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# Neri di Bicci: A study of three of his patrons' commissions of the Assumption of the Virgin altarpieces with a focus on their choice of an all'antica style

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NERI DI BICCI: A STUDY OF THREE OF HIS PATRONS' COMMISSIONS OF THE  
*ASSUMPTION OF THE VIRGIN* ALTARPIECES WITH A FOCUS ON THEIR CHOICE OF  
AN *ALL'ANTICA* STYLE

by

KARA SAMPLES

Under the direction of Dr. John Decker

ABSTRACT

This thesis will analyze why three of Neri di Bicci's patrons—the Spini family of Florence, a nun of the Bridgettine Order of Florence, and Ser Amideo of Santa Maria degli Ughi—desired to commission an altarpiece of the *Assumption of the Virgin* in an *all'antica* style. Neri di Bicci's background as an artist, existing scholarship, and comparisons of older styles of art will also be discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Neri di Bicci, Patrons, Artistic Production, Early Modern Period, Commissions, *All'antica*, Thirteenth-Century, Fourteenth-Century, Fifteenth-Century, Florence, Italy, Spini, Bridgettine Order, Santa Maria e Santa Brigida al Paradiso, Santa Maria degli Ughi, Assumption of the Virgin

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## Introduction

In the *Quattrocento*, Tuscan patrons commissioned artists to create works that demonstrated their piety, supported their political maneuverings, and flaunted their wealth. One guild painter in that period, Neri di Bicci (1419-1491), capitalized on this trend by offering his talent to wealthy merchants, priests and nuns, confraternities, and the upper class. Neri's aspiration to meet the specific requests of his benefactors was well documented in his shop's daily ledger, called *Le Ricordanze*, which recorded his interactions with his patrons between March 10, 1453- April 24, 1475.<sup>1</sup> The content of the book ranges from "the various kinds of activity carried on by Neri and his shop, the types of clients served, and a listing of associates, collaborators, and apprentices."<sup>2</sup>

### Patrons

Given the centrality of clients to an artist's livelihood, it is important to examine those patrons who played major roles in Neri's career. In this thesis, I will describe three patrons who each commissioned a new altarpiece with the theme of the *Assumption of the Virgin*. I have limited my investigation to the Spini family of Florence; an unnamed Bridgettine nun of Santa Maria e Santa Brigida al Paradiso; and Ser Amideo, the rector of Santa Maria degli Ughi. Each provides a valuable case study because while these patrons played different roles in society and had diverse reasons for commissioning their works, they all chose the same theme – the *Annunciation of the Virgin*. This link is important because I wish to examine these works not in terms of subject matter or iconography *per se* (though I will of necessity examine these things) but in terms of their handling: specifically of Neri's use of the so-called *all'antica* style. By amalgamating the works under their shared subject matter, and choosing commissions that the



*Ricordanze* notes as being *all'antica*, I offer theories as to what this term (described a bit later in this paper) may have meant for each of these patrons. In doing so, I hope to further nuance our understanding of the concept of *all'antica* in the Renaissance and show how patrons could use this style – and what it implied – to their advantage.

### Existing Scholarship

The existing scholarship on Neri di Bicci, which includes using *Le Ricordanze* as a tool to investigate the art market during the years covered by this document as well as trace social patterns and art patronage, is a valuable starting place for my examination.<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, I will only touch upon the aforementioned research to build the base upon which my argument will take shape. *All'antica* and the role of the patron in the commissioning process is demonstrated through: D.S. Chamber's *Patrons and Artists in the Italian Renaissance*; Jonathon Nelson's *The Patron's Payoff: Conspicuous Commissions in Italian Renaissance Art*; Michelle O'Malley's *The Business of Art: Contracts and the Commissioning Process in Renaissance Italy*; Anabel Thomas's *The Painter's Practice in Renaissance Tuscany*; Jill Burke's *Changing Patrons: Social Identity and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Florence*; Guy Lytle and Stephen Orgel's *Patronage in the Renaissance*; and Alison Wright and Eckart Marchand's *With and Without the Medici: Studies in Tuscan Art and Patronage 1434-1530*.

These authors analyze the role of a patron in the *Quattrocento* Florentine art market. Nelson discusses patrons and their interactions with artists through commissions that were of particular significance. He focuses in particular on how the artwork produced from those interactions affected the patron's place in society. O'Malley describes how workshops fulfilled these commissions once patrons placed their orders. She discusses the language of contracts as

well as the way in which that language could either be “ironclad” with no room for the artist to deviate from the stipulations or “loose,” which allowed the artist to take more liberties and even economize on the work by making cost effective choices. The latter type of contract was more beneficial for the artist because the main goal for the artist, after all, was to maximize on profits while staying true to the patron’s specifications for the artwork. Thomas discusses the paintings as a product of lengthy workshop practices, which included: explanations of marketing strategies the artists employed to attract patrons; the commissioning process itself; the day-to-day tasks of the artists as they create the paintings; and the effect of the cost of materials and labor to that of profits acquired, including fluctuations in market prices. Burke’s work centers on prominent patrons in *Quattrocento* Florence and how the artwork they commissioned was created to promote their status in society, gain political footing, and showcase their piety. Wright and Marchand gather essays that center on the common theme of patronage in Tuscany from 1434-1530. The research discussed in the compilation focuses on how patrons commissioned artwork to enhance their societal or political aspirations. Lytle and Orgel discuss a generality of patronage during the Early Modern period in Italy by assembling essays from the perspective of the patron and artist. The various authors included in the compilation explain the power dynamic between the patron and artist. One of the key questions they raise is whether the artist is hired to create a painting to benefit the patron, or does the patron become the benefactor of the artist because of the artist’s talent? This particular question carries significant weight in my own analysis, below, though I investigate it from a different perspective. Namely, I pose the question did the three patrons in question hire Neri because of his talent, his reputation in Florence, his facility with the style of generations past, or all of these? I then seek to answer the question of how might the choice of artist and style have affected the reputations of these patrons?

Each of the sources I have briefly described provides valuable insights into the relationship between artists and patrons. In what follows, I build on the research of Nelson, O'Malley, Burke, Lytle and Orgel, Wright and Marchand but change direction to focus on the use of *all'antica* to bolster the patron's place in society or promote the authority of an institution. My thesis discusses how Neri's patrons influenced the finished paintings through their ambitious stipulations.

### Purpose of *All'antica*

A few of the authors above mention *all'antica* in passing. The research on this topic is divided between proposing that *all'antica* meant reviving the glories of Rome, and that it reflected Italo-Byzantine influence.<sup>4</sup> Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood's *Anachronic Renaissance* argues, for example, that *all'antica* is a modern revival of an ancient art style built on a foundation of prominent and culturally significant precedents that influenced the turn of artistic style in the Early Modern period. For Neri, however, *all'antica* meant working in a purposely archaizing manner, one that showed his familiarity with, and mastery of, the Italo-Byzantine style that had been superseded by Giotto. Chambers, in particular, discusses Neri's use of *all'antica* "not [as] a would-be Renaissance of the lost paintings of Antiquity, but a traditional, *Trecento* style, though the implication is that it is a style which has been superseded."<sup>5</sup> In other words, Neri did not turn to Antiquity while composing the three altarpieces I analyze, below, but rather the contracts' wordings of *all'antica* point to *Trecento* (or even *Duecento*) influences. I argue that the patrons used this particular meaning of *all'antica* (i.e. of the respected art forms of previous generations) as a means of projecting particular social, political, and or spiritual identities designed to further their own desires.

I will examine each of the three patrons, their commissions recorded in *Le Ricordanze*, and the ways in which each used Neri's approach to *all'antica*. I assert that the first patron, the Spini family of Florence, commissioned their altarpiece as a display of their past glory. My belief is that the second patron, a nun from the Bridgettine convent and monastery of San Salvatore e Santa Brigida, at the southern end of Florence, commissioned the altarpiece to honor and support the authority of Saint Bridget's visions as a way to reaffirm the convent's mission. I contend that the third patron, Ser Amideo, rector of Santa Maria degli Ughi, commissioned an altarpiece to remind parishioners of the prestige the church once had when it was the main parish church of the city during the time Santa Maria del Fiore was built, between the late-*Duecento* and mid-*Quattrocento*.<sup>6</sup> My analysis will nuance our understanding of the uses and reception of the *all'antica* style by demonstrating that revival of a non-Antique past could be as important for some patrons as the glories of Rome.

In order to demonstrate Neri's approach to the *all'antica* style of the three altarpieces under discussion, it is important to first examine paintings that were produced in a more "modern" manner. Alesso Baldovinetti's *Madonna and Child* of 1460 (figure 1) provides a good example as does Fra Filippo Lippi's *Madonna and Child* of 1455 (figure 2). Both of these paintings can be considered as representing the more progressive style of the mid-*Quattrocento*. The "modernity" of these works was evident in the careful modeling of form and the use of a natural light source each artist employs, as well as the minimized halos, which differ from the large, obtrusive gold discs used during the time of Giotto or Cimabue. Although the figures in the Lippi *Madonna and Child* are painted with golden discs representing halos, these nimbi are less majestic than Neri's *all'antica* halos. In addition to the difference between halos, Neri's *all'antica* paintings re-use the earlier styles of the *Duecento* and *Trecento* with its Italo-

Byzantine influences, such as the suppression of anatomic form, flattened patterns and lack of modeling or depth, calligraphic lines, de-emphasis on perspective, an extensive use of gold foil and expensive blue pigments. Even though the two “modern” paintings do not share the theme of Neri’s works (i.e. the *Assumption of the Virgin*), they were contemporaries of the altarpieces I analyze; as such, they provide examples of how self-consciously “old fashioned” Neri’s work could be when the client desired it.

### **Background**

The following section, describing the background of Neri’s artistic development, will help to understand how he was able to produce the older style of art that was essential in creating his version of *all’antica* style. During the *Quattrocento*, a craftsman would likely apprentice his son to his own workshop. This provided several benefits from decreasing the costs of paying for an apprenticeship elsewhere to increasing the profitability of the workshop by not having to pay another worker.<sup>7</sup> As a journeyman and a companion (either a craftsman with the skills necessary to be an independent master but without master status or, in Italian use, a business partner sharing in the business),<sup>8</sup> Neri’s task would be to imitate his father, Bicci di Lorenzo’s (1373-1452), work as closely as possible so that there were no real traces of his own hand. This process was facilitated by the use of workshop books that were often passed down from father to son, or from master to preferred assistant. These books contained the models used by the shop to create its signature style. By copying these exemplars, each artist in the shop was trained to imitate and emulate a pre-existing manner. This standard practice allowed the master to assign commissioned work to his assistants without any noticeable difference in style, increasing the number of profitable projects the shop could produce. Sometimes a contract would specify how much of the painting was to be done by the master’s own hand, *suo mano*,<sup>9</sup> which would increase

the cost of the painting to make up for the artist's time. The common practice of learning both imitation and emulation was part of the artistic training Neri received in his father's shop, which enabled his familiarity with the styles of the preceding generations. Through the manuals passed down by his grandfather, Lorenzo di Bicci (1350-1427), Neri was practiced in an old-fashioned style and as a result was often commissioned to restore older pieces, which preserved the appearance of the original work.

This did not mean, however, that Neri worked solely in the style of his grandfather and father. Once he became master of the shop, he needed to develop his own signature style to draw in more clients. By working in his father's shop, Neri was likely able to meet high society patrons. His introduction to Lorenzo's clientele would have been gradual and may have provided him an opportunity to show his skill and professionalism in a way that would have encouraged his father's patrons to continue to commission artwork at the di Bicci workshop after Lorenzo's death. It can be speculated that painters who began their careers without a family establishment to ease their way into the business might be forced to start off on the lowest rung of the ladder and work their way to the top ranks. Neri, already introduced to patrons of the highest class, would be able to use that connection to gain other affluent patrons.

### **Analysis of Patron and Altarpiece**

#### Spini Family

The wealthy Spini family of Florence was certainly aware of Neri and his abilities. The Spini commissioned the artist to complete an altarpiece (Figure 3) for the family chapel in Santa Trinita, Florence on February 28, 1454. The contract states that the commission was approved by "leave of Lady Bancha degle Spini."<sup>10</sup> Though nominally presided over by a woman, the

commission was in fact overseen by two male members of the Spini family, Salvestro Spini and Giovanni del Pechorella Spini. The family, consisting mainly of merchants and bankers, was influential in Florence. They reached the pinnacle of their success during the end of the *Duecento* and would have remained the top of the economic and political ladder if not for the rise of the Medici. The Spini family remained in power until 1434 and then went through a period of decline.<sup>11</sup>

I believe that the Spini chose Neri and stipulated that he work *all'antica* as a means of drawing attention to the heyday of when they were in power. An altarpiece executed in a style reminiscent of previous centuries would remind the public of the longevity of the family and be an attempt at asserting their past glory. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find archivalia from the Spini that directly states this and, as such, my analysis must remain somewhat speculative. The importance of the *Duecento* to Spini identity, however, could be referenced in the completion of the family home, Palazzo Spini Feroni, in 1289.<sup>12</sup> During the *Duecento*, this palace was the largest privately owned residence in Florence. It would have been in direct contrast to another main building that was in the midst of being finished at the same time, the seat of government, the Palazzo Vecchio.<sup>13</sup> From the public's perspective, their palazzo was the most noticeable and accessible art commissioned by the Spini. An architecturally magnificent achievement such as Palazzo Spini Feroni would have easily displayed the family's wealth, taste, and influence. As their star began to wane, the commission of a work of art in a major parish church may be seen as an attempt to reassert their prominence and social relevance.

The patrons and Neri arranged a total sum of 480 *lire* for the altarpiece,<sup>14</sup> making this the most expensive of the three altarpieces I analyze. This altarpiece was one of the first that Neri completed as a master running his own workshop and as a new business owner this sum would

be a substantial amount of money.<sup>15</sup> At the end of the contract for this altarpiece, Neri stated that he “turned over the table at the said time and placed the altar in the said chapel in said church on August 28, 1456 and my services were well received by Salvestro and Giovanni del Pechorella.”<sup>16</sup> The quote is significant because it demonstrates that Neri’s work was a success and that all parties were pleased with the transaction.

The extravagant altarpiece, commissioned with the theme of the *Assumption of the Virgin*, was to be painted within a frame already built by Guiliano Maiano. The composition included the Virgin surrounded by many angels and the twelve Apostles. The luxurious element was seen through the use of “ultramarine blue and fine [golden] adornment.”<sup>17</sup> This blue was the most expensive pigment a patron could order and yet it was not used on the Madonna, which could have been a signifier of her importance; instead, it was used to highlight several of the Apostles clothing as well as the background. The Madonna was painted in white, which may have been an allusion to the priesthood of the Madonna, obviating the use of an expensive blue to denote prestige.<sup>18</sup>

The priesthood of the Madonna was attributed to her connection to Calvary, the place of Christ’s crucifixion, and through traditional Catholic lore it is believed that she was the one to receive Christ’s pastoral role of the salvation of humanity upon his death.<sup>19</sup> At the burial of the Madonna, she ascended into heaven, thus explaining the title of the altarpiece.<sup>20</sup> The apostles that surround the Madonna’s sarcophagus discover not her body, but flowers, thereby showing that not only her spirit but also her whole body ascended into Heaven.<sup>21</sup> The Apostles are divided in their understanding of what has happened; some are flabbergasted, some are mourning, and some look upward to acknowledge her Assumption. The halos above all the figures signify their holiness. Saint Thomas, kneeling upon the sarcophagus, doubts that the woman who presents



herself at the burial is actually the mother of Christ. He asks for proof and in response, the Madonna lowers her sash for his inspection.

The sash is now preserved in Prato, located only 10 miles from Florence and may explain the presence of this scene in the altarpiece. For the Spini, however, the proximity of the preserved relic may not have been the only motivation. The narrative of the Assumption asserts that even though the Madonna died a mortal death, she transcended her previous condition and lived in greater glory than when she was on Earth.

In the image, Saint Thomas distrusts the Madonna's identity in much the same way he doubted Christ's resurrection. With Christ, Thomas asked for proof, by which Christ showed the holes in his hands that were placed there by the soldiers who nailed him to the cross. In the painting, Thomas seeks similar proof. This produces a parallel that casts the Madonna more Christological light. Whether Saint Thomas was of particular interest to the Spini is not known. The motif of doubt, proof, and witnessing, however, might be associated with the Spini's agenda to re-establish their social standing by stating, again, that they were not completely destroyed by the Medici rise to power, but would be revitalized. In other words, the promise of resurrection and life after tragedy may have held more than its normal Christian valence for the Spini. The family, having died a social and political death, could perhaps take comfort in the belief that they had not been defeated but, like the Virgin (and Christ whom she imitates in her Assumption into Heaven), would arise again. The placement of the image in Sta. Trinita, then, could be seen as a declaration of the family's faith in the Virgin for turning around their fortunes.

To some extent, the centrality and scale of the Madonna in this image underscores her prominence. In the altarpiece, the Madonna is depicted in hierarchical scale and placed above the

others to denote her importance. That status is underscored by the use of gold foil. Churches at this time would use candles to light the interior. As candles provide a flickering light, the light would reflect off the burnished surface of the metal, providing an illusion of movement and would help bring the image to life. The Madonna is seated upon a cloud with golden beams surrounding her. As candlelight illuminated those beams it would flicker and give the impression of the immediate presence of the Virgin as a heavenly being. This use of foil would impress upon the parishioners of the church that she is a holy and ethereal person who should be venerated as such. A copious use of gold not only added lighting effects, it also reinforced both the status of the painted saint as well as the wealth of the patron. This assertion of wealth would have been very important to the Spini family. It would demonstrate their fall from power did not decrease their wealth and they are able to spend a copious amount of money on the altarpiece, as was demonstrated by the use of ultramarine blue. Combined with the *all'antica* style, the flagrant display of wealth would be an asset in regaining their prestige as a powerful high society family.

#### A Nun of the Bridgettine Order

The next altarpiece (Figure 4) was commissioned on January 3, 1460 for a nun of the Bridgettine Order from the convent and monastery of Santa Maria e Santa Brigida al Paradiso. Established in 1390, the church is located at the southern end of Florence.<sup>22</sup> The convent's patron saint is Saint Bridget who established the Bridgettine order of nuns and monks in 1346.<sup>23</sup> Her visions of God led to her create the order and Pope Boniface IX canonized her in 1391. She was known for her charitable works and protection of unwed mothers and their children. Bridget's own daughter, Saint Catherine of Sweden, became the head of the convent after her mother's death. Catherine is a patron saint who protects women against abortion and miscarriage. She was canonized by Pope Pius II in 1484.<sup>24</sup>

The altarpiece, completed in an *all'antica* style, was commissioned about a century after the order was established in Sweden, allowing an argument to be made that the altarpiece was ordered as a way to assert the continuing importance of Saint Bridget's visions. Perhaps the patron believed that commissioning an older style altarpiece would impart a sense of authority to the altarpiece and by proxy to the order and the convent. Painted images could be considered a transmitter of spiritual knowledge and authority. The ability of an image, or image type, to convey spiritual "truth" or "fact" was well established. Gregory the Great called images the "books of the unlettered" and the Church routinely used them to instruct the faithful. Further, the authority of images was established, according to medieval belief and practice, through apostolic examples. St. Luke, for example, was credited with creating the "authorized" image of the Madonna and Child that propagated through Christendom.<sup>25</sup> The visions of Bridget, as accepted glimpses of divine truth, would have carried their own authority. For Neri, and his client, the challenge was transmitting that "truth" with gravity and decorum. The use of *all'antica* provided an appropriate stylistic approach for relating the Saint's visions.

The contract for this altarpiece was split into three entries in *Le Ricordanze*. The first entry was written on January 3, 1460. It stated that the "altarpiece of the Virgin Mary [required] gold and azure where needed... that suits my expenses. The whole cost is 22 *lira* 13 *soldi* [for the gold and azure]."<sup>26</sup> This entry states that while proper budgeting was requested of Neri, he was allowed to add opulence where needed to create a splendid altarpiece. The total cost for the altarpiece was 111 *lira* 10 *soldi* 4 *denari*. While this was the least costly of the three altarpieces I analyze, it still includes expensive materials.

The next entry in the contract was recorded on March 13, 1461. It stated that the altarpiece was to include “four little scenes: Assumption of the Virgin (*Nostra Donna*), Annunciation, Nativity of Christ, and Saint John the Baptist in the Desert.”<sup>27</sup>

The last entry in *Le Ricordanze* that concerns this altarpiece states that the purple pigment Neri bought for the robes of Saint Bridget and Saint Catherine in the Assumption scene, and the Madonna in both the Nativity and Annunciation scenes, cost 3 *lira* 6 *soldi* and 2 gold grains cost 1 *lira* 16 *soldi*. To paint the Madonna cost 20 *lira*. The other figures cost 21 *lira* 2 *soldi*. The mountain background was 40 *lira* 53 *soldi* 4 *denari*. Altogether the cost recorded in this entry was 88 *lira* 17 *soldi* 4 *denari*. The contract for this commission, albeit entered in three parts of *Le Ricordanze*, gives the most detail in terms of the actual cost of materials used in the altarpiece.<sup>28</sup> For an altarpiece of this size along with when it was commissioned, the amount of azure and gold leaf used, and the demand for the artist, the cost was on par with similar works of art, such as the altarpiece of the *Annunciation of the Virgin* created by Neri for the church of the Campora in Florence. That particular altarpiece was commissioned on January 9, 1463 and cost 99 *florins*, around an equal rate to the Bridgettine altarpiece. The Campora altarpiece had less gold in the composition, which probably lessened the cost but the sizes were fairly the same.

For the Bridgettines, the Assumption had a particular attraction as the founder of their order had a vision regarding it. The *Revelations of Saint Bridget of Sweden* give an account of the Assumption as “your [the Virgin’s] body's most holy flesh knows that it now exists in heaven as both virgin and mother. It sees itself in no way stained by any mortal or venial crime. No, it knows that it did all the works of virtue with such charity that God, in justice, had to revere it with highest honor.”<sup>29</sup> Further, Bridgett’s revelation states, “Know, too, that there is no human body in Heaven but the glorious body of my Son and mine.”<sup>30</sup> Another of Bridget’s significant

visions was that of the Nativity, which is also included in the image. It is connected to the Madonna's Assumption because it demonstrated her pure, Virginal being. Saint Bridget's vision of Christ's birth stated that, "after having been conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, you [Christ] physically grew in the Virgin's womb; and in it you humbly dwelt until the time of your birth. After your delightful nativity, you deigned to be touched by the most clean hands of your Mother, to be wrapped in cloths, and to be laid in a manger."<sup>31</sup> Not only the subject matter but also the *all'antica* style of this scene reinforces the legitimacy of Saint Bridget's visions, which occurred in the *Trecento*.

The iconography of the altarpiece begins with the Madonna as the central focus, as she is the largest figure and is framed by a mandorla. Inside the mandorla are golden rays that would illuminate the Madonna in the flickering candlelight of the church and draw attention to her. There are five angels holding up the mandorla, along with putti interspersed throughout the angels. At the very top of the central panel is God, separated from the scene by golden rays and three putti acting as a frame. God presents the Madonna by extending his arms to encompass the scene. Positioned underneath the Madonna are five Saints: Jerome, Margaret, Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Sweden. The last two are the patron saints of the Bridgettine Order. Saint Thomas kneels upon the sarcophagus of the Madonna and receives her sash, connecting the two figures and allowing the viewer to be introduced to the Madonna through proxy of that connection. The central Madonna is the only figure in the entire altarpiece that gazes directly at the viewer, which is also an invitation to approach her. The focus on Thomas is interesting as Saints Bridget and Catherine were the patron saints of the Order, not Thomas. As was the case in the Spini altarpiece in Sta. Trinita, Thomas acts not as a patron saint *per se* but as a bridge between the audience and the Madonna. His presence stems from De Voragine's account of the

Assumption and was part of the orthodox view of the event.<sup>32</sup> Such orthodoxy was an important part of establishing the authority of the narrative. This, along with the *all'antica* style the Bridgettine nun wanted, would have been well suited to asserting the importance and legitimacy of the Bridgett's visions.

In addition to the Assumption, the altarpiece contains the Annunciation, on which Bridgett spoke while giving a prayer on humility.<sup>33</sup> The scene appears on the interior wings of the altarpiece. The Madonna is in the upper part of the left door and the Archangel Gabriel is on the upper part of the right door.<sup>34</sup> This allows both of them to be on the same field but separated. The separation may be attributed either a composition element of splitting the field of the divine from the land of humanity, with the *Assumption of the Virgin* in the center acting as a bridge, or may also have been designed that way to fit the frame.

As noted above, the Nativity also makes an appearance in the narrative complex presented on the altarpiece. The iconography of the sacred scene is important as there are two traditions that have been combined. The first tradition is a Latin approach in which Christ was born in a barn-like structure, and the second is a Greek approach in which Christ was born in a grotto (or cave). The combination resulted in a barn-like structure within a cave. Such an approach is significant as it makes reference to an older style of depicting these scenes. For Florentines, works contemporary with Giotto's fresco cycle in the Scrovegni Chapel (c. 1305-06) would have provided a ready source for comparison that may perhaps more clearly have defined Neri's work as being in an older style. An appeal to Giotto and his contemporaries may have helped increase the cultural and spiritual authority of the image by merging style with message.

The last scene on the bottom of the left panel is that of a youthful *John the Baptist in the Desert* as he begins his ministry to spread the word of God while living in the wilderness. Saint Bridget was particularly keen on purging the world of corruption and immorality. Thus, the particular inclusion of when John the Baptist lived in the wilderness may have been in reference to Saint Bridget's vision of Christ in which he told her, "I made my way in the wilderness of this world and prepared a road through my blood and sweat. The world might well be called a wilderness, since it was lacking in every virtue and remained a wilderness of vice."<sup>35</sup>

#### Ser Amideo, Santa Maria degli Ughi

The last altarpiece (Figure 5) was commissioned on May 8, 1464 by Ser Amideo, rector of Santa Maria degli Ughi, Florence. This church acted as the main Florentine cathedral while Santa Maria del Fiore was being built. After construction of the new cathedral was finished in 1436, Santa Maria degli Ughi lost its status as the main cathedral of Florence.<sup>36</sup> As Santa Maria degli Ughi was connected to the prestigious Ughi family of Florence, this would have affected the family as well and, consequently, the church and family would have experienced a loss of prestige. This commission may have stemmed from the effort to regain status for both family and institution. The use of an *all'antica* style may also have played a significant role as the older style reflected the time when the church was at its peak. It may be that, like the Spini family, the Ughi family, who were deeply invested in the church of Santa Maria degli Ughi, would have been interested in rising again in power and status. Part of the significance of this altarpiece is its similarity to the Spini altarpiece, in regards to the reason for the commission. Both were attached to a powerful and wealthy family who wanted to re-establish their place in society. Also, both the Spini family and Santa Maria degli Ughi were in their prime at the same time which points to the desire to recreate that important period through the use of an *all'antica* altarpiece.

The analogy of resurrection would also be applicable here, as the Ughi would want the Florentine community to know that they were not going to remain in obscurity as just another parish church but wanted to salvage their reputation. There are not many records today describing the Ughi family; however, the altarpiece *St. Francis of Assisi Receiving the Stigmata* (1290) by Giotto has been associated with the Ughi coat of arms.<sup>37</sup> The choice of Neri and of his approach to *all'antica* – especially as a revival of the *Trecento* – may indicate that the Ughi were hoping to revive their own past glories and, like the Spini, remind Florentine society of their longevity and importance.

The contract states that Neri was commissioned to make an altarpiece:

*all'antica* for the major altar of that church, with a square shape... and to paint an Annunciation of the Virgin (*Nostra Donna*) surrounded by angels and three figures on each side... put on fine gold and work in ultramarine blue; the length 4 *braccia* by 5 *braccia*. I made a covenant with the said Ser Amideo of the aforesaid [altarpiece], and it is to be finished by the middle of August, 1465. I agree he should give 271 *lira* 8 *soldi*.<sup>38</sup>

This altarpiece was not as extravagant as the one Neri made for the Spini but the price was nonetheless a substantial amount of money.

The altarpiece was arranged with the Madonna in the center of the panel. She is seated within a mandorla and golden rays were placed behind to illuminate her, which was a device used to highlight her significance above the other figures. The background of the panel is gold leaf that would give an otherworldly appeal and demonstrate that this is a sacred scene. There are six saints arranged below the Madonna with Saint Thomas, who is shown kneeling in front of the Madonna's sarcophagus to receive the sash. Saint Thomas was the only saint to be named in the contract, putting him at a level of the most importance, after the Madonna.<sup>39</sup>



Standing to the right of the Madonna is Saint John the Baptist and Saint Nicolas. The saints standing to the left of the Madonna are Julian and Francis and the kneeling figure is Saint Jerome. Six angels hold up the border of the mandorla, acting as a frame to separate the Madonna from the saints. The Madonna's robe is white with a red undershirt that enhances the location of her womb and demonstrated her status as the Mother of Christ, but it may also be the Priesthood of the Madonna that I discussed in the Spini analysis. The inclusion of Saint Nicolas may have also been a signifier of the Priesthood of the Madonna as he was dressed in priestly vestments. The border of the mandorla is blue, creating a striking feature as it is the main blue color in the scene, which along with the golden rays and size of the figures, helps to indicate the hierarchy within those portrayed in the altarpiece. The predominant color in the scene is gold, which demonstrates the holiness of the scene as well as the wealth of the patron. The *all'antica* rendering of the scene is indicated by the Italo-Byzantine influences of the prevalence of gold and highly ornate halos above each figure's head. The connection to the Spini family, in terms of the reason *all'antica* was chosen, allocates these influences to one of a social and political dynamic. Deliberately choosing an old-fashioned style altarpiece would be a way of tying the past with the present, thereby creating a template from which a rise in status could occur.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the three altarpieces I examine provide substantial evidence that they were commissioned to assert the prestige and authority of the patron through the use of an *all'antica* style. This style retained some of the Gothic and Romanesque influences that many patrons would have viewed as conservative. Before the onset of the Early Modern period, noble families were the most affluent and able to patronize artists. With the rise of the merchant/banking classes in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, commissioning works of art became a way of

establishing public presence. For families like the Spini, conservative styles associated with the past or with the nobility (e.g. the so-called International Gothic) would have been particularly attractive. A prime example of this is the Strozzi family, an up-and-coming wealthy banker family, who commissioned an *Adoration of the Magi* from Gentile da Fabriano in 1423. The image carefully follows the conventions of the international court style favored by prelates and princes alike. The use of a noble style can be seen as a self-conscious attempt at projecting the status the family wished to have by, as Jean Wilson has put it, “living nobly” through their use of wealth.<sup>40</sup> The social climbing evidenced in the Strozzi commission is in the same vein as the types of public self-fashioning I have claimed for Neri’s patrons. For the Strozzi and the Spini (as well as the two other patrons), the use of an identifiably old-fashioned or conservative style carried with it certain associations that could be used to the client’s advantage.

The commission of an *all’antica* altarpiece after the Spini family lost power would have been a defining gesture in an effort to re-assert itself on the social and political ladder. The same holds true for a nunnery’s or cathedral’s effort to remain true to a conservative style as it would enforce the power of the church. The *all’antica* style asserted authority and originality (in the sense of returning to an “origin”). This style, combined with a large quantity of gold and expensive ultramarine, would have been part of establishing the wealth of a family and reminding others of its history. Wealth could endorse a family name as recognizably influential, which opened doors to further economic and political opportunities. An altarpiece in this sense could be viewed as an investment to seek further prominence.

It would be interesting to see how this thesis could be developed through further research, such as comparing Neri di Bicci to a similar artist who failed at running a successful workshop. I wonder if a richer argument could be made and what that research could be done towards

understanding more of the Bicci family workshop. Not much is known about the workshop after Neri died; such as if the workshop was run by one of Neri's children, sold to another artist, or ceased production. Another topic that exceeds the boundaries of this thesis is whether Neri di Bicci painted more paintings than is recorded in *Le Ricordanze*.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps there is a research opportunity to discover if there are unrecorded (or mislabeled) paintings still existing today.

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<sup>1</sup> Neri di Bicci, *Le Ricordanze*, ed. Bruno Santi, Pisa, 1972.

Santi stated that this document was probably part of a set of books that detailed the workshop's daily business and that there may have been others that were written before this edition (probably written by his father prior to 1453) as well as after 1475, maybe up to Neri's death in 1491. This edition is labeled C and referenced A and B in earlier parts of the book. Not much is known about the workshop after Neri died; such as if the workshop was run by one of Neri's children, sold to another artist, or ceased production.

<sup>2</sup> Borsook, Eve. "Le Ricordanze (10 Marzo 1453-24 Aprile 1475) by Neri di Bicci, a Review." *The Art Bulletin* June 1979: 313.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Lee Rubin, *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> A few sources that exemplify the term *all'antica* as a radical revivalism of antiquity are Erwin Panofsky's *Renaissance And Resuscitations In Western Art*, 1972; the already examined *Anachronistic Renaissance* by Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, 2000; Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, 1550 (Dover Publications, 2005 edition).

<sup>5</sup> D. S. Chambers, *Patrons and Artists in the Italian Renaissance*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1971: 183.

<sup>6</sup> Il Grande Museo del Duomo, *Cathedral*, accessed May, 2014. <http://operaduomo.firenze.it/opera/statuto>

Jeff Cotton, *Churches of Florence*, 2014. <http://www.churchesofflorence.com/centre.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Michelle O'Malley, *The Business of Art*, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> R. W. Lightbown, *Donatello and Michelozzo: An artistic partnership and its patrons in the early Renaissance*, 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Own hand.

<sup>10</sup> Neri di Bicci, *Le Ricordanze*, 25-26. The Abbot of the church that the altarpiece was made for also participated in the commission and it should be noted that the Abbot, Messer Bartolommeo, was mentioned first in the contract.

<sup>11</sup> Claudia Tripodi. *Gli Spini tra XIV e XV secolo. Il declino di un antico casato fiorentino*, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Guido Zucconi. *Florence: an Architectural Guide*, Arsene Editrice, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias. Palazzo Spini Feroni. 2013.

<http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/6091840>

<sup>14</sup> "The Florentine *florin*, first minted in 1252, was made of 3.53 grams of gold, while the Venetian *ducat*, issued in 1284, weighed 3.55 grams. These currencies fluctuated against each other in response to market forces.... Many states also had a silver-based coinage, usually known as the *lira* (1 *lira* = 20 *soldi* = 240 *denari*), which fluctuated against the local gold currency.... Wealth was assessed in gold, the currency of international trade, while the silver coinage was used for everyday transactions, such as buying food and paying wages." Mary Hollingsworth, *Patronage in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (London: John Murray (Publishers) Ltd., 1996): xii.

<sup>15</sup> To understand the economics of Florence during the Italian Renaissance, it is easy to view sums as it applies to the wage a basic laborer earned in one year. In general, a laborer could earn about 24 florins per year.

<sup>16</sup> Neri di Bicci, *Le Ricordanze*, 25-26.

<sup>17</sup> Neri di Bicci, *Le Ricordanze*, 25-26.

<sup>18</sup> Priests dress in white on the feast day of the Assumption of the Virgin.

<sup>19</sup> Norberto Rivera C. *The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life and Ministry of the Priest*. July 9, 1997.

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccclergy\\_doc\\_19071997\\_conri\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_doc_19071997_conri_en.htm)

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<sup>20</sup> The word assumption began in the middle ages and meant taken up or received (based on its Latin base).

<sup>21</sup> The National Gallery of Art, Canada. *The Assumption of the Virgin, 1455-1456*.

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=10047>

<sup>22</sup> Mentioned in 1181 under the title of Santa Maria di Fabraro, the church became known as Santa Maria alla Badiuzza when it was granted to Benedictine monks. The name 'al Paradiso' comes from the nearby villa of the Alberti, transformed in 1390 into a double monastery for the monks and nuns of St Birgitta of Sweden, which took care of the parish.

<sup>23</sup> Francesca Steele. "Brigittines." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 2. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02785a.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Johann Peter Kirsch. "St. Catherine of Sweden." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 3. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03448a.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Italian Renaissance Learning Resources, the National Gallery of Art, and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation. *Saint Luke Paints the Virgin and Child: Genealogy of an Image*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

<http://italianrenaissanceresources.com/units/unit-1/essays/saint-luke-paints-the-virgin-and-child-genealogy-of-an-image/>

<sup>26</sup> Neri di Bicci, *Le Ricordanze*, 156-157.

<sup>27</sup> Neri di Bicci, *Le Ricordanze*, 180.

<sup>28</sup> This is one of the only entries in *Le Ricordanze* that have multiple parts to give information on the composition of the painting. This suggests that either Neri forgot to record parts of the commission or later there was a need to record those parts, raising the question of whether Neri wrote down each and every painting that he ever created. As this altarpiece was first recorded about a year after the commissioning date, does that also mean that other paintings were not thought to be worthy of recording in his ledger? This is strange because it seems that everything Neri did business-wise was written down in the ledger, even daily business transactions and his real estate investments. Does this mean that the relationship that he had with the patron did not require an entry in the ledger until later? This would indicate a large amount of trust on either Neri or the patron's behalf. Did the trust end or was it an error that was later corrected when the commission was recorded in the ledger in two parts?

<sup>29</sup> *The Prophecies and Revelations of Saint Bridget*: 887. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/19058462/Prophecies-Revelations-of-Saint-Bridget-of-Sweden#page=887>

<sup>30</sup> *The Prophecies and Revelations of Saint Bridget*: 793. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/19058462/Prophecies-Revelations-of-Saint-Bridget-of-Sweden#page=793>

<sup>31</sup> *The Prophecies and Revelations of Saint Bridget*: 888. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/19058462/Prophecies-Revelations-of-Saint-Bridget-of-Sweden#page=888>

<sup>32</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The golden legend: readings on the saints* translated by William Granger Ryan. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993.)

<sup>33</sup> *The Prophecies and Revelations of Saint Bridget*: 951. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/19058462/Prophecies-Revelations-of-Saint-Bridget-of-Sweden#page=951>

<sup>34</sup> As viewed from looking out from the altarpiece towards the audience.

<sup>35</sup> *The Prophecies and Revelations of Saint Bridget*: 221. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/19058462/Prophecies-Revelations-of-Saint-Bridget-of-Sweden#page=221>

<sup>36</sup> Incidentally, the cathedral was completed two years after the Medici attained the political and economic reins of the city.

<sup>37</sup> Martine Depagniat, Dominique Thiébaud. *St. Francis of Assisi Receiving the Stigmata*. 2014. <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/st-francis-assisi-receiving-stigmata>

<sup>38</sup> Neri di Bicci, *Le Ricordanze*, 226.

<sup>39</sup> This is an important part of the contract because it signifies that not everything to do with the composition of the altarpiece was placed in the contract; how much of the composition was told to Neri after the contract had already been drawn up and/or why was it not considered important enough to add to the contract in the first place?

<sup>40</sup> Jean C. Wilson, *Painting in Bruges at the Close of the Middle Ages: Studies in Society and Culture*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Reference endnote 1.

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## Appendix

Figure 1:



Figure 2:



Figure 3:

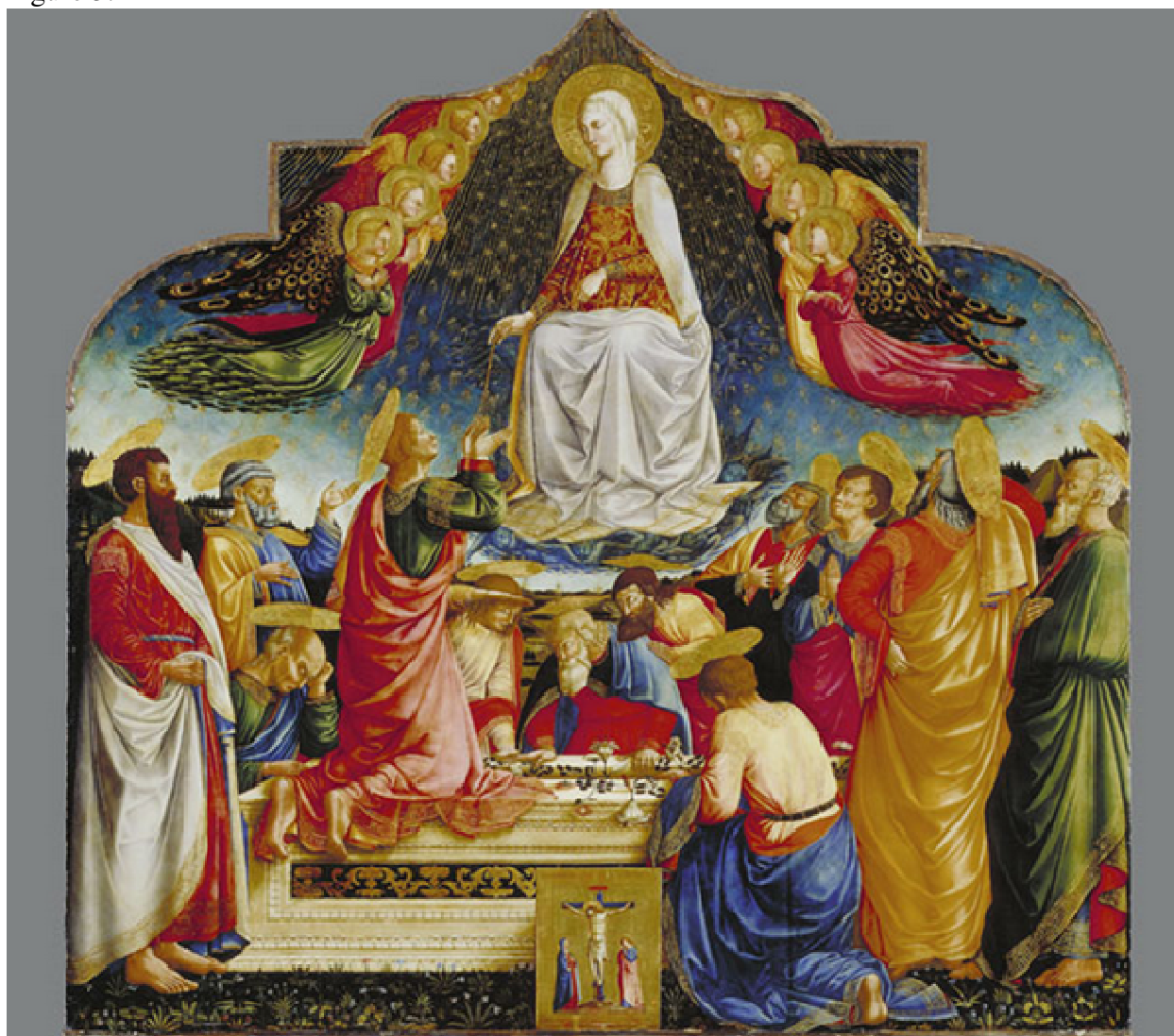


Figure 4:



Figure 5:

