaking Babe (Plate XI), however, where there must of necessity be a

closer contact between the principal figures and the observers, the central space becomes less a ceremonial device for displaying the action than an intimate space to contain the great mass of people who press in to hear the babe. It has been pointed out by White that the space created is similar to that of the stage space of the theater.²⁶ It would appear that this assumption holds true not only, as White was suggesting, in so far as both create a 'stage space' in which the action takes place, but further in that both create a space that is ideally suited to the action which is to take place.

In the architectural space that Donatello creates for The Heart of the Miser (Plate XII), one feels a density and malleability which, although present to some degree in the space of other reliefs, here finds its greatest expression. The highly sculptural back wall literally molds the space it creates; the massive coffered barrel vault reveals a sense of sculptural grandeur that simply did not exist in any building of that day.²⁷ This dense, moldable concept of space vaguely reminds one of the "thickness of reality" in the philosophy of Nicolas of Cusa, and perhaps it would not be going too far to assume that the space of Donatello was "permeated with the presence of the infinite,"²⁸ as was the world of Nicolas.

The Paduan relief whose space most exhibits tragic potential is that of The Miracle of the Angry Son (Plate XIII). That this should be so is understandable, for the story portrayed in this relief has the greatest tragic potential. It deals with a boy who kicks his mother in a moment of sheer rage. Once his anger has subsided, the lad realizes the wickedness of his action and is overcome by a sense of guilt. Grief-stricken, he cuts off his foot. The moment depicted in the relief is that of S. Antonio

miraculously rejoining the severed limb to the boy's body. This story certainly does not have to be interpreted tragically: one can dwell upon the miraculous 'happy ending', be secure in the belief that this is, in fact, a just world in which penitence is rewarded, and can thus remain totally outside the realm of tragedy. Yet it is also possible to find in this story great tragic potential: here is someone who acted--and it may even be possible to imagine that he acted out of necessity (perhaps the mother should have been kicked to prevent her from committing some terrible act?)--and was then so struck by the guilt he incurred in so doing that he cut off his leg in remorse--much as Oedipus struck out his eyes.

Donatello's sense of life led him to see in this story its tragic potential. Although the iconography, most certainly prescribed by the Cathedral authorities, may have centered on the a-tragic moment of S. Antonio's intervention in the story, Donatello's spatial construction would certainly indicate that it was the earlier, tragic elements of the story that most interested him. The space he constructs for the scene is not one of harmonious order, but, on the contrary, a space of tension. The main actors are crowded into an arbitrarily defined, shallow foreground space, disregarding the deep pictorial space of the central volume which recedes with almost dizzying rapidity behind them. Moreover, the orthogonals of the building at the right vanish to a point so distinctly different from those of the other elements of the relief that it is obvious the artist consciously wrenched the building out of its normal perspective position. Such spatial dislocation certainly would not serve the purpose of emphasizing the proper order that the Saint had restored, but this "space of disjunction"²⁹ would serve to underline the tragic situation of the boy cutting off his

leg. One feels that if a Brunelleschi or an Alberti had been commissioned to do this relief, he would have seen in the story only the system-affirming elements and, oblivious to any tragic potentialities that might have existed, would have depicted the scene completely within his completely rational, regular space. Donatello, however, had a sense of life that led him to see the tragic potential of the story, and, passing over that phase of the story which gave it an a-tragic ending, he depicted the scene in a world in which such tragic potential was emphasized and could be realized, "by the liberty of breaking the mould of a system"³⁰ that tended to obscure such potential through its excessive rationality.

A Tragic View of the World

In the reliefs examined in the section above, one finds Donatello exhibiting evidence of all the component elements that together comprise the tragic sense of life. The techniques that he employed were not essentially different from those of the other 'new' artists of his day, but the way in which he used them indicates a view of the world vastly different from that of most of his contemporaries.

For Donatello, the ordering systems created by man were not binding. For Brunelleschi, as for Alberti, linear perspective and the rational order it represented could be used to understand and control all space. Donatello did not have this extreme confidence in the ability of man's rationality. Linear perspective was for him merely a general principle of organization; but it, as other such principles, had no ultimate validity as far as he was concerned. From the St. George relief on, Donatello showed that he had only limited faith in such man-made orders. He uses perspective only

This world is not one in which all is in harmony--like the harmony that exists between the elements of a Brunelleschi church. Rather it is a world wrought with tension. This tension is echoed in the nervous energy of his schiacciato surfaces and in the interplay between surface and depth.

Both Donatello and Brunelleschi recognized the importance and stature of man, and accordingly gave him the central position in their spaces. Nevertheless, it is only in the space of Donatello that man has the potential for tragic action. In Brunelleschi, as in Alberti and the mainstream of Renaissance thought, man was secure in his rationality and in the system which it created. In Donatello man was important, but his position in the universe was far from secure. Donatello saw in life those same tragic aspects that were recognized by Salutati, Nicolas of Cusa, S. Bernardino, and Pico della Mirandola. He saw in life irrationality and tension, ambiguity and conflict, limitations on reason and unresolved questions. These are the tragic elements that are found dispersed throughout the thinking of these particular Renaissance philosophers, but which are found combined in the vision of Donatello. Certainly a man who could--and did--look at the world in such terms must have had the capacity for tragedy.

5. A TRAGIC VIEW OF MAN

By examining the space of his relief sculpture, we have seen that Donatello's view of the world admitted the irrationality, ambiguity, and tension necessary for the realization of tragic potential. Moreover, in his treatment of certain themes we have seen him demonstrate a recognition of the tragic potential inherent in given situations. Yet even this is not sufficient to prove that Donatello in fact had a tragic sense of life.

The ultimate measure of an artist's tragic sensibility is the way in which he treats man. Man, as the vehicle for tragedy, is the crucial component of the tragic vision. Thus it is now necessary to examine the nature of Donatello's view of man.

The Tragic and the A-Tragic in Donatello

An artist who has a tragic sense of life does not view everything as tragic. Only in certain situations does the potential for tragedy exist; and where it does not exist, it cannot be portrayed. Shakespeare, an author who obviously had a tragic vision, saw fit sometimes to view the world in the historic or the comic mode. In his writings only certain situations are interpreted tragically--and this is as it must be: any attempt to portray lesser situations in tragic terms leads only to melodrama. Thus an artist must adopt a mode of representation that is appropriate for the theme which he is representing.

The St. George (Plate XIV), done by Donatello for the Armorer's Guild, is an early marble statue in which the artist begins to explore the human

potential for tragedy. It has been dated to 1415-1417 on the basis of the purchase date of the marble slab which serves as its base.¹

The niche on Or San Michele that the statue was designed to occupy is unusually shallow, due to a staircase enclosed in the masonry behind it.² Rather than being limited by this shallowness, Donatello exploits it to project his figure out into the real space of the street. The St. George is not statically contained by its niche; rather the saint appears ready to step out of the niche completely.

This feeling that the entire statue is about to step forward is echoed in the forms within the statue. The figure portrayed is an active young man. He is, as Vasari noted,

very vivid and proud; the head shows the beauty of youth, the brave spirit of the warrior, a true-to-life quality terrifying in its fierceness, and a marvelous sense of movement (gesto di muoversi) within the stone.³

The statue abounds with this sense of aggressive motion, and this sensation could only have been heightened by the presence of the metal sword or lance that the saint was designed to hold. This weapon, no longer extant, would have projected aggressively out into the real space of the street, intensifying the entire effect.

This aggressive motion with which Donatello imbues the St. George is called for by the theme which he is treating. In this theme the saint is aggressive and active, and the sculptor chose his mode of representation accordingly. As Filarete wrote,

When you have to do a St. Anthony, you should make him look alert, not timid. Such is the St. George as Donatello represented him...⁴

Donatello captures in his St. George the moment of the story that has the greatest tragic potential. He captures the very moment at which the saint is deciding to act:

His knitted brow, his strained glance towards the left, tells us that it is a sudden awareness of danger from that direction. The pose of our figure must be understood as a gesture of the body in response to a danger signal.⁵

Donatello is not portraying a man who blindly rushes to some activity heedless of the consequences and dangers. There are such men who engage in totally unreflective heroism--Shakespeare provides a wealth of examples such as Hotspur and Laertes--but they are not capable of tragedy. The tragic hero acts, but his action is taken with as great an awareness of the consequences as is possible. St. George is portrayed by Donatello in that moment in which he is weighing the alternatives. Charles Seymour observes that he is "midway between defense and attack."⁶ The saint's weight is on his forward leg, but his right leg and shoulder are drawn back. Donatello's statue reflects a moment of inner decision:

its emphasis was not upon corporate courage and restraint, but upon individual action, and the inward struggle for decision required to take action.⁷

Seymour sees the sculptor embodying in this statue the "dramatic moment... when, under stress, the character of a youth is moulded into that of a man,"⁸ and this is the same sort of development in a boundary situation that forms the basis for all tragedy.

The St. Louis of Toulouse (Plate XV), also done by Donatello for Or San Michele, was executed not long after the St. George. This bronze statue and the marble niche it was to occupy--which was also done by, or at least under the direction of Donatello⁹--were completed for the Parte Guelfa in ca. 1423.¹⁰ That the statue was indeed intended specifically for this particular niche--and not for the one on the façade of Santa Croce where it was placed for many years--is widely accepted by modern scholarship, particularly since 1945 when Bruno Bearzi discovered in the floor of the niche a socket meant to receive the bottom tip of St. Louis' crozier.¹¹

There is a feeling that pervades the St. Louis, however, that is radically different from that of the St. George. The St. Louis is not aggressive or active; nor is it tense or indecisive. Rather there is a calm, contemplative air about it. Particularly with his body completely shrouded in drapery, St. Louis is more of a mystical appearance than a human presence. In fact, there is so little emphasis on 'humanity' and human action that many earlier scholars were led to doubt whether this statue was 'Renaissance' enough to have been meant for the clearly Renaissance forms of the niche on Or San Michele. Men such as Planiscig concluded that the St. Louis was far too 'Gothic' ever to have been meant for the Renaissance world of this niche.¹² He also claimed that this statue was far too large to have been housed by this particular niche: the St. George, which is 209 centimeters high, is approximately the same size as the other

niche statuary on the church; the St. Louis, on the other hand, stands 266 centimeters high.¹³

The answer here, as in the St. George, lies in the fact that Donatello was employing a style of representation chosen to best express his theme. In the St. Louis he was not dealing with a story of courageous, tragic action. Gelli recounts what must be considered a somewhat apocryphal story about Donatello defending his St. Louis:

When a friend asked him why he had made a statue so...unlike his [usual] manner, he replied that he believed that he had never made a statue that was truer or closer to nature than this one. And when his friend laughed at this, he added: "I had to show that this man renounced a kingdom for the sake of becoming a friar. What sort of a person did that make him, do you think?"¹⁴

It may not be possible to place much faith in the truth of this story, but the principle at its core is certainly sound: Donatello was adjusting his style of representation to the demands of the subject matter he wished to represent.

In order to be faithful to an a-tragic theme, an artist must use an a-tragic mode of representation. St. George was an active, tragic hero; St. Louis was a contemplative, holy man. Donatello accordingly represents St. George as a human actuality who challenges his world, and St. Louis as a somewhat divine presence who confers holiness upon that world without even having to act. Thus the St. George, close to life-sized, steps ag-

the common iconography and the presence of Isaac, was begun and finished in 1421.¹⁶ The last two, called D-III and D-IV by Janson, were done between 1423 and 1435.¹⁷ It has been firmly established that these two statues are the ones commonly referred to as the Popolano and the Zuccone. There is considerable disagreement, however, as to which of these statues corresponds to which of the documents. Traditionally, D-IV, called a Habakkuk in the documents, was identified with the Zuccone, and Pope-Hennessy still maintains that this identification is correct.¹⁸ Janson and Seymour, on the other hand, claim that the Zuccone is the earlier statue, D-III, and that the Popolano is the Habakkuk.¹⁹ The arguments for both positions have much to commend them, yet neither is conclusive. Since in this study these two prophets will be treated as being roughly contemporaneous--being two later examples, as opposed to the two examples executed before the Abraham--it will not be necessary to consider the complex problem of their exact dates. Therefore we can simply refer to the statues by their common, descriptive names, and thus avoid the problem of having to decide which is the Habakkuk of the documents.

The theme of the prophet is basically similar to all these pieces, yet it was only after Donatello had dealt with it for several years that he began to recognize the full tragic potential of this theme.

The idea of the prophetic life may be interpreted in many different ways. From Early Christian times right through the Middle Ages, the emphasis was always placed on the visionary aspects of this life. What was of paramount importance about the prophet was his close contact with God and his resultant ability to foretell the future. This interpretation was far removed from the actual Old Testament picture of the prophet, however. In

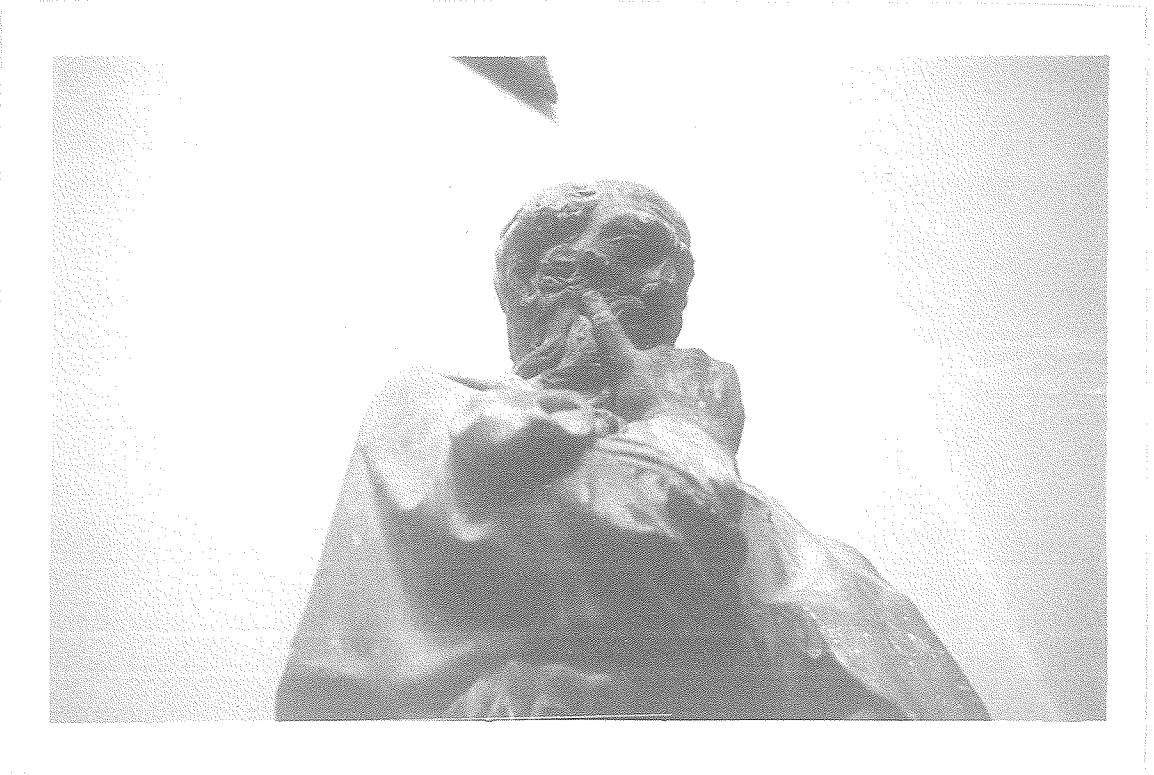
the Old Testament the emphasis was on the social, rather than the divine, context of the prophet's life. There it was the manner in which the prophet attempted to convince his people of his message that was crucially important--and the way he received that message was only of secondary importance. Moreover, the nature of his 'message', albeit in a religious context, was primarily moral. In the Old Testament the role of the prophet was to reform the morals of his society lest that society perish. This picture of the prophetic life is thus fundamentally different from that of the Medieval Christian view, which concentrated on the purely visionary, mystical side of this life.

It is obvious that the Old Testament concept of the prophet has far more tragic potential than the Medieval Christian concept. Whereas the Christian view treated the prophet as a mystic--and even an ascetic--the Hebraic view looked upon him as someone actively involved in trying to challenge the existing standards of the world. He had a vision in the Hebraic version, to be sure; but that vision was of a more moral society. And his role was that of trying to propound his message in a society that would have wanted little to do with it. It is not an easy task to convince a society of its iniquity, and it is even more difficult to convince its members to change their ways. Yet this was the Hebraic picture of prophetic life, and the Hebrew prophet did indeed suffer in the process of "maintaining his way." One who has the tragic sense of life can easily picture this process of suffering for one's cause--and the wisdom which is achieved through it--as a tragic situation.

The two early prophets Donatello carved show only a slight recognition of the tragic potential of this situation. To be sure, both the Beardless

and the Bearded Prophet are characterized as noble individuals, capable of supporting tragedy. Their stature is monumental, and their resolve is that of the man who is willing to face adversity unafraid. There is something sad about the face of the Beardless Prophet (Plate XVI); his visage shows the traces of suffering. Yet there is nothing pathetic about him. He is still firm in his resolve: he points insistently at the scroll he displays--and this scroll symbolizes the tradition to which he has dedicated his life; it is his 'message.' One feels that the Bearded Prophet (Plate XVII), too, has had to face much adversity. The problems he has faced would seem to have immersed him in a state of thoughtful examination--questioning the meaning of his own actions, as well as those of his world; yet there is no sign that his resolve has been shaken in the least. These are men of great moral strength, but they are also men of great wisdom. The Beardless Prophet is cast as a Roman orator, and the Bearded Prophet exudes a pensive wisdom. They are men who are aware of the consequences of their actions. Moreover, they are individuals. The vivid realism of their faces insists that there are personalities that lie behind them, and the viewer feels as though he is confronted with distinct individuals. (Figure 3). Nevertheless, the total feeling of these statues is not tragic. One feels that Donatello may quite naturally still have been operating under a more standard Christian interpretation of the prophetic role. His first two prophets seem to lack the active involvement so much a part of the Old Testament view of the prophet--and of the tragic sense of life. The Beardless Prophet is depicted in terms of a Roman orator, and as such he maintains a certain amount of distance from his message. He lacks the personal commitment, the total immersion required of an Old Testament prophet and of a tragic hero. The Bearded

FIGURE 3



COMPARISON OF THE HEADS OF THE BEARDLESS PROPHET
AND THE BEARDED PROPHET.

Prophet, on close examination, seems a little too pensive—a little too introspective; tragedy requires more concession to activity.

The Abraham and Isaac (Plate XVIII) was not done by Donatello alone. The Cathedral documents refer to this as a joint commission of Donatello and Nanni di Bartolo, also called Il Rosso. Nevertheless, the daring design of the statue would not have been within the capabilities of Nanni, and must therefore be attributed to Donatello. Morisani has also observed that the overall quality of the carving and the subtlety of touch are too masterful to have been by the hand of Nanni.²⁰ The piece must therefore be the design, and, for the most part, the hand of Donatello; and Nanni's role must merely have been the carving of some of the details.

The theme of the Sacrifice of Isaac is wrought with tragic potential. It was this story that inspired Kierkegaard to write his Fear and Trembling; and this work thoroughly explores the tragic implications of this theme. Kierkegaard recognized in this story the tremendous, irreducible paradox that faced Abraham: the promise of the Covenant, that Abraham was to be the father of a great nation, was to be fulfilled through Isaac, and yet God was telling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. "Abraham suffered, whereas all the while he nevertheless believed."²¹ This paradox transcends all solutions; it results in what Kierkegaard termed "a suspension of the ethical." There was no way to resolve the paradox, yet Abraham had to act anyway—and therein lies the tragedy.

Naturally, one need not find in the story any tragic potential—and most men do not. To the Medieval Christian, this is the story about a man so devoutly religious that he was willing to obey God's commandment without hesitation. Such men see no great paradox in the story, no great suffering on the part of Abraham. He was simply obeying God's will—which

he had no reason to doubt; and in the end was rewarded, as would be expected. One sees this blind obedience in the interpretations of this theme by Ghiberti and Brunelleschi in their competition panels of 1401. In the Ghiberti panel, Abraham prepares to act and his son accepts--all under the gaze of the onlooking angel. In the Brunelleschi relief, Isaac squirms in horror as his determined father is stopped by the angel at the very moment he is about to complete the sacrifice. In neither representation is Abraham pained or remorseful: he is simply carrying out God's command. One has the feeling that all is divinely ordained, and that the 'happy ending' follows quite naturally upon the father's show of complete obedience to God. There is no room for tragedy in so orderly an interpretation.

In Donatello's treatment of the theme one finds some hints that the sculptor was sensitive to the tragic potential of his story. There is no angel present in his group to indicate that all is comfortably divinely ordained; father and son are in close, human contact with each other--with nothing to mitigate the immediate implications of what Abraham was about to do. Moreover, Abraham's pained expression gives the impression that he is well aware of the horror of the deed he was about to commit.

Even if Donatello did realize some of the tragedy which was latent in this story, however, his statue does not represent the moment at which the tragic nature of the situation was most apparent (Plate XIX). The real tragic moment has passed:

Abraham is not about to plunge his knife
into his son...but his tensed right arm is
beginning to grow slack, the knife is sliding
away from the boy's throat. In other words,

we see the moment "after the event--the angel
has come and gone--rather than the climax
itself.²²

Donatello has thus chosen to represent the moment after the tragic tension--
the irreducible paradox--has been resolved.

That the sculptor did not portray the tragic moment of the story does
not in any way mean he was oblivious to the tragic potential of the situa-
tion. The climactic moment of this story was one that would have been
familiar to any Florentine viewer; it did not have to be cited specifically
to be evoked. Donatello seems to have been assuming that part of the story
and proceeding to examine the aftermath of it.

This examination of the results of a tragic experience is not unknown
in literary tragedy. This is precisely what Sophocles was doing in Oedipus
at Colonus. In an earlier play, Oedipus the King, the reader saw Oedipus
acting out his tragic existence--living through his tragic moment. It was
in the earlier play that he chose his course of action and attempted to
live it through. There was his resolve and his confrontation with experience;
but above all, there was his action in which all else was contained. Oedipus
at Colonus does not include a total action with all its tragic involvements.
Quite the contrary, it is a close, reflective examination of those events
and actions which had been completed at an earlier time. The play is cen-
tered about Oedipus' realization and examination of his tragic perception--
of the wisdom he gained through his suffering. At the end of the hero's
life there is a resolution that serves to affirm the value and validity of
his past strivings. This resolution is an indication that Sophocles in this
play is moving beyond tragedy, for ideally tragedy maintains a balance which

avoids any final resolution. Oedipus at Colonus is still highly tragic: it is full of tragic elements woven together by an author with one of the most highly developed tragic sensibilities of all times. Nevertheless, it is not completely tragic, for the hero is no longer living through a tragic experience, but rather reflecting back on one.

In the Abraham the tragic ordeal is over; the paradox has somehow been resolved. Yet the pained, bewildered expression of Abraham reflects more than the suffering he endured before the appearance of the angel. Abraham still has a difficult task before him: he must now try to make some sense of what he has experienced. We see him in a painfully human situation--he is standing there with his son, whom he was about to kill--and it is obvious that whatever meaning he draws from this situation, he will have to find it in human terms. The angel, symbolic of the divine intervention in the story, has come and gone, causing a resolution of the action, but not resolving the problems which lie at the heart of Abraham's experience. Rembrandt did an Abraham and Isaac that depicted this same moment, after the angel's appearance. In his treatment, however, the angel is still present, conferring a divine meaning on the experience--and the awe-filled expression of Abraham reflects the wondrous perception he receives. Donatello's Abraham has no one who will bestow this understanding upon him--he must find it for himself. Out of the scrambled manifold of what he has experienced he must draw his own meaning. Yet one feels confident that Abraham will gain wisdom from his suffering and be able to find meaning in it. As Charles Seymour observes:

The patriarch, mutely and sluggishly turning
and looking upward, is on the point of seeing

truth. The physical dimensions are about to be increased by a new dimension of spiritual perception.²³

He has been through a tragic experience, and the proof of this is in the perception he gains. True, this resolution moves beyond the realm of tragedy, for it concentrates on the perception rather than the process through which this perception has been gained. Nevertheless, such a conception of this theme presupposes a recognition of the full tragic potential of the events leading up to it.

Donatello most fully realizes the tragic potential of the prophetic theme in his last two prophets, the Popolano and the Zuccone. In these two figures Donatello embodies all the powerful human drama of tragedy.

The Popolano (Plates XX to XXIII) is a strong-willed, determined man who faces his task with an unswerving directness. Donatello has depicted him in the very act of delivering his message: in his left hand he clutches the scroll which contains that message (Plate XX). This is not a scroll which he displays, as did the Beardless Prophet (Figure 4). That earlier prophet was cast as a Roman orator, and his scroll was a formal device of rhetoric, used by him as a prop. The scroll of the Popolano is not something he uses visually to inspire his audience; on the contrary, it is something from which he draws his personal inspiration. This scroll is his own little fragment: it is a humble document, crumpled from long use. It draws its significance not from its physical characteristics, but from the moral importance of its contents; and it becomes an important part of the statue not through optically asserting itself on the viewer's senses, but through psychologically asserting itself on the viewer's overall comprehension

FIGURE 4



COMPARISON OF THE SCROLLS OF THE BEARDLESS PROPHET
AND IL POPOLANO.

of the work. It is important to the statue because it is so greatly important to the prophet. The scroll symbolizes the message to which he has chosen to devote his life. He faces his people to propound that message, holding his scroll before him almost as if for moral support.

It must be remembered that the message of the prophet was never an easy one for his audience to accept. The Old Testament prophet had a message that was primarily moral and a role that was essentially that of social reform. His was the difficult task of convincing his fellow men of their injustice and iniquity. Moreover, he had to get them to change their ways. People are never readily convinced that their behavior is wrong, and they are even slower to be convinced that they should change. Thus the work of the prophet was always met with much resistance.

The Popolano would appear to react angrily to the resistance he meets in propounding his message (Plate XXI). The intense furrow of his brow, his tight frown, the tensed muscles of his face, the strained sinews which stand out on his neck--his expression reveals an angry disapproval, not only of his people's iniquity, but also of their blindness. He has tried to warn them, and they have not accepted his message.

The Popolano looks angrily away from his people (Plate XXII). His gaze is off to the left and up--above the heads of his audience. He averts his gaze not to ignore his people and become introspective, nor to turn to an ascetic mysticism by withdrawing from the demands of the situation, but rather to gather his energy for another volley. He is disgusted with his people and his entire figure reflects the tension of his anger: the muscles of his right arm are tense and strained, causing the veins to stand out sharply; his right hand is angrily pressed so hard against his thigh that

it gives energy to the powerful undulations of drapery that seem to spread away from this gesture as ripples spread from a disturbance on water (Plate XX, and Figure 5). Nevertheless, he will not abandon those who have caused this anger. The determination in his gaze is as obvious as the anger, and in his entire figure one feels a solidity that reflects his resolve. His strong conviction obviously will triumph over those feelings which try to shake it. He looks away to regain his composure, but he will again return to his task. He faces great adversity, but he will never yield to that adversity.

There is in the Popolano a powerful realization of the tragic implications of the role of the prophet. In it one can see what it means, in human terms, to devote one's life to propounding a message that people do not wish to hear. One feels with the prophet the anger and frustration of being rejected by the very people to whom he has dedicated his life. One feels the suffering of a man who is willing to step outside the system and question accepted norms. In the fiery spirit of the Popolano, Donatello seems to have recaptured something of the Old Testament, tragic concept of the prophetic life.

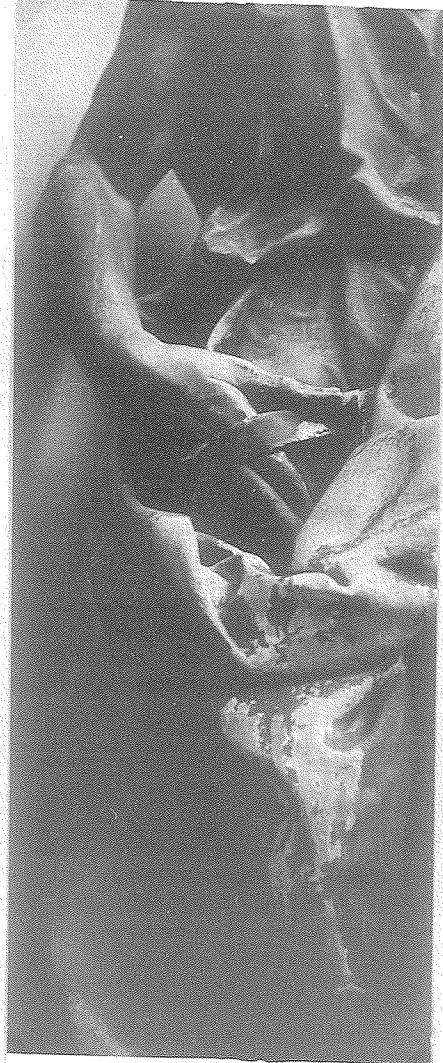
The Zuccone (Plates XXIV to XXVII) shows the same awareness of the tragic potential of the prophetic life, yet in this statue one feels a very different response to this situation. The Zuccone is a man who faces the same adversity and rejection in the course of "maintaining his ways" as did the Popolano, but he, unlike the other prophet, has come to accept this adversity. This is not to say that he accepts the world's iniquity, or that he has given up the painful process of trying to eradicate it, for there is a feeling of resolve about the Zuccone that is at least as strong as that of the Popolano.

It is a quiet resolve, however, unlike the fiery, unwavering determination of the Popolano. The Zuccone is strong: a look at the marvelously muscled right arm tells the observer that this is a man of great physical stamina, if not of the great physical activity which was reflected in the tensed muscles of the Popolano (Plate XXIV); but more importantly, his knowing gaze betokens a wisdom that will enable him to persist in the face of adversity. There is an aura of assurance about this figure that makes one certain that when he feels he is right his resolve will be unshakable, and that he could never be forced to abandon a cause in which he believes. Nevertheless, one feels that this man has come to accept the suffering he must undergo in the process of propounding such a cause.

The suffering of the Zuccone is evident (Plate XXV). His face is sad and somewhat pained. Problems have deeply furrowed his brow. His eyes are deep and heavy. Yet there is no trace of pathos. One recognizes that this man has suffered, but one does not pity him. One cannot pity him, for one is forced to admire his greatness--and that greatness would seem to have come, at least in part, from his suffering. His great bald head, his knowing glance, his aura of assurance--his calm resolve combines with a sense of the adversity he has had to face to give an impression of a man with the highest form of wisdom--that which, in the words of Aeschylus, "comes through suffering alone."

The Zuccone does not look away in anger, but rather looks down at his people compassionately (Plate XXVI). Unlike the Popolano, whose lips were pressed tightly together, the Zuccone's lips are slightly parted. He is not tense, he is relaxed; he is not angry, he is tired. His right arm, almost identical in pose to that of the Popolano, is totally different in

FIGURE 5



COMPARISON OF THE RIGHT ARMS OF IL POPOLANO
AND LO ZUCCONE.

feeling (Figure 5). Whereas the latter's arm was strained and tense, that of the Zuccone is relaxed. The hand does not press against the thigh, but rather rests there in a loose belt. His drapery is not agitated and energetic like that of the Popolano. In the Zuccone there is a great, heavy mantle that hangs over the shoulder and down the front of the figure (Plate XXVII). This mantle is cut so deeply into the marble--the folds are often ten to sixteen centimeters deep, whereas the base of the statue itself is only thirty-eight centimeters in depth--that one is given the impression that it is a great weight that actually bears down upon the figure.

This sense of the prophet bearing up under a great load was precisely the effect that Donatello wished to create. Physically, the weight may be that of the mantle, but thematically it is the demands of the prophetic life. Donatello is depicting the prophet who has come to accept his role--not becoming angry at the adversity he must face, but rather 'bearing up' under the great weight of his task.

In both the Popolano and the Zuccone, the power Donatello achieves is derived from his recognition of the tragic potential in the role of the prophet. His interpretation here has little to do with the Medieval picture of the prophet as visionary. These men are not otherworldly in the least. They are intimately and immediately concerned with the events of this world. It is not even so very essential to understand what the individual message of each of these men is. The real importance lies in the recognition of what they must go through to propound this message. Donatello saw the tragic implications of prophecy in the Old Testament sense, and he explored these implications in terms of what they mean for individual human beings.

There can be no denying the individuality of the Popolano and the

Zuccone. Their totally different reactions to what was essentially the identical situation indicates a fundamental difference in personality that seems to be consistently carried out throughout the entirety of the pieces. The great individuality of the statues has even led to much speculation about their possibly being portraits. There is a legend that developed early in the history of these works that they were in fact the likenesses of Giovanni di Barduccio Cherichini and Francesco Soderini.²⁴ Unfortunately, these speculations are, as Janson says, only "fanciful psychological interpretations."²⁵ That they exist, however, is an indication of the highly individualized personalities of the statues they deal with.

Donatello was able, within a Christian context, to see in the theme of the prophets all the tragic potential that the ancient Hebrews had envisioned-- and perhaps even more. In the true spirit of the Renaissance and of the tragic artist, he examined this potential in terms of what it meant for individual human beings. Even at the stage of his fullest recognition of the tragic implications of this theme, he was willing to admit that differences in personality could greatly affect the nature of human action in a tragic situation. In examining individual reactions, Donatello managed to arrive at what Charles Seymour has called a "'portrait' of the tragic genius of prophecy;"²⁶ for man, in the view of Donatello, could have the stature, the courage, and the individual assertiveness to exist in the tragic mode.

6. MAN "ON THE WAY"

Tragic sensibility requires not only a certain view of the world and a certain concept of man, but ultimately requires a particular type of activity in the world. Tragedy occurs only in the course of human activity; it deals with man in action. To achieve the level of tragedy man must be able to rise to meet the demands of the situation; he may not fall short, for to do so lowers him into the realm of the pathetic. At the same time, however, tragic man is always unable to transcend his situation; he never goes beyond the existential fact of his human dilemma toward some higher resolution. Tragedy thus consists of man meeting extreme, boundary situations--but always in human terms. It deals with man in the process of his activity, with man "on the way."

The Nature of Human Activity in Donatello

To determine the nature of human action in the art of Donatello, it will be useful to compare his works with those of two quattrocento painters, Masaccio and Castagno. These men surround Donatello chronologically. Masaccio was actually a contemporary of Donatello, but his career was abruptly cut short by his death in 1428. Castagno, born as late as 1423¹, was a member of the next generation of Florentine artists. Furthermore, these two men were familiar with the works of Donatello: Masaccio was a friend of his,² and Castagno, like all artists in the generation which followed Donatello in Florence, would certainly have known the works of so famous a master. The manner in which these two painters treat human activity will

therefore serve to throw Donatello's treatment into sharper relief.

By the mid-twenties, the paintings of Masaccio demonstrate the artist's solid, theoretical grasp of the laws of linear perspective. The painted architecture of his Holy Trinity fresco in Sta. Maria Novella conforms rigorously to these laws. The figures of the Virgin, St. John, and the two donors are carefully foreshortened in conformity with the low viewing point of the fresco. Nevertheless, Masaccio admitted some non-rational effects to emphasize the supernatural, visionary nature of the theme he was portraying: Christ and God the Father, who should be sharply foreshortened due to their high position in the composition, are left completely un-foreshortened. The effect Masaccio achieves by deliberately exempting these figures from the laws of perspective³ is to heighten the 'unreality' of the event that is taking place. Despite this illusionism, however, the space the painter creates is basically a deep, rather logical one. Similarly, Masaccio creates a deep, continuous space for his fresco of the Tribute Money in the Brancacci Chapel (Plate XXVIII). This effect is achieved only in part through the use of linear perspective, as in the architecture of the building at the right. For the most part the artist relies on the more empirical technique of atmospheric perspective to create the vast, more loosely defined space of the landscape of the fresco.

In the Tribute Money, Masaccio populates his space with great, monumental figures. These figures have a solidity and a power that suggest a kind of nobility. The Giottoesque force and authority with which these figures assert themselves indicate that they are men who represent the highest degree of human potential.

What is peculiar about the Tribute Money fresco is that there is

tension between surface and depth as there is in any Donatello relief. The deep space of what at first appears to be a large airy hall is contradicted by the way the wildly veined marble panel in the wall behind Christ jumps forward at the viewer. Its assertive patterning insistently emphasizes the actual surface of the fresco, while the other marble panels, without this forceful veining, tend to sink back into the pictorial depths of the space. The rationally incongruous effect of identical architectural elements appearing to exist at inexplicably different depths generates a tension that reverberates throughout the entire composition. This tension is echoed in the ceiling of the painted architecture, where the optically unstable arrangement of alternating bands of light and dark keeps the observer's eye in a state of constant agitation. One finds similarly irrational effects in Castagno's St. Jerome fresco in SS. Annunziata (Plate XXX). Here the extreme foreshortening of Christ creates an emotionally illusionistic effect of an intensity that Masaccio never created.

As in Masaccio's Tribute Money, the figures in Castagno's St. Jerome are more symbols than actors--but in a way completely different from the calm, eternal grandeur of Masaccio. In Castagno the symbolic narrative of Masaccio is replaced by emblematic emotion. The two Mary's in the St. Jerome fresco gesture intensely. Mary Magdalene throws open her extended palms toward the divine vision above, while Mary of Egypt clasps her hands to her breast. We can tell little about these two figures, for rather than facing the viewer they turn their backs on him, looking back into the picture space at the vision of the Trinity. They exist primarily for the emotional impact they add to the scene. St. Jerome himself is clothed in violently agitated drapery. His tunic is thrown open to reveal his blood-stained chest. His

tense, extended right arm still grips the stone with which he has been beating himself. His gaunt face (Plate XXXI) is contorted in an expression of emotional ecstasy. St. Jerome is not a human being with the full complement of human emotions and thoughts: rather he is consumed by a single, all-pervading emotion. Thus Castagno's representation is one of pathos, not tragedy.

Donatello occupies a position between these two painters--not only in time, but in spirit. In a composition such as his Herod (Plate V), one observes that he avoids the stabilizing composition focus Masaccio works to attain. The center of Donatello's relief space is simply a blank section of wall; the action takes place elsewhere. Without this centering to lock the composition in place, the action is carried off in several directions. In the case of the servants at the far right and the children at the left, it carries right out of the represented space.

Donatello's figures are not sensed as inert symbols. They react emotionally and physically to what is going on. The guests and even Herod himself draw back in horror from the sight of the severed head. These figures are not given the heavy, stable drapery of Masaccio's figures; rather, their drapery is as agitated as the reactions of their bodies.

Perhaps the best examples of Donatello's expressive use of drapery are the Popolano and the Zuccone (Plates XXI and XXVII). Here the drapery is highly expressive of the individual psychological state of each of the prophets: the drapery of the Popolano is tense and agitated while that of the Zuccone is heavy and burdensome.

Although Donatello's figures show far more emotion than the rather stolid, idealized, symbolic figures of Masaccio, they are not consumed by

these emotions as is Castagno's St. Jerome. The Prophets clearly have their emotions, but they subordinate them to their sense of conviction. The Popolano is angry and the Zuccone is tired, but both will continue in their earthly task because of their overriding determination and devotion. They will never lose sight of their earthly purpose, nor will they give way to emotional or mystical ecstasy such as that of St. Jerome.

The most moving aspect of Donatello's figures is their humanity. They are noble, but not so noble as to transcend the temporal world of human action, as in Masaccio. They feel emotions, but not so strongly as to be consumed by them and to move out of the realm of earthly existence into the mystical pathos of Castagno. Donatello's men are individuals with the full range of complex feelings, thoughts, emotions, and aspirations that characterize real human beings. They are great men because of the determination, courage, and perseverance they show in the face of adversity--but they are no more than men.

It is interesting to see that Donatello sometimes even thought of Christ in such human terms. In the Resurrection relief (Plate XXXII) of the bronze pulpits he executed for S. Lorenzo at the end of his career, Donatello presents an image of Christ that is unique in the quattrocento--and perhaps in all of history. This resurrected Christ is not at all like the traditional Christ of Castagno (Plate XXXIII). Castagno's Christ appears triumphantly as a divine vision, unmarred by what he has suffered. Donatello's Christ (Plate XXXIV) is a haggard, tattered, weary figure whose trials have clearly left their mark. Christ drags himself out of Limbo, his face drawn and his eyes squinting from the strain. It is almost as though this were a human being, and not God, who had undergone Christ's suffering.

Donatello saw action always in terms of what it meant for human beings. He may have been interested in the eternal significance of such action, but his prime focus was on its immediate, temporal significance. Thus it was that he concentrated not on that which was symbolized by human actions, but rather on the process of human beings in action. In a genuinely tragic manner, he chose to draw meaning directly from man's confrontation with experience, rather than to attempt artificially to superimpose meaning upon that experience.

Conclusions

Through the examination of Donatello's art we have found that his vision was one that could validly be called tragic. It was seen that the philosophy of his period was, in a general way, open to such a vision, even if the mainstream of thought was essentially a-tragic. Furthermore, we noted that there were several variants of the thought of the period that closely approached the tragic sense of life. Although these factors make feasible attributing tragic sensibility to a man of Donatello's day, it is only the actual art of Donatello that establishes him as the possessor of such a vision.

Donatello saw in the world all those elements necessary for the existence of tragedy. His art shows a recognition of the underlying irrationality that renders man's logical systematizations only relative. He employed the rational principles of linear perspective, for he felt that the process of rational human inquiry was justified; but he was never bound by these rational laws, for he recognized that not all of experience could be reduced to such rational terms. His willingness to admit the presence of the irrational led

him to view the world as a place where--in the midst of man's seemingly secure rational order--there could exist ambiguities and unresolved questions of tragic magnitude: and the tension which pervades his space reflects the tension that pervades such a world.

Donatello pictured man as having the capability to support tragedy. Certainly not all of his figures have this great potential--but the tragic man can be considered common in no group. Donatello did endow some of his figures with enough stature to enable them to exist in the tragic mode. Certain of his men seem obviously capable of "maintaining their ways" in the face of any amount of adversity--and, moreover, of learning from their suffering. It is these figures--men such as the Popolano and the Zuccone--that demonstrate the sculptor's ability to see man as equal to the demands of tragedy.

Donatello recognized the tragic potential of certain forms of human action. He viewed man in his activity, and his art portrays man in the actual process of living through his experience. Yet the activity of Donatello's figures is never unreflective. He endows his actors with an aura of wisdom and understanding that assures the viewer that these men will be able to draw meaning from their experiences. Moreover, Donatello recognized the tragic potential in certain themes. His treatment of the Miracle of the Angry Son indicates a focus upon the tragic aspects of that story. In his treatment of the Prophets for the Campanile, the sculptor realized a tragic potential which, while inherent in the Old Testament theme, had all but been destroyed by the Medieval reading of the subject. Donatello seemed to recognize that in certain boundary situations--situations that forced man to act outside the security of his rational order, and to come to grips

with the irrationality that lay beneath that order--man could find the fullest answers to the fundamental questions of existence.

Finally, Donatello recognized the irreducible complexity that characterizes all human activity. He understood the ambiguity that accompanies moral decisions in real life situations--where the alternatives rarely offer a choice between clear good and clear evil, but more commonly represent a combination of both in an unclear mixture. He also understood the complex galaxy of thoughts, emotions, desires, and fears that represents the psyche of every individual. He thus could see and represent that intense dilemma of tragic man.

All these elements of Donatello's art, reflecting components of his mode of vision, tell us a great deal about the way this man must have viewed life itself. Moreover, the realization that he had such a view of life ultimately leads to a greater understanding of his art. Thus Donatello's tragic sense of life, which we have found exemplified in his art, again leads us back to his art. Having made this circuit, however, we have gained an understanding of certain aspects of his artistic expression, and we are now able to see in his art dimensions of which we were formerly unaware.

The Tragic Human Predicament

In the manner of one who views life in accordance with the tragic vision, Donatello recognized the problems that could arise in the process of human activity. Donatello saw the world as permeated with irrationality, tension, and conflict. Within this world man's knowledge was imperfect, and his rationality could carry him only so far. In Donatello's art, therefore,

man may find himself bound by necessity to make a decision in a situation in which he will be guilty regardless of what he decides. Thus man, in Donatello's conception, can be enmeshed in tragedy. Donatello's treatment of the Christ before Pilate relief (Plate XXXV) for the bronze pulpits for S. Lorenzo can only be understood in terms of this tragic human predicament.

In the Middle Ages, Pilate was viewed in the dichotomous moral terms so typical of that time. As his role is somewhat ambiguous in the Biblical account, he was alternately regarded as either entirely good or entirely evil. In the Ethiopian Church he is a saint, while on the bronze doors of the Hildesheim Cathedral he is pictured in league with the devil.⁶ Although the Medieval mind could envision him at either extreme of the moral spectrum, its moral system--which precluded the concept of moral neutrality--left no possibility of seeing him as occupying an ambiguous, middle position.

Donatello, however, seems to have abandoned both of the extreme positions in favor of just such a moral status. The sculptor places immediately behind Pilate a servant who brings the governor the water in which he will later wash his hands. In an unprecedented iconographic departure, Donatello depicts this servant as a two-faced, Janus figure (Plate XXXVI).

Irving Lavin has suggested that this Janus figure, as its antique prototype, symbolizes the idea of 'alternation.'⁷ Since this servant is not part of the Biblical account of the story, and

since he was invented expressly to assist in the act of hand-washing, any meaning attached to him would be automatically associated with that act, and hence with Pilate.⁸

To associate the idea of alternation with Pilate is a radical departure from the traditional interpretation of the event. Tradition weighed heavily in favor of looking at Pilate as an archetype--representing either a force of good or a force of evil. The mainstream of Renaissance philosophy--with its confidence in man's ability to know good from evil, and with the moral polarity that results from this confidence--would have concurred with such a reading of the situation. Nevertheless Donatello, with his tragic sensibility, was able to look upon even Pilate as an individual. In these terms he was able to perceive the moral dilemma with which Pilate was faced. Pilate found no evil in Christ, yet he was unable to dispute the charges of Christ's accusers. He was confronted by a decision he did not have sufficient rational knowledge to make.

By viewing this predicament in human terms, Donatello was able to gain insight into the complex thoughts and emotions the Medieval moral dichotomy had reduced. Donatello could picture Pilate as a man experiencing doubt, anxiety, and conflict. He could see the 'alternation' and indecision of Pilate in much the same terms Shakespeare could see these reactions in Hamlet. Donatello could understand the agonizing, human decision-making process in which Pilate was embroiled.

Although Pilate, who ultimately 'washes his hands' of his predicament, may not have had the stature to see his tragic dilemma through to its conclusion, Donatello, in recognizing the human anguish and tragic potential involved in this situation, fully understood the tragedy of the human predicament. Perhaps alone in his time, he possessed what we call the tragic sense of life.

NOTES

Chapter 1

¹Lorenzo Valla, here quoted from Peter and Linda Murray, The Art of the Renaissance (New York, 1963), p. 9.

²All that remains are a few tax declarations.

³H. W. Janson, The Sculpture of Donatello (Princeton, 1963), p. xv.

Chapter 2

¹Miguel de Unamuno, The Tragic Sense of Life, trans. J. E. Crawford Fitch (New York, 1954).

²Richard B. Sewall, The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven, 1959), p. 24.

³Ibid., p. 5.

⁴Ibid., p. 46.

⁵Ibid., p. 47.

⁶Karl Jaspers originated this phrase in 1919, inspired by his reading of Kierkegaard. I first came across it and its history in R. Sewall, op. cit., p. 151.

⁷Paul Tillich, The Protestant Era (Chicago, 1948), p. 197.

⁸Job, 13:15.

⁹Jay Leyda, The Melville Log (New York, 1951), entry under 23 March 1850.

¹⁰R. Sewall, op. cit., p. 48.

¹¹Sophocles, Oedipus the King, trans. David Greene (Chicago, 1942), l. 989.

¹²Ibid., ll. 1060-1061.

- ¹³Ibid., ll. 1065-1066
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- ⁴⁰Ibid., p. 32.
- ⁴¹E. Cassirer, op. cit., p. 50, notes that Nicolas of Cusa was not so much as mentioned by the Florentine Platonists or by Pomponazzi, but that there is evidence that there was some knowledge of him--particularly by Alberti.
- ⁴²Etienne Gilson, History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages (New York, 1955), p. 536.
- ⁴³E. Cassirer, op. cit., p. 22. (parenthetical remarks my own, R. R.).
- ⁴⁴R. B. Sewall, op. cit., p. 7.
- ⁴⁵Idem.
- ⁴⁶Roland Bainton, op. cit., pp. 93-4.
- ⁴⁷Ibid., p. 94.
- ⁴⁸Idem.
- ⁴⁹Hans Baron, The Crises of the Early Renaissance (Princeton, 1955), p. 187.
- ⁵⁰J. H. Plumb, The Italian Renaissance (New York, 1961), p. 58.

⁵¹E. Cassirer, op. cit., p. 62.

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⁵³E. Cassirer, loc. cit.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 62-3.

Chapter 4

¹The date of the document is probably as Janson contends, the old Florentine style; vid., H. W. Janson, The Sculpture of Donatello (Princeton, 1963), p. 24.

²H. W. Janson, op. cit., p. 30.

³Idem.

⁴Idem.

⁵John Pope-Hennessy, Italian Renaissance Sculpture (London, 1958), p. 273.

⁶H. W. Janson, op. cit., p. 31.

⁷J. Pope-Hennessy, op. cit., p. 267.

⁸Alberti mentions this friendship in his treatise on painting, L. B. Alberti, op. cit., p. 39. Thus, even if later in their lives the two men were sometimes at odds with each other, it is certain that they were friends in their formative years--when Alberti's work was written.

⁹One such study that was available as early as the turn of the century was John Peckham's Perspectiva Communis.

¹⁰Bates Lowry, Renaissance Architecture (New York, 1965), p. 12.

¹¹Peter Murray, The Architecture of the Italian Renaissance (London, 1963), p. 34.

¹²Ibid., p. 52.

- ¹³ According to Pope-Hennessy, op. cit., p. 267, work was begun on S. Lorenzo in 1421, and was still in progress in 1446. The earliest mention of Donatello's involvement with the Siena sculpture is in a document of May, 1423 (Péleo Bacci, Jacopo della Quercia, nuovi documenti (Siena, 1929), p. 124.) It is also soundly documented that the finished relief was in the possession of the Cathedral Workshop of Siena by 13 April 1427 (P. Bacci, op. cit., p. 168). Thus it had to be done between 1423 and 1427; probably ca. 1425, as suggested by Janson, op. cit., p. 68.
- ¹⁴ Charles Seymour, Jr., Sculpture in Italy (Baltimore, 1966), pp. 80-1.
- ¹⁵ Matthew, 4:6-11; and Mark, 6:21-8.
- ¹⁶ C. Seymour, op. cit., p. 81.
- ¹⁷ William Shakespeare, Hamlet, I, v, l. 189.
- ¹⁸ For a discussion of the traditional iconography of the Feast of Herod, vid. H. W. Janson, op. cit., pp. 70-1.
- ¹⁹ C. Seymour, loc. cit.
- ²⁰ John White, The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space (London, 1957), p. 150.
- ²¹ C. Seymour, loc. cit.
- ²² J. White, op. cit., p. 151.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 152.
- ²⁴ Idem.
- ²⁵ J. White, op. cit., p. 155, notes that this was not the overall gilding of Ghiberti's panels or even of Donatello's Herod, but a selective, decorative use of the gilding process that added to the sense of surface patterning.
- ²⁶ Ibid., pp. 154ff.
- ²⁷ In fact, perhaps the only parallel that can be found outside the work of Donatello is in the painted architecture of Masaccio's Trinity fresco in S. M. Novella.

²⁸E. Gilson, op. cit., p. 536.

²⁹C. Seymour, op. cit., p. 128.

³⁰Ibid., p. 129.

Chapter 5

¹H. W. Janson, op. cit., p. 26, demonstrates how the 1427 date of this purchase must serve as a terminus ante quem for the statue.

²C. Seymour, op. cit., p. 63.

³Vasari, Le Vite de piú Eccellenti Pittori, Scultori ed Architetturi, II, p. 50, here quoted from H. W. Janson, op. cit., p. 24.

⁴Filarete, Tratto dell'architettura, book xxiii, p. 622, here quoted from H. W. Janson, op. cit., p. 24.

⁵H. W. Janson, op. cit., p. 29.

⁶C. Seymour, op. cit., p. 63.

⁷Idem.

⁸Idem.

⁹As H. W. Janson, op. cit., pp. 51-3, notes, Donatello's hand is evident in parts of the tabernacle, and the design reflects some of his general sensibilities. Also, the architectural details on the head of St. Louis' crozier closely recall the architecture of the niche itself. There is still much disagreement, however, as to the actual extent of Donatello's role in designing and making the tabernacle.

¹⁰A Parte Guelfa document of 14 May 1423 (C. v. Fabriczy, "Donatello's Hl. Ludwig u.s. Tabernakel...", in Jahrbuch Kgl. Preuss. Kunstsln. (1900, vol. xxi), pp. 247f.) authorizes a disbursement to Donatello of 300

florins, indicating that the statue was well under way by this time; while a second document of 24 November 1425 (C. v. Fabriczy, loc. cit.) speaks of the finished tabernacle. Thus the sculpture and niche would have to have been done between 1422 and 1425--probably being completed, as H. W. Janson, op. cit., pp. 50f, claims, about 1423.

¹¹vid. H. W. Janson, op. cit., p. 48.

¹²Leo Planiscig, Donatello (Florence, 1947), pp. 35ff.

¹³Idem.; measurements are from H. W. Janson, op. cit., pp. 23 and 45.

¹⁴Giovanni Battista Gelli, Vite d'artisti, here quoted from H. W. Janson, op. cit., p. 47.

¹⁵It is possible to determine from the documents of the Operai of the Cathedral (vid. Giovanni Poggi, Il Duomo di Firenze (Berlin, 1909), numbers 224, 230, 231, 238, and 243) that Donatello did two prophets, one 1416-1418 and the second ca. 1418-1420. Modern scholarship is almost unanimous in agreeing that these were the Beardless and Bearded Prophets. It is my opinion, agreeing with H. W. Janson, op. cit., p. 38, and C. Seymour, op. cit., p. 69, that the Beardless Prophet is the earlier on stylistic grounds. It must be noted that there is not complete agreement on this point (e.g., Pope-Hennessy, op. cit., p. 277).

¹⁶The documents (G. Poggi, op. cit., numbers 245 and 251) refer to this statue by name--mentioning the presence of Isaac--thus making this dating and attribution certain.

¹⁷Donatello did the first of these, D-III, between 1423 and 1425 (vid. Poggi, op. cit., numbers 260, 263, and 272); and he did the second, D-IV (called a Habakkuk in the documents), between 1427 and 1435 (vid. Poggi, op. cit., numbers 284, 316, 322, and 323).

¹⁸J. Pope-Hennessy, op. cit., pp. 277f.

¹⁹H. W. Janson, op. cit., pp. 37ff.; and C. Seymour, op. cit., pp. 86f.

²⁰Ottavio Morisani, Studi su Donatello (Venice, 1952), pp. 123ff.

²¹Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York, 1954), p. 64.

²²H. W. Janson, op. cit., p. 37.

²³C. Seymour, op. cit., p. 70.

²⁴H. W. Janson, op. cit., p. 40.

²⁵Idem.

²⁶C. Seymour, op. cit., p. 86.

Chapter 6

¹George M. Richter, Andrea dal Castagno (Chicago, 1943), p. 2, ends whatever controversy existed over Castagno's early dates.

²L. B. Alberti, op. cit., p. 39.

³That this lack of foreshortening is in fact deliberate may be ascertained by comparison with Masaccio's earlier treatment of a similar representation in the Pisa Altar, in which the crucified Christ is foreshortened.

⁴J. White, op. cit., p. 138.

⁵John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," l. 28.

⁶Irving Lavin, "The Sources of Donatello's Pulpits in San Lorenzo," in The Art Bulletin (March, 1959, vol. XLI, no. one), p. 35.

⁷Ibid., p. 34. That this figure invokes its antique symbolism, and not the moralized, Medieval Christian reading of it as the Virtue Prudence, is obvious from the context. Moreover, Lavin demonstrates that this particular figure is derived from the only unmoralized example of this symbol that reached the Renaissance: the symbol for January, which, like Don-

atello's servant, carries a jug.

8 Idem.

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- II. Renaissance Philosophy and its Antecedents
 - A. Humanist Thought
 - B. Theological Thought
 - C. General
- III. The Artistic Climate of the Quattrocento
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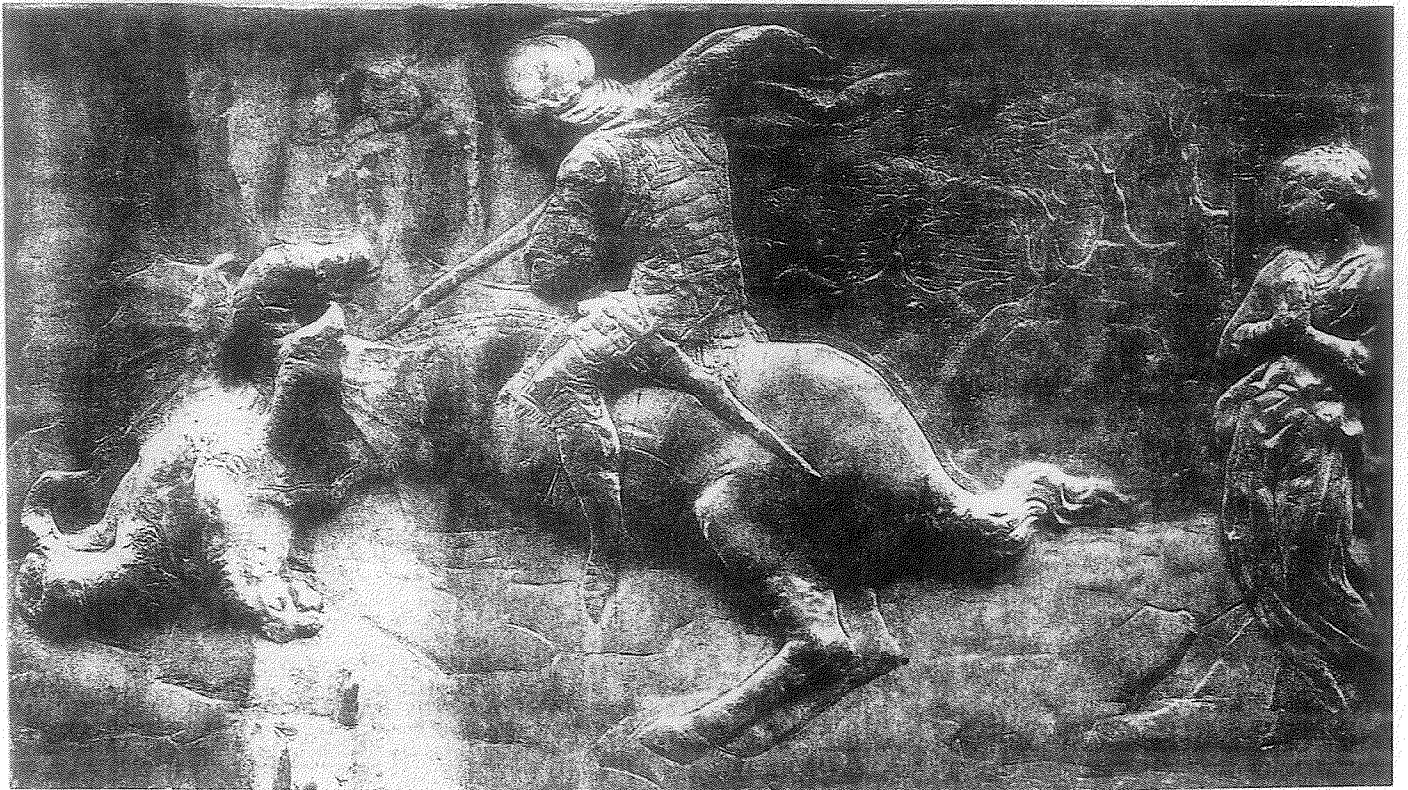
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PLATE I



(A) ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON, CA. 1417,
OR SAN MICHELE, FLORENCE.



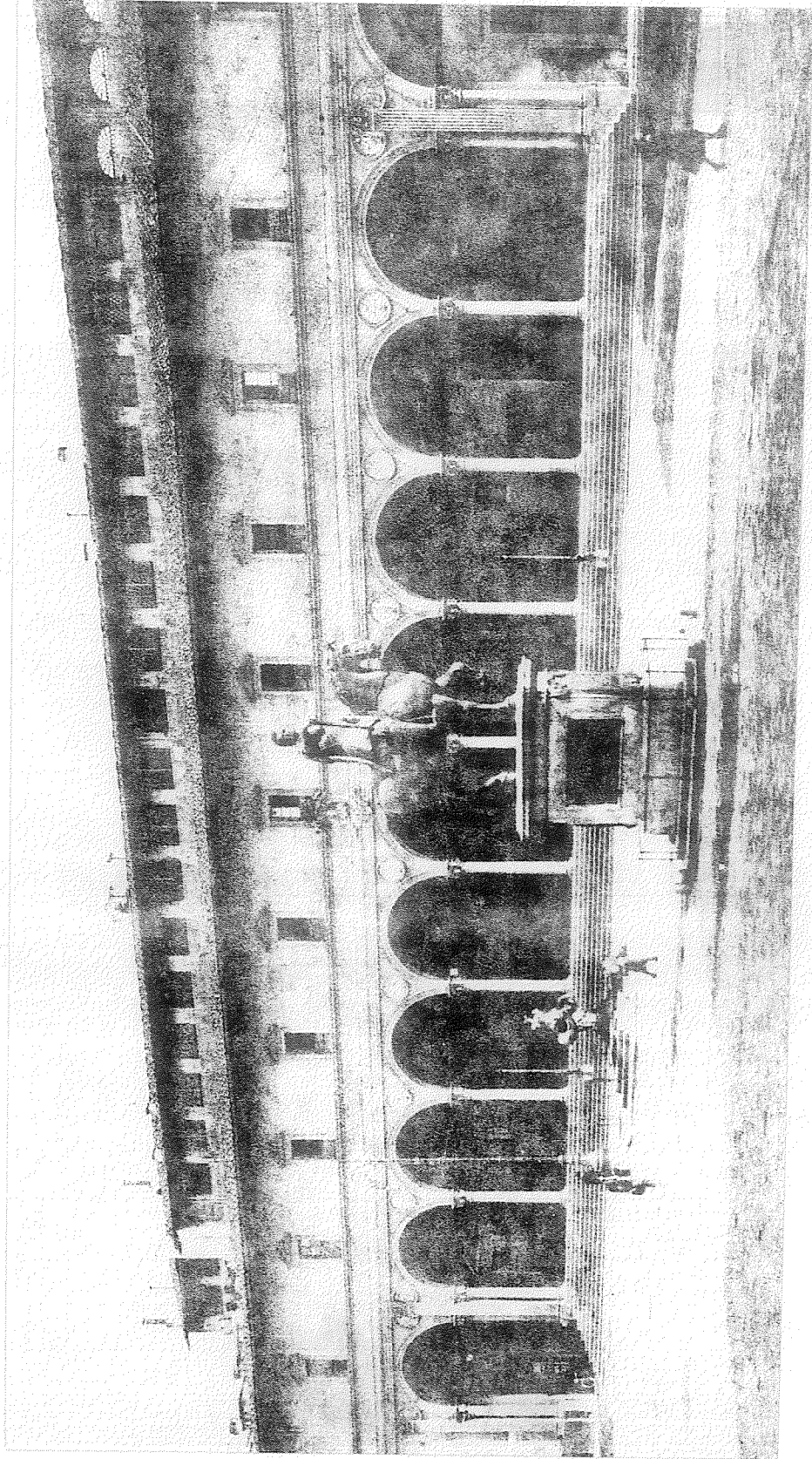
(B) ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON, DETAIL.

PLATE II



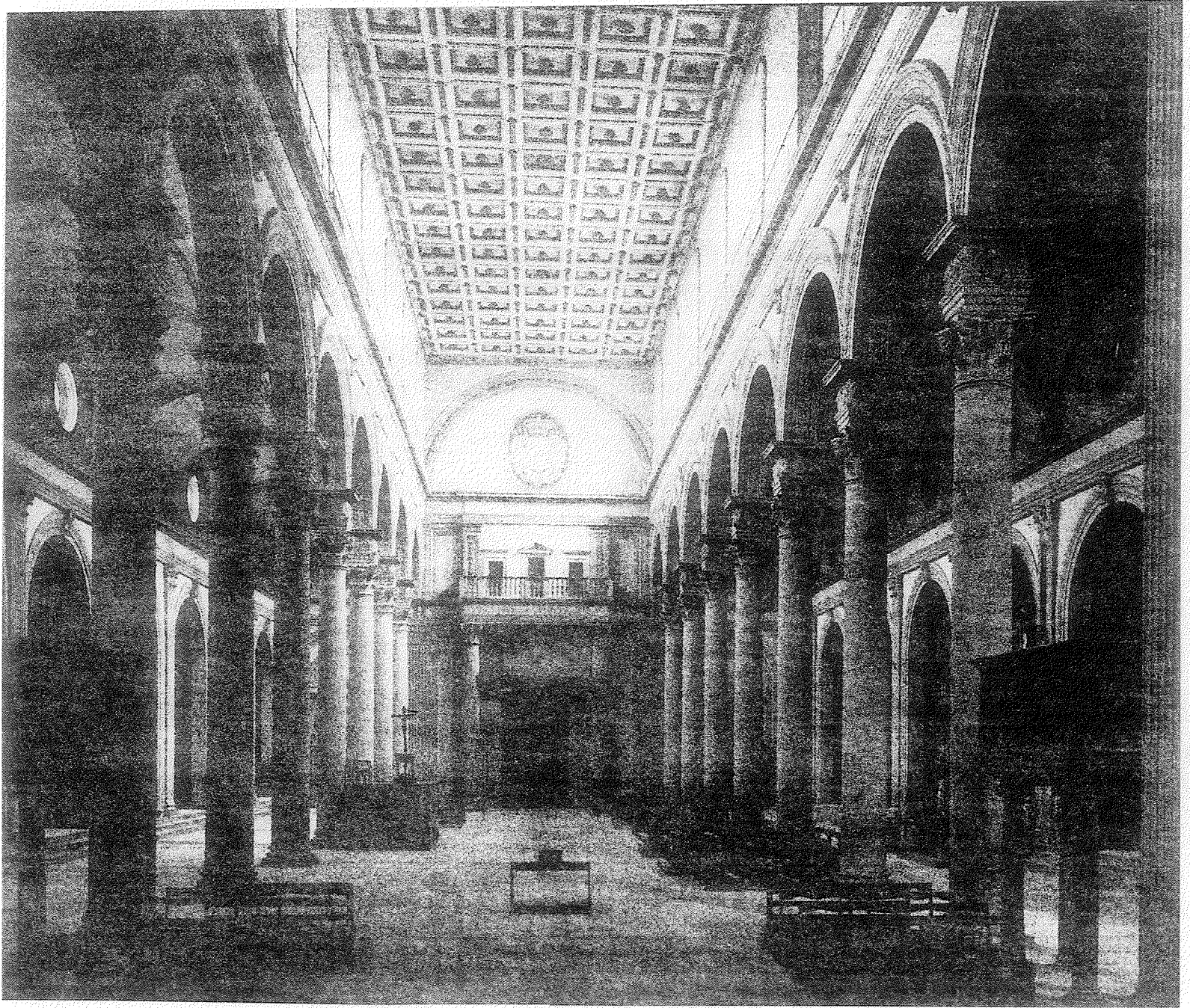
ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON, DETAIL.

PLATE III



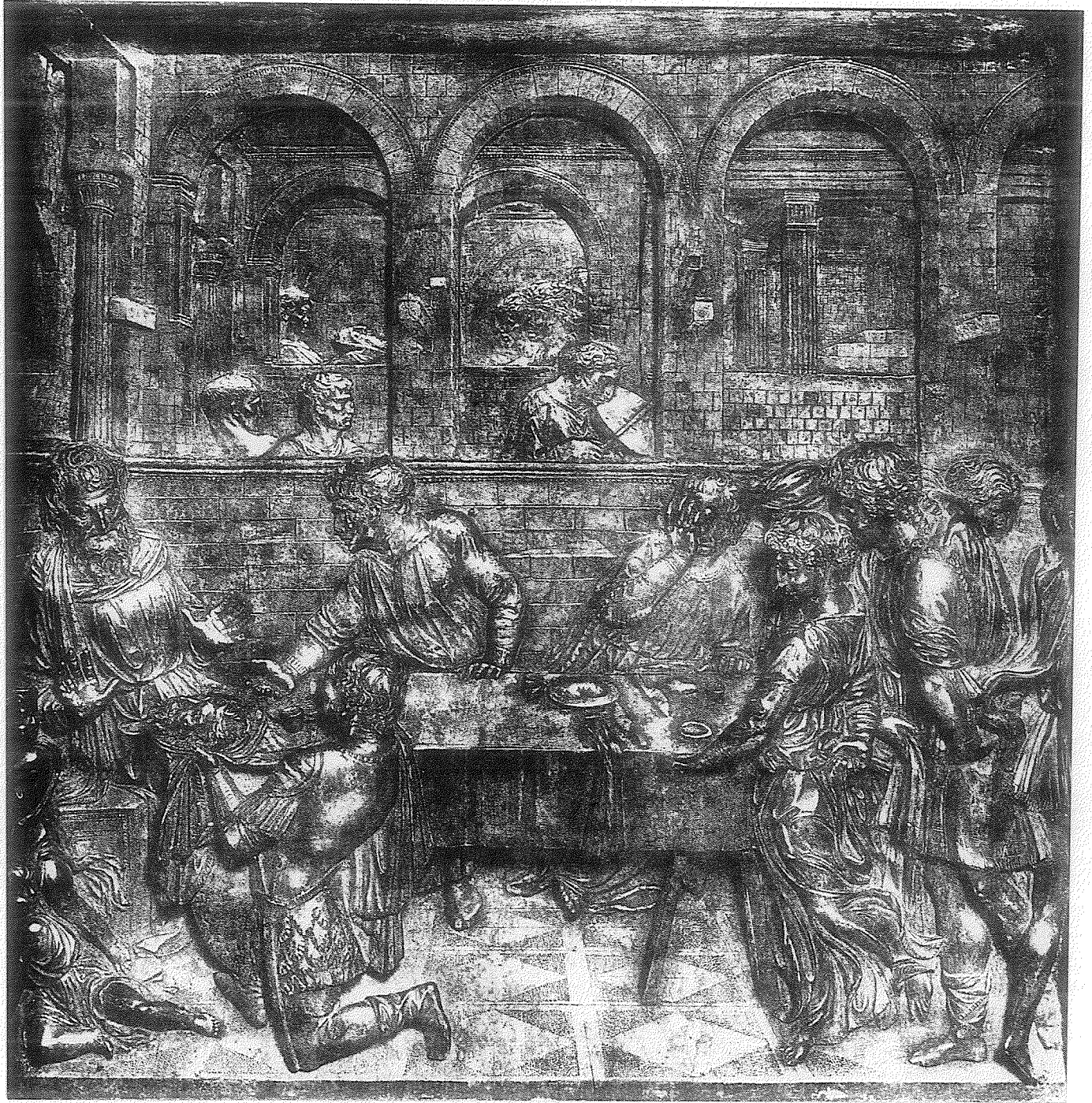
BRUNELLESCHI: FOUNDLING HOSPITAL, BEGUN 1419, FLORENCE.

PLATE IV



BRUNELLESCHI: S. LORENZO, BEGUN 1421, FLORENCE.

PLATE V



FEAST OF HEROD, 1423-7, BAPTISTERY, SIENA.

PLATE VI



FEAST OF HEROD, DETAIL.

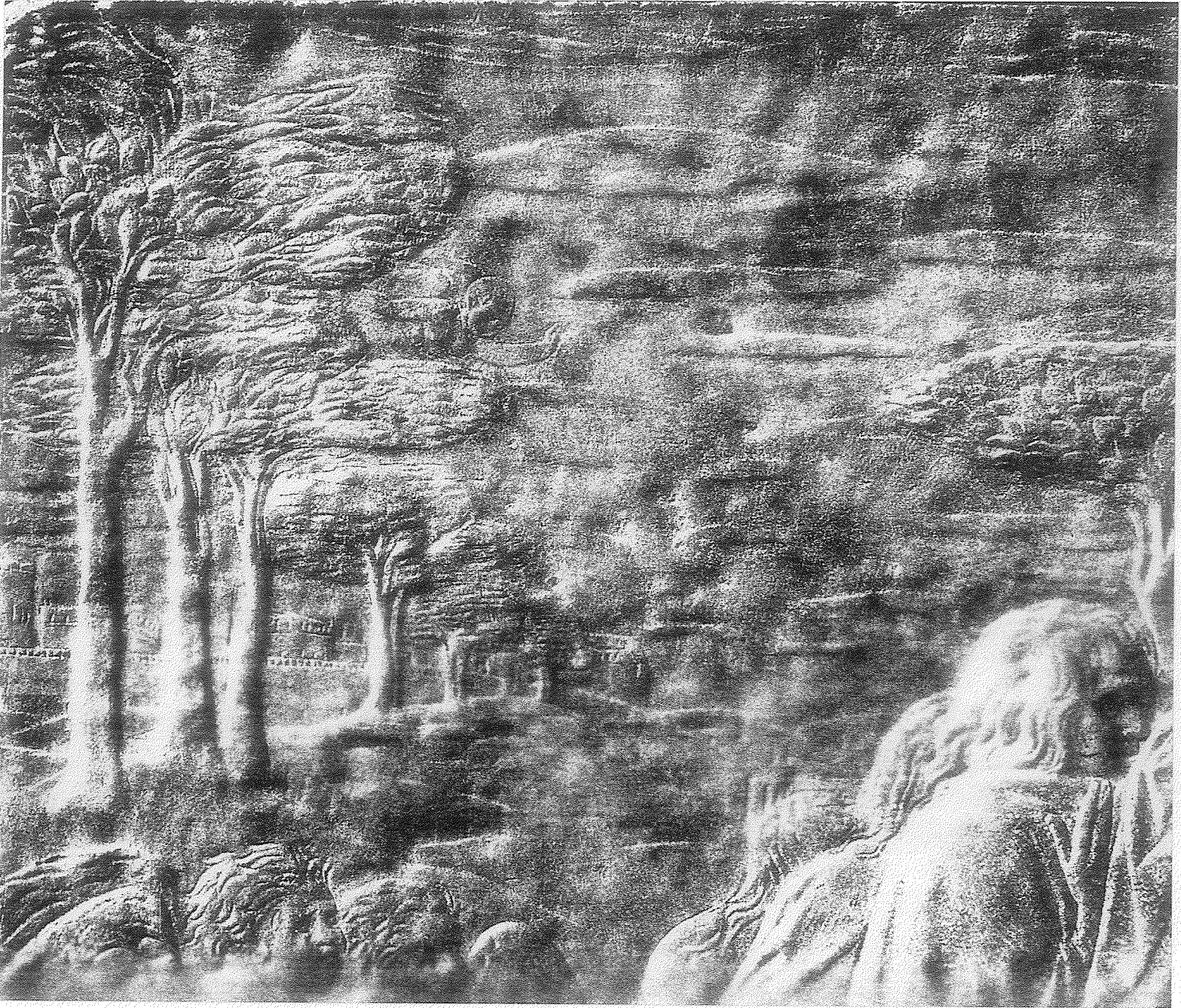
PLATE VII



DONATION OF THE KEYS TO ST. PETER, CA. 1425-30,

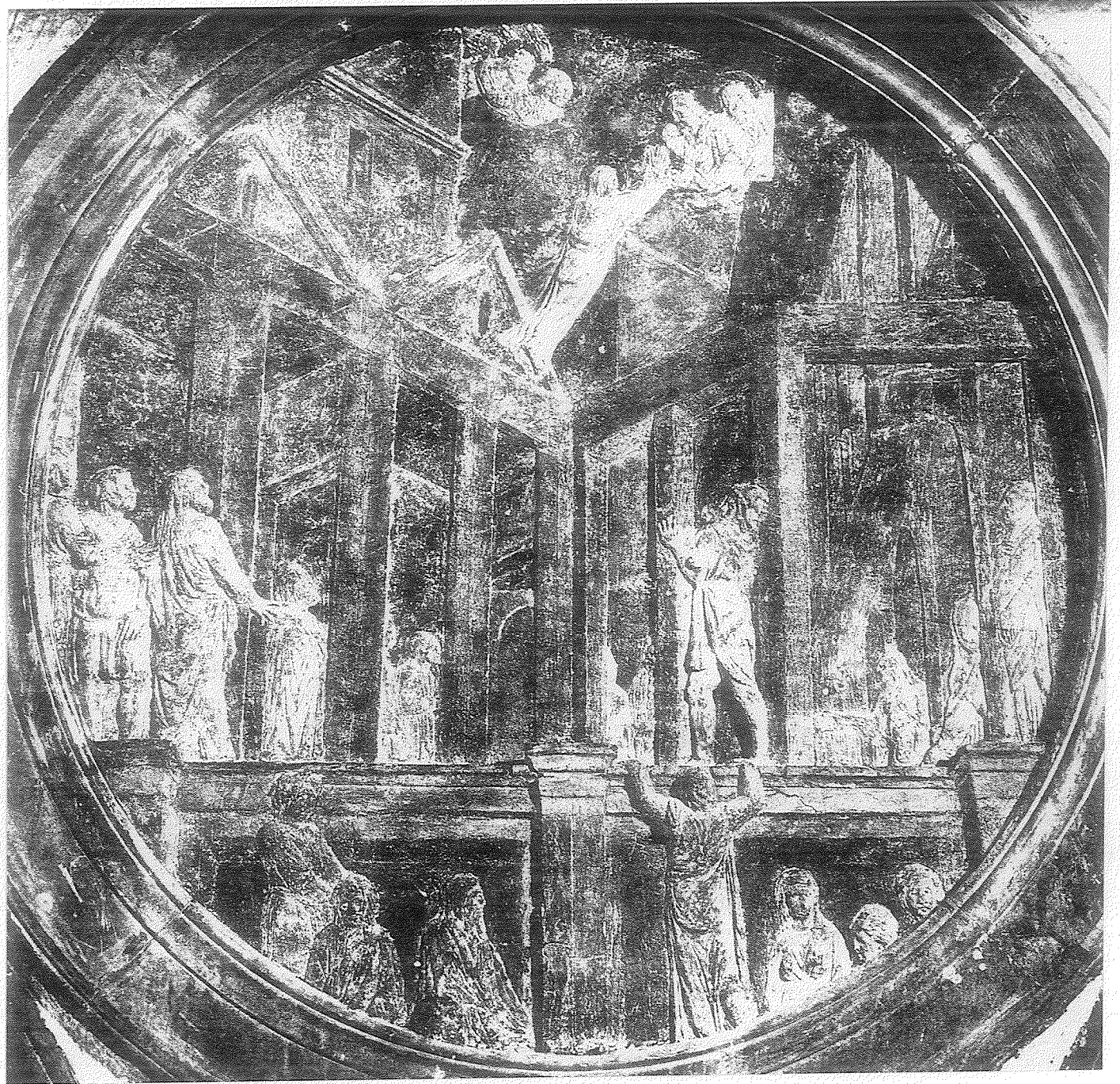
VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON.

PLATE VIII



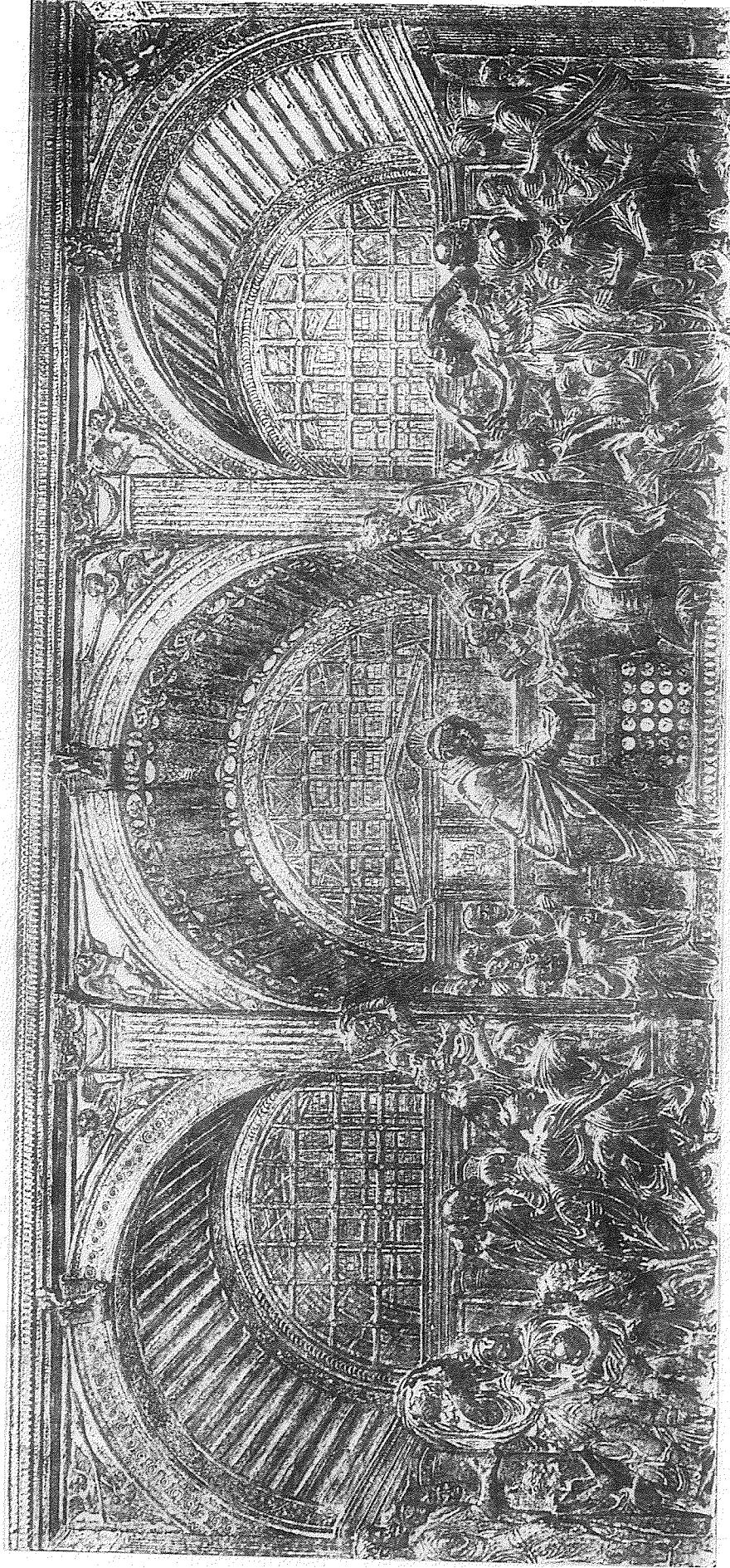
DONATION OF THE KEYS TO ST. PETER, DETAIL.

PLATE IX

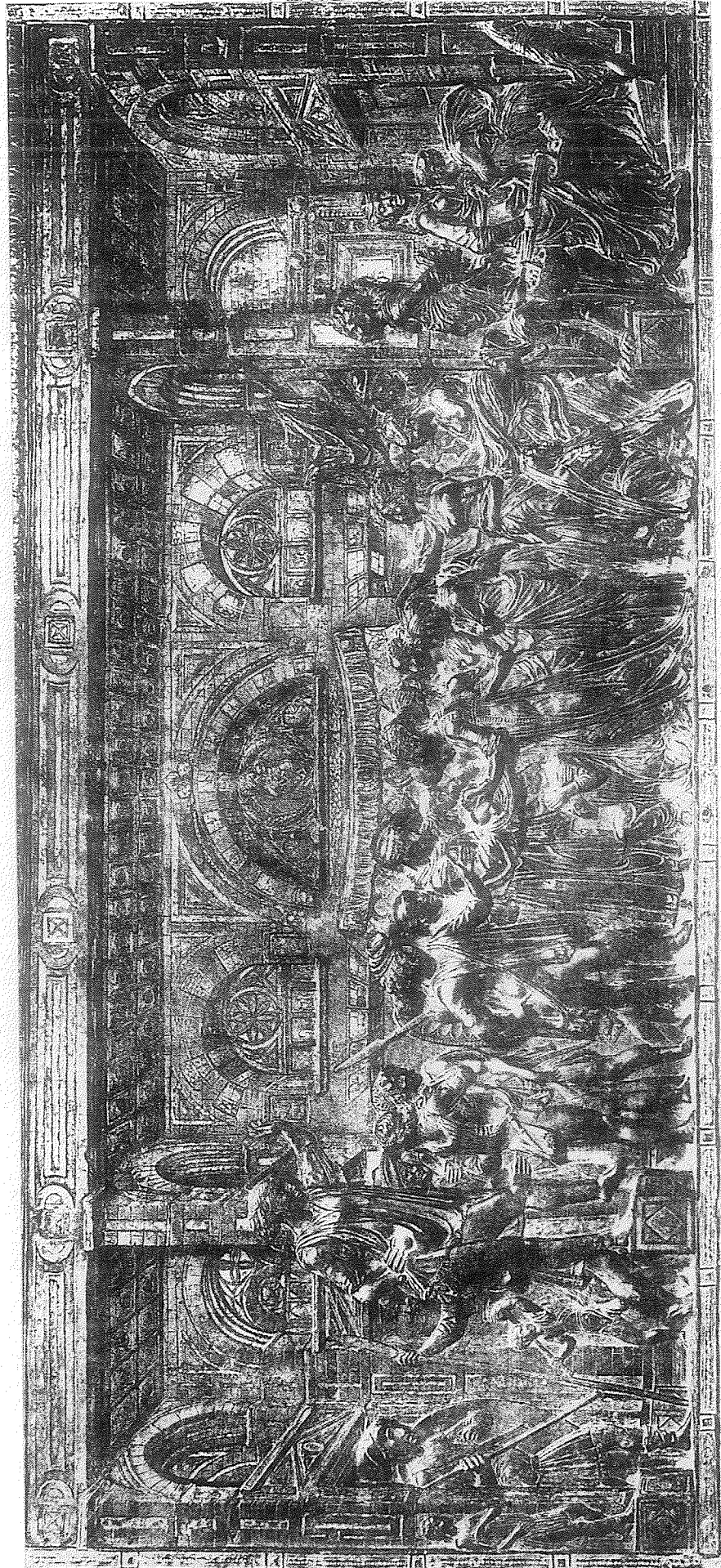


APOTHEOSIS OF ST. JOHN, CA. 1435-40,
OLD SACRISTY, S. LORENZO, FLORENCE.

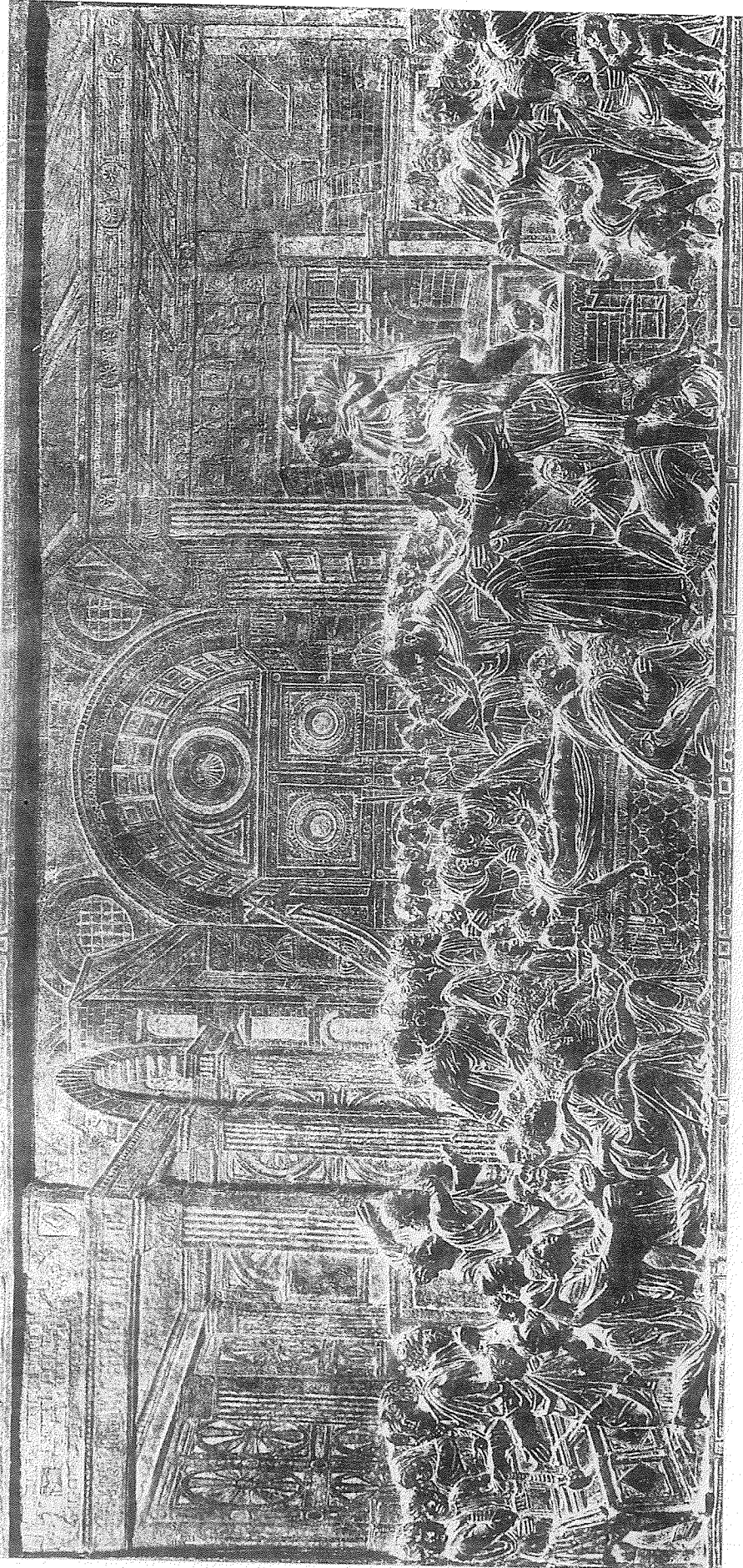
PLATE X



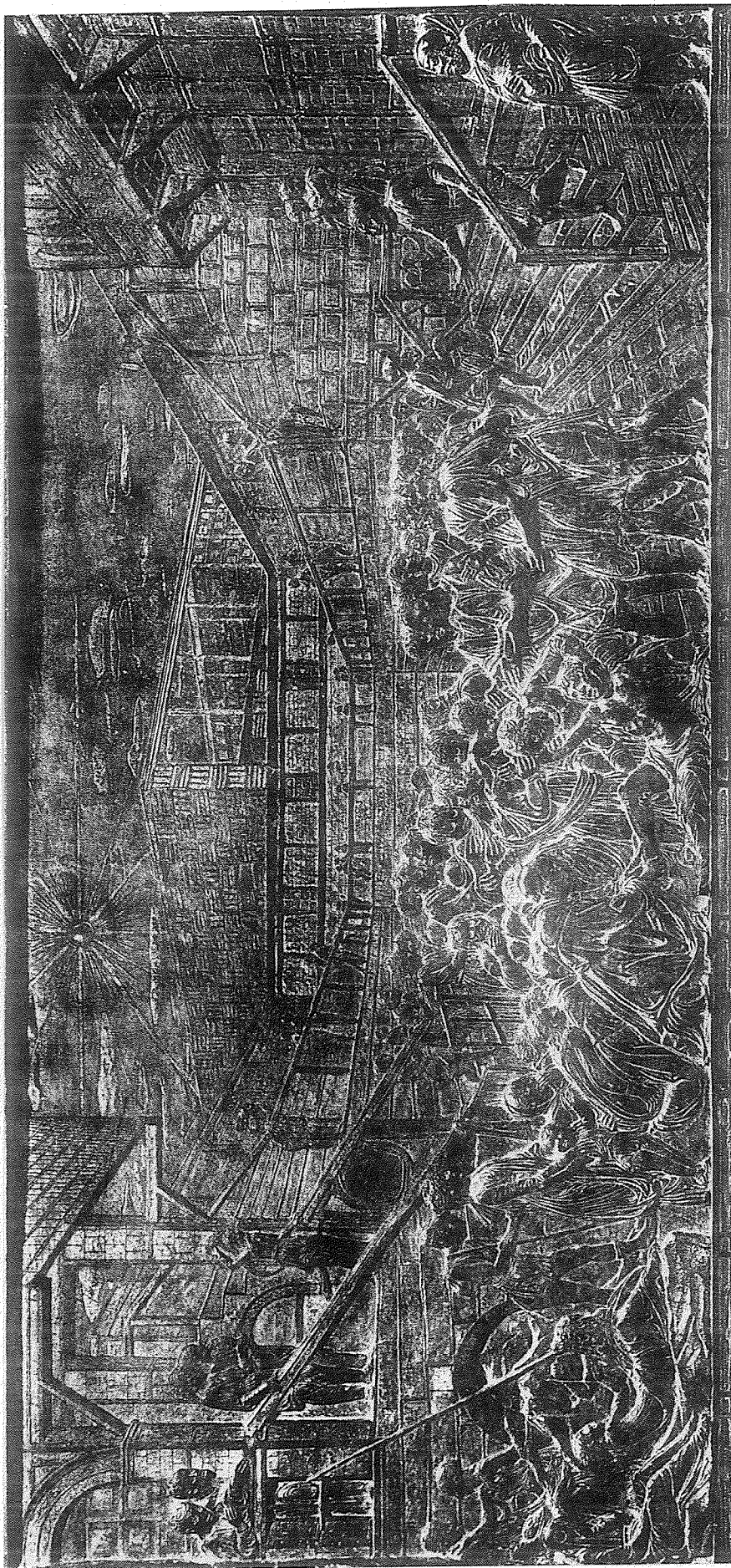
THE ASS OF RIMINI, 1446-50, HIGH ALTAR, S. ANTONIO, PADUA.



THE SPEAKING BABE, 1446-50, HIGH ALTAR, S. ANTONIO, PADUA.

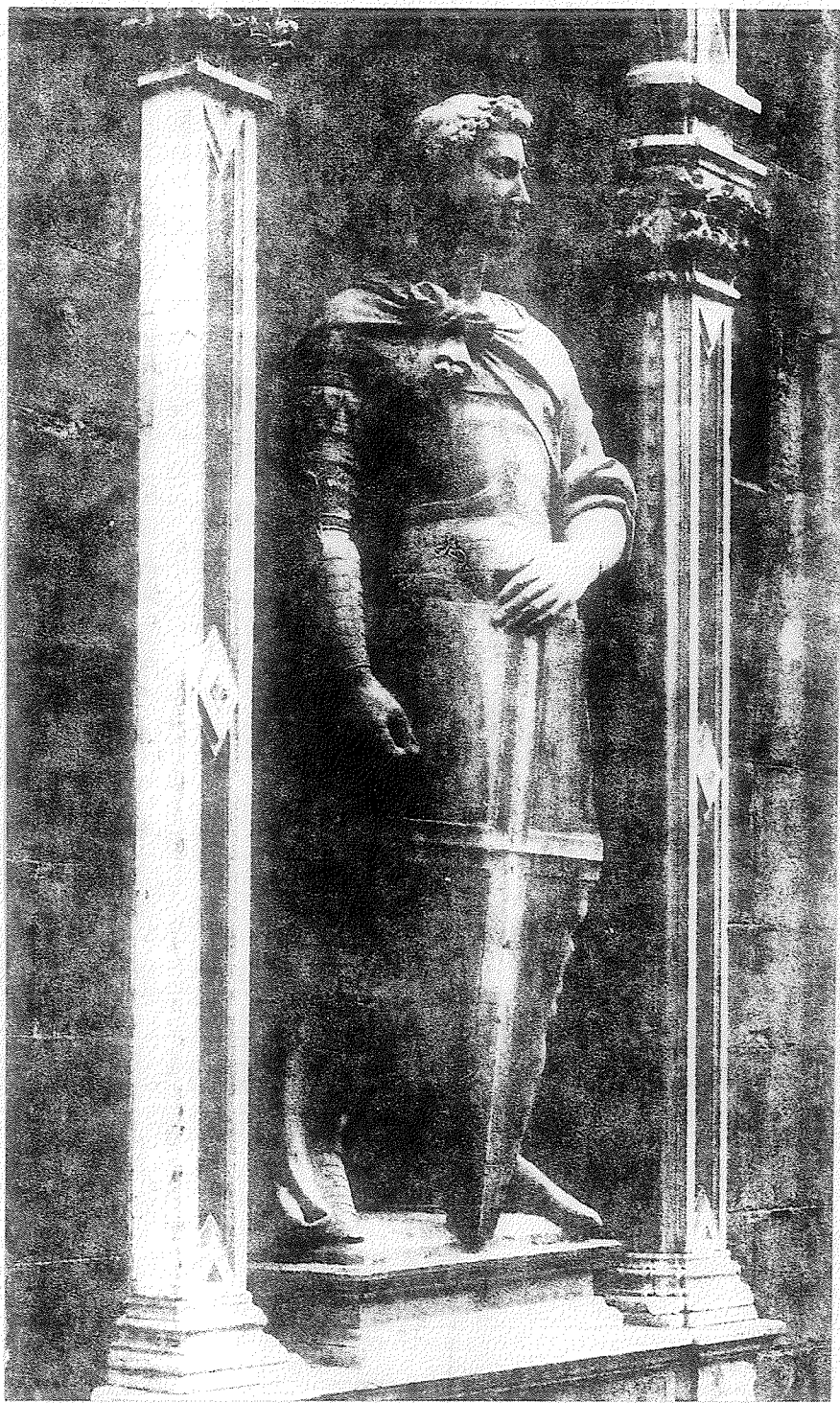


THE HEART OF THE MISER, 1446-50, HIGH ALTAR, S. ANTONIO, PADUA.



THE ANGRY SON, 1446-50, HIGH ALTAR, S. ANTONIO, PADUA.

PLATE XIV



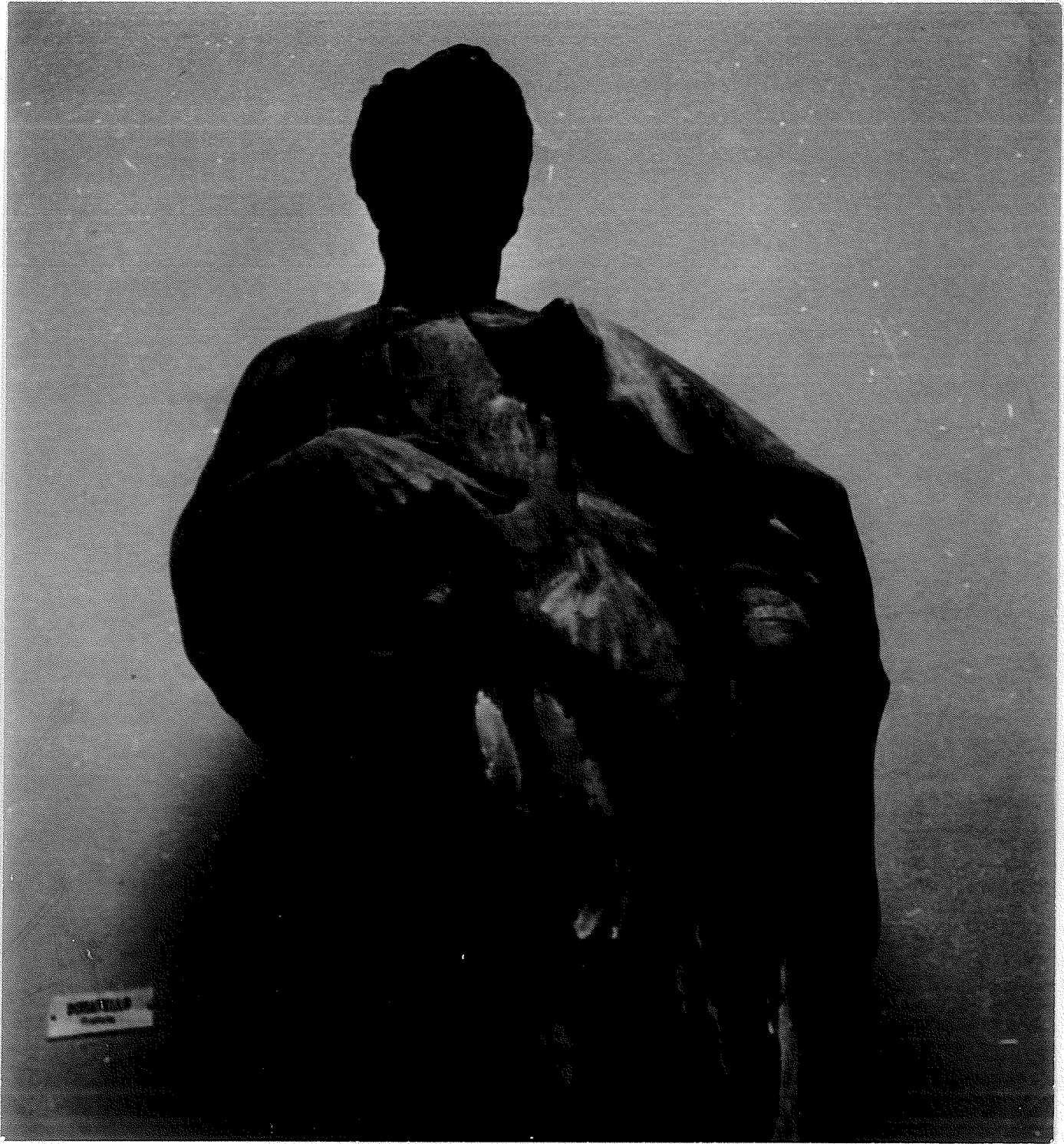
ST. GEORGE, NICHE OF THE ARMOURERS' GUILD, 1415-17,
OR SAN MICHELE, FLORENCE,

PLATE XV



ST. LOUIS OF TOULOUSE, CA. 1423, OR SAN MICHELE, FLORENCE.

PLATE XVI



BEARDLESS PROPHET, 1416-18, FOR THE CAMPANILE OF THE DUOMO,
MUSEO DELL'OPERA DEL DUOMO, FLORENCE.

PLATE XVII. BEARDED PROPHET, 1418-20, FOR THE CAMPANILE
OF THE DUOMO, MUSEO DELL'OPERA DEL DUOMO, FLORENCE.

PLATE XVII



PLATE XVIII. DONATELLO ASSISTED BY ROSSO:
ABRAHAM AND ISAAC, 1421, FOR THE CAMPANILE OF THE DUOMO,
MUSEO DELL'OPERA DEL DUOMO, FLORENCE.

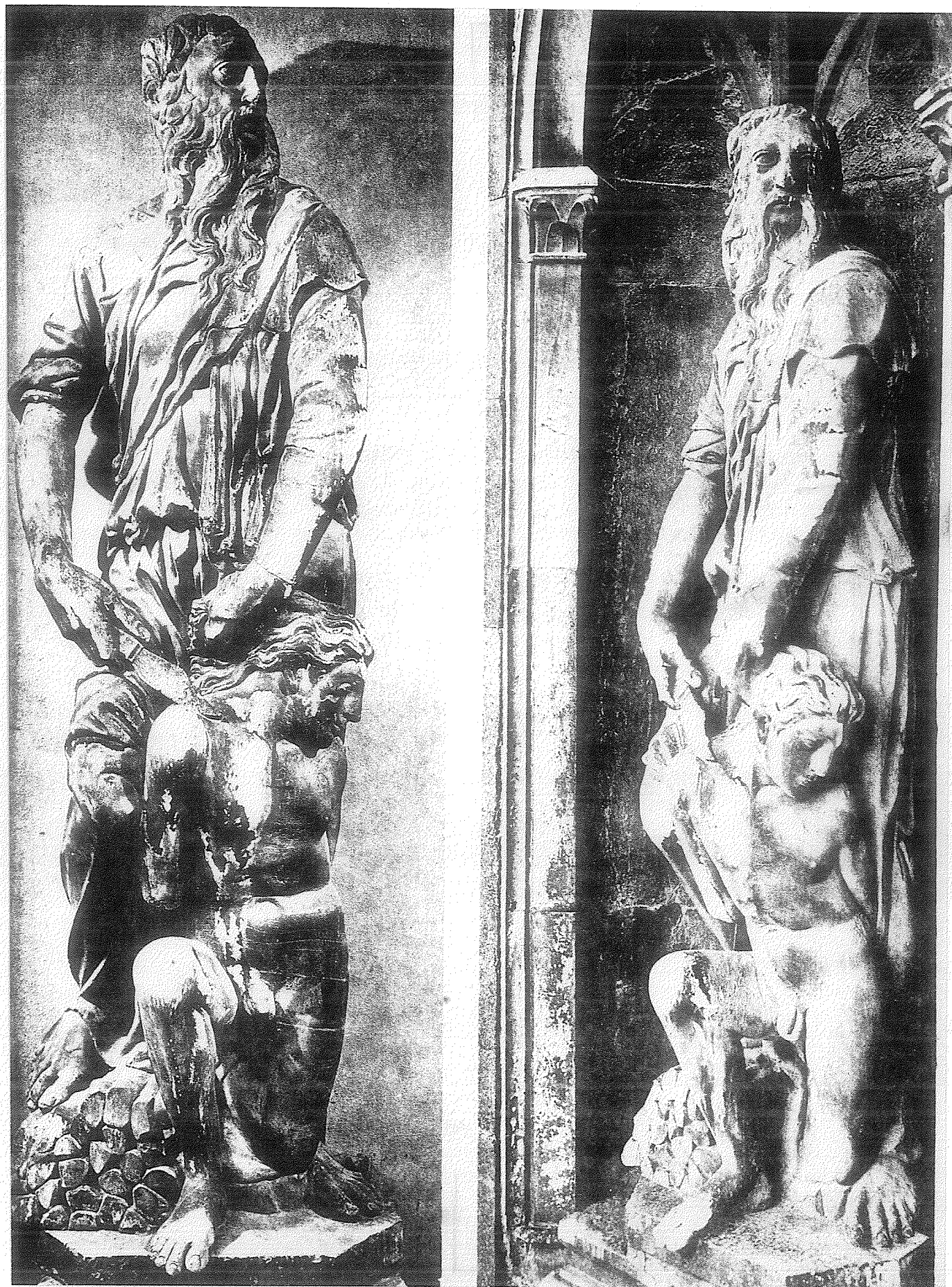


PLATE XIX



DONATELLO ASSISTED BY ROSSO: ABRAHAM AND ISAAC, DETAIL.

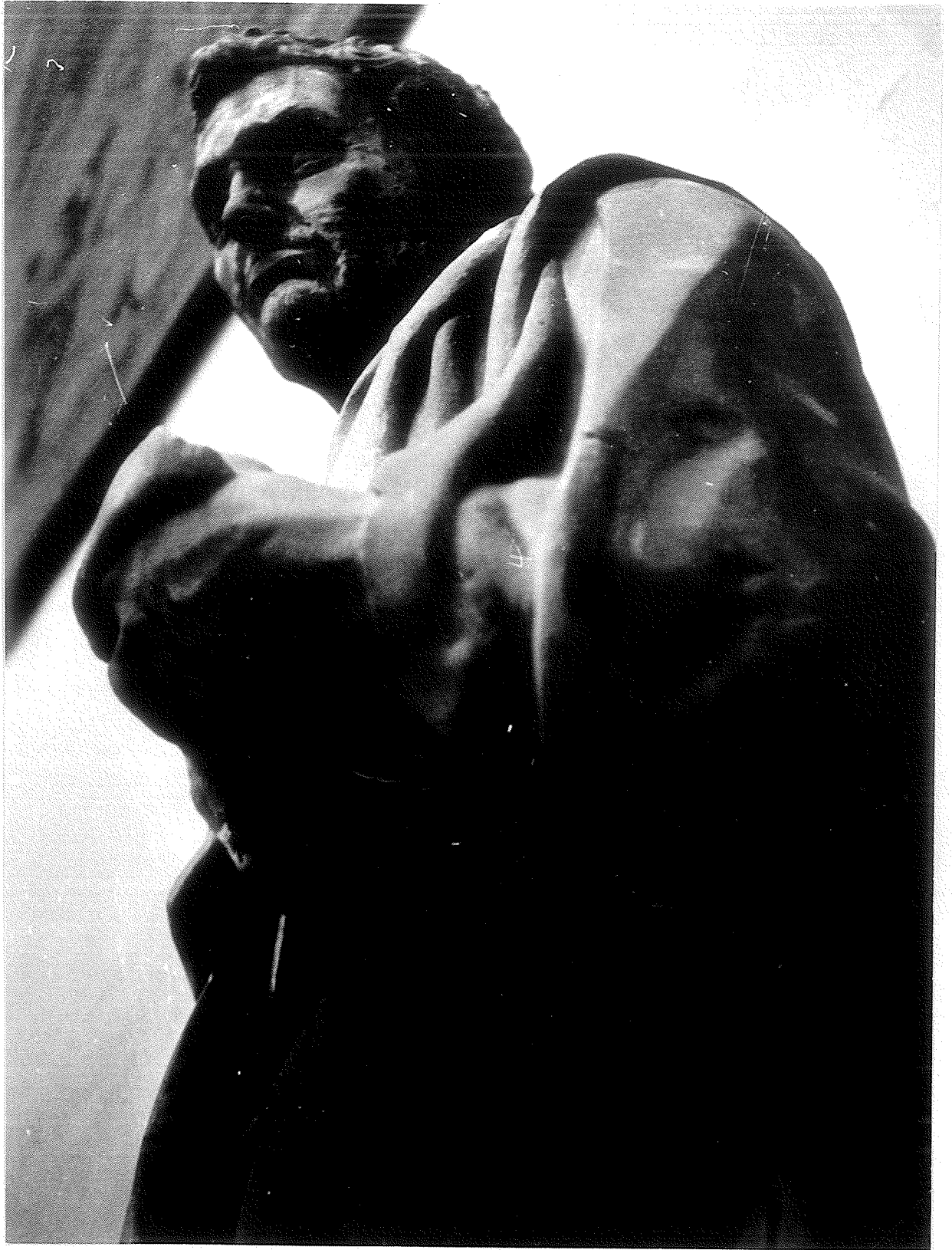


IL POPOLANO, (1423-5?), FOR THE CAMPANILE OF THE DUOMO,
MUSEO DELL'OPERA DEL DUOMO, FLORENCE.



IL POPOLANO

PLATE XXII



IL POPOLANO.

PLATE XXIII



IL POPOLANO.



LO ZUCCONE, (1427-35?), FOR THE CAMPANILE OF THE DUOMO,
MUSEO DELL'OPERA DEL DUOMO, FLORENCE.



LO ZUCcone, DETAIL.

PLATE XXVI. Lo ZUCCHONE.

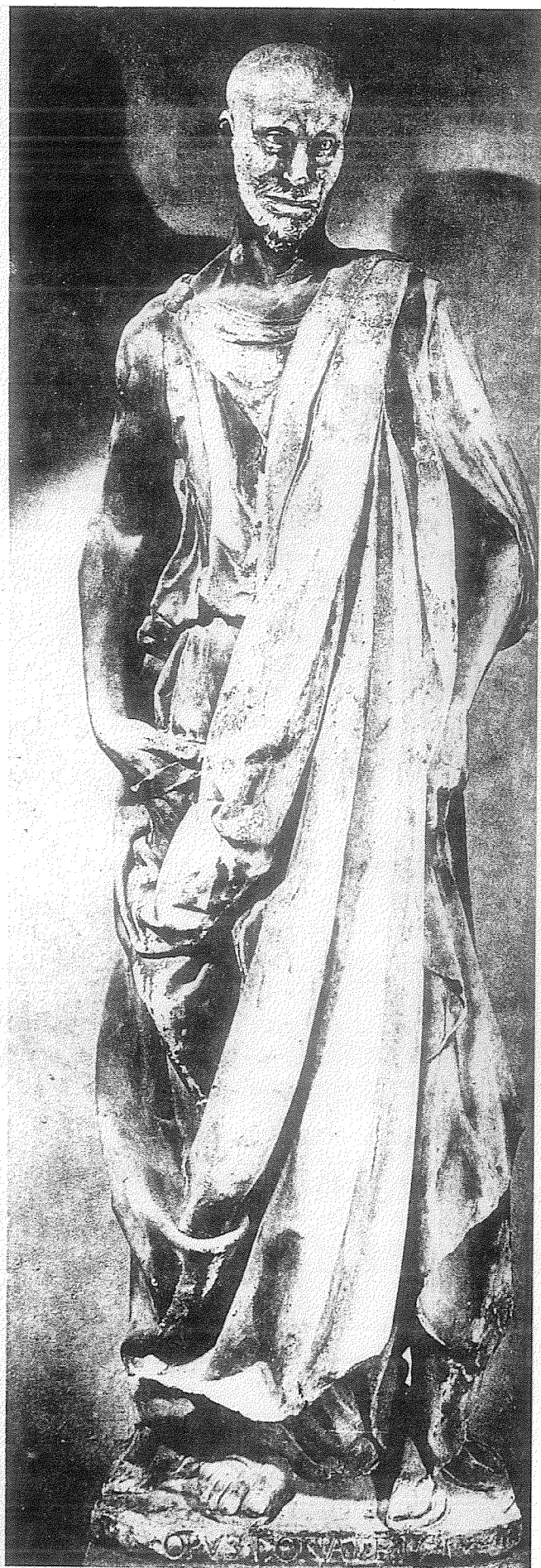
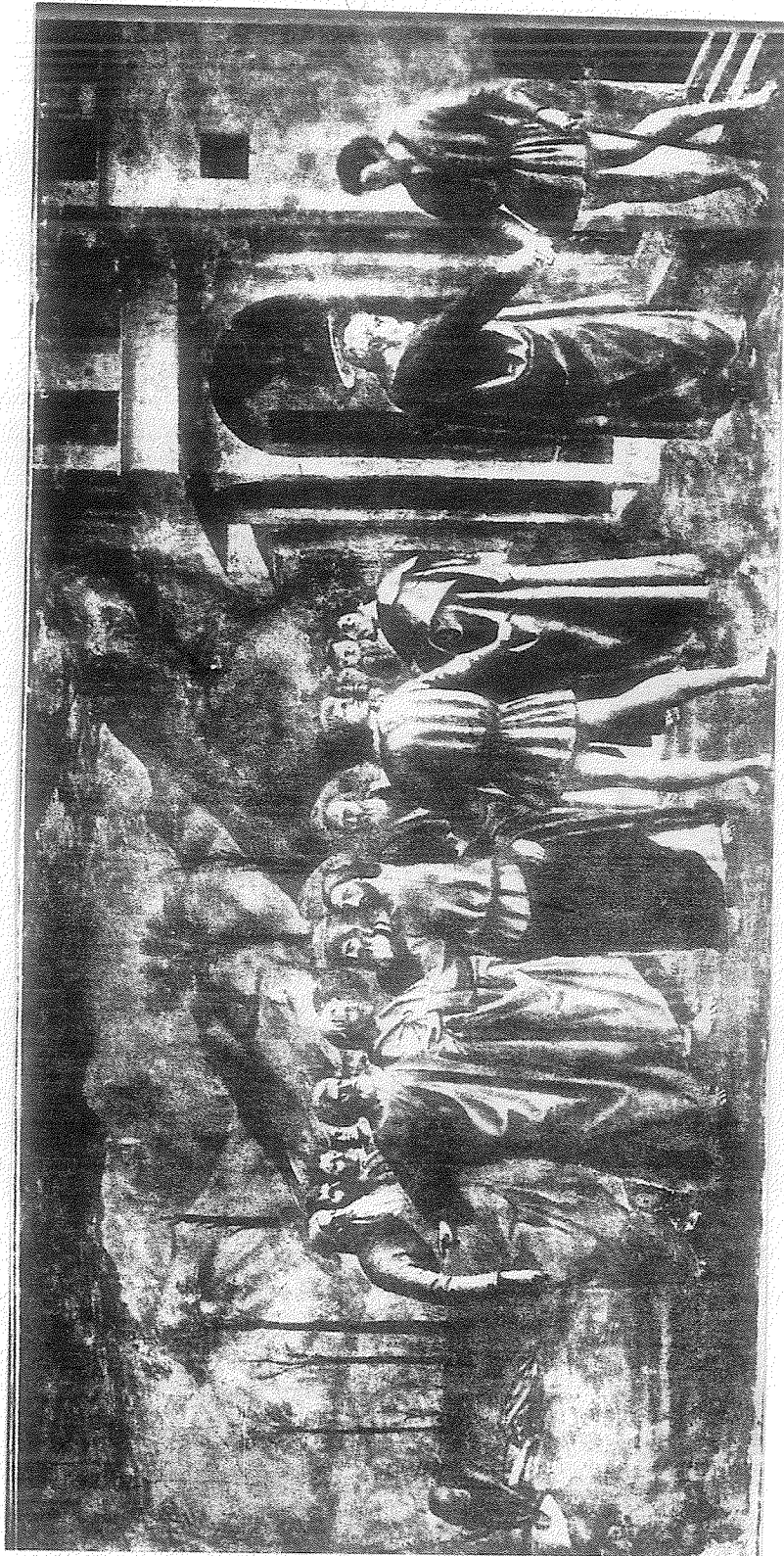


PLATE XXVII. Lo ZUCCONE.

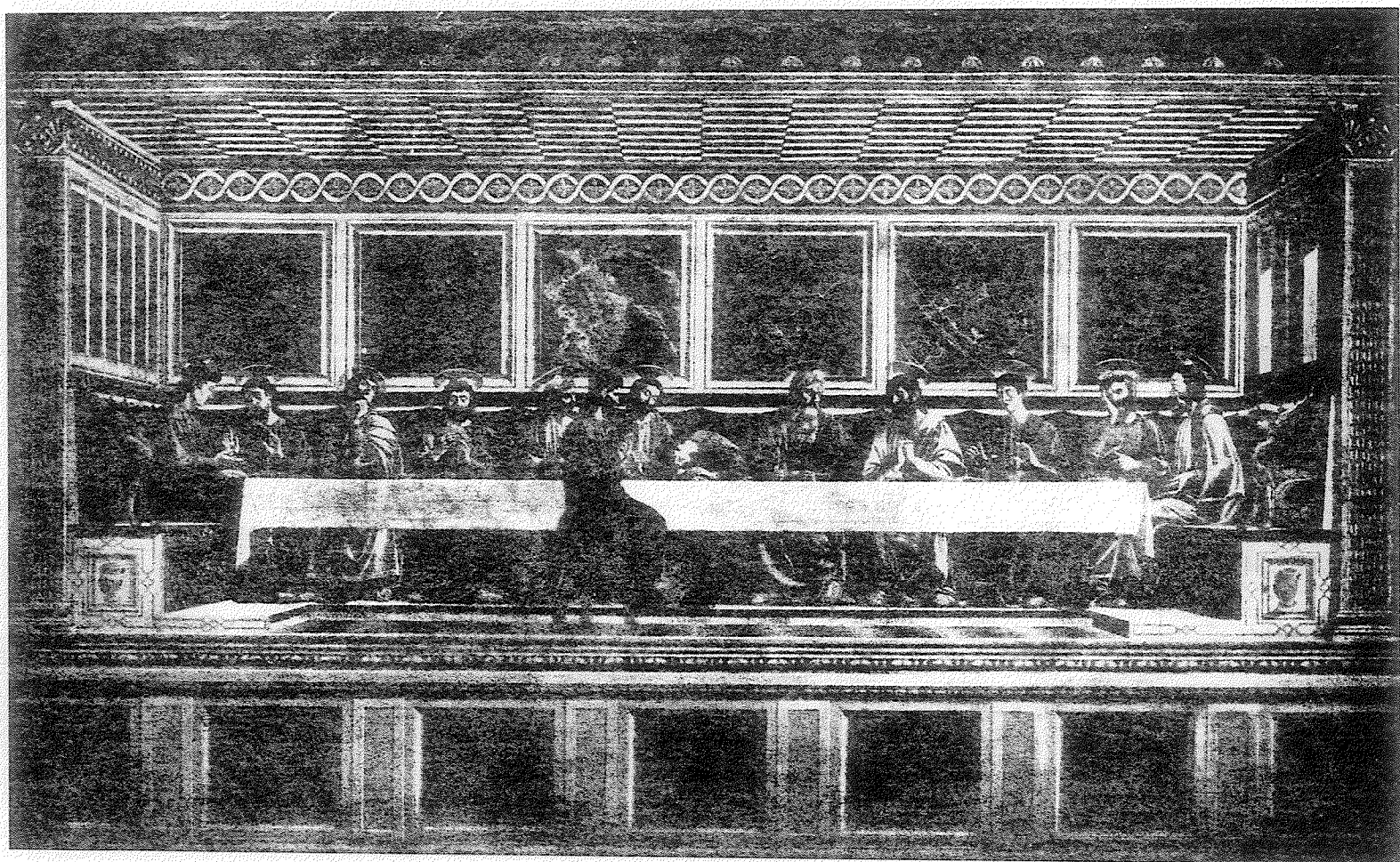
PLATE XXVII





MASACCIO: THE TRIBUTE MONEY, CA. 1427, BRANCACCI CHAPEL,
STA. MARIA DEL CARMINE, FLORENCE.

PLATE XXIX



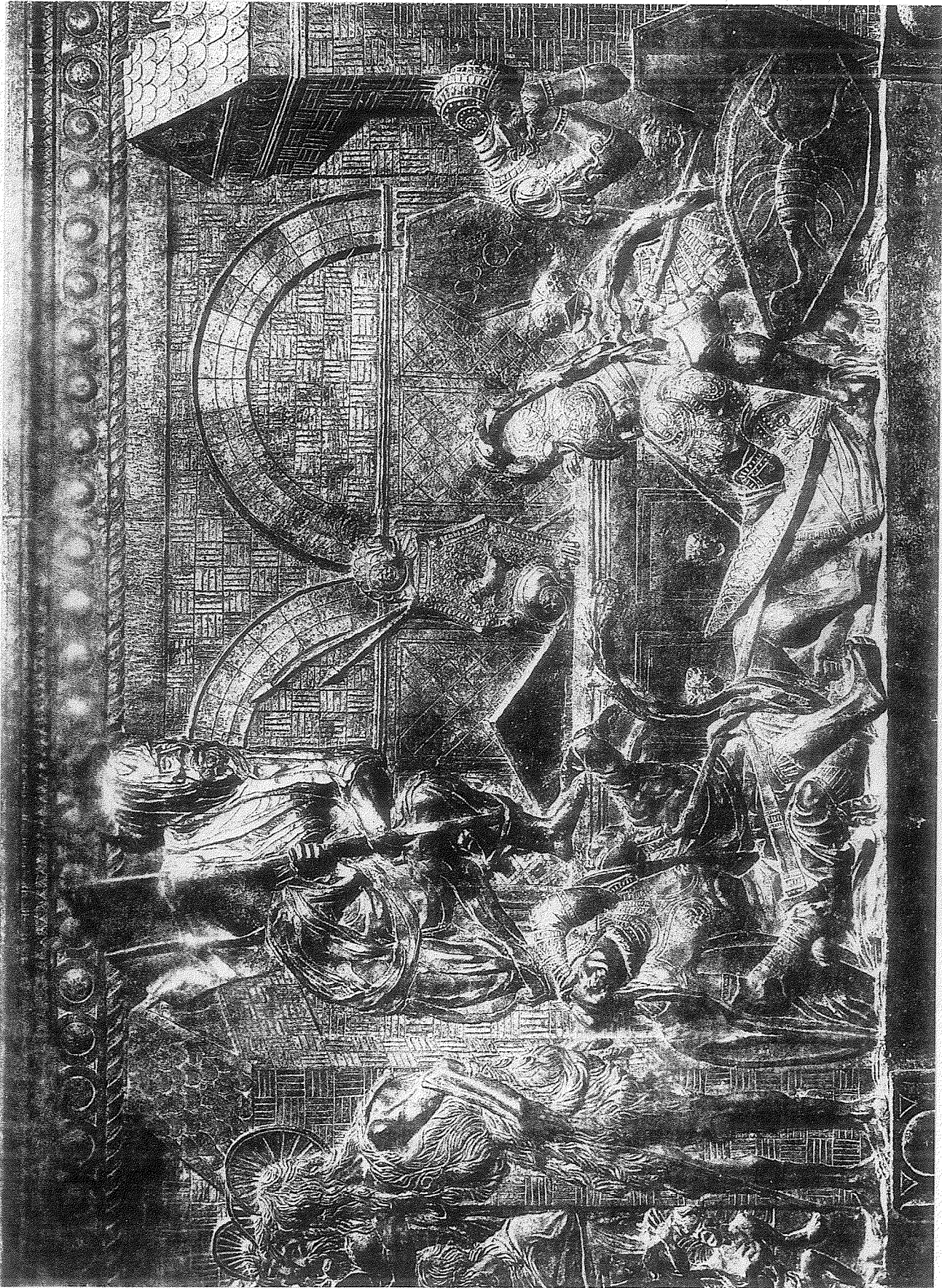
CASTAGNO: LAST SUPPER, CASTAGNO MUSEUM,
S. APOLLONIA, FLORENCE.



CASTAGNO: ST. JEROME WITH THE HOLY WOMEN
AND THE TRINITY, SS. ANNUNZIATA, FLORENCE.

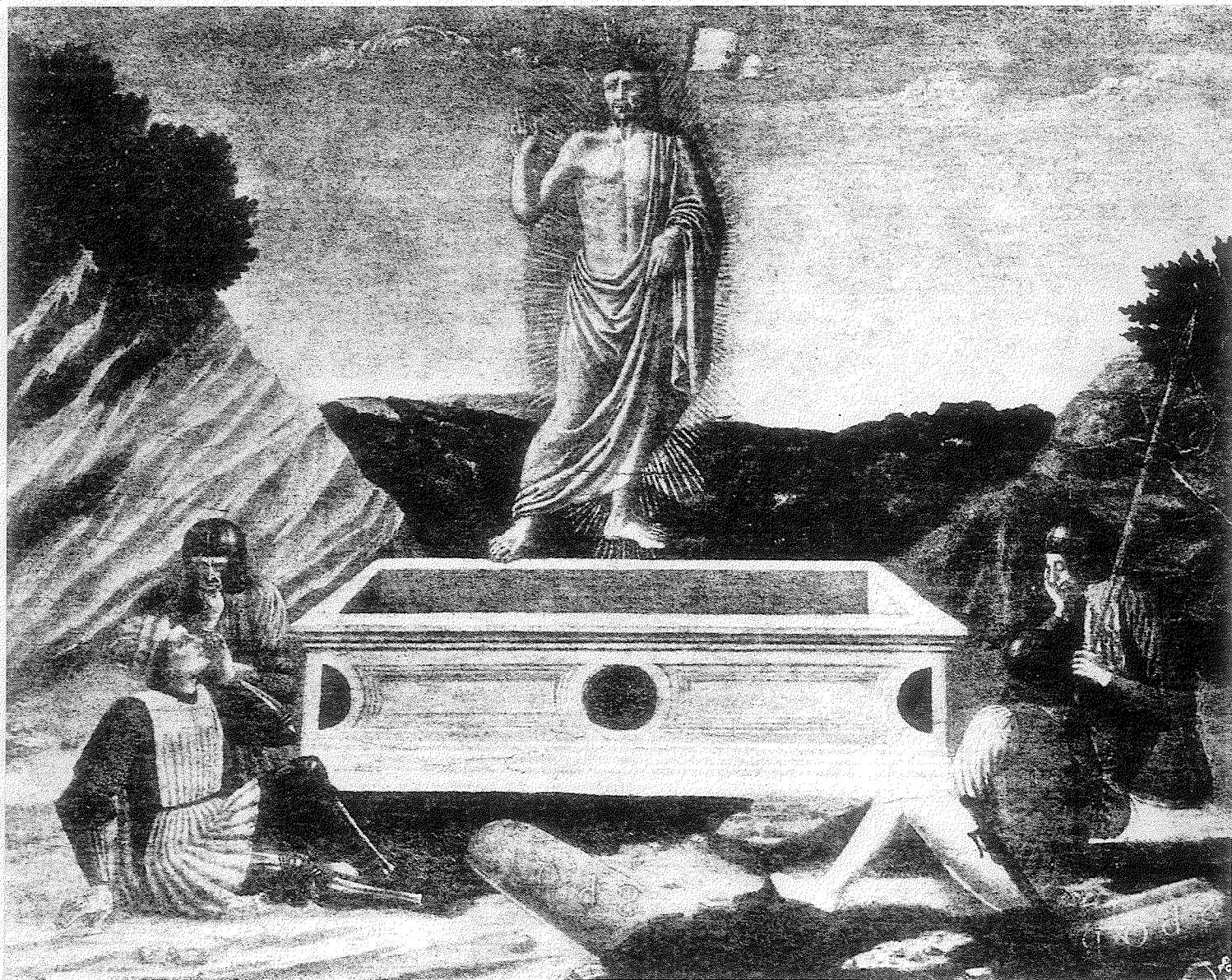


CASTAGNO: ST. JEROME WITH THE HOLY WOMEN
AND THE TRINITY, DETAIL.



RESURRECTION, 1460-6, SOUTH PULPIT, S. LORENZO, FLORENCE.

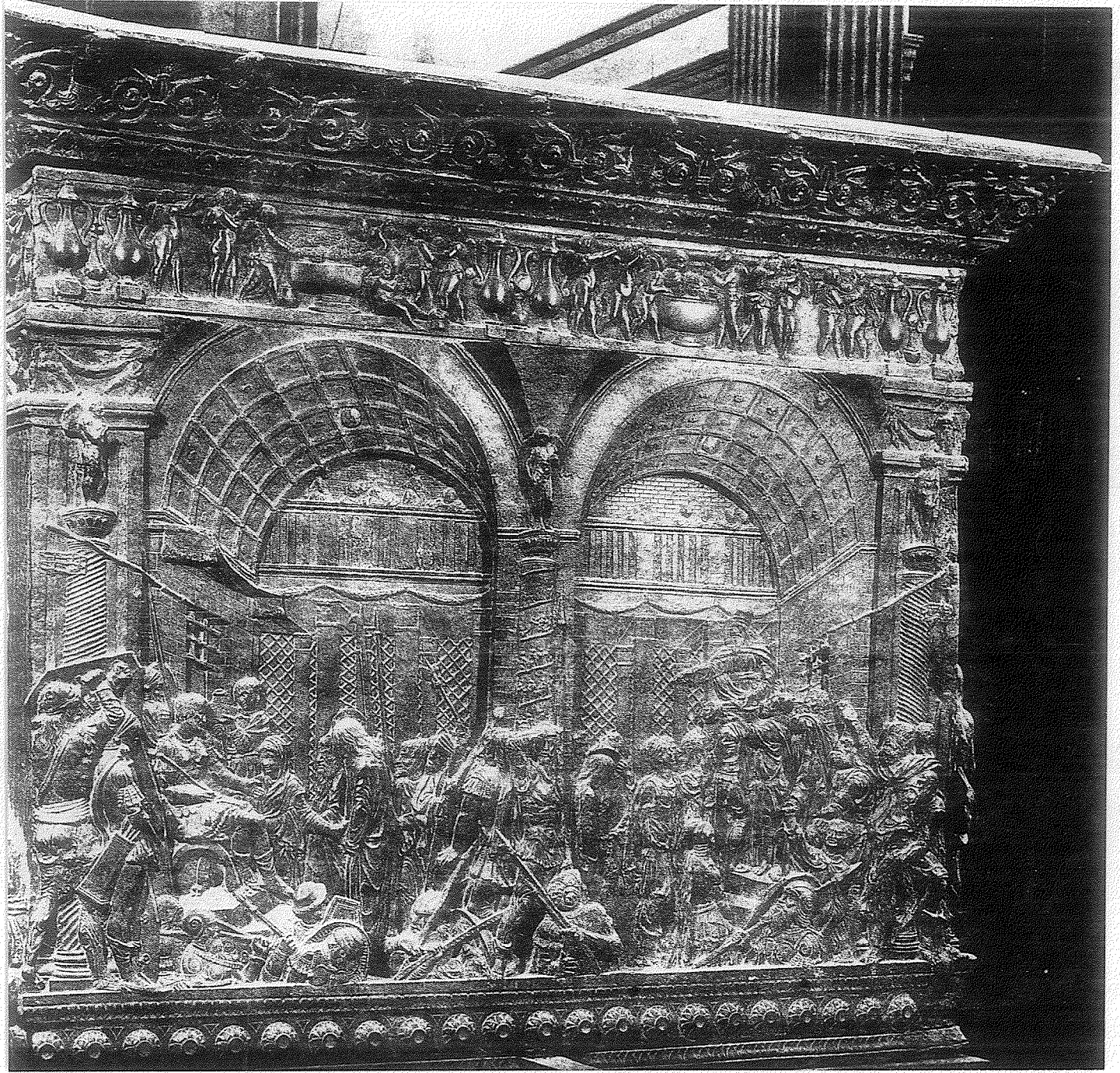
PLATE XXXIII



CASTAGNO: RESURRECTION, FRICK COLLECTION, NEW YORK.

PLATE XXXIV, RESURRECTION, SOUTH PULPIT,
S. LORENZO, DETAIL.





CHRIST BEFORE PILATE, 1460-6, NORTH PULPIT,
S. LORENZO, FLORENCE.



CHRIST BEFORE PILATE, DETAIL.