

“Index of Art Historical Sites: Florence, Italy: Reliefs, South Doors, Florence Baptistry”

Mary Ann Sullivan

Reliefs, South Doors, Florence Baptistry

Andrea Pisano

1330-36, gilded bronze, 49.7 x 43.2 cm

Note: these photographs were taken of the reliefs outside on the doors. These photographs were taken at two different times--2005 and 2006; they are of uneven quality.

The Florence Baptistry (a copyrighted image, thus gray scale and not clickable)

Pisano's doors are at the doorway visible on the left. These bronze doors were commissioned by the Calimala, the guild responsible for the maintenance and decoration of the Baptistry, perhaps imagining a grand doorway, like those in Pisa or Venice. Prior to this, large scale casting had not been done in Florence. Little is known for certain about Andrea's background. It is clear he had been a goldsmith, but this is his first authenticated large work. (It is signed and dated at the top.)



The South Doors

The doors are comprised of two valves, each with 14 square panels. Twenty of the panels depict events from the life of John the Baptist while eight at the bottom are personifications of virtues. The twenty scenes relating to John the Baptist read chronologically from top to bottom and from left to right--on each valve. (That is, like pages of an open book, they read individually and not across "pages.")



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The borders of the doors by Vittorio Ghiberti, son of Lorenzo (thanks to Jorge Ordiozola for this information)

One [internet source](#) says this: "The only surviving work known to be his [Vittorio Ghiberti's] is the decorative bronze frame of Andrea Pisano's South Portal doors for the Florence Baptistery, which he executed between 1453 and 1464. The sharp reliefs and floral details contrast somewhat incongruously with the Gothic austerity of Pisano's style, but it brought Vittorio considerable fame in his day." The borders of the reliefs have lozenge-shaped studs, rosettes, and lions at each of the corners (the marzocco, the symbol of Florence). Rows of dentils are just inside the frames. The external borders to the doors proper have figurative designs as well as foliate ribbons.



John the Baptist was the patron saint of baptistries as well as the patron saint of the city of Florence. The first six scenes depict the birth and youth of the Baptist while the next four show his public ministry, culminating in the baptism of Jesus. Like Giotto, Andrea Pisano depicts volumetric bodies with robes that help define the body (not conceal it). A kind of early realism is evident in the dynamic between some of his figures (see Herod and Salome below) and in the emotions and expressions of some of the figures. Contrast the naturalism of Pisano's portrayal with that of the mosaics on the lowest tier in the Baptistery. Although the scenes depicted are similar, Pisano's portrayal forecasts the Renaissance understanding and depiction of the body.

Shema of the South Doors

Top row



Angel announces to Zachariah



Zachariah is struck mute



St. John reprimands Herod Antipas



Incarceration of St. John

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Second Row



Visitation



Birth of the Baptist



Disciples visit St. John



Disciples visit Jesus

In the relief depicting John's disciples visiting him in prison, it is notable that John is not present. An important source for art about John the Baptist was an anonymous 14th century life of the Baptist. In it, in this scene John was inside the prison praying, which explains why he is absent.

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Third Row



Zachariah writes the boy's name



St. John as boy in desert



Dance of Salome



Decapitation of St. John

In the naming of the Baptist, the woman presenting the child is the Virgin Mary. (She has a halo.) In the Biblical version of the story she is not present. However, in the apocryphal tradition, she was present at his birth. Her presence signifies a special honor to the baby John. Note the rhythmic drapery folds in the garments of the figures. Salome has an identifiable coiffure as well as a distinctive headband (tiara?).

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Fourth Row



Preaching to the Pharisees



St. John announces Christ



Presentation of St. John's head to Herod Antipas



Salome takes head to Herodias

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Fifth Row



Baptism of his disciples



Baptism of Jesus



Transport of St. John's body



Burial of St. John

The baptism of Christ is depicted as so sacred that only an angel was present. The classical nude body of Christ demonstrates Pisano's mastery of anatomy. Note that in the death and burial of John the Baptist the same six disciples are present both carrying the corpse and placing the body in a sarcophagus. The head seems to be reattached in the transporting scene--perhaps out of a sense of decorum. An elaborate Gothic canopy is above the tomb of the Baptist.

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Personification of Virtues

The bottom two rows depict personifications of virtues seated on benches with identifying inscriptions and the usual attributes. From left to right on one row across both valves are the Theological virtues: Hope, Faith, Charity, with the addition of Humility. Pisano needed a fourth virtue for the layout but Humility was a relevant choice. Historically this is a time when mendicant orders, which stressed simplicity and humility, were influential and it is also a time when two important churches of mendicant orders were built--Santa Croce (Franciscan) and Santa Maria Novella (Domenican). Under these four virtues are the Cardinal virtues: Fortitude, Temperance, Justice and Prudence. Charity holds a flaming heart up to God (I think, representing love of God as a burning fire) and also holds a cornucopia, a symbol of earthly charity. Humility has a downward glance and holds (what?); justice has the typical symbols--the sword indicating her power and the scales her impartiality. She is not blindfolded, however, an attribute that only goes back to the 16th century; in antiquity, justice was known for her clear-sightedness.



Hope



Faith



Charity



Humility

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Fortitude and Temperance



Justice and Prudence

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