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**The Statues Speak:  
Political Rhetoric in the Sculpture of Orsanmichele**

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## **Abstract**

Orsanmichele was an important civic center in Renaissance Florence, dedicated to a series of miracle-producing images of the Virgin Mary. The guilds of Florence were patrons of the building and responsible for much of the construction and decoration of the space during a tumultuous political period that saw the peak of the citizen republic and its eventual fall as the Medici rose and seized control of the commune.

This paper draws on scholarly historical research and first hand visual analysis of Orsanmichele's external statuary. My question is whether the messages signaled by the statues of this religious cultural center went beyond the immediately apparent religious level. By examining four statues within the political and religious context of the period, I hope to demonstrate the role that these statues played in telegraphing the shifting political and civic values of the commune. Nanni di Banco's *Four Crowned Martyrs* represents the voice of the citizen guild members intent on reinforcing their roles as community leaders. Ghiberti's *Saint Matthew* represents the voice of the bankers at the time when financial leaders were a rising political force. Donatello's *Saint Louis of Toulouse* speaks for the Parte Guelfa, the old line elite and historical leaders of church and state. And Verrocchio's *Christ and Saint Thomas* asserts the moral authority of the Medici through their control of the Mercanzia.

Together, these and other statuary of Orsanmichele do more than represent historical saints and a miraculous Madonna: they tell of the ongoing political struggle for control and influence in Renaissance Florence.

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## Key Dates for Orsanmichele

- 1240 Orsanmichele functions as community grain market on former orchard of oratory to Saint Michael; open loggia with pilasters; one is painted with image of the Virgin Mary
- 1291 Confraternity compagnia della Madonna di Orsanmichele formed to administer charitable donations attracted by miraculous Madonna on pilaster
- 1296 Building of the Florence cathedral begins
- 1304 Original grain market burns
- 1336 Decision to rebuild Orsanmichele as grain repository and shrine to Madonna
- 1337-9 Construction starts on loggia; Decision to give major and minor guilds representation inside
- 1339 Decree that seven major and five minor guilds will decorate exterior pillar faces with images of patron saints makes Orsanmichele an acknowledged guild center. Thirteenth pillar given to Parte Guelfa
- 1340-45 Bankruptcy crisis of Florentine banks following loan defaults by British crown
- 1346-49 Famine and peak years of Black Death; Florence loses approximately 50% of population
- 1378 Ciompi rebellion – year of worker government
- 1380 Loggia enclosed
- 1406 Guilds given 10-year deadline to fill niches or forfeit spots
- 1412 Estimated date for commission of Stone Mason Guild's *Four Crowned Martyrs* statue from Nanni di Banco

- 1419 Bankers buy niche from Bakers Guild
- 1422 Donatello commissioned by Parte Guelfa to create *Saint Louis of Toulouse*
- 1425 Ghiberti commissioned by Banker's Guild to create *Saint Matthew*
- 1466 Verrocchio commissioned by Mercanzia to commission *Christ and Saint Thomas*
- 1478 Pazzi conspiracy - unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Medici
- 1483 *Christ and Saint Thomas* unveiled

## **Introduction**

Orsanmichele is easy to overlook on the way down Florence's main road from the Palazzo Vecchio to the Duomo. The building is not included on the "must see" lists for visitors making a short tour of Florence's highlights. There are no long lines around the building—in fact, there are no ticket takers at all, or guides offering informational tours. So curious visitors are often stunned to step inside the open doors and confront the exquisite Orcagna marble and bronze tabernacle for the Madonna della Grazie. What is this building? Some of the tour books laid out on an unmanned table call Orsanmichele a church; others call it a "religious temple," while noting the role of the guilds in creating the building. All point out the shrine to the Madonna and the saints that fill the niches surrounding the building. Is this is a church? I contend it may be a shrine, but a church it is not.

It would be reasonable to browse the interior of Orsanmichele with its scenes from the life of Mary, and conclude that this was a church dedicated to the Virgin. Most scholarly literature on the niche statues focuses on the religious representation or on the stunning Renaissance advances in art and sculpture that are reflected in the progression of artwork and sculpture here. But Orsanmichele had a much bigger role in Florentine culture than a simple neighborhood church—and the saints that line the exterior walls are not your typical saints. I argue that the messages they convey go far beyond typical religious reinforcement.



For centuries, the site that is now Orsanmichele served the citizens of Florence as a hub of communal focus—for food, for community, for reverence, and for celebration by the guild members of the commune. I believe that Artusi Luciano was particularly apt when he described Orsanmichele as being “*doubly sacred: sacred for being a house of God and sacred for the reminders [of the time when] the force and industrious genius of the Guilds dominated.*”<sup>1</sup>

As a result of this guild “force and industrious genius” during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Orsanmichele also became a revolutionary artistic hub reflective of the politics of the day. Through the decoration and artwork of the building, particularly the exterior tabernacles or niches, one can see the interrelationships and competition within Florentine society through the workers’ guilds. The selection and depiction of the saints in each of the guild tabernacles take what is ostensibly a religious representation and mold it to fit the agenda of the sponsoring organization. Here one can also see the changing worldview that occurred during the Renaissance. That rapidly evolving worldview, especially between the years of 1339 and 1483, is better illustrated through the statuary of Orsanmichele than any other single place in the republic.

This paper will explore the underlying meanings in the exterior statuary created during the latter part of this period and explain the role they played in promoting or challenging the quickly evolving political agendas of this time. Little seems to have been written on the works in light of the changing political and religious landscape between the time that the decoration was decided (1339) and the time the niches were filled (1483)

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<sup>1</sup> Luciano Artusi, *Historic and Artistic Guide to Orsanmichele in Firenze* (Florence: Kina Italia, 1982), 7.

—or refilled, as in the case of the Mercanzia’s *Christ and Saint Thomas*. Politically, this period covers the peak reign of the Florentine republic, the bloom of the humanist movement, and the struggles of the rich and powerful—ultimately in the form of the Medici—to lay claim to the hearts and minds of the citizens.

To explore these political messages, I will analyze four sculptures: Nanni di Banco’s *Four Crowned Martyrs*, Ghiberti’s *Saint Matthew*, Donatello’s *Saint Louis of Toulouse*, and Verrocchio’s *Christ and Saint Thomas*. Each of these statues represent the distinct perspectives of their patrons and demonstrate how the Saints of Orsanmichele are far more than religious icons. I will look at the history of the period, the symbology used by the artists, the sponsors of each work and the political environment within which they were created. Through this analysis, we will be able to look beyond the biblical story of each saint, and hear the statues speak about the politics of Renaissance Florence.

Chapter 1 reviews the relevant history that gave rise to the civic center that is Orsanmichele from its humble beginnings as a grain marketplace. I examine how the political landscape led to the guilds becoming patrons of the center, how its charitable role benefited Orsanmichele through periods of famine and plague, and how the political environment influenced reconstruction after destruction of the original market in the early 1300s.

Chapter 2 investigates how the changing political environment combined with developments in artistic technique to drive competition and progress on the erstwhile ignored exterior tabernacles of the building. This competition ultimately spurred an array of artistic advances by some of the most skilled artisans of the Renaissance.

Chapter 3 looks at Nanni di Banco's *Four Crowned Martyrs* and explores how this traditional story of stone masons who were martyred for refusing to carve a graven image for a Roman emperor became an icon for republican civic values.

Chapter 4 studies Ghiberti's *Saint Matthew*, and analyzes how this traditional statue of Matthew the Apostle conveyed secondary meaning for an increasingly influential group of citizens in the Bankers' Guild.

Chapter 5 analyzes the Parte Guelfa and Donatello's *Saint Louis of Toulouse*. Through a review of the history of the Parte and the political milieu at the time the statue was commissioned, we see why the traditional patron saint for this group was bypassed in favor of a recent saint with stronger political affiliations.

Chapter 6 examines the Mercanzia, another group who passed over their traditional patron saint in favor of Verrocchio's *Christ and Saint Thomas*, and explores what this choice says about the changing political values of those in power.

Together, these statues tell a story of political rhetoric and struggle for influence that overshadows the traditional religious messages that would typically be conveyed. This makes Orsanmichele unique among civic religious structures in the city, casting the building in a different light.

## Chapter 1: A History of Orsanmichele

Throughout its history, Orsanmichele held an unusual communal position in Florence—one that kept it vital in a time of shifting alliances. From its early days as a granary and home to a miracle-performing Madonna, it was central to the community. Notably, the structure was never aligned with any particular religious order or even a specific area of the city. Instead, the confraternity charged with oversight of the structure represented each of the city's six districts—reflecting much broader civic involvement than a parish church or a single guild hall.<sup>2</sup> Confraternity (*Compagnia*) captains were elected every four months by their predecessors, and could not immediately serve again after their term was complete.<sup>3</sup> This diverse membership and the frequency with which leadership changed kept the institution relevant and visible.

The duties of the institution also kept Orsanmichele relevant to the larger community. Beyond the distribution of grain during famines and other times of need, a primary responsibility of the confraternity was receiving alms to the Madonna and redistributing them to the poor. By the early 1300s, monies collected from those paying homage to the granary Madonna and bequeaths by wealthy citizens had transformed Orsanmichele into one of the city's leading charitable institutions.<sup>4</sup> In 1329, it was receiving donations from the government, estates, its own members, and the Wool Guild, with which Orsanmichele had a long-standing relationship.<sup>5</sup> This broad community

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<sup>2</sup> Diane Finiello Zervas, *Orsanmichele A Firenze* (Modena: Mirabilia Italiae, 1996), 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. This alliance with one of the most powerful guilds in the city was the first instance of a guild aligning itself with Orsanmichele.

support was crucial to a decision to rebuild after an early 14<sup>th</sup> century fire burned the entire section of the city where Orsanmichele was located.

Following the fire, there seems to have been no question on whether or not to rebuild Orsanmichele. As a granary and home to a revered religious icon, the structure was critical—Florence could produce less than half its annual grain needs at the time the project was approved<sup>6</sup> and the alms given to the granary Madonna were an important source of charity for the poor in a time of recurrent famine. An institution of this import warranted more than the reconstruction of an open air market. As part of the rebuilding, the compagnia decided to enclose the loggia that housed the miraculous Madonna, and move the granary to newly constructed second and third floors.<sup>7</sup> At the time it was approved, however, the project had to vie for funds with many competing needs: revaulting of the Bargello after a fire of 1332; work on the Duomo and campanile (restarted after a famine and major flood); and rebuilding streets, walls, and bridges damaged by that flood.<sup>8</sup> There also was an ongoing expensive war with Verona at the time. These many competing needs would make the construction of the new Orsanmichele slow going over the next hundred years. The effect of this delay was that it allowed the shifting sands of the political landscape to be captured in the artwork of the structure.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>7</sup> Artusi, *Historic and Artistic Guide*, 4. The holes that are still visible in the Oratory pillars today are the grain chutes, through which grain was delivered from the second floor to the bags of the grain merchants.

<sup>8</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele A Firenze*, 35.

## The Politics of Reconstruction

From the start, it was clear that reconstruction of Orsanmichele was to be a major civic project and that art would play a critical role. The Florentine structure of government ensured civic participation in corporate buildings and art, and the support of the guilds guaranteed involvement through financial support, civic engagement, and oversight.<sup>9</sup> As with many civic projects of the time, beauty was mentioned along with practical need for the new project.<sup>10</sup> The Orsanmichele declaration promised that the new building “*would contribute greatly to the city’s honour, beauty, and appearance, and to the city’s perfection.*”<sup>11</sup>

The guilds played a major role in reconstruction of the civic monument, reflecting their central role in Florentine society. Responsibility for Orsanmichele’s reconstruction was given to an elected committee, who placed the wealthy silk maker’s guild in a project oversight role. The selection of the silk guild illustrates the concept of balance in political appointments that was observed between major guilds at the time. This guild was not the most influential in the city nor the one most aligned with Orsanmichele. But the wool makers, the guild most closely aligned with Orsanmichele to that point, had recently been placed in charge of construction of the Duomo, so were not viable candidates to lead the project.<sup>12</sup> It might also have seemed logical to give the task to the grain merchants’ guild,

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<sup>9</sup> Carl Brandon Strehlke, “Introduction,” in his *Orsanmichele and the History and Preservation of the Civic Monument*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele a Firenze*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> Carl Brandon Strehlke, “Orsanmichele before and after the Niche Sculptures: Making Decisions about Art in Renaissance Florence,” in *Orsanmichele and the History and Preservation of the Civic Monument*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 43.

as the granary would still be housed on the second floor of the building. The grain merchants, however, were not a major guild, so would not have had the political or financial clout needed to run the project. The silk makers had shown their ability through a rotating responsibility for the construction of Santa Maria del Fiore, and the businesses of many of its members were in the neighborhood of Orsanmichele.<sup>13</sup> It is notable that the Duomo project, managed by the wool maker's guild, was still underway at the time—a fact that may have influenced the slow development of Orsanmichele's exterior as both buildings competed for resources.

So the Silk Guild was placed in charge of the project: but how could they overcome the fact that Orsanmichele was intimately linked with the Wool Guild? An answer—one of historic import to the future of Orsanmichele—was found in 1339, when the Silk Guild successfully petitioned the Signoria to have the guilds adopt and decorate the interior and exterior of the new structure. The external pier faces would contain thirteen tabernacles—openings that would be filled with the patron saints of the official political party (the Guelfs) and the seven major and five medium-level guilds. Although the exterior was reserved for the most influential guilds, *all* guilds—including minor ones not represented on the exterior—would decorate designated piers on the interior of the structure in honor of their patron saints. Each guild would hold celebrations and collect donations on their patron saint's day and the money would be used for the poor.<sup>14</sup> This not only set up a series of ongoing festivities centered on Orsanmichele, it also guaranteed support from the major guilds and the dominant Guelf party far into the

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<sup>13</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele a Firenze*, 49.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

future. Inadvertently, it also set the stage for Orsanmichele to become the repository for a collection of transformational art reflecting the significance of the guilds in public life during this time.

That transformation didn't happen immediately. The first statue created for the niches was a marble Saint Stephen in the early 1300s. Although records have been lost along with the carving's head, the statue is ascribed to Pisano, who was also designing the cathedral's bell tower at the time.<sup>15</sup> There is nothing remarkable about this statue, which resembles other monumental sculpture of the day. The saint stands erect but not lifelike, with little real indication of the figure beneath the robes. There is little to indicate a relationship with the viewer. But *Saint Stephen* did set the standard for using sculpture as the preferred depiction of each guild's patron saint, as the compagnia had left open the options of sculpture or painting on wood panels.<sup>16</sup> If completed at this stage, Orsanmichele could well have fallen into obscurity as just one more building with monumental statues of biblical saints, similar in appearance to the cathedral, the bell tower, and many other churches of the area adorned by the apostles or other saints. But other factors, which will be explored in the following chapters, combined to make the statuary of Orsanmichele extraordinary.

The elite families of Florence found their way into representation on the exterior of the monument through the Parte Guelfa. As Zervas aptly points out, by the time that Orsanmichele was being constructed, the powerful families had melded with the Guelf

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<sup>15</sup> Enrica Neri Lusanna, "Andrea Pisano's Saint Stephen and the Genesis of Monumental Sculpture at Orsanmichele," in *Orsanmichele and the History and Preservation of the Civic Monument*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 57.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



party so that this group constituted the political elite of Florence.<sup>17</sup> The guilds, on the other hand, constituted the electoral arm of the government. Their interests in broad republicanism were the opposite of the political elite. The seven major and five medium level guilds assisted in the election of priors, held a critical role in deciding nominees for top offices, and pushed republican ideals. It is likely not coincidental that this governing system was initially proposed by a member of the Silk Guild—the group that put forth the idea of overt guild presence in Orsanmichele. The elite families, through the Parte Guelfa, had recently seized power. Struggles between the guilds and the elite were fresh at the time the new structure was being proposed and approved, and the guilds were growing in power. Shortly after the proposal for the design of the exterior tabernacles, election reform returned the twelve guilds to the nominating body, and the power of the Guelf party was reduced.<sup>18</sup> Discord over the guilds' former political exclusion continued during the period when the new Orsanmichele was being built. By positioning themselves on the exterior of this civic monument, the twelve guilds and the Parte Guelfa would have asserted themselves as symbols of the republic, and their saints as charitable guardians.<sup>19</sup>

The organizational structure of the reconstruction project reflected Florentine values of civic involvement, resulting in an organization that was highly reflective of and responsive to the citizenry. Citizen opinions were solicited for the design of the building and for the artwork. Artwork committees were set up, drawn from men from each district to ensure fair representation.<sup>20</sup> Even the superintendent of the building was subservient

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<sup>17</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele A Firenze*, 54.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>20</sup> Strehlke, *Orsanmichele before and after*, 26.

to these committees.<sup>21</sup> Members of these boards were elected for a year, with the possibility of reelection. This is in contrast to Siena, where the boards for the cathedral and the Hospital were appointed for life.<sup>22</sup> This electoral system would have created a board that was highly influenced by the politics of the moment.

Evolving Florentine civic values could be seen in the appearance of the building itself and how the exterior artwork was positioned. Although the new building was to be tall enough that the “officers of abundance” could stand on the roof and survey crops in nearby fields,<sup>23</sup> the statues and corresponding artwork are unusually low and open.<sup>24</sup> Instead of standing high above the city as on the Duomo and other cathedrals, the saints of Orsanmichele are approachable and could be viewed almost eye to eye, bringing their individuality to life for the observer and putting the increasingly independent Florentine citizen on near par with the saints. This accessibility to the citizenry likely influenced the design of the sculptures placed in the niches over the years.

The initial years of the reconstruction saw statues installed only by the wealthiest guilds, reflecting the economic upheaval of the time. The Wool and Silk Guilds were the first to erect statues by 1341, followed by the Butchers in 1346. Surviving documents suggest that construction was then halted due to financial difficulties, and did not resume until around 1350.<sup>25</sup> This was the time of the Black Death, which reduced Florence’s population by an estimated fifty percent and greatly altered the balance of wealth in the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Artur Rosenaur, “Orsanmichele: The Birthplace of Modern Sculpture,” in *Orsanmichele and the History and Preservation of the Civic Monument* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 176.

<sup>24</sup> Strehlke, *Orsanmichele before and after*, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele a Firenze*, 126.

city. Additional famines and plagues during the 1360s and 1370s further hindered construction but actually bolstered Orsanmichele finances as rich citizens left their estates to the shrine of the miraculous Virgin in attempts to influence fate or buy their way into heaven.<sup>26</sup> Just prior to the Black Death, a new society of Saint Anne (Mary's mother) also came to be associated with Orsanmichele, which brought in additional revenues for the confraternity.<sup>27</sup> Reflecting Orsanmichele's strength, at one point the government borrowed from the Orsanmichele confraternity for various construction, and at another point diverted taxes raised for Orsanmichele to construction of the Duomo.<sup>28</sup> Gradually over the next 80 years, the Orsanmichele confraternity, and not the commune, took over the financing of Orsanmichele. During this time, the guilds initiated what little work was done, commissioning frescoes and other works for their piers on the interior of the building; little work took place on the exterior.

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<sup>26</sup> Charlotte Blake Colman, *Orsanmichele, a Medieval Cynosure, a Polestar for the Renaissance* (Winter Park: Rollins College Press, 1995), 69. In this way, Orsanmichele benefited from the common belief that God's anger at moral corruption had brought about the Plague. Colman points out that during this time, giving part of one's wealth to charity was an accepted path to grace.

<sup>27</sup> Artusi, *Historic and Artistic Guide*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele a Firenze*, 126. Note that these were the key years of the Black Death, when the Florentine population plummeted by as much as half.

## Chapter 2: Changing Guild Politics Ignite Progress

Chaotic changes in the political landscape during the latter part of the fourteenth century affected the civic position of the guilds, expanding their hold on Orsanmichele. In 1378, an uprising led by Selvestre de' Medici sought to reform the Guelf government. The intent of the uprising was to return power that had been usurped by the Guelfs to the *popolo*, or “the people.”<sup>29</sup> But the uprising spread to the common workers, who were not considered to be part of the *popolo grosso* or *popolo minuto*—both of these groups already participated in elections and held office.<sup>30</sup> The reform spiraled out of control, and the populist uprising resulted in the addition of three lower “common man” or workers guilds—the dyers, the doubletmakers, and the common workers (*Ciompi*)—and the equal distribution of electoral offices among the now 24 guilds.<sup>31</sup> This short-lived government was quashed by the Signoria in 1378 and the Ciompi Guild was dissolved, but the other two lower guilds were left intact. The new guilds selected patron saints, as these and other guild emblems played an important symbolic role in the community, and took new places on the interior piers of Orsanmichele. The center experienced resurgence in popularity as a communal repository of guild symbology. Much activity centered on internal decoration and the annual celebrations observed by each guild. By 1383, 20 of the 21 guilds had a place within Orsanmichele when the Signoria ordered the Armourers

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<sup>29</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele A Firenze*, 141.

<sup>30</sup> Colman, *Orsanmichele, a Medieval Cynosure*, 59. The *popolo grosso* were the members of the major guilds; *popolo minuto* were members of the minor guilds. Colman sums up the situation, saying that workers were considered “*miserable creatures in the eyes of wealthy Florentines... who should be grateful for merely being allowed to work.*” This much is clear: the communal republic of Florence was far from a true republic.

<sup>31</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele a Firenze*, 141.

and Swordsmiths to begin honoring a holy day, or face a penalty.<sup>32</sup> In the midst of this surge of popularity and guild strength, a push was made to finish the building.

The downside of the Ciompi rebellion and its aftermath was that the major guilds, accustomed to power and central to the management of civic construction projects, now held less influence in relation to the middle and lower guilds. This may be one reason that not much progress was made on the building as a whole while the guilds were busily positioning themselves through interior decoration. This problem was resolved in 1382 by yet another government overthrow, this time by the upper classes—now including the post-plague *gente nuova* or newly rich—which dissolved the recently created lower guilds. This overthrow returned the elite families to the political arena, but balanced them with the major guilds. The result was a unified government, weighted in favor of the major guilds and elite families.<sup>33</sup> This consensus government, which had the appearance of inclusion among the upper and middle class, masking the reality of stable rule by an elite body of citizens, continued for several decades.

The consensus regime encouraged a change in civic focus that upset the balance of power at Orsanmichele. The new civic focus encouraged Florentines to identify less as individual guild members than as members of a larger collective entity—the citizen leadership of the republic.<sup>34</sup> This shift in focus to the *res publica* changed the way guilds at Orsanmichele were positioned. Formerly a repository of the symbolism of freedom embodied by the individual guilds, the site was now positioned as a repository of civic

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<sup>32</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele A Firenze*, 163.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 157. Zervas refers to this as a shift in focus to the *res publica*.

values and ambitions. In this civic role, the commune continued to support the completion of the building, and even required all churches in the city to give their Saint Anne's day gifts, together with the commune's, to Orsanmichele.<sup>35</sup> In this way, the support that had come from individual guild observations now became a communal event, a function of the republic.

Changes made by compagnia treasurer Franco Sacchetti regarding the interior of Orsanmichele further restricted the ability of guilds to differentiate themselves. Redecoration redistributed the spaces allotted to the guilds, making all of them substantially equal. All guild panels were removed, and replaced with uniform images of patronal saints.<sup>36</sup> Through these changes, the guilds were positioned as equal members of the larger *res publica*, not as important individual entities. In addition, some of the important communal saints were also duplicated elsewhere in the interior, as if to emphasize that their values were not unique to the guilds.<sup>37</sup>

Changes to the interior had an impact on the developing exterior artwork as guilds, now officially encouraged to view themselves as equal members of the republic, sought new venues to project influence and power. Stripped of their ability to differentiate themselves through their interior positioning, the guilds turned to the artwork and sculptures of their external tabernacles. These had long been ignored by many of the guilds, but now activity and competition began anew. And with the old standards changing, representation on the outside of Orsanmichele began to change, as

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., *Orsanmichele A Firenze*, 169.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 165.

well. Instead of conformity being the driving force on the exterior decoration of the building, individuality and competitiveness were now emphasized and honored as civic values. The result of this competitiveness still can be seen in the remarkable collection of statuary created over the next two decades, unmatched anywhere else in the city. The guilds now engaged in artistic elitism, competing through sculpture to recast their histories in keeping with the new civic values of the *res publica*.<sup>38</sup>

### **New Techniques Reflect Developing Civic Values**

During this time of competition, sculptors learned from painters how to use perspective and developed new techniques to engage their audience and reflect civic values. Instead of centering a statue to fill a niche, these modern sculptors calculated the viewpoint of the observer, and designed both niche and sculpture to draw the viewer in.<sup>39</sup> Orsanmichele was the first place that many of these techniques were so brilliantly illustrated.<sup>40</sup> These techniques enhanced the artists' ability to connect with the citizens through more naturalistic depictions and perspectives that engaged viewers and helped them step into the niche settings in their imaginations. This engagement had political implications, too, as the opportunity to engage came with an opportunity to share a point of view.

Popular thought of the day was reflected stylistically as well. The work of painters and sculptors during this period was marked by an emphasis on the perspective

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<sup>38</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele a Firenze*, 185.

<sup>39</sup> Rosenauer, *Orsanmichele: The Birthplace*, 171.

<sup>40</sup> Strehlke, *Orsanmichele before and after*, 176.

naturalism of the classical style. As the educated class turned away from the constraints of the church toward the strength and independence of their republic, they found in these ancient classical societies a reliance on the powers of observation and reason, and an independent citizenry which suited the questioning that was going on in their time. The classical independence characterized in many of the statues on Orsanmichele reflected the growing independence of the Renaissance citizen. For example, Donatello's *Saint Mark* stood independently and naturally, draped in classical garb, as did many of the other statues. Religion was still an important element of civic life, but in a new role that was less regimented with more emphasis on man as an independent being. The combination of these messages can be seen in the way that the patron saints of the guilds are depicted. Many of them are in classic garb and poses, and both the attitude of the statues and the stories depicted with them show an independence of spirit and sufficiency of man. Viewed in contrast to earlier Orsanmichele works, the increasing freedom of the Florentine citizen is clearly illustrated through the statues of the day.

Although the ancient past was revered, modern advances in artistic techniques projected an expanding world view through art and statuary. Through perspective, viewers were brought into artwork, and made part of the scene. The invisible wall between viewer and artwork was breaking down, as can be clearly seen in the statues discussed in the next sections. This reflected the changing worldview of the Renaissance citizen: rather than a powerless being at the mercy of unseen divine hands, the citizen of this day was more able to shape his world and, while still influenced by "*Fortuna*," had



more sway over his destiny.<sup>41</sup> This perspective was achieved in part through the use of *relievo schiacciato*, in which gradations were carved to create an illusion of depth which had not been present until this time. Instead of having everything in the foreground, carving could also show space—and a sense of the infinite. Donatello’s relief for the

tabernacle of *Saint George* is a good example of this technique, in contrast with the predella beneath the sculpture of the *Four Crowned Martyrs*. When you look at Nanni di Banco’s relief of the four martyrs at work, the first of the tabernacles to contain a carved predella, you can see that everything is carved on the



**Figure 1:** Predella beneath Nanni di Banco’s *Four Crowned Martyrs* and Donatello’s *Saint George*. Source: Zervas, *Orsanmichele in Firenze Vol. 2*, 135 and 141

same plane. Yet when you look at Donatello’s relief for *Saint George*, you see depth and sense movement and see how the background is brought into the scene through the dimensionality created by this new technique. The difference is quite striking, and is believed to be the first time a sculptor achieved the concept of perspective, using *relievo schiacciato* in sculpture.<sup>42</sup> Rosenauer makes a compelling case that this advance occurred at Orsanmichele because the paintings inside the building challenged the sculptors to innovate in order to match the advances that were happening in paintings.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Susan Fedley Osmond, “The Renaissance Mind Mirrored in Art,” *The World and I*, 13 (Dec 1998): 31.

<sup>42</sup> Rosenauer, *Orsanmichele: The Birthplace*, 175.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

It is clear that to keep up with the progress taking place inside Orsanmichele, progress also had to happen outside.

### **Niches Provide New Platform for Competition and Innovation**

With advances in sculptural technique, the guilds turned to their niches as an opportunity to project their wealth and influence. As niche sizes were fixed and relatively similar, this distinction had to come through artistic technique. The Physicians and Apothecaries Guild appear to have been the first to incorporate some of these technical advances to break the model of Gothic uniformity, creating *Madonna of the Rose*, a work where the growing confidence and independence nurtured by the participative government of the republic can be seen.<sup>44</sup> The dimensionality of the tabernacle draws the viewer in, and the advances in draping and other elements of the statue itself give a more human, approachable feel.

Once the physicians and apothecaries raised the bar, other guilds, accustomed to having more dominant presences at Orsanmichele, scrambled to keep up. The Silk Guild now decided to update their *Saint John the Baptist* statue, commissioning Ghiberti to create a monumental bronze. While Saint John was carved in the older Gothic style, at the time it was the largest bronze created, so it set a new standard for competition among the guilds. This move marked Orsanmichele as a worthy spot for these more expensive

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<sup>44</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele a Firenze*, 163.

statues, and ratcheted up the pressure on other wealthy guilds to modernize their tabernacles. It also highlighted the gulf between the wealthy guilds and the less-wealthy medium guilds, who responded by hiring younger, less expensive artists who brought new techniques to the fore, further driving innovation.

### Chapter 3: Nanni di Banco and the Four Crowned Martyrs



**Figure 2:** Copy of Nanni di Banco's *Four Crowned Martyrs*, Orsanmichele.  
Source: Museums of Florence website: [www.museumsofflorence.com](http://www.museumsofflorence.com).

While not a monumental bronze, Nanni di Banco's statue of the *Four Crowned Martyrs* stands out among the statuary of Orsanmichele for many reasons. Despite the fact that this work was created for one of the least wealthy major guilds, Nanni di Banco, working with the help of Donatello, created a monumental sculpture that calls to mind the very essence of Renaissance republicanism.

The biblical-era four crowned martyrs were the patron saints of the Stonemasons Guild, the organization of the building trades including woodworkers, architects, stone masons, and sculptors. Like his father, Nanni di Banco was a leader in this guild.<sup>45</sup> Scholars surmise that the *Four Martyrs* work was commissioned in 1409, during one of di Banco's several turns as one of the four governing consuls for the guild. In 1418, di Banco achieved even higher elected office as one of the twelve Signoria who governed the commune—an unusually high achievement for a Stonemason.

The four martyrs were the Christian sculptors Claudius, Castorius, Nocstratus, and Symphorianus, who refused to create a pagan idol for Roman Emperor Diocletius around 300 AD and were thereby sentenced to death. Other than the fact that they are clearly sculptors, none of these additional story elements are obvious from the sculpture. Unlike Orsanmichele's Saint Matthew, who holds his Gospel while watched over by an angel; Saint Louis of Toulouse, who blesses the viewers while garbed in his bishop's robe; or doubting Saint Thomas, who reaches out to touch the wounds of Christ, the four martyrs originally held instruments of their trade, making them appear more secular than religious. This is rather astounding for a structure built to protect a miraculous Madonna, and reflects the changing mores of the day.

The martyrs are particularly interesting for their representation of a group of classical citizens—clearly models of how the Stone Masons and Woodworkers Guild wished to portray themselves. Clad in Roman garb, three of the men listen intently to

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<sup>45</sup> National Gallery of Art, *Monumental Sculpture from Renaissance Florence: Ghiberti, Nanni di Banco and Verrocchio at Orsanmichele*, (Washington D.C: 2006), 7.

their compatriot. The hand of the statue to the left of the speaker rests on the speaker's shoulder in a sign of male solidarity. They ignore the viewer completely, engrossed in their own conversation, appearing to pause and consider the words of the speaker. These men reflect the ideal republican values of responsible citizen-guildsman or of the leaders of the guild. Certainly, they depict independence, intellect, and moral fortitude, both by their story and by their portrayal in stone, implying similar traits in their fellow stone masons of the guild of di Banco's day.

Beyond the classical references, this grouping echoes culture at the time that it was created. Bergstein relates the work to a popular story of the time, *The Fat Stonecarver*.<sup>46</sup> During this period, it was common for special dispensation to be given for upper class men to participate in exclusive supper clubs after curfew hours. The story of the fat stonecarver places such a group of comrades—bound by friendship, honor, and intellect—against a “new man” (one of the post-plague *gente nuova*) in the upper echelon, portraying the newcomer as lacking wit, honor, and a stable point of view. Bergstein posits, and I agree, that the four martyrs could easily have been viewed as the characters in this popular story, which would reinforce their membership among upper class guildsmen.

It is striking how little religious context is used in this sculpture. There is no sign of martyrdom here—these men appear neither persecuted nor victims. Instead, they appear confident and comfortable with their compatriots. Their bodies and garb clearly

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<sup>46</sup> Mary Bergstein, “The Fat Stonecarver,” in *Orsanmichele and the History and Preservation of the Civic Monument*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2102), 191.

mirror classical statuary, while their heads appear to be taken from Roman portraiture.<sup>47</sup>

Scholars have pointed out the resemblance of the four martyrs to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180) and other Roman portraiture. At a time when guild influence was starting to wane, the intent of the imagery to portray these guild members as essential citizen leaders seems to be clear. What better self-compliment than to portray one's group as Roman leaders?

The inset below the four saints is one of the earliest known uses of a carving below a statue to tell a related story. Like the statues above it, the story is notable for its lack of religious imagery. In fact, although the men in the carving are in classical garb, they appear to be pursuing the present-day craft of the guild, going about their work of carving and sculpting. Faith does not seem to play a role in this story.

The secular emphasis of this work may also reflect the period between the time that this work was commissioned (1409) and when it was completed (around 1416). Zervas notes that Orsanmichele was being used during this time period for various non-religious activities—including a reading of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.<sup>48</sup> In 1415, Orsanmichele was promoted to a collegiate church—on a par with the Duomo and San Lorenzo—and assigned two priests and accompanying staff, in an attempt to strengthen its ties to the church.<sup>49</sup> This surprising move would have come around the time that the Parte Guelfa began its campaign to reinstate its former civic position, commissioning *Saint Louis of Toulouse* for their niche at Orsanmichele and increasing the number of

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<sup>47</sup> National Gallery of Art, *Monumental Sculpture*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele A Firenze*, 186.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 187

religious observances and processions. The contrast between the strikingly secular appearance of the four martyrs and the clearly religious attitude of St. Louis may well reflect the tensions between the humanists leading the guilds and the old-time Parte supporters who were traditionally aligned with the Pope. At the very least, the two works portray strikingly different priorities.



## Chapter 4: The Non-Guild – the Parte Guelfa



**Figure 3:** Donatello's *Saint Louis of Toulouse*, Santa Croce Opera Museum.  
Source: Zervas, *Orsanmichele in Firenze Vol. 2*, 514.

Completion of the Parte Guelfa's tabernacle came rather late in the process of filling the exterior niches of Orsanmichele. The organization's contribution of *Saint Louis of Toulouse*, carved by Donatello, was completed around 1420—shortly after the ten-year deadline established by the confraternity for filling or forfeiting the niches, and coinciding with an ultimately unsuccessful Parte campaign to revive its political role in governing the city.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Heather L Pollock, *Donatello's Saint Louis of Toulouse and Its Role in Religious Ritual of Early Renaissance Florence*, (St. Thomas: University of St. Thomas Press, 2007), 3.

On the surface, this late completion seems surprising. Historically, the Parte was made up of Florence's old elite families—citizens who sought to position themselves as the guardians of the moral values and communal freedom of the republic.<sup>51</sup> The Parte was a dominant player in Florentine politics, and represented the government as a unifying party among the often sparring guilds and a mediator against the demands of the wealthy families who wanted to usurp government power. In fact, there was a long history, the most recent leading to the Ciompi revolution, of the Parte dominating government power. Their tabernacle—assigned to the Parte during one of the peaks of their power—was the prime position on the building, next to the main entrance and facing the main route for processions through the city. The niche itself was twice as wide as those of the guilds, and taller, reflecting the important role of the Parte. But times had changed, and the Ciompi revolution and its aftermath had taken their toll. Sources of power and influence had begun to shift since the tabernacle was originally planned. Following the Ciompi revolution, the influence of the Parte began to wane. Although they retained their wealth and properties, their dominance as a working organization and political power was diminished. The years that the exterior niches of Orsanmichele were being filled saw the Parte's role in communal politics begin to decline.

The Ciompi revolution and the resulting short-lived People's government (1378-1382) was a reaction to the excesses of the Parte Guelfa and its members during the years after the Black Death, when production was cut back and wage pressures increased, leading to increasing struggles between the elite—which now included the newly rich

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<sup>51</sup> Rosenauer, *Orsanmichele: The Birthplace*, 175.

*gente nuova*—and the workers.<sup>52</sup> During the Ciompi revolution and the ensuing People’s Government, government focus shifted from protecting the republic from the wealthy families to protecting the republic from the workers. This altered the relationship of the Parte to the guilds.

The Parte’s foothold among the elite was also altered during this time. Post-revolution, power moved increasingly into the hands of the *gente nuova*—those who had been able to capitalize on changing economic opportunities that followed the plague. These newcomers quickly moved to exclude the oldest families—who made up most of the Parte—from public office. They also moved to reduce the power of the guilds, further undercutting the importance of the Parte as mediator.

But one of the key factors in the Parte’s decline was the increasing reliance of the Florentine government on the *gente nuova* families throughout the 15th century. From the 1390s through the late 1400s, Florence was continually at war. Many of these wars were fought by hired mercenaries, at immense cost to the government.<sup>53</sup> The high costs were underwritten by the wealthy families of the commune, an ever more select group as costs continued to rise. Najemy writes that by the turn of the century “*military expenses concentrated power in the hands of those wealthy enough to underwrite them.*”<sup>54</sup> This power rendered the Parte Guelfa less and less relevant—but no less striving. It was in this situation—still determined to recapture their relevance—that the Parte commissioned Donatello to create their *Saint Louis of Toulouse*.

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<sup>52</sup> John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200-1575*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 171.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

The choice of Toulouse himself is interesting. Up until around 1400, the Virgin Mary was the official patron saint of the party—but the Orcagna shrine inside Orsanmichele and the Madonna in the physician's niche filled that role. So the Parte looked elsewhere for a patron saint that would communicate their influence. They found that influence in a much more recent saint.

During the previous century, the Guelfs had aligned themselves with the King of Naples, establishing trading and political partnerships.<sup>55</sup> The Neapolitan royal family was descended from the Angiven royal family of France. Louis of Toulouse, who had only been elevated to sainthood in the early 1300s, was a member of this Anjou family. Among his traits, he was noted for his devotion to the Virgin. Selecting Louis as a new patron saint for the Parte presented a good way to honor that Angiven patronage while still maintaining the group's previous ties to the Madonna.<sup>56</sup> Since Louis had visited Florence on his way to Rome, staying with his Franciscan order at Santa Croce, the citizenry, which embraced the Franciscans, was familiar with him. This familiarity and his devotion to the Virgin would have made him a logical choice for her shrine.

Louis of Toulouse was the son of Charles II of Anjou, King of Naples and Sicily, and first in line to inherit the throne. However, Louis and his brother had been given to the King of Aragon as hostages during the wars between France and Spain, and were raised in Spain by the Franciscans.<sup>57</sup> At 21, he was offered the throne of Naples. Instead, he renounced the throne and joined the Franciscans. As a condition of this deal, he agreed

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<sup>55</sup> Colman, *Orsanmichele, a Medieval Cynosure*, 62.

<sup>56</sup> Pollock, *Donatello's Saint Louis of Toulouse*, 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

to accept the Bishopric of Toulouse, but never gave up his vow of poverty. He died soon after at the age of 23.<sup>58</sup>

Beyond flattering their Neapolitan protectors, the political message that the Parte would have communicated by the choice of Louis was clear. By choosing to trade wealth (although not power) for a life of poverty, Louis portrayed the choice of rejecting wealth, with the accompanying reward of sainthood. The Parte, struggling to remain relevant in competition with the *gente nuova* families like the Albizzis and the Medici, would have been eager to showcase this message.

The Parte commissioned Toulouse as a bronze, one of Donatello's first, adding to the collection of bronze statuary on Orsanmichele's walls. In a display of power and wealth, they also requested that the statue be fully gilded—the only such statue on the exterior.<sup>59</sup> The positioning of the monument within its niche used this gilding to great effect.

Donatello chose a revolutionary way to portray the young saint. Rather than positioning him within his niche, Donatello portrayed the saint reaching out from his niche to bless the passerby. As Louis's niche faced the main processional route, reflecting the light, he would have been highly visible to the citizenry as they paraded by his position in the ever-increasing number of religious observances dictated by the Parte.

A number of scholars believe that Donatello was able to create an optical illusion with the interplay of the carvings in the background of the niche, the statue, and the hand

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>59</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele A Firenze*, 201.

that proffered the blessing.<sup>60</sup> By positioning the gilded hand so that it caught the light, these scholars assert that Louis's hand appeared to move up and down as viewers approached it on foot.<sup>61</sup> It is impossible to prove the accuracy of this supposition, but it would have been a powerful experience if true.

Donatello tied Louis to the role played by the miracle-working Madonna house in Orsanmichele. Both are meant to be seen as spiritual protectors.<sup>62</sup> This protector role was reinforced by the putti, or nymphs, that Donatello included in Louis's tabernacle. Where ancient putti were most often seen holding garlands, Donatello's putti are wearing *shields*, positioning them in the role of protector.<sup>63</sup> This mirrors the role envisioned by the Guelfs for their party—protector of the spirituality of the people, of Florentine liberty, and of the church.

Scholars have varying views on the appearance of Louis himself. Some say that his overly large robes and slight appearance are meant to portray Louis as clumsy. Colman portrays Donatello as having created this aspect intentionally, noting that Donatello thought the saint a “clumsy fool to relinquish a kingdom for the sake of becoming a Friar.”<sup>64</sup>

Others scholars, including Pollack, seem to feel that the appearance was meant to emphasize the meekness and humanity of the saint, and to reinforce his rejection of the trappings of power. I side with these scholars: the overwhelming mass of his robes, when

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<sup>60</sup> Pollock, *Donatello's Saint Louis of Toulouse*, 30.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>64</sup> Colman 149. *Orsanmichele, a Medieval Cynosure*. Colman attributes this quote to Vasari.

contrasted with the simplicity of his sandals and Louis's fresh, unlined face, project an image of youth and humility—meek, perhaps, but not foolishly clumsy. This portrayal seems more to reflect the traditional view of spiritual power coming in humble packages.

Donatello added other touches that tie the saint to Orsanmichele. The bishop's staff held by Saint Louis bears carvings that are very similar to those of funeral reliquaries. As a goldsmith, Donatello would have created such reliquaries for patrons. The introduction of funereal imagery to the tableau invokes a likely tie to the story of one of Louis's miracles. It was said that Louis appeared at his own funeral, hovering above the crowd and blessing the participants. This would have been much like his appearance on Orsanmichele, hovering above the crowd, raising his hand to proffer blessings to all passers-by.<sup>65</sup> The staff is topped by a sheaf of wheat, bolstering the tie to Orsanmichele's historic role as a granary for the people.<sup>66</sup>

Considering all of the elements in play, I believe the message sent by the *Saint Louis of Toulouse* carving was spiritual as well as political—much like the Parte itself. The Guelfs created a stunning display of wealth and spiritual protection, while at the same time reinforcing the importance of humility and adherence to faith. At a time when the Guelfs were trying to reassert themselves into the civic conversation through an increase in spectacle, pageantry, and processions, this saint would have served as a near-daily reminder of these values.

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<sup>65</sup> Pollock, *Donatello's Saint Louis of Toulouse*, 27.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

## Chapter 5: The Bankers and Ghiberti's Saint Matthew



**Figure 4:** Copy of Ghiberti's *Saint Matthew*, Orsanmichele.  
Source: Museums of Florence website: [www.museumsofflorence.com](http://www.museumsofflorence.com).

*Saint Matthew* exemplifies a guild with a different agenda. Over the years, the stature of the Bankers Guild had risen, as their role in the extension of credit for commerce and warfare became more integral to the functioning of the republic. The members of this group were global leaders in the early world of finance—creating the first letters of credit, earning interest from loans, and exchanging currencies.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Artusi, *Historic and Artistic Guide*, 13.



In 1419, the Bankers purchased an empty tabernacle from the Bakers Guild.<sup>68</sup> Why the Bankers did not already have a spot on the exterior is not clear, although Zervas convincingly speculates that it was because the Baker's patron, Saint Lawrence, was also the founding-day saint of the Orsanmichele compagnia.<sup>69</sup> But however relevant, Saint Lawrence was not to appear on Orsanmichele's exterior. In their decision to award the tabernacle to the Bankers, the Signoria noted that the Bakers were too poor to ever be able to afford a statue for their niche.<sup>70</sup> The Bankers, in contrast, were not only able to afford the niche, but were also intent on making a statement with their representation.

The Medici influence behind the scenes was instrumental in the commissioning and creation of this work. Still in his early thirties and yet to make his mark, Cosimo di Medici was a key member of the guild's artistic committee.<sup>71</sup> His father, Giovanni di Medici, fronted the money for the sculptor's tools, and Cosimo was one of the largest donors as materials were obtained.<sup>72</sup> Access to this funding was important, because the Bankers had lofty goals for their niche. When complete, the statue's cost would be eleven hundred florins—roughly the cost of building a new Florentine residence.<sup>73</sup>

The bankers were not content with a marble statue. Although documents from the Signoria indicate that a marble statue was approved for the niche, the Banker's records make it clear that they intended from the start to commission a bronze—a material ten

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<sup>68</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele a Firenze*, 433.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>70</sup> Eleonor Luciano, "A More 'Modern' Ghiberti: The Saint Matthew for Orsanmichele," in *Orsanmichele and the History and Preservation of the Civic Monument*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 217.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 215

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>73</sup> National Gallery of Art, *Monumental Sculpture*, 11.

times the cost of marble.<sup>74</sup> The Bankers' documents tell of the search for "the best master there is," after which the guild commissioned Ghiberti, who had recently completed another monumental bronze for Orsanmichele, *John the Baptist*, created for the traditionally strong and powerful Wool Guild. As one of the first monumental bronzes to be cast since antiquity, the Banker's statue would have made a commanding statement about the wealth and power of the guild—whose influence had by this time in fact surpassed that of the Wool Guild. The bankers requested that their Saint Matthew be "*at least the size of John the Baptist of the Camilana guild or larger.*"<sup>75</sup>

In addition to the expense of bronze in a larger size, the whites of Matthew's eyes and the letters of his book were gilded in silver. His sandals were detailed in gold along with a message added to the bottom of his robe: *The work of the guild of Bankers of Florence in the year of our Lord 1420.*<sup>76</sup> Without speaking a word, the bankers were leaving no doubt who controlled the wealth of the commune.

Matthew was a natural patron saint for the Bankers. Before giving up his work to follow Christ, Matthew had been a tax collector in the service of the Romans. He was often portrayed carrying a bag of money. At times, the Bankers of Florence assisted in the collection of taxes, and the collection of interest from loans—often at rates that would be considered usury then or today—was a major source of their revenue (this despite church prohibitions on usury and the charging of interest). The transformation of tax collector to Apostle despite his usurious past would appeal to these leaders of finance—

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<sup>74</sup> Luciano, "A More 'Modern' Ghiberti," 210.

<sup>75</sup> National Gallery of Art, *Monumental Sculpture*, 11.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

who might be inclined to overlook the fact that Matthew walked away from his usurious profession and still ended up beaten to death with an ax before his ultimate admission to heaven.

The Bankers' Matthew does not look like a humble follower—rather he is elegant and exudes confidence. Colman notes that as the representative of a major guild, Matthew would have been expected to portray dignity and austerity.<sup>77</sup> I see little sign of austerity in the magnificent folds of this Matthew's robes, but rather more than a hint of the proud leader.

The Bankers got their way: magnificent Matthew was a full eight inches taller than John the Baptist.<sup>78</sup> Vasari notes that *Saint Matthew* was more highly praised than *John the Baptist* because of the more modern techniques employed by Ghiberti on the newer statue. Standing erect, with his beautifully coifed head inclined down, Saint Matthew evokes images of a classic Roman orator. He gazes directly at the public, full of gravitas, directing them to consider his gospel in his hand. He clearly seems to be telling the viewer that he has the answers and that he is one to be followed. In this way he engages the viewer more directly than any of the Orsanmichele statues to this point.

What a statement of power and might the statue would have made! Large and imposing, cast of gleaming metal, Matthew gazes intently at the passerby, pointing to draw their attention to his book. On the surface and to the religious, this is his first book of the Gospel. To those who owed money to the bankers, this solemn citizen in his classic

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<sup>77</sup> Colman, *Orsanmichele, a Medieval Cynosure*, 142.

<sup>78</sup> National Gallery of Art, *Monumental Sculpture*, 3.

garb could just as easily been drawing their attention to the book of accounts—Ghiberti having created a figure so lifelike that he seems ready to step out of the tabernacle and buttonhole the viewer. Or he could be pointing out the book of guild assets for those who might wonder about the power of this group. It is clear from the records left behind that the bankers were meticulous record-keepers, and that fact must have been known by the citizens of the day. With book in hand, Matthew would tower over the citizenry, reminding them to settle their accounts, both earthly and spiritual, before it was too late.

## Chapter 6: Shifting Alliances: The Mercanzia, The Medici, and Verrocchio's Doubting Thomas



**Figure 2.** Copy of Verrocchio's *Christ and Doubting Thomas*, Orsanmichele.  
Source: Museums of Florence website: [www.museumsofflorence.com](http://www.museumsofflorence.com).

One of the last significant changes to the outside of Orsanmichele took place years after the period that most scholars consider when discussing the monument. Yet this change beautifully illustrates the continuing value of this civic center in portraying important messages of political rhetoric.

The change I refer to occurred with the removal of the *Parte Guelfa Saint Louis of Toulouse* from the façade in 1452, reflecting the rising political power of the Medici.<sup>79</sup> The chancellor of the Guelf party, in announcing the change, stated “*the wise and honourable men among our citizens...judged that the dignity of the most illustrious and excellent Parte Guelfa was not suitably honored by being placed among the captains of the guilds [at Orsanmichele] and on their same level.*”<sup>80</sup> It was not coincidental that this change was made at the same time that the pro-Medici rulers changed the title of the Florentine priors from “Priors of the Guilds” to “Priors of Liberty.”<sup>81</sup> This was the most major statement to date on the dwindling influence of the guilds and the rise of the Medici.

Zervas makes a convincing argument about additional considerations driving the timing of this change. The signs and saints of the Guelf party had been fitting symbols for the Medici to use during the war against Milan. But by 1451, the Medicean government had entered into different alliances *with* Milan against Venice and King Alfonso I of Naples. This made reverence for an Angevin saint (Saint Louis) historically associated with Naples inappropriate, and he was removed from the list of communal saints to be honored.<sup>82</sup> In 1452, Frederick III, a traditional Guelf opponent, was received in Florence as an honored guest. The fact that the Guelf tabernacle was in a highly visible position on the main processional route likely played a role in the removal of *Saint Louis* to Santa Croce, as it would be number of years before a replacement statue was completed.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele a Firenze*, 211.

<sup>80</sup> As translated by Zervas, *Orsanmichele Documents*, 1336-1452, (Modena: Polgrafico Muchi, 1987), 357.

<sup>81</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele a Firenze*, 211.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

The tabernacle was sold to the Mercanzia, the merchants' court for all of the guilds and the republic. The Mercanzia's civic role—and its controlling position over the commune—was in great flux during this period, but control of the organization was firmly in the hands of the Medici. The purchase of the niche and the commissioning of the new statue were facilitated by Piero Medici.<sup>84</sup> The *operai* (or managing committee) of the Mercanzia at the time that the statue was commissioned was made up of Piero di Medici, Leonardo di Bartolomeo Bartolini, Dietisalvi Neroni, Pandolfo Pandolfini, and Matteo Palmieri.<sup>85</sup> During the period that the statue was being created, Lorenzo replaced his father Piero on the committee, Pucci replaced Palmieri on his death, and Neroni was exiled for his involvement in the Pazzi conspiracy. All of these men, including Neroni in his time, were close confederates of the Medici. Pucci is pictured next to Lorenzo in Ghirlandaio's fresco, *Confirmation of the Rule*, in the Sassetti Chapel (created between 1482 and 1486).<sup>86</sup>

Quiet Medici influence can be seen in the selection of a patron saint for the tabernacle. Traditionally, the Mercanzia identified Zenobius, the first bishop of Florence, as their patron saint. But Zenobius also was a communal saint and patron of the Locksmiths' Guild and as such, already represented twice inside Orsanmichele, suggesting the need for an alternate patron saint. The Medici had a long-standing affiliation with Saint Thomas, and were patrons of his church, San Tomasso in the

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<sup>84</sup> Andre Butterfield, "Verrocchio's Christ and Saint Thomas: Chronology, Iconography, and Political Context," *The Burlington Magazine*, 34, no 169 (Apr 1992), 228.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

Vecchio.<sup>87</sup> Additionally, doubting Thomas was traditionally associated with the virtues of justice and fairness—images of Saint Thomas already appeared in courtyards throughout Tuscany.<sup>88</sup> A fresco of *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, c 1385, was known to be above the door inside the audience chamber of the Signoria, along with a verse by Sachetti:<sup>89</sup>

*First. Touch the truth as I do, and you will believe in the high justice of the Trinity, which always exalts each person who makes judgments.*

*Second. Your hand to the truth and your eyes to highest heaven, your whole tongue and your every deed direct to the common good without hesitation*

*Third. Search for the truth, following justice; [direct] your whole and free mind to the common good for without this every government is deficient.*

For citizens familiar with this verse, the Mercanzia—and by extension the Medici—were now clearly presenting themselves as justice and representatives of the common good.

The Mercanzia was an important organization for the Medici. During the 1470s, Lorenzo packed its leadership with Medici loyalists and reorganized the judiciary system, moving some of the powers formerly held by the Captain of the People to the Mercanzia and making it the ultimate court of appeals.<sup>90</sup> The selection of *Christ and Saint Thomas* to represent the Mercanzia in Orsanmichele’s most visible niche furthered the Medici program of using the Mercanzia to associate themselves with the virtues of ideal rule: justice, fairness, evenhandedness, and the moral authority to determine right from wrong. This tie is further illustrated in a document formalizing one of Lorenzo’s judicial reforms:

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<sup>87</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele A Firenze*, 216.

<sup>88</sup> Butterfield, “Verrocchio’s Christ and Saint Thomas,” 231. Images appeared in courtrooms in Siena, Certaldo, Scarperia, Pistoia, and in the Mercanzia’s palace.

<sup>89</sup> Zervas, *Orsanmichele a Firenze*, 216.

<sup>90</sup> Butterfield, “Verrocchio’s Christ and Saint Thomas,” 230.



the front cover of the decree is marked with the Medici crest, the back cover with the indicia of the commune. On the front page is an image of Christ and Saint Thomas.<sup>91</sup>

Despite associations with justice and fairness, *Saint Thomas* followed a rocky path to completion. Records show that Verrocchio was commissioned to create the work in 1466, and that casting took place in 1470 and 76, with the statue's unveiling in 1483.<sup>92</sup> Work stopped midway, as payment disputes made their way to the Signoria. In 1481, the Signoria ordered payments to resume.<sup>93</sup> This is unusual, because the government did not typically get involved in Mercanzia contracts. Based on records that order the Mercanzia to pay Verrocchio in installments over four years due to financial difficulties, Butterfield speculates that this involvement was related to financial upheaval brought on by the Pazzi crisis.<sup>94</sup> This is plausible, but also illustrates the increasingly blurred lines between the government and the Mercanzia. Whatever the reason, the Mercanzia did not fully honor the agreement, and records show disputes over non-payment continuing into the 1490s. Perhaps by this time, the Medici did not feel bound by decrees other than their own, however moral or right.

The statue itself represents the iconic moment when Christ invites Thomas, who is unconvinced by his appearance, to touch his wounds. Thomas is shown in classical garb, leaning in with one foot outside the boundaries of the tabernacle, one hand extended hesitantly. His humanity shines through his young unlined face and flowing hair. The Christ is beatific but weary—face lined, the hair receding, the wounds gaping. The

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

message is clearly reinforced through the message from John 20 written on the hems of the garments—Thomas’s declaration of faith: “My Lord and my God,” and Christ’s response, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

Laurie Taylor-Mitchell points to a striking similarity between Verrocchio’s *Saint Thomas* and an earlier work, *Annunciatory Gabriel*, tentatively attributed to Nanni di Banco.<sup>95</sup> While the similarities in stance are undeniable, any comparison clearly highlights the immense advancements in technique during the prior century – where Gabriel has otherworldly beauty, lifelike Saint Thomas and the Christ seem able to step out of the niche and walk. Limbs are clearly defined beneath their classic garb, and the tension is palpable in Thomas’s hands, one grasping a handful of his robe as the other reaches toward Christ.

The advanced technique would have created a stunning reflection of a familiar story to Florentine citizens viewing the work, while also reinforcing a message of justice and truth—as provided by the Medicis. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.*

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<sup>95</sup> Laurie Taylor-Mitchell, “A Florentine Source for Verrocchio’s Figure of Saint Thomas at Orsanmichele,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, (1994), 607. Taylor suggests that Verrocchio saw the tie between Gabriel’s announcement of Christ’s physical presence and Thomas’s witness of it.

## **Conclusion: Ending an Era**

As a group, the statues examined in this paper tell the story of an ongoing struggle for power and influence. Through Nanni di Banco's *Four Crowned Martyrs*, guild leaders reinforce the importance and responsibility of individual citizens in keeping the republic strong. In a last-gasp effort to remain relevant, the Parte Guelfa uses Donatello's *Saint Louis of Toulouse* to speak to the importance of religion and tradition in an attempt to assert themselves against the growing power of the "new money" men. As their powers rise, the bankers—many of them "new money" men, use Ghiberti's *Saint Matthew* to remind the citizens who really holds the purse strings through a display of their wealth and influence. Ultimately, those new men overturn tradition. Verrocchio's *Christ and Saint Thomas* asserts the moral authority of the Medici through their control of the Mercanzia, as they dismantle the republic and establish princely rule.

Together, these and the other statuary of Orsanmichele do so much more than represent historical Saints and a miraculous Madonna: they tell of the ongoing political struggle for control and influence in Renaissance Florence.

With the addition of the Mercanzia statue, a new political era dawned. The guilds, though still competitive with each other, were no longer potent forces in Florentine politics. Instead, the power of the elite, particularly the Medici, was on the rise. But the statuary of Orsanmichele would forever enshrine the period when participative government and republican civic values of the Florentine commune created a surge of artistic innovation that would revolutionize the art world.

## Appendix - Orsanmichele Images

**Figure 6:** Orsanmichele Exterior. Source: Museums in Florence website:  
<http://www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/orsanmichele.html>



**Figure 6:** Orsanmichele Interior. Source: Aturi, *A Historical and Artistic Guide to Florence*.



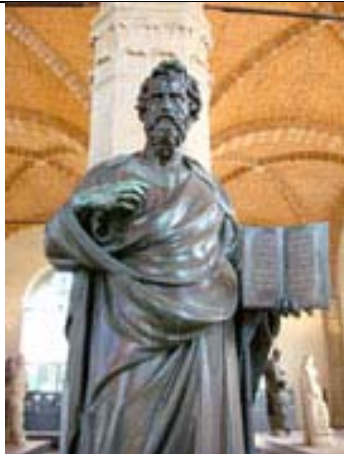
The statues on the outside of Orsanmichele today are copies, Many of the originals can be found on the second floor of Orsanmichele, in what used to be the granary, while others have moved to museums around Florence. This museum is open only one day per week, but is well worth the time to visit. Images of these originals are shown below.



Donatello, Saint Louis of Toulouse,  
[http://www.connaissancedesarts.com/medias/2013/12/10/104541\\_1386692199\\_re1\\_559x420p.JPG](http://www.connaissancedesarts.com/medias/2013/12/10/104541_1386692199_re1_559x420p.JPG)



Verrocchio, Christ and Saint Thomas,  
<http://www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/orsanmichele.html>



Ghiberti, Saint Matthew,  
<http://www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/orsanmichele.html>



Nanni di Banco, The Four Crowned Saints,  
<http://www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/orsanmichele.html>

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