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Nanni di Banco, Four Crowned Martyrs, 1412-15

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The Four Crowned Martyrs and Their Cult

The vast majority of martyrs venerated in the Christian church before 1500 were early Christians martyred by the Romans before Constantine legitimized Christianity in 313 AD. According to medieval Christian legend, the Four Martyrs were Christian sculptors who refused to carve a statue of a pagan god for a Roman temple. They were sealed up alive in lead coffins and thrown into a river to drown. Their bodies were recovered and buried in Roman sarcophagi in the crypt of S. Marcellino e Pietro in Rome. To honor their memory, the basilica of S. Quattro Santi Coronati was erected in Rome in the late fourth century. Despite having their own church, the cult of the Four Martyrs remained minor and they were rarely depicted in art, presumably due to their lowly status as artisans. Their cult flourished primarily

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among stone workers and carpenters. In Florence, they were the patron saints of the stonemasons and wood workers guild which ranked twelfth out of fourteen in the hierarchical world of Florentine artisanry. (Although the guild included architects, its low ranking stemmed from the inclusion of unskilled construction workers and even cesspool diggers.)¹

Notes on the Patron and the Location

Nanni di Banco's *Four Artisan Martyrs* was commissioned by the stone and wood workers' guild of Florence for their niche on the exterior of the city-wide guild hall, Orsanmichele. Established by the magistrates as a municipal grain hall in 1285, Orsanmichele became an important church in the 1290s when its painting of the Madonna began working miracles and attracting pilgrims and civic processions. A magnificent late Gothic tabernacle was built in the 1350s to house the miraculous icon inside the grain hall and plans were made to sell rights to each of the fourteen niches on the exterior to the city's major and middle guilds to be filled with statues of their patron saints. Located between the town hall and the cathedral, Orsanmichele combined secular and religious functions in a seamless whole. It was at once a commercial market and grain storage facility (on the upper floors) and a city-wide church where the guilds of Florence could rise from their lowly status to civic prominence and sanctity.

Although each guild proudly displayed itself in its niche statue, the collective patronage of the whole allowed the guilds to display themselves on a larger scale and to claim greater civic visibility and importance in the material fabric of the city. By celebrating artisan saints in large, public sculptures on an impressive guild building in the center of town, Florentine workers also tried to overcome their political marginalization by the burgher elites monopolizing power. The public location and civic meaning of the sculptures was particularly important for Donatello's *St. George* and Nanni's *Four Artisan Martyrs*. For Nanni's sculpture allowed lowly Florentine stoneworkers, carpenters, and construction workers to identify with Christian martyrs whose public deaths in the Roman arena inspired thousands of other early Christians. Thus the sculpture sanctified the lowly craft of masonry and gave construction workers a quasi-heroic place in the new public arena of Florentine republican discourse.

The Classicizing Interpretation of Early Christian Martyrs

Although the subject of martyrdom generally contrasted pagan Rome with early Christianity, Nanni di Banco undermined and transformed this traditional medieval dichotomy through the innovative classical treatment of the martyrs' clothing, faces, and posture (contrapposto). While the theme of early Christian martyrdom bespoke the traditional medieval idea of Christianity triumphing over paganism, Nanni di Banco's Roman handling suggested the resurgence of Renaissance classicism at the expense of

medieval Christian values. Indeed, the four martyrs look more like four Greek philosophers in togas or Roman consuls than early Christian martyrs. The speaking figure at right even extends his hand in an oratorical gesture known from classical art.ⁱⁱ As scholars have noted, they lack all of the conventional attributes of martyred saints: haloes, crowns, and palm leaves.ⁱⁱⁱ Well-dressed, dignified in posture, handsome in classical Roman faces, and engaged in serious conversation, the artisan martyrs were reinterpreted as intelligent and noble citizens of ancient Rome. Any visual reference to their martyrdom was omitted entirely. Although Romans rarely wore togas, Nanni may have used this Greek costume as a generic sign for classical dignity and grandeur. If he had enough education to know that the toga signified Greek philosophical pursuits in Roman culture and was worn by those affecting philosophical wisdom (like the philosopher-emperor, Marcus Aurelius), the choice of togas worked even more deliberately to intellectualize and ennoble the lowly world of late medieval craftsmanship.

The classical handling of the martyrs worked on other levels as well. On the one hand, it allowed the lowly Florentine stone workers to participate in the same Florentine humanist discourse proudly recalling the city's ancient Roman origins. Developed by the city's educated elites, this historical pride in the Roman past was most eloquently expressed by the humanist chancellor of Florence, Lionardo Bruni, in his *Panegyric on Florence*.

What in the whole world is so splendid and magnificent as the architecture of Florence? . . . But in our city there is really no street, no quarter that does not possess spacious and ornate buildings. Almighty God, what wealth of buildings, what distinguished architecture there is in Florence! Indeed, how the great genius of the builders is reflected in these buildings, and what a pleasure there is for those who live in them. . . . What, therefore, was the stock of these Florentines? Who were their progenitors? By what mortals was this outstanding city founded? Recognize, men of Florence, recognize your race and your forebears. Consider that you are, of all races, the most renowned. . . . But your founder is the Roman people - the lord and conqueror of the entire world. Immortal God, you have conferred so many good things on this one city so that everything - no matter where it happens or for what purpose it was ordained - seems to redound for Florence's benefit. . . . Since Florence had as its founders those who were obeyed everywhere by everyone and dominated by their skill and military prowess, and since it was founded when a free and unconquered Roman people flourished in power, nobility, virtues, and genius, it cannot be doubted at all that this one city only stands out in its beauty, architecture, and appropriateness of site (as we have seen), but that Florence also greatly excels beyond all other cities in the dignity and nobility of its origin. . . . O incredible magnificence and excellence of Florence! O Roman people and race of Romulus! Who would not now esteem the name of Florence with great honor on account of the excellence of its spirit and the vast dimensions of its deeds? What

greater thing, what more outstanding feat could this city accomplish . . .

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By remaking early Christian martyrs into exemplary citizens of ancient Rome, Nanni's classicism took up the same Florentine pride in Roman origins but now on behalf of the city's lowly artisans. If this showed the wider resonance of Renaissance humanism beyond the city's educated elites, it also allowed uneducated stone workers to join a lofty humanist discourse, largely monopolized by burgher elites, and to display their own Roman virtue in line with new humanist ideals of inner nobility.

Early Christian Martyrdom as Roman Fortitude and Virtue

Although common in medieval Christian discussions of martyrdom, the simple opposition between cruel pagans and innocent Christians does not do justice to the theme of martyrdom. It also obscures an important connection between ancient Roman and early Christian values which helps explain Nanni's unusual classicism in a scene of early Christian martyrdom.

Put to death in public to display the majesty, power, and justice of the Roman state, the early Christian martyrs went to their horrible death bravely and peacefully. By displaying traditional Roman virtue of fortitude, courage, and self-sacrifice for the larger good, the early Christian martyrs managed to convert their own public deaths into powerful displays of Christian virtue and piety. The success of the martyrs in using their own deaths to convert more Romans depended on their ability to display a range of familiar Roman virtues in the arena. It was the Roman virtue of the early Christian martyrs, widely recognized in Christian literature, which gave Nanni di Banco a window of opportunity to infuse so many classical qualities into his innovative sculpture of four early Christian martyrs. And seen elsewhere in Renaissance art and literature, if there was an opening for classical values in any Christian subject, it was quickly seized by artists and writers. (Examples include the *Venus pudica* in Masaccio's shameful Eve or the Roman triumphal arch in his Holy Trinity where Christ triumphed over death.) Nanni's classical treatment also allowed all of Florence to admire the inner nobility of artisans both in their noble intellect (signaled, implausibly, by their togas, intelligent faces, and serious conversation) and in the noble deeds of self-sacrifice as exemplary citizens.

Although lifted above the mundane street in their Roman aesthetic grandeur and historical costume, Nanni's martyrs formed an open semi-circle as if to invite passersby to join in their lofty conversation and exemplary civic Christianity. In this way the lowly artisans reversed the real social hierarchies of the day, lifting themselves to the top of an imaginary Florentine social ladder and erasing all traces of their status as *popolo minuto*.

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Imaging the Modern Craftsmen as an Artist

Although Nanni carefully excluded any hint of manual labor from his image of the four upstanding citizens, he added a relief below proudly depicting the very craftsmanship suppressed above while reinterpreting it as something more akin to a liberal art. The two masons working at the left appear surrounded by measuring tools as one builds a wall while the other finishes carving an ornate column. At left and right, Nanni included the bases for two columns each decorated with the simple Renaissance geometry seen in the architecture of Brunelleschi and Alberti. Two of the carvers display the mathematical knowledge required for good masonry and carving by using measuring tools in their work while more four more tools - ruler, triangle, compass, and L-bracket - appear as symbolic ornament scattered across the geometric composition and echoing its careful organization. Just as his architectural forms referenced Brunelleschi's new classicism, Nanni's sculptor at right finished up carving a beautiful classical nude reminiscent of the thousands of cupids and amors embellishing ancient Roman sculpture and already used as decorative figures in the Duomo including one carved by Nanni himself around 1407.^v Even if we see this as a naked Christ Child, it proclaims the robust and beautiful nudity of classical sculpture and is carefully studied from life. Indeed, the nude child seems to have come alive and contemplates its maker with an animated expression.

By connecting stone carving with classicizing architectural and sculptural principles and with the knowledge of mathematics and geometry, Nanni transformed the lowly craft of stone carving into something more like a liberal art. The association of masonry with architecture – long upheld as a nobler art even in the Middle Ages - takes on greater significance as a proud embellishment in the façade of Orsanmichele, a public monument displaying the wealth and civic importance of the guilds as a whole.

ⁱ Mary Bergstein, *Nanni di Banco*, Princeton, 2000, p. 118.

ⁱⁱ Bergstein, p. 121, citing Herzner's article of 1973.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bergstein, op. cit., p. 120. She sees togas only in the two figures at right. The use of dignified clothes to enhance the social status of the guild has been discussed at least since Horster's article of 1987.

^{iv} Lionardo Bruni, *Panegyric to the City of Florence*, trans. Benjamin Kohl, in Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, eds., *The Earthly Republic. Italian Humanists on Government and Society*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978; 1991 ed., pp. 135-175; passages cited here taken from pp. 139, 149, 154, 168.

^v Bergstein, pp. 94-96, who also notes the pagan qualities of the child in the workshop scene. She also cites ancient Roman reliefs of craftsmen which bear a striking resemblance to Nanni's scene in the way tools are laid out as geometric elements in the composition (op. cit., p. 145).