

THE INTERIOR DECORATION OF THE PALAZZO DATINI IN PRATO*

by Bruce Cole

Just under a hundred years ago some sacks filled with old documents were found under a staircase in the Palazzo Datini in Prato. These were the papers of the merchant Francesco di Marco Datini (1335-1410), the city's most famous son. This discovery of over 150,000 letters and 500 account books was most significant, for it revealed the commercial dealings and complex personality of a strange and interesting man. In fact, through the preservation of the Datini papers, we know more about Francesco di Marco than any other figure of his century.¹

The history of the merchant's life is a Trecento success story. The orphaned son of a poor tavern keeper, Francesco began his career by selling an inherited plot of land for a few florins. With the money Datini left Prato for the papal city of Avignon, where by a series of shrewd dealings (in arms and luxury goods — including the importation of Florentine pictures²), he parlayed his small sum into a sizable fortune. Here the merchant met and married Margherita di Domenico Bandini, the daughter of a noble Florentine. Finally, in 1383, Francesco returned to Italy. He settled in Prato and built the largest palazzo in the city (Fig. 1). From here Datini further expanded his interests to include trade in the profitable cloth market and in 1410, after a long and busy life, the taverner's son died, leaving a legacy of over 70,000 florins.

Although successful in trade Datini was not happy. Despite his money and position he was always acutely conscious of his humble origins. Margherita, his noble wife, did little to help matters. For example, she once told him,

I have a little of the Gherardini [her mother's family] blood although I prize it not over-much; but what your blood is, I know not.³

Francesco's letters, especially those of the last years, were written by a fearful and insecure man who suspected everyone and trusted no one. He was obsessed by details and fanatically

* To Professor Ulrich Middeldorf, for his 66th birthday.

This paper was read on 11 October 1966 at the *Kunsthistorisches Institut*, Florence. Dr. Eve Borsook was kind enough to read the manuscript and offer many helpful suggestions. Work on the Palazzo Datini was carried out while the author was the recipient of a grant from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.

¹ The fundamental work on Datini is Iris Origo's, *The Merchant of Prato*. Francesco di Marco Datini, London, 1957. This brilliant biography contains a list of archival sources and a bibliography of studies on Datini. See also, *Enrico Bensa*, *Francesco di Marco da Prato*, Milan, 1928 and *Federigo Melis*, *Aspetti della vita economica medievale: Studi nell'Archivio Datini di Prato*, I, Florence, 1962.

² Several letters from members of the Datini "firm" in Avignon to their Florentine colleagues clearly show that the painters of the late Trecento did not work only on commissions. They must have painted panels and displayed them in their shops where they could have been seen and purchased by the public. The following letter of 27 March 1387 (from Buoninsegna di Matteo in Avignon to his correspondents in Florence, published in *Robert S. Lopez and Irving W. Raymond*, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World*, New York, 1955, pp. 114-15) illustrates this type of commercial exchange: "... You say that you do not find paintings at the price at which we want them because there is none at such a low price. And therefore we tell you this, that if you do not find good articles and at a good price, pass them by, since there is no great demand for them here. They are articles one ought to take when the master who makes them needs money".

³ Origo, p. 164.

concerned over even the smallest matter of his personal and business life. But above all, the merchant worried about his soul. His fears were well founded: he had engaged in usurious practices, he was avaricious, and he had fathered at least one bastard. All this is reflected in Datini's papers, where we see his thoughts swinging pendulum-like between an almost crazed longing for the things of this world and a terror of the next.

In the end the spirit triumphed. The merchant gave all his money and worldly goods to the poor of his native city. According to the terms of Francesco's will the money was to be distributed by a foundation housed in his palazzo.⁴ Both the foundation and the house still exist.

Recently the Palazzo Datini was admirably restored, and from under a covering of old plaster the fresco decoration of Francesco's time came to light.⁵ This was a happy find, for while there are many extant palaces of the fourteenth century, few still have their original decoration.⁶ Thus, the recovery of the paintings in the Palazzo Datini was of no mean importance for they are rare examples of secular frescoes of the Trecento.

Because Datini had a reputation for not paying people, each of the artists who painted in the merchant's house submitted a careful account of his work. These *conti* are preserved and can be used to trace, almost step by step, the decoration of the building.⁷

Datini began to think about the house while still in Avignon. As early as 1358 instructions to buy land were sent to Prato, although actual building began later.⁸ Work was still going on in 1379, but the building was not finished for at least another decade.⁹

During the construction Francesco must have been constantly hovering around the builders demanding to know every detail. In 1386 he wrote from Florence:

I rejoice that you have begun to quench the lime with water from the well. But you tell me not if any men have been to the kiln, nor what sort of lime it is: this you should have told me!¹⁰

When the house was finally finished it was the largest private residence in Prato, its size comparing favorably to some of the palaces of the wealthy Florentines. It may not have been, as one of Datini's friends called it, "the finest castle in the world"¹¹, but it was a substantial home. Another of the merchant's friends gave a more somber appraisal:

You say you are done with the building, and now would attend to your trade and your soul. As to the building, it is high time.¹²

But the soul still had to wait. Francesco was not yet satisfied. He had built a magnificent palazzo and like all great homes it needed to be decorated. This work began in 1391.

⁴ For Datini's will see, *Cesare Guasti*, Ser Lapo Mazzei. Lettere di un notaro a un mercante del secolo XIV, Florence, 1880, vol. II, pp. 273-310. Mazzei was Datini's closest friend and his letters — many of which have been published by *Guasti* — are an important source for the merchant's life. Some of the money left by Datini was used in 1411 to commission a series of frescoes. These were painted on the outside of the palazzo, but today only the sinopie remain. See *Ugo Procacci*, *Sinopie e Affreschi*, Florence, 1960, pp. 56-57.

⁵ *Nello Bemporad's* Il restauro del Palazzo Datini a Prato, Florence, 1958, contains several interesting plans of the palazzo before and after its restoration as well as some photographs of the frescoes. The text is concerned only with the actual restoration.

⁶ For a general survey of the Florentine palazzo of the Trecento see, *Attilio Schiaparelli*, *La casa fiorentina e i suoi arredi nei secoli XIV e XV*, Florence, 1908.

⁷ Many of these *conti* were discovered and published, in abridged form, by *Melis* in his book on the Archivio Datini.

⁸ *Origo*, p. 222.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-224.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 223. Letter to Simone d'Andrea dated 31 March 1386.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 221. Letter of Ser Lapo Mazzei dated 20 August 1391.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 224. Letter signed "Piero" and dated 5 June 1392.



1 Palazzo Datini, Prato. Corner Via Ser Lapo Mazzei and Via Rinaldesca.



2 Agnolo Gaddi and Bartolomeo Bertozzo, Vault of the office. Prato, Palazzo Datini.

In September of the same year, the painters Agnolo Gaddi and Bartolomeo Bertozzo arrived in Prato. They were feted by Datini and installed in the merchant's home where they worked for the next three months.¹³ Gaddi was a well known Florentine who had already completed the monumental choir frescoes in the church of Santa Croce.¹⁴ Bartolomeo was, instead, a minor artist whose only recorded work (aside from the Palazzo Datini) is the roof decoration of the now destroyed church of Santa Cecilia in Florence.¹⁵ In Prato Bartolomeo must have acted as assistant to his more famous colleague.

A few days after they finished the artists submitted a detailed account of their work.¹⁶ They listed the painting of several timbered ceilings on the upper floors of the palazzo.¹⁷ Also enumerated are a series of frescoes in the courtyard. Here the two men executed a number of painted tabernacles, each flanked by twisted columns entirely surrounded by bands of simulated marble inlay.¹⁸

¹³ A "ricordanza" — Archivio Datini, Prato (hereafter cited as ADP), n. 1173, Miscellanea, Documenti d'arte, *Ricordanza ch'è, questo dì, 5 di gienao 1391, delle cose ci ànno dipinto Bartolomeo e Angniolo, dipintori, e de' pregi adomandano* — lists the time the artists spent in the Palazzo Datini. They arrived on 19 September 1391 and left on 21 December of the same year. See, *Melis*, p. 96.

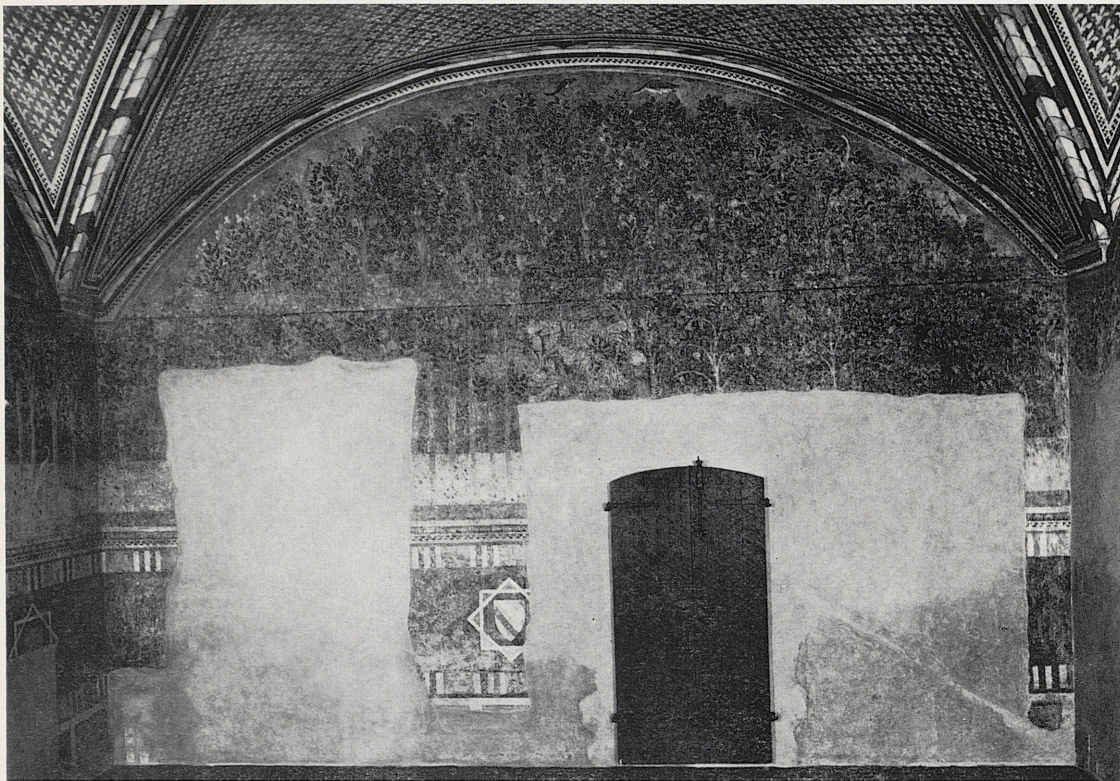
¹⁴ The only monograph on Gaddi is *Roberto Salvini's*, *L'arte di Agnolo Gaddi*, Florence, 1936.

¹⁵ For Bartolomeo's career see, *Dominic E. Colnaghi*, *A Dictionary of Florentine Painters*, London, 1928, p. 34. The church of Santa Cecilia is discussed in *W. and E. Paatz*, *Die Kirchen von Florenz*, Frankfurt, 1940, vol. I, pp. 442-48.

¹⁶ The *conto* of Agnolo and Bartolomeo — ADP, n. 1173, Miscellanea, Documenti d'arte, *misure di lavorii dipinti per Bartolomeo e Angnolo, dipintori, misurò Francesco di Francesco di Leone* (hereafter cited as ADP, n. 1173, *misure*) is dated 5 January 1391/2. See, *Melis*, pp. 59-60.

¹⁷ ADP, n. 1173, *misure*. Each part of the timbered roof is listed.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Payment was given for each part of the tabernacles. The document describes every member of the painted structure as though it was a real piece of architecture.



3 Agnolo Gaddi and Bartolomeo Bertozzo, Office. Prato, Palazzo Datini.

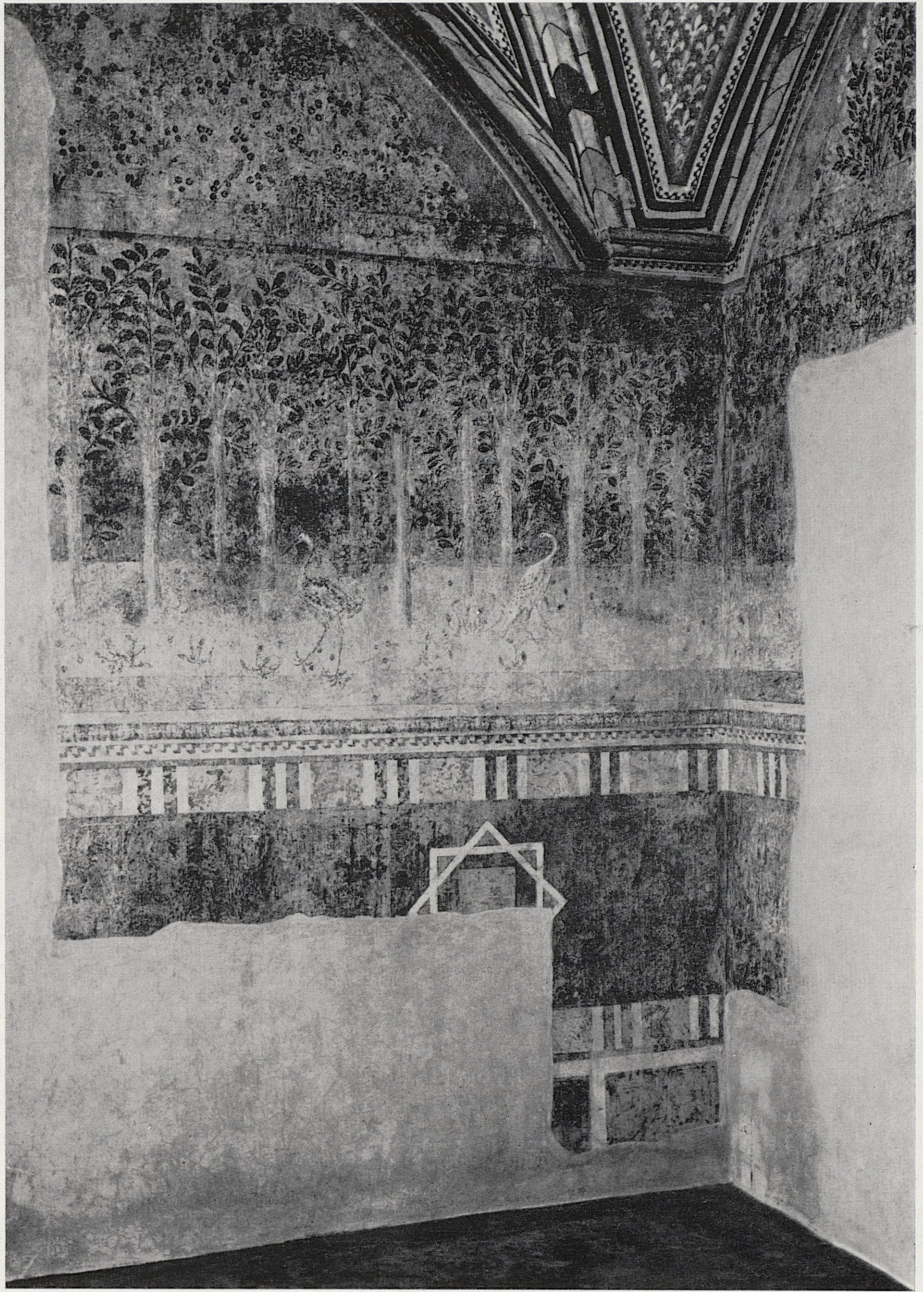
The major task of the artists was the decoration of a large room on the ground floor.¹⁹ From an inventory of 1405 it is clear that this was an office, and it is from here that the merchant must have conducted a great deal of his business.²⁰

On the quadripartite vault (Fig. 2) Agnolo and Bartolomeo painted four large coats of arms, each enclosed in a medallion — two of the red and white Datini shields and two more with the green shields of his wife's family. The remainder of the vault is covered by hundreds of gold lilies set against a blue field. Francesco must have been very proud of this ceiling and the huge coats of arms and golden lilies must have impressed his customers as they sat waiting to see the merchant.

When the spectator turns his glance from the vault to the walls he is surprised by a marked change in the decoration (Fig. 3), for the heavy heraldic scheme of the ceiling gives way to a beautiful landscape.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, The *conto* states that the walls were *dipinte ad alberi* and the vault *a gigli gialli nel campo azzuro, con quattro compassi dipinti armi*. See, *Melis*, pp. 59-60.

²⁰ *Origo*, p. 225, "According to an inventory dated 1405, the rooms on the ground floor included an office, a small cellar, a guest room with two beds, and the loggia..." The loggia is in the courtyard of the building and there is a small "cellar" or storeroom set into one of the walls of the guest-room.



4 Agnolo Gaddi and Bartolomeo Bertozzo, Office. Prato, Palazzo Datini.

The immediate foreground of the landscape is occupied by forest wildlife (Fig. 4). Graceful storks, small birds, and other animals walk in front of a row of trees whose trunks serve as a screen separating the foreground plane from the dark depths of the forest beyond. The area



5 Agnolo Gaddi and Bartolomeo Bertozzo, Office. Prato, Palazzo Datini.

above the trunks (Fig. 5) is completely covered by the branches of the trees and the leaves and fruit which they bear. These elements form an abstract pattern which emphasizes, like a tapestry, the flat surface of the wall.

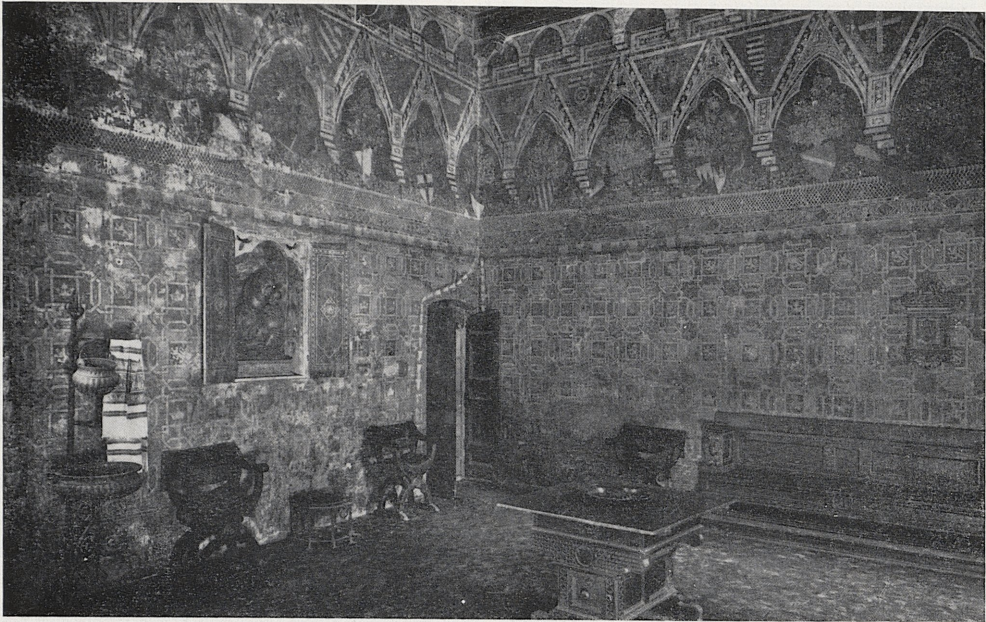


6 Fresco fragment from the old center of Florence. Florence, Museo di San Marco.

We know from a number of fresco fragments found during the destruction of the old center of Florence (Fig. 6) and from the Palazzo Davanzati (Fig. 7), the sole surviving example of a Trecento Florentine palace with its original decoration, that landscapes must have been quite common in the major rooms of fourteenth century palaces.²¹

But the extant Florentine frescoes are very different from those in the Palazzo Datini. In the Davanzati Palace, for example, the landscape is confined to a narrow band covering only the upper quarter of the wall (Fig. 8). Landscape is perhaps an inadequate term for these paintings since they show only the tops of trees seen through a painted arcade. Gaddi's frescoes, on the other hand, cover three-quarters of the wall and impose no artificial barrier — such as an arcade between the onlooker and the landscape. Furthermore, the Palazzo Datini paintings show us a fully developed forest, complete with full length trees and a foreground plane.

²¹ For these fragments and for the frescoes of the Palazzo Davanzati see, *Schiaparelli*, pp. 141-159.



7 Frescoed room. Florence, Palazzo Davanzati.



8 Detail of landscape. Florence, Palazzo Davanzati.



9 Frescoes in the Tour de la Garde-Robe. Avignon, Palace of the Popes.

The Palazzo Datini type of large landscape appears to have been quite rare. No other surviving Trecento examples exist in Florence. But a possible prototype for Gaddi's frescoes may be found in the Tour de la Garde-Robe of the Palace of the Popes in Avignon (Fig. 9). Here, circa 1340, a group of Italian artists painted a series of large scale, fully developed landscapes, that are in conception quite similar to the frescoes of the Palazzo Datini.²² These hunting and fishing scenes, like the frescoes in Prato, cover great areas of the walls, and do not impose a barrier between the spectator and landscape. It has been suggested that the

²² For the most recent study of these important frescoes see, *Enrico Castelnuovo*, *Un pittore italiano alla corte di Avignone: Matteo Giovannetti e la pittura in Provenza nel secolo XIV*, Turin, 1962, pp. 34-46.



10 Bartolomeo Bertozzo (?), Christ. Prato, Palazzo Datini.



11 Agnolo Gaddi, Christ. Prato, Duomo.

Avignon frescoes derive from tapestries.²³ Their decorative flatness seems to confirm this theory. These paintings, or others like them, may have set the pattern for a standard type of room decoration which the landscapes in the Palazzo Datini followed. But the lack of other large pure landscapes of this type does not allow us to be sure about this hypothesis. The possibility of direct influence, since Datini lived in Avignon for many years, cannot be discounted.

A lunette just above the door to the office contains a fresco of Christ (Fig. 10).²⁴ He is shown half-length, blessing with his right hand, and holding an orb in his left. The figure is part of the "iconography" of the room; it blessed Francesco and, we hope, his clients every time they passed into the office.

The painting is not listed in Agnolo's *conto*, but I believe he designed it. The actual execution of the figure, perhaps by Bartolomeo, is crude, but its composition betrays an artist of a higher quality. The fresco's affinity with Gaddi's work can best be seen by comparing it to one of his documented works painted circa 1395 (Fig. 11). This is a lunette of the same subject in the Cappella della Cintola in the Duomo at Prato.²⁵ The later painting shows a freer, less symmetrical style characteristic of the last works of Gaddi, but we can easily see that both it and the Christ from the Palazzo Datini owe their conception to the same artist. Both faces are long ovals divided by slender noses highlighted along the ridges and outlined around the nostrils. Other common features are the slit-like mouths, each underlined by a fully developed underlip, the large eyes and the clearly defined irises. The brows and the texture, length and shape of the hair further reveal the hand of Gaddi at work in the two paintings.

²³ See, L.-H. Labande, *Le Palais des Papes et les monuments d'Avignon au XIVe siècle*, Marseille, 1925, vol. II, p. 29.

²⁴ ADP, n. 1173, *misure*, lists the vault above the fresco as *dipinto a gigli nel campo rosso*. Melis, p. 59. The fresco of Christ has been badly damaged. The two raised fingers of the right hand seem to have been extended at a later date and part of the left hand has been overpainted.

²⁵ For a redating of this chapel see my forthcoming article, *Per una nuova datazione di alcune opere di Agnolo Gaddi*, in: *Archivio storico pratese*, XLII, 1966.



12 Entrance hall. Prato, Palazzo Datini.

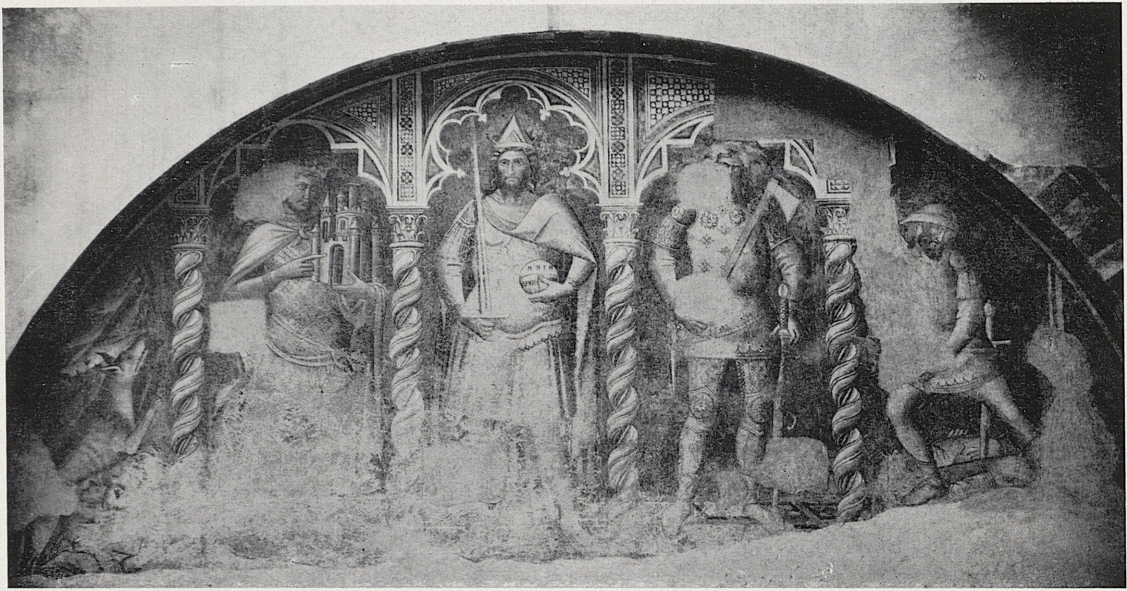
Almost directly opposite the lunette in the Palazzo Datini is a large fresco of Saint Christopher²⁶ by Niccolò di Pietro Gerini (Fig. 12), a Florentine painter who worked side by side in the palazzo with Agnolo and Bartolomeo.

Niccolò was a popular artist who executed many commissions in collaboration with other painters. He seems to have been somewhat of a specialist who was, on occasion, called upon to do certain parts of large artistic projects.²⁷ That Francesco liked Gerini's work is evident; after the completion of the palazzo he gave the artist a number of other jobs.²⁸

²⁶ In 1394 this fresco was finished by two unknown artists. See, *Origo*, p. 225.

²⁷ A masterly description of Gerini's style is found in *Richard Offner's*, *Studies in Florentine Painting*, New York, 1927, pp. 83-95. For an example of Niccolò's collaboration with other artists see, *R. Offner and Klara Steinweg*, *Corpus of Florentine Painting*, Sec. IV, vol. III, New York, 1965, pp. 1-2.

²⁸ For these commissions see, *O. Sirén*, "Niccolò di Pietro Gerini", *Thieme-Becker*, 1920, vol. XIII, pp. 465-467.



13 Niccolò Gerini, Four figures. Prato, Palazzo Datini.

Gerini, like Agnolo and Bartolomeo, compiled an account of his work in the Palazzo Datini.²⁹ This list shows that aside from the Saint Christopher, most of Niccolò's labor was concentrated in the loggia and courtyard of the palazzo.³⁰ This courtyard is situated in the center of the house and flanked by a vaulted loggia. The loggia is formed by two short end walls joined to a longer central or back wall, and opens onto the court.

Around the walls of the courtyard Gerini painted a series of fourteen figures — each enclosed in one of the fictive tabernacles executed by Gaddi and his helper.³¹ The surviving figures (Fig. 13) — four out of the original fourteen — represent a bearded warrior trampling on two bodies, a warrior holding an axe, a monarch carrying both sword and orb, and a crowned

²⁹ Gerini's *conto* — ADP, n. 1173, *Miscellanea, Documenti d'arte, conti di Niccolò Gerini* (hereafter cited as ADP, n. 1173, *Gerini*) — is undated. However a letter from Gerini to Datini (ADP, n. 1092, lett. Firenze-Prato, 25 gennaio 1391/2) asks for *i' resto che debbo avere da vvoi dello lavoro che d'io v'òne fatto: sapete che gli è u' mese e più che mi achomiatasti... Però, vi vo' preghare che vvi debbia piacere — se ssiete chontento alla iscritta che feci iscrivere a sSimone, presente Istoldo — della adimanda del detto lavoro*. This letter and the *conto* are published by Melis, p. 59, who points out that Niccolò's *conto* is *vergato* by Simone (Bellandi). ADP, n. 1173, *Gerini* must, therefore, be dated *u' mese e più* before the date of the letter to Datini or around the first part of December 1391. The *Ricordanza* of 5 January 1391/2 (see note 13) states that both Gerini and Gaddi left the Palazzo Datini on 21 December 1391. Francesco lived up to his reputation and all the artists had trouble getting paid. They wrote a combined letter to Datini in which they asked for their money (January 1391/2, published in *Guasti*, II, pp. 393-394). There then followed a complicated series of maneuvers on both sides. For these see, Renato Piattoli, *Un mercante del Trecento e gli artisti del tempo suo*, in: *Rivista d'Arte*, XI, 1929, pp. 537-579.

³⁰ ADP, n. 1173, *Gerini* lists three other figures, *Charllo Mangnio*, *Giuditta* and *Chamilla*. See, Melis, p. 59. It seems that these three figures were painted somewhere in the house. No trace of them has been found.

³¹ ADP, n. 1173, *Gerini*: *per lle figure che sono ne le faccie della corte, cioè 14 figure in tutto*. See, Melis, p. 59.



14 Loggia. Prato, Palazzo Datini.

figure holding the representation of a walled city. Next to this last figure is another niche containing a wolf and two babies.³²

On the northwest end wall and part of the back wall were frescoes of the Seven Virtues (Fig. 14). From the surviving fragments we can see that the Virtues were seated, and the

³² These figures may have formed part of a series of the Nine Heroes. The two babies with the wolf seem to be Romulus and Remus. The standing figure holding the city could be Romulus with Rome, and the man with the orb and sword Julius Caesar. The warrior holding the axe may be Joshua. Caesar and Joshua appear together with similar attributes in a fresco of the Nine Heroes in the Castle of Manta. If the man with the axe is Joshua the meaning of the figure to his right becomes clear. This armed warrior trampling over bodies would surely be a reference to Joshua's great victories. Similar figures may have been included in the fourteen listed in Niccolò's *conto*. Perhaps each of the three courtyard lunettes contained three of the Heroes and a number of attribute-figures like the armed warrior. For the fresco in the Castle of Manta see *Paolo D'Ancona, Gli affreschi del Castello di Manta nel Saluzese*, in: *L'Arte*, VIII, 1925, p. 99. My thanks to Dr. *Hans Martin von Erffa* for his help on this problem.



15 Loggia. Prato, Palazzo Datini.

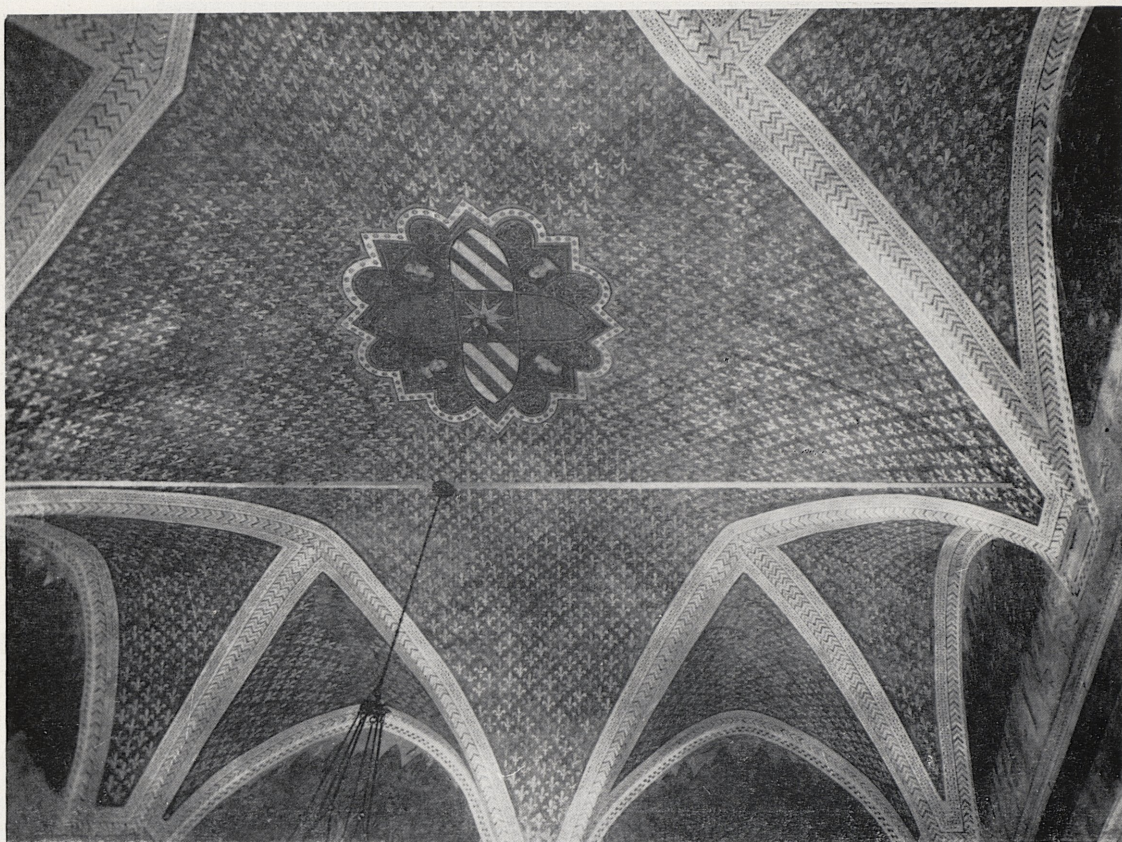
conto states that a personification of a contrasting vice was placed below each figure.³³ The southeast end wall and the rest of the back wall were covered by frescoes of the Seven Sciences (Fig. 15). These frescoes have been almost completely destroyed, but we know from Gerini's description that under each he painted a philosopher — probably a portrait of the most famous exponent of the science pictured above.³⁴ The program of the loggia was completed by the decoration of the vaults and their lunettes. Here four more philosophers were each enclosed in a painted tondo.³⁵ A field of lilies covered the remainder of the vaults.³⁶

³³ ADP, n. 1173, *Gerini: per le 7 virtù, cho' vizi da pie'*. See, *Melis*, p. 59.

³⁴ ADP, n. 1173, *Gerini: per le 7 scienze, con filosafi da pie'*. A similar scheme is found in the Spanish Chapel in Santa Maria Novella, Florence. See, *Millard Meiss*, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, Princeton, 1951, p. 100.

³⁵ ADP, n. 1173, *Gerini: per quatro filosofie, sono in deta logia, del cielo de la volta e sotto*.

³⁶ The lilies of the vault were painted by Agnolo and Bartolomeo — ADP, n. 1173, *misure: La volta detto logia nel campo azuro dipinti a gli*.



16 Arrigo di Niccolò, Vault of the guest room. Prato, Palazzo Datini.

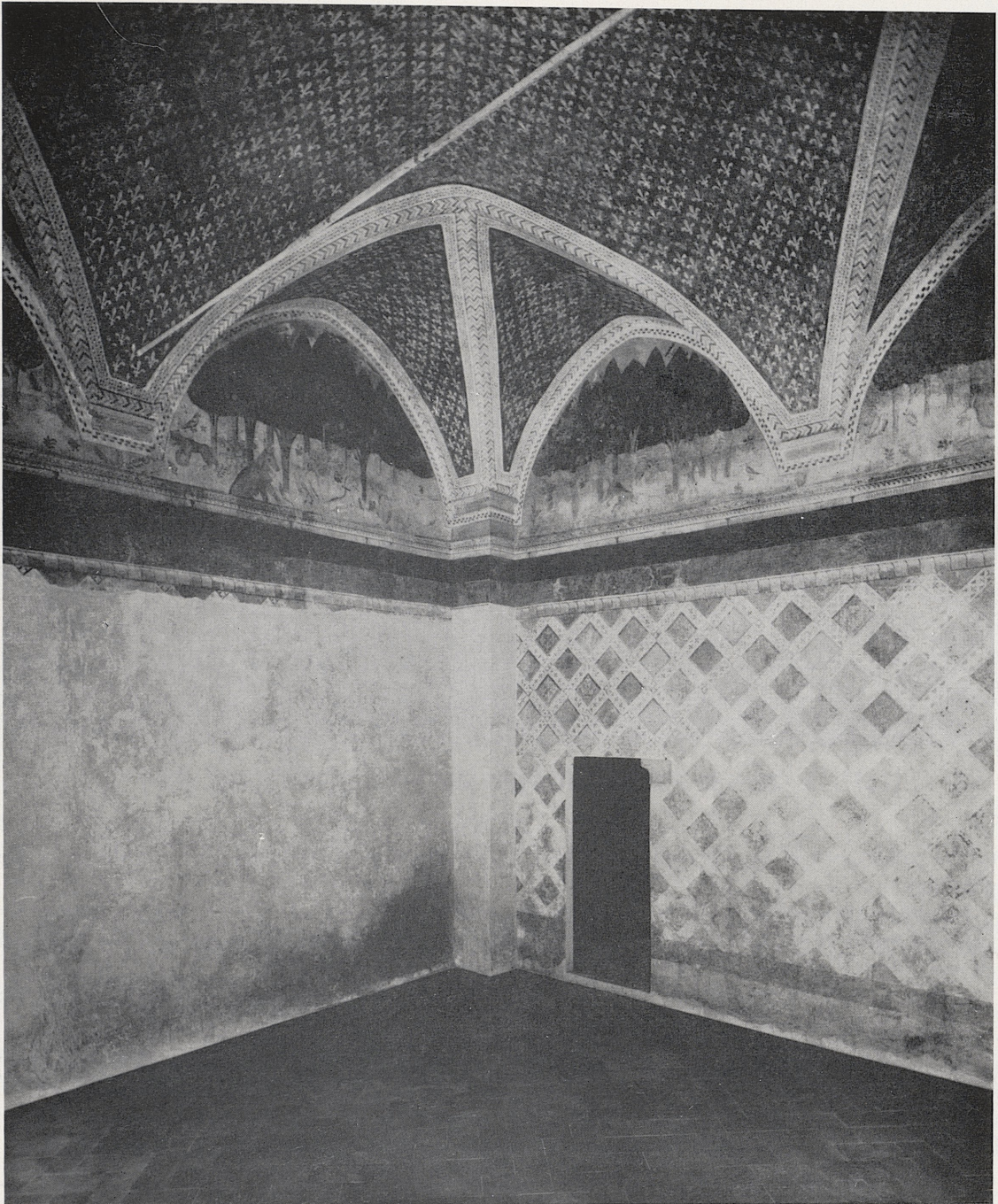
By December of 1391, Niccolò, Agnolo, and Bartolomeo had finished their respective jobs and painting in the Palazzo Datini ceased. But almost two decades later an important event in Francesco's life brought still another artist into the merchant's house — this time for the decoration of a large room on the ground floor known as "*la camera terrena*". Datini must have been exceptionally interested in this, for it was the guest room of the house, and it was here that many of the famous people who visited Prato stayed.³⁷ Its decoration, therefore, had to be, at least in Francesco's eyes, suitable. It seems, from yet another set of *conti*, that this room was painted twice during Datini's lifetime — first in 1389, and then again just before his death.

On 11 December of 1389, two artists began to fresco *la camera terrena*. These men, Dino di Puccio and Jacopo d'Agnolo³⁸, who are known only by their work in this room, painted until eight that evening because Francesco, who was leaving for Florence the next day, did not want any work done without his personal supervision.³⁹ Two days later the artists returned

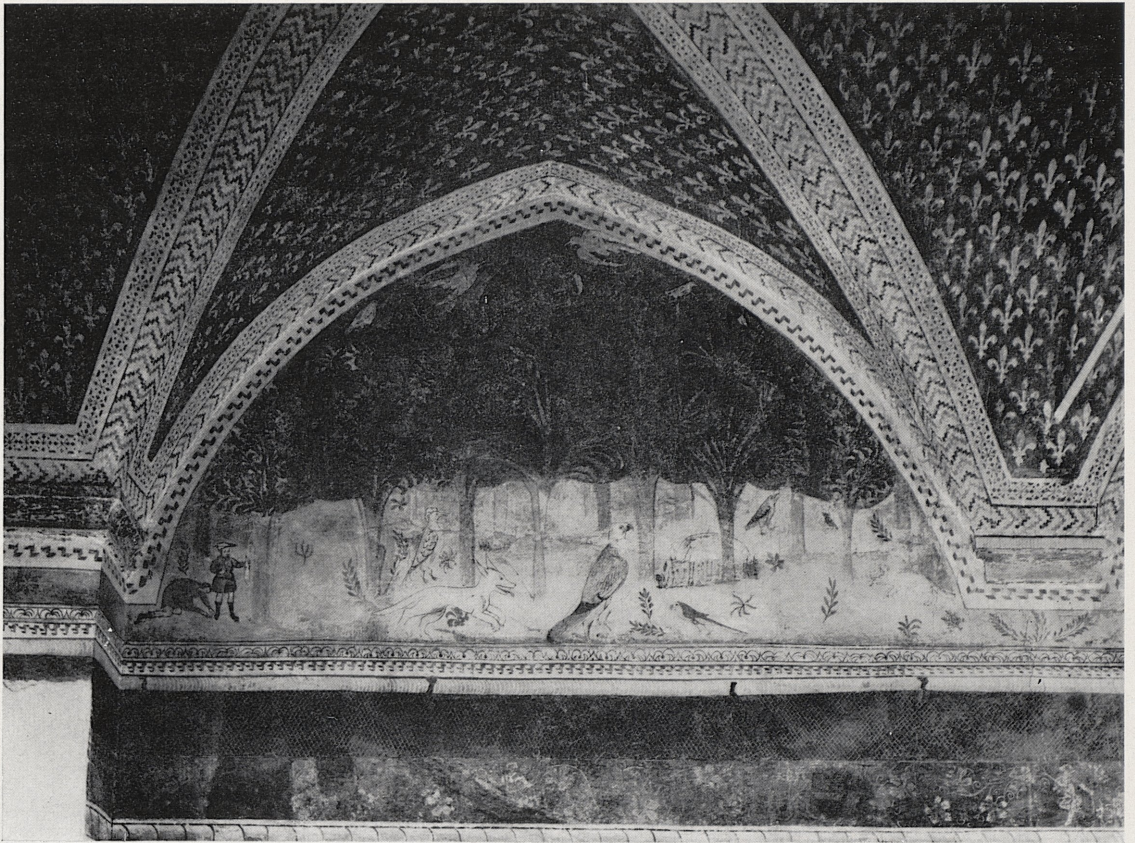
³⁷ See note 20.

³⁸ Their *conto* — ADP, Ricordanze, 1387-90, a.c. 181 t. — is published in *Guasti*, II, pp. 385-386.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 385.



17 Arrigo di Niccolò, Guest room. Prato, Palazzo Datini.



18 Arrigo di Niccolò, Lunette of the guest room. Prato, Palazzo Datini.

to the palazzo where they stayed for a week. Unfortunately their *conto* does not describe the paintings.

Whatever their subject, Datini seems to have been well satisfied, because for almost twenty years he made no modification to the decoration. However, a *conto* of circa 1409, for the local painter, Arrigo di Niccolò, indicates that the room was repainted.⁴⁰

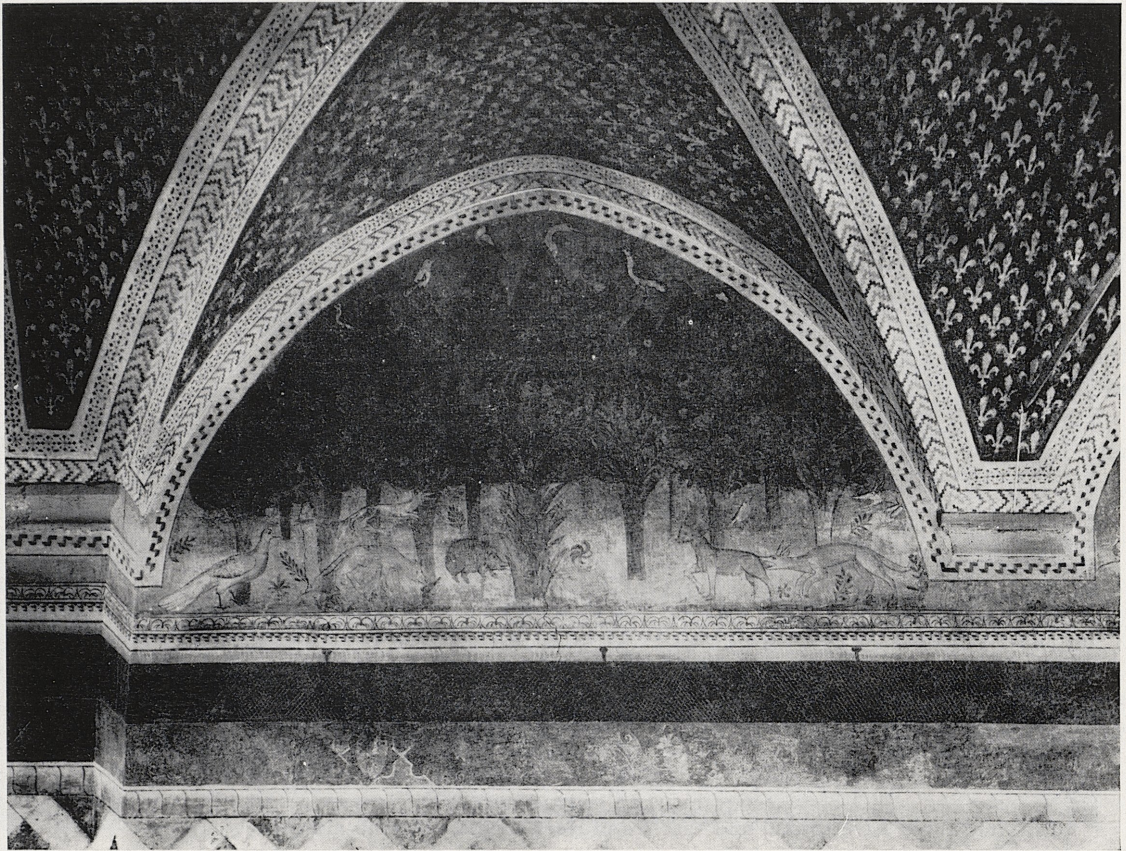
Arrigo's small *oeuvre* consists of a few minor frescoes in and around Prato.⁴¹ For his work in the *chamera terrena* he received the very respectable sum of fifteen florins.⁴²

In the center of the room's vaulted ceiling the arms of Datini and his wife appear once again (Fig. 16), although this time in a much reduced scale compared to those of the office. They

⁴⁰ Arrigo's *conto* – ADP, B. 1090, *Nota della pitture fatte per Francesco Datini da Arrigo di Niccolò, pittore pratese* – states that the artist painted *nella chamera terrena a lato alla schala uno sopraciolo cholle pareti da lato*. This document, published in *Guasti*, II, pp. 412-414, is not dated. It was, however, submitted to Datini's estate and states that the work listed was done *nel tempo che lo detto Franciescho visse*. Since this document appears to be the first *conto* submitted we can assume that the painting it lists was done near the end of Datini's life.

⁴¹ For the only study of Arrigo di Niccolò see, *Aldo Petri*, *Un pittore pratese del trecento: Arrigo di Niccolò*, in: *Prato, storia e arte*, dicembre, 1962, pp. 47-50.

⁴² *Guasti*, II, p. 413.



19 Arrigo di Niccolò, Lunette of the guest room. Prato, Palazzo Datini.

are arranged in a cross pattern with a star at the center and flanked by four small female faces. The whole complex is set in a painted compass and the remainder of the vault is covered with gold lilies.

In the six lunettes formed by the ribs of the vault Arrigo painted a series of landscapes (Fig. 17). He must have studied the frescoes of the nearby office, for his basic components are clearly borrowed from Gaddi's work (Figs. 18 and 19). The populated foreground plane, the row of tree trunks, and the tapestry-like pattern formed by the overlapping branches, are common to both sets of frescoes. But the placement of the scenes high on the wall and their small scale also connect Arrigo's paintings to the "banded" type of landscape found in the Palazzo Davanzati.

The rest of the room was painted to look like a cloth wall hanging. Below the level of the lunettes, the entire wall surface was painted with a series of lozenges each filled with either a crown or four lilies (Fig. 20).

Undoubtedly the decoration of the guest room is very pleasing, but why did Datini, who was certainly not a spendthrift, have it repainted? The answer is, I believe, furnished by the decorative motifs which cover its walls.

In November of 1409, Louis of Anjou, King of Sicily and Jerusalem, Prince of Capua and Duke of Apulia, spent several days in Prato.⁴³ Louis stayed in the Palazzo Datini, and Francesco spared no effort or expense to please his royal boarder. It was not every day that the son of an innkeeper could serve as host to a king.

We know that the painter Piero di Miniato was commissioned to paint the arms of Louis.⁴⁴ These were hung over the main entrance to the palace and must have contained the crown and lilies of the house of Anjou.⁴⁵ Since these two symbols appear together on the walls of the guest room (and nowhere else in the palazzo), it seems likely that Francesco redecorated the room for the king's stay, and that its decorations were meant to honor him.

Francesco was in a turmoil over the royal visit. But when Louis left, the merchant was dissatisfied and disappointed with the preparations he had made. Worse yet, one feels that the king knew his host well, perhaps too well, and that he had lent his royal presence to the merchant's house for a price.

Shortly after Louis's departure, Datini's closest friend, Ser Lapo Mazzei, wrote a consoling and understanding letter.

We hear you are vexed, deeming you did not all you might for so great a lord, but this I beseech you to banish from your mind. I trow he thinks the better of you, and deems you a more solid and wiser man, than had he seen you do too much, as light men do. Remember the 30 florins spent on his dinner, and the 500 lent him! And he showed you his mind, in his sweet and friendly leave-taking.⁴⁶

Within ten months of this "sweet and friendly leave-taking", Francesco was dead. Ser Lapo was at the deathbed and has described Datini's passing in a remarkably incisive letter. He wrote:

Of his death I will tell you little, for it would take a whole quire: his sufferings and his sayings, and his passing, which was in my arms. For it seemed to him very strange that he should have to die, and that his prayers should be of no avail.⁴⁷

Francesco died in the palace that he had built and decorated. Today, over half a millenium later, the merchant's personality is still dimly reflected by the paintings which he commissioned.

One of the most striking features of the palazzo is its almost total lack of religious subjects. There are, in fact, only two frescoes of a sacred nature — the Christ by Gaddi and Gerini's Saint Christopher.

Both of these frescoes are, however, functional. According to a popular Trecento legend, which Francesco must have believed, the image of Saint Christopher provided protection against sudden death.⁴⁸ Gerini's fresco is placed at the base of a staircase which leads from the main door to the upper floors of the palace, and could have hardly escaped the merchant's glance.

⁴³ For the visit of Louis see, *Origo*, pp. 333-335.

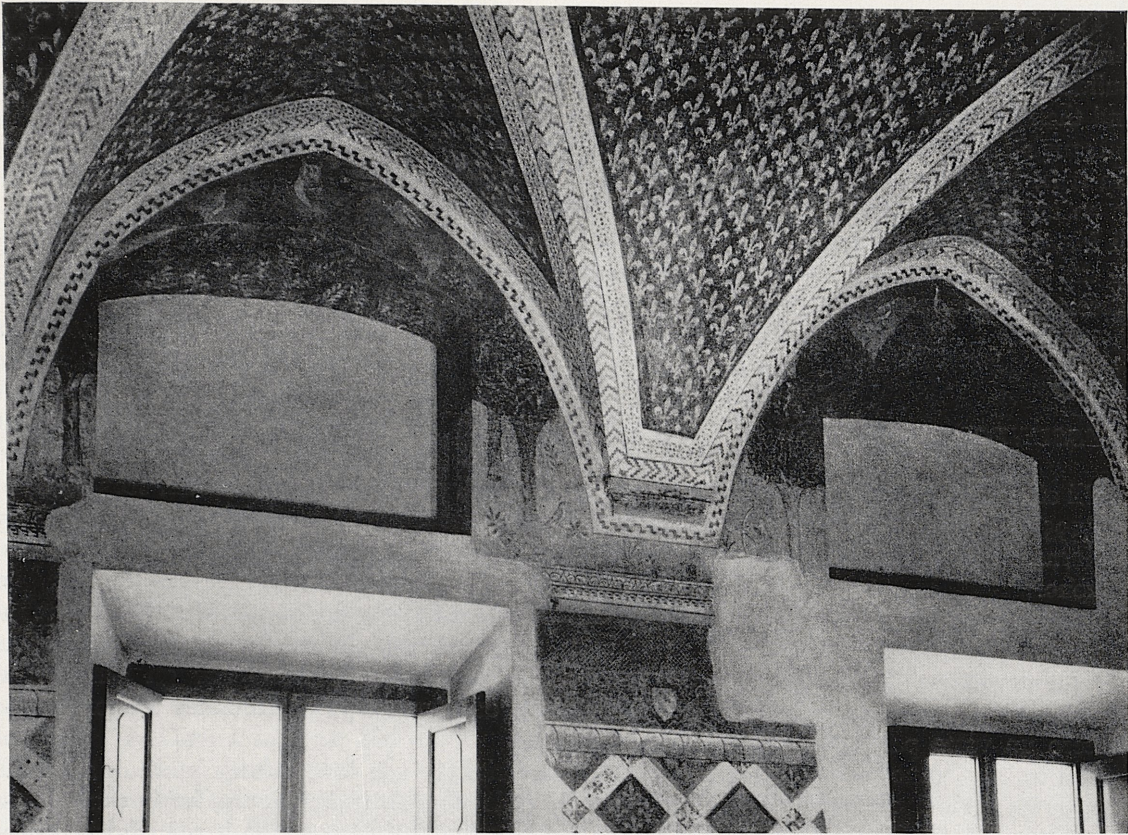
⁴⁴ ADP, *Libro di mercatanzie*, F, 1410-16, a.c. 139: *Piero di Miniato da Firenze dipintore de' avere per questo lavoro fatto alla chasa, cioè per l'arme de' re Luigi sopra la porta della chasa grande del Ciepo (Palazzo Datini), lire dodici*. This document is published in *Guasti*, II, p. 423.

⁴⁵ For the arms of the house of Anjou see, *Alessandro Cutolo*, *Gli Angioini*, Florence, 1934.

⁴⁶ *Origo*, p. 334. The letter is dated 10 November 1409. In the summer of 1410 Louis was once again in Prato. He stayed eighteen days and before leaving gave Datini a charter granting him the right to add the lily of France to his coat of arms. For the royal charter see, *Guasti*, I, pp. CXXVIII-CXXIX.

⁴⁷ *Origo*, p. 336. To Cristofano di Bartolo dated 24 August 1410.

⁴⁸ For the Saint Christopher legend see, *Hans-Friedrich Rosenfeld*, *Der heilige Christophorus, seine Verehrung und seine Legende*, Leipzig, 1937 and *George Kaftal*, *Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting*, Florence, 1952, pp. 268-69.



20 Arrigo di Niccolò, Guest room. Prato, Palazzo Datini.

The Christ in the lunette was also a protective image since it blessed those about to enter the office. Both of these “functional” frescoes were painted on the walls which served as the palazzo’s main entrance hall, and they would have been seen by everyone who entered the building. This hall is, in fact, a religious frontispiece to a home full of secular decoration.

Much of this profane decoration is pure show. Coats of arms were placed throughout the building. They appear in the vaults of the office, guest room, and loggia. Others of a portable type were hung elsewhere.⁴⁹ These shields, and the golden lilies that surrounded them, must have delighted Francesco, because they represented two things very dear to him — wealth and family.

The paintings of the courtyard and loggia do not glorify Datini. Their program may well have been common to other Trecento palaces, but once again a lack of evidence prevents a more definitive statement.

Gaddi’s frescoes in the office are the most unexpected feature of the decoration. They are an extremely rare form of Trecento landscape, and their presence in the palazzo establishes Datini’s rôle in the history of patronage of the late fourteenth century.

⁴⁹ Datini also had his coat of arms placed on dishes, forks and bed curtains. See, *Origo*, p. 226.

The papers and letters of Francesco and the *conti* of Agnolo, Bartolomeo, Niccolò and Arrigo form an unusually detailed picture of the construction and decoration of a Trecento building. The frescoes are rare surviving examples of secular painting of the fourteenth century, and their rediscovery increases our knowledge of the non religious decoration of Datini's time. Although Francesco's home is certainly not the grandest or most beautiful palazzo of its era it is, art-historically speaking, among the most significant. Its decoration is also important as an index to the taste of a wealthy merchant of the Trecento since it illustrates Francesco di Marco Datini's personal preferences. This, perhaps, is one of the most important aspects of the building. For the palazzo, unlike a church or town hall, was a private place built to please only one man, and as such remains a faithful witness to his personal world.

RIASSUNTO

Gli affreschi nell'interno di Palazzo Datini, soggetto di questo studio, sono stati scoperti solo nel 1958. Essi furono commissionati dal ricco mercante Francesco di Marco Datini.

Numerosi documenti ne stabiliscono con chiarezza la data ed i nomi degli artisti che li eseguirono.

La decorazione del palazzo iniziò nel 1391; dal settembre al dicembre di questo anno un gruppo di artisti, fra i quali Agnolo Gaddi e Niccolò di Pietro Gerini, dipinse una serie di affreschi.

La decorazione dello studio al pian terreno e del cortile costituirono per gli artisti uno dei compiti più impegnativi. Nello studio, il Gaddi ed il suo aiuto Bartolomeo Bertozzo, dipinsero un vasto paesaggio.

Essi collaborarono inoltre ad un mezzo busto di Cristo in una lunetta sulla porta di accesso.

Sulle pareti del cortile il Gerini dipinse una serie di quattordici figure fra le quali probabilmente sono raffigurati i Nove Eroi; nella loggia attigua dipinse invece le figure delle sette Arti e delle sette Virtù.

Con la ridipintura di una seconda stanza al piano terreno la decorazione del Palazzo Datini fu completa. Questa ridipintura fu affidata al pittore locale Arrigo di Niccolò, il quale dipinse paesaggi nelle lunette della volta ed un affresco tipo arazzo sulle pareti.

I dipinti di Palazzo Datini costituiscono un raro documento superstite di una decorazione di palazzo Trecentesco, che accresce le nostre cognizioni circa la decorazione profana del tempo.

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