Events from the Life of St. Peter accompanied by the Fall and Expulsion of Adam and Eve

Painted in collaboration with Masolino da Panicale between 1423 and 1428; finished by Filippino Lippi between c. 1481 and 1485

Depth, width of chapel: 6.96 x 5.38 m
Height of double tier of scenes: 5.00 m
Height of scenes from floor: 1.69 m

HISTORY: The original Gothic church, of which the Brancacci Chapel is one of the few remaining sections, was built for the Carmelites between 1268 and 1422. In 1386 the Brancacci already had a chapel in the Carmine. The Byzantine Madonna which forms the chapel's altar-piece may have been brought here at the time when the new church was consecrated. It is to her, the Madonna del Popolo, that the chapel is dedicated. Although plans to fresco the walls with the theme of St. Peter may go back to the previous century, nothing was done until Felice Brancacci's return from an Egyptian embassy in February 1423. By that time, Masaccio had either completed or was still in the cloister painting, the famous monochrome fresco (the lost Sagra) commemorating the consecration ceremony celebrated in front of the Carmine in April of the previous year. It is unknown what the terms of the commission for the Brancacci frescoes were, or what Masaccio's status was in relation to Masolino, who was eighteen years his senior. The bond which united both artists appears to have been their native town, Castel San Giovanni (the modern San Giovanni Val d'Arno). Despite their disparate style and age, they collaborated in another well-known work: the large panel in the Uffizi of the Madonna and Child with St. Anne. The only documented information concerning the presence of either artist at the Carmine after Felice Brancacci's return, is that Masolino was paid early in July 1425 for painting clouds and angels there for a mystery-play of the Ascension, staged annually by the Confraternity of St. Agnes. According to popular legend, Christ consigned the keys of Heaven to St. Peter on Ascension Day, and we know that the play was performed in the crossing directly in front of the Brancacci Chapel where the Acts of St. Peter were painted. Shortly after Masolino helped to touch up the 'props' for the mystery play, he left for Hungary in mid September and did not return until July 1427. There is no agreement among scholars as to whether both artists collaborated on the murals from the start, or whether Masaccio's participation began at some later point, such as Masolino's departure for Hungary. As far as we know, Masaccio was in Florence during 1424 and 1425. For some of the next year he was occupied with the Pisa altar-piece. In July 1427, he was in Florence when Masolino returned. In May 1428, Masolino went to Rome, followed shortly afterwards by Masaccio, who probably died there late in June.

After Masaccio's death, Masolino was too busy with other commissions from Cardinal Branda Castiglione ever to complete the murals before 1435, when the Brancacci, opponents of the Medici, were sent into an exile lasting forty years. Brockhaus suggested that many of the portraits in the Raising of the Prince of Antioch's Son were defaced by detractors of the Brancacci. Between c. 1481 and 1485, this scene was finished or repaired by Filippino Lippi, who also painted several of the missing scenes in the lower tier.

Before its destruction between 1746 and 1748, the vault was frescoed with the Four Evangelists, while scenes occupied the three lunettes. A copy of one of these, based upon a composition attributed to Masolino of the Calling of Peter and Andrew, survives in a panel formerly in the Giovannelli Collection in Venice. This subject probably occupied the lunette on the left wall above Masaccio's Tribute Money. The other scenes, illustrating Peter walking on the Water and Peter's Denial and Remorse probably filled the lunette on the opposite wall and the corresponding spaces on either side of the altar wall window. Proceeding downward to the next tier, there is to a large extent general agreement as to attribution. The Temptation, on the right entrance pier, is by Masolino; while opposite it the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise is by Masaccio. Continuing from left to right around the chapel, come Masaccio's Tribute Money followed by a pair of narrow scenes on either side of the altarpiece: Masolino's Peter preaching at Whitsun and Masaccio's Baptism of the Neophytes. Then, on the wide space on the right wall is Masolino's Peter curing the Cripple and the Raising of Tabitha. The lowermost scenes on the entrance piers, both by Filippino Lippi, show Peter in Prison visited by St. Paul on the left, and Peter's Liberation from Prison on the right. Inside, on the wide space at the left, is the Raising of the Prince of Antioch's Son and the Chairing of Peter, begun by Masaccio and finished by Filippino. Then, on either side of the altar, are Masaccio's Peter healing with his Shadow and the Distribution of the Goods of the Church and Death of Ananias. On the right wall, Peter and Paul before Nero and Peter's Martyrdom were combined into a single scene by Filippino.

SCHEME: Until recently, the reason behind the combination of the Old Testament scenes on the entrance piers with the Petrine cycle inside the chapel was obscure. This has been explained in a brilliant study by Astrid Debold-von Kritter. Adam and Eve as the original sinners, have their echo in Peter, the redeemed sinner, who is given the means (by his own example and by the institution of the Church) to lead mankind to salvation-back to the heavenly gates from which Adam and Eve had been expelled. That the Expulsion leads directly to the adjacent scene of the Tribute Money is deliberate. Of all the apostles, Christ chooses the indignant, challenging, Peter to find the means to pay the tax-collector. Is it a coincidence that Peter pays the tribute in front of an arch recalling the portal from which Adam and Eve were expelled? The various episodes of
healing and resurrection (four scenes) are to be understood as allegories for the remission of sins—of forgiveness for mortal weakness.22 That these ideas were current among Masaccio's contemporaries has been demonstrated by Debold-von Kritter's examination of various theological texts such as Nicholas of Lyra's commentaries (a copy of which was in the Carmine library) and of the various hymns and breviaries deriving from a sermon of Maximus of Turin devoted to the comparison of Peter with Adam and Eve.23 To these might be added the text of another sermon for the feast of the Chairing of Peter for which there are two Florentine manuscripts praising Peter as an example of the triumph of a humble man.24 The same contrast occurs in Masaccio's frescoes: between the humbled Peter paying the tribute and Peter enthroned at Antioch, which are situated directly one above the other.

Most of the episodes are also to be found in the Acts of the Apostles and in those chapters of the Golden Legend devoted to the three feasts of St. Peter.25 The feast of the Chairing of Peter (22 February) celebrated the raising of Peter to the Pontificate in Rome and other related events.26 Jacopo da Voragine's account of it was the source for the scenes on the lowermost tier on the left from St. Paul's Visit to Peter in Prison to his Enthronement as Bishop of Antioch.27 In the large scene, Peter's authority and status are acknowledged for the first time. After the raising of Prince Theophilus of Antioch's son by Peter, the ruler (so the legend goes) turned his own house into a church and had a high seat raised for Peter so that all could see and hear him. Masaccio stressed this submission of secular authority by contrasting Theophilus' low throne on the extreme left with Peter's larger and higher chair on the extreme right. Furthermore, Theophilus reappears kneeling in front of the enthroned apostle.28 According to Jacopo da Voragine, it was at Antioch that Peter instituted the rules of the clergy—including the tonsure. Thus, the group of Carmelites to the left of the enthroned Peter appear with the prescribed haircut.

The Golden Legend also explains that Peter was exalted in three churches: that of the Church Militant, for which he defined the rules and then received the Papacy at Antioch; that of the converted pagans (represented on the altar wall); and that of the Church Triumphant, which he entered through his own passion and martyrdom (on the right wall). Another triad of reasons given by the Legend for the celebration of Peter three times a year is expressed in the murals: his privilege and office as Prince of the Apostles, his beneficence as healer and converter, and his moral example as a sinner who doubted and denied the Lord but who redeemed himself.

The chronological sequence is unimportant here; the full significance of each scene must be understood in relation to the main theme governing the entire programme:29 Peter's role as a redeemed sinner who, as Christ's vicar on earth and guardian of the heavenly gates, shows the way to salvation—a theme eminently suited to a family burial chapel.

More than once it has been remarked that a crucial episode, Christ consigning the Keys of Heaven to St. Peter (the theme of the mystery play performed in front of the chapel) is missing. Pope-Hennessy's suggestion that this subject, in the form of Donatello's marble relief now in London (Victoria and Albert Museum), originally formed part of the frame for the Dugento altar-piece, has found wide acceptance.30 For the lost decorations on the curved surface of the entrance arch, Watkins has proposed a series of medallions representing saints by Masolino.31

The murals have been variously interpreted as reflections of contemporary events. While this aspect may well be present, the entire programme, as noted by Debold-von Kritter, has so far not proved susceptible to such analysis.32 For instance, the scene of the Tribute Money, a subject infrequently represented, has been seen as an allusion to the institution of the Catasto (a census of taxable property and goods) which had been deliberated upon since 1424 but had not been legislated for until 1427.33 Felice Brancacci, however, was among those opposed to the law, which was devised to help finance yet another war against Milan.34 The only monetary matter Felice was concerned with was the international acceptance of the fiorino largo issued in 1422 (for the purpose of making it seem more like the Venetian ducat the dominant coinage in the Levant trade). This was one of the reasons for his mission to Cairo in 1422.35

The presence of many portraits in the Raising of the Prince of Antioch's Son, something which was imitated afterwards by Baldovinetti, Ghirlandaio, and others, argues strongly for the existence of a patriotic local message within the larger theme. Peter Meller has made three convincing identifications among the many portraits here: Giangaleazzo Visconti (died 1402) the former ruler of Milan, in the guise of Theophilus; and Coluccio Salutati (who was Florentine Chancellor at the time of Visconti's demise) sitting on a step beneath him.36 Among the bystanders at the miraculous resurrection is Lemmo Balducci, the founder of a hospital, who, like the other two men portrayed here, died years before Masaccio painted them.37 Meller was able to show that Balducci's portrait was probably based on a death-mask, and points out the appropriateness of representing all these dead worthies in a resuscitation scene.38 It was well known that originally the feast of the Chairing of Peter was also celebrated as a day of the dead—an idea which lived on in the Golden Legend as well as in several medieval Florentine sermons for the day in which the living invoke the presence of the dead so that they too may be assured of salvation and eternal life.39

Meller noticed that two conversations on the right side of the chapel are probably substitutes for similar subjects in the original plan. In Masolino's large scene on the right wall, Peter and John curing the Lame Man in Jerusalem near the Portico of Solomon was painted instead of the Curing of the Paralytic at Lydda—an episode which included the pair of elegant strollers in the centre of the scene who, according to the biblical account, went to Lydda to get Peter to raise Tabitha in Jaffa.40 Similarly, Lippi's Peter freed by an Angel, an event which occurred in Jerusalem, probably took the place of Peter freed by a Convert in Rome, which would have been the appropriate preamble for the adjacent scene representing Roman episodes. The reason for changing the locale of these events is not clear. All the episodes on the altar wall take place in Jerusalem,41 while most of those on the side walls occurred elsewhere—in Capernaum, Antioch, Jaffa, and Rome.
TECHNIQUE: The sections painted by Masaccio were largely executed in true fresco. Only such details as foliage and the gilded haloes were added later after the plaster was already dry. There were in the Tribute Money, many more trees in full leaf. Judging from the joins in the plaster, Masaccio often painted two or three heads in a single session and sometimes more. For instance, the Expulsion was carried out in only four sessions, while the entire scene of the Tribute Money was done in twentyeight. In the Distribution of the Goods of the Church, the upper half of the mother and infant (Plate 80) were painted on a single patch of wet plaster. The large strokes, heavily laden with paint, show with what boldness and assurance Masaccio worked—constantly setting off dark against light, thereby establishing the solidity of every form. Masolino worked at about the same speed.

Among the few traces of the preparations there is the nail-hole in the middle of the wide scene including the Raising of Tabitha, which coincides with the vanishing point of the perspective. The perspective in the Tribute Money was calculated from a point said to be either behind Christ's face (which was the last to be painted in a row of eight giornate) or slightly to the right of it. Another clue to Masaccio's working method is the vertical lines marked into the plaster by snapped cords establishing the axis for each of the standing figures in the Tribute Money. In each case, the line begins beneath the head and terminates in the heel of the weight-bearing foot. This is the earliest known instance of the use of plumb lines as an aid to make figures stand firmly on their feet—a practice which has since become the stock-in-trade of every art school. Oertel argues that these signs are evidence that Masaccio worked without cartoons; he assumes the existence of a sinopia on the arriccio beneath, with the vertical marks serving as supplementary guide-lines on the intonaco. Further guidelines were also incised for the straight edges of the architecture, but this was a traditional practice used for well over a century. Essentially, Oertel is correct in describing Masaccio's fresco technique here as "free-hand".

Tintori and Watkins have supplied technical evidence that Masaccio and Masolino might have worked side by side on the same scaffolding. In the upper tier of scenes only, the giornate turn the corners at the rear of the chapel and the order of precedence indicates that work began on the altar wall and proceeded outwards. The upper portions in either corner include the Brunelleschian pilasters usually attributed to Masaccio. Furthermore, these giornate, as well as those below, bridge across scenes which, on one side, are recognized as Masaccio's and on the other, as Masolino's. If this is so, Masaccio after painting the top of the pilasters, proceeded with the Baptism of the Neophytes, while Masolino painted St. Peter preaching at Whitsun. Similarly, after Masolino finished the latter, Masaccio carried on with the Tribute Money. There is nothing in the giornata scheme plotted by Tintori which would exclude the possibility that the entire altar wall was completed before work began on the lower tier on either side.

Longhi's widely accepted attribution to Masaccio of the architectural background in Masolino's scene of the two Miracles of St. Peter, on the right wall, has been challenged by Watkins. He points out that there is no difference in style between this area and the adjacent view down a street which belongs to a giornata universally accepted as Masolino's. It could be argued, however, that if both artists worked on the same scaffolding elsewhere in the chapel (to say nothing of their collaboration upon a single panel such as the Uffizi Madonna, Child, and St. Anne), either they may have worked on the same giornata in the background of this fresco, or Masaccio might have begun the scene, subsequently carried out by Masolino. In this case, not even technical evidence provides a conclusive answer to the problem of attribution.

In the light of Tintori's most recent giornata scheme, it is now more difficult to attribute to a helper the two small heads behind St. Peter's in the Shadow Healing, which were all done on a single small patch of plaster. Furthermore, the head of the old man closely resembles St. Anthony Abbot on Masaccio's S. Giovenale altar-piece of 1422, discovered by Berti in 1961.

The evidence for Masaccio and Masolino working in fresco at the same time brings up the question of when this would have been possible. Procacci and Berti have devoted much study to this problem. Although both painters were involved with other commissions between 1423 and Spring 1428, apart from Masolino's absence in Hungary for almost two years (between September 1425 and July 1427) none of these other works were of a sufficient extent to exclude work in the Brancacci chapel. Masaccio would have been left alone there during Masolino's absence. It seems that even during 1426 when he was supposed to be concentrating on the Pisa altar-piece, he neglected it, or threatened to, probably for the Brancacci frescoes which neither he nor Masolino completed.

CONDITION: Between 1670 and 1674 structural alterations began. After the paintings were restored, the pavement and marble dado were added. Around 1690, thanks to the intervention of the Grand Duchess of Tuscany, the Marchese Ferroni's attempt to detach the frescoes and entirely re-do the decorations was thwarted. The murals were cleaned again in 1734 and ten years later, the long Gothic window (which originally extended more than one and a half metres below the present window) was altered. Watkins has shown that originally the window bisected the altar wall lunette, providing spaces for two separate scenes. Between 1746 and 1748 also the vault and the lunettes were transformed. Whether parts of the original murals remain beneath those added by Meucci and Saccam is unknown. As a result of the great fire of 1771 which destroyed the rest of the church, smoke darkened the paintings and two sections of plaster fell down, severely damaging the rear left-hand corner of the chapel. These areas were crudely repainted (including the steps to the right of the Tax-collector) probably in 1782, when the Riccardi, the chapel's new patrons, paid for a general restoration which provided the altar-piece with a new marble frame. In 1904, the murals were cleaned by Filippo Fiscali. At some time a thick, waxy, substance was applied, lowering the key of all the colours which were once clear and bright (judging from the strip uncovered in 1946 along the left edge of the Baptism of the Neophytes). In several areas on the altar wall the colours have been obscured by a whitish bloom caused by moisture and oxidation of materials applied to the surface. Repaints, according to Berti, disfigure the face of the angel in the Expulsion.


2 Bacchi, 1929, 59.

3 Bacchi (loc. cit.) suggests that the choice of the theme of St. Peter may have been due to Piero di Piuvichese Brancacci. Cf. Peter Meller (“La Cappella Brancacci: problemi ritrattistici ed iconografici”, Acropoli, iii 11960-11, 202) proposes that Antonio di Piero Brancacci (died 1391) was the man responsible. For Felice Brancacci’s embassy and his activities as a Florentine official, see Astrid Debold-von Kritter, Studien zum Petruszyklus in der Brancaccikappelle (Berlin, 1975), pp. 153-7. Anthony Molho’s study (“The Brancacci Chapel: Studies in its Iconography and History”, JWCI, xl 119771, 50-98), published numerous documents concerning the Brancacci family. However, his iconographical explanation, mainly political in nature, seems less persuasive than Debold-von Kritter’s analysis which was evidently unknown to him.

4 Procacci claims that Panicale (the town linked with Masolino’s name) never existed in Val d’Elsa, but that a place so named was a sort of suburb of San Giovanni; Luciano Berti, Masaccio (Milan, 1964), pp. 65, 139 n. 168; Alessandro Parronchi, Masaccio (Florence, 1966), p. 3, refers to Panicale di Renacci as the birthplace of Masolino.

5 This is the only other undisputed work of collaboration. There is still debate concerning Masaccio’s participation in the S. Clemente murals in Rome.

6 Giuseppe Bacchi, “La Compagnia di S. Maria delle laudi a di S. Agnese nel Carmine di Firenze”, Rivista storica carmelitana, iii (1931), 34-5; and Ugo Procacci, “Sulla cronologia delle opere di Masaccio a Masolino tra il 1425 a il 1428”, Rivista d’arte, xxviii (1953), 39 f. and n. 54


8 For a survey of the different points of view see Berti, 1964, P- 93; Ugo Procacci, “Nuove testimonianze su Masaccio”, Commentari, xxvii (July-December 1976 but issued in 1978), 236-7.

9 Berti, 1964, pp. 37-8, 134 nn. 83 and 84.

10 Loc. cit. Masaccio’s Catasto declaration written on 29 July 1427.

11 Berti, 1968, p. 84; Procacci, 1976, 235-6.

12 H. Brockhaus, “Die Brancacci Kappelle in Florenz”, Mitt. Flor., iii (1919-29), 16082; and Berti, 1964, p. 93

13 Who ordered the completion of the murals is unknown. Filippino’s work is variously dated in this period; cf. Debold-von Kritter, p. 169.

14 Berti, 1968, p. 93.


18 Longhi attributed to Masaccio the architectural background (1940, 156-7); cf. Watkins, 1973, 71.

19 Debold-von Kritter, 1975, pp. 129-45


21 Debold-von Kritter, 1975, p. 186, notes that Peter’s payment of the Tribute made access to Paradise again possible. Cf. Meiss, loc. cit., who cites a sermon of St. Augustine in which the Tribute is a symbol of redemption frequently expressed by the gift of the keys.


23 Ibid., pp. 129 ff.


26 Klauser, 1971, pp. 157, 159. For further bibliography on the subject see idem, Gesammelte Arbeiten zur Liturgiegeschichte and Christlichen Archdologie (Jahrbuch fur Antike and Christentum, supplement vol. 1n, 1974), p. 113.

27 Golden Legend, ch. XLIV.


29 Debold-von Kritter, 1975, pp. 185, 195 n. 54


33 Meller, 1960-l 204-5; Meiss, 1963, pp. 123-5; Berti (1964, pp. 27, 1102; idem, 1968, p. 94) also sees the Shadow Healing and Distribution of the Goods of the Church as allusions to the Catasto. In the latter scene, Ananias is punished for having made a dishonest declaration of his property.

34 Ibid., p. 125.

35 Mario Bernocchi, "Il fiorino d'oro di Firenze", Bollettino numismatico, iii (1966, No. 1), 4-5.

36 Meller, 1960-1, 195-6, 200 ff., 277-9. No explanation, however, is given for the inferior place occupied by Salutati with respect to Visconti.

37 Ibid., 196-7.

38 Ibid., 196-8.


41 Loc. cit. Meller notes that the miraculous Madonna which is the chapel's altar-piece was thought to have been brought from the Holy Land.

42 Cf. Tintori's giornate schemes prepared for Berri (1968, pp. 93, 95, 97) and Watkins, 1973, 71, Figs. 5a and b.

43 Loc. cit.

44 Loc. cit. But for the Temptation Masolino used five giornate, to Masaccio's four in the Expulsion.

45 The vanishing point was already noticed by Jacques Mesnil, Masaccio et les débuts de la Renaissance (The Hague, 1927), p. 62. For the technical significance of the nail-hole, see Robert Oertel, "Die Fruhwerke des Masaccio", Marburger Jahrbuch fur Kunstwissenschaft, vii (1933), 221 n. I, 233-Fig. 16; idem, "Masaccio and die Geschichte der Freskotechnik", Jahrbuch der preussischen Kunstsammlungen, lv (1934), 236-7; Longhi, 1940, 156; R. Oertel, "Perspective and Imagination", The Renaissance and Mannerism: Studies in Western Art, Acts of the Twentieth International Congress of the History of Art (Princeton, 1963), 11, p. 158 - - it is not clear here if Oertel believes this to be the work of Masolino or Masaccio as he refers to it in connection with both painters on the same page.

46 Longhi, 1940, 160-1, suggested that Masolino's sole intervention in the scene was in the area of Christ's head. Cf. Berti, 1964, pp. 97, 148 n. 247, who cites varying opinions regarding the authorship of this head. For the claim that the vanishing point is further to the right see Berri, 1968, p. 95.

47 Oertel, 1934, 237 ff.

48 Loc. cit.
49 Ibid., 1934, 234 f; idem, 1963, pp. 151 f.
50 Idem, 1934, 240.
52 Ibid., 70.
53 Ibid., 73. Watkins also casts doubt on another of Longhi's ideas: that Christ's head in the Tribute was by Masolino rather than Masaccio; ibid., 71-2.
54 Ibid., 71, Fig. 5a.
55 Berti, 1964, Fig. 4 opposite p. 20 and Fig. 54 on p. 155.
56 See nn. 6 and 11; Berti, 1968, p. 93.
57 L. Tanfani-Centofanti, Notizie di artisti tratte dai documenti pisani (Pisa, 1898), pp. 178-80; note that the document here dated 1427 according to the Pisan style corresponds to our 1426. See also Mesnil, 1927, p. 68.
61 Watkins, loc. cit.
62 Richa, Chiese fiorentine (Florence, 1762), x, pp. 38-40; Procacci, 1932, 157-8, 192; idem, 1956, pp. 218-20; Berti, 1968, p. 93.
63 Procacci, 1932, 158; idem, 1956, pp. 220-1.
64 Procacci, 1932, 159-96 n. 1; Berti, 1968, p. 93.
65 Arte a storia, xxiii (1904), 165.
67 Berti, 1968, p. 94.