



1 Masolino, The Testing of the Cross; The Finding of the True Cross. Right wall, lower panel. Empoli, S. Stefano, Cappella della S. Croce.

A RECONSTRUCTION OF MASOLINO'S TRUE CROSS CYCLE IN SANTO STEFANO, EMPOLI *

by Bruce Cole

On 2 November 1424 Maso di Cristofano "*dipintore da Firenze*" was paid for painting the Cappella della Santa Croce in the church of Santo Stefano degli Agostiniani at Empoli (Fig. 2). Masolino's frescoes, which illustrated scenes from the Legend of the True Cross, were destroyed in August of 1792 when the brothers of the church decided to strip the paintings from the walls and replace them with a fresh coat of plaster. The chapel remained in this unhappy state until 1943, when, under the direction of Ugo Procacci, a number of *sinopie* were discovered. Since that time this important chapel has not been closely studied, nor has any correct reconstruction of its program been published. The present note is devoted to these two tasks.¹

* A modified version of this note was read at the Frick Art History Symposium of 1965. My thanks to Professors Creighton Gilbert and Charles Mitchell for a number of helpful suggestions.

¹ For the documentation of this chapel and a discussion of its ancillary pictorial decoration see Ugo Procacci, *Sinopie e affreschi*, Milan, 1961, p. 61. Procacci, p. 227 and Ireneo Lazzeroni, *Le sinopie*



2 Cappella della S. Croce. Empoli, S. Stefano degli Agostiniani.

Below the Sheba scene is the *Extraction of the Wood from the Piscina* (Fig. 3, lower panel). A group of onlookers stand before an arcade and watch two workmen pulling the wood from the water. The *Making of the Cross*, the next scene, begins just to the right of the laborers. A large building with a clerestory and single portal fills the background. Before this structure, which represents the Temple of Jerusalem, a group of men observe two carpenters making the Cross of Christ.⁴ Unfortunately, this area of the *sinopia* is so badly damaged that only the upper parts of the standing men and the legs and arms of the workmen remain.

The document which records payment to Masolino says nothing about the subject matter of his paintings. Therefore, any attempt to reconstruct them must be based on the *sinopie* and the few small areas of paint which escaped total destruction.

Masolino's frescoes of the Legend covered the two side walls of the chapel. Each wall was divided by painted borders into four separate horizontal panels. The three upper panels of each wall (with the exception of the top left) incorporated two distinct, but continuous scenes, while the bottom panels on each side were reserved for portraits of members of the Compagnia della Croce standing in a pair of *loggie*. This confraternity employed Masolino.² The cycle itself begins in the upper panel of the right wall, continues down the wall for two more units and then resumes in the top section of the left side.

The left-half of the first *sinopia* (Fig. 3, upper panel) depicts the Queen of Sheba and her retinue kneeling before the bridge of the sacred wood. Two large horses tended by a groom fill the background. The right-half of the panel is completely obliterated.³ I shall later suggest that it originally contained the *Burial of the Wood*.

degli affreschi di Masolino nella Cappella della Croce in Santo Stefano degli Agostiniani, in: *Bullettino storico empoese*, I, 1957, pp. 141-154, both discuss the subjects of the destroyed frescoes. They are, however, often mistaken in their identifications of the individual scenes. Robert Oertel, *Perspective and Imagination*, in: *The Renaissance and Mannerism (= Studies in Western Art: Acts of the Twentieth International Congress of the History of Art, Vol. II)*, Princeton, 1963, pp. 146-159, briefly comments on several of the *sinopie* (pp. 156-157). Emma Micheletti, *Masolino da Panicale*, Milan, 1959, does not discuss the *sinopie* of the True Cross Legend. She mentions only some of the ancillary decoration.

² See Ugo Procacci, *Sulla cronologia delle opere di Masaccio e di Masolino tra il 1425 e il 1428*, in: *Rivista d'Arte*, XXVIII, 1953, p. 41.

³ Procacci, *Sinopie*, p. 227, identifies the left-half as *Sheba before the Wood* and says that the right-half is indecipherable. Lazzeroni, p. 153, flatly states that he sees the *Visit of Sheba and Solomon* and the *Burial of the Wood* in the almost completely destroyed right-half. He calls the subject of the left-half *Sheba before the Wood*.

⁴ Procacci, *Sinopie*, p. 227, identifies the scenes as the *Stealing of the Cross* and *Chosroes Hiding the Cross*. I know of no example of the last scene in any Italian cycle of the True Cross legend. Lazzeroni, p. 153, says the whole *sinopia* represents the *Stealing of the Cross*.



3 Masolino, The Queen of Sheba before the Bridge; The Burial of the Wood (above); The Extraction of the Wood from the Piscina; The Making of the Cross (below). Right wall, upper panels. Empoli, S. Stefano.

The left half of the next panel (Fig. 1) shows the *Testing of the Cross* in front of a high mountain range. The boy, miraculously restored to life, sits on his bier while two men hold the True Cross above him. The scanty remains of the right half of the panel depict a number of figures; three on the left and two on the right.⁵ I shall demonstrate that these illustrated the *Finding of the True Cross*.

No underpainting exists on the badly damaged bottom panel of the right wall. All that remains of the original decoration is a small paint strip containing bases of columns. The surviving *sinopia* of the opposite scene on the left wall serves to reconstruct this missing fresco (Figs. 4 and 6, lower panel). This panel depicts two arches supported on three columns. There are very faint outlines of other smaller columns behind the arches and a paint strip containing column bases and edges of robes runs along the base. All this suggests, as Procacci has pointed out, that the lowest panels of each wall originally depicted full-length figures in a painted loggia.⁶ As they do not belong to the traditional legend we can surmise that they portrayed members of the confraternity which commissioned the cycle.

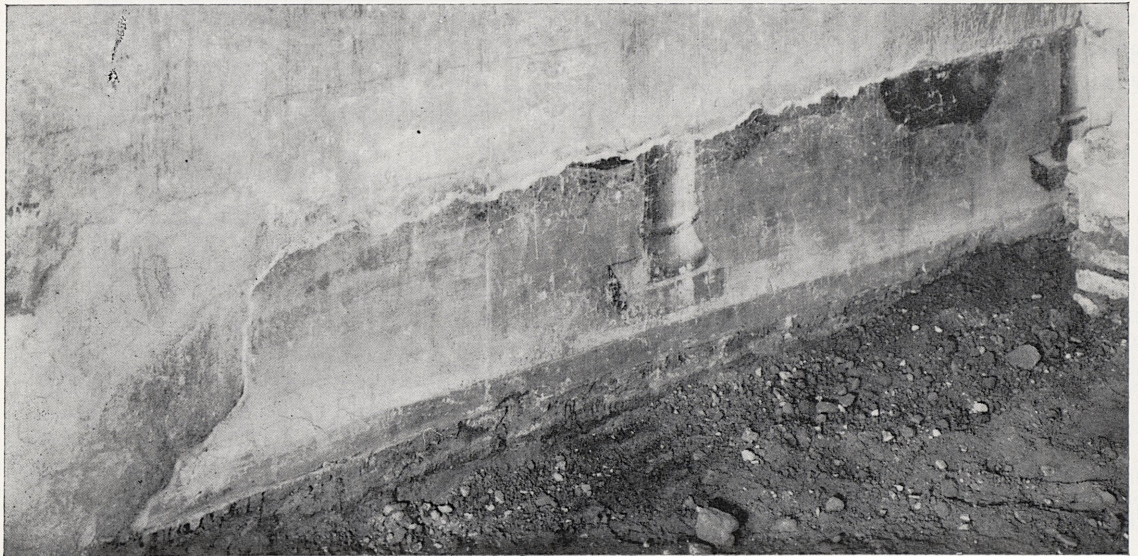
Now we come to the left wall. The damaged top panel (Fig. 5, upper panel) shows seven people against a now blank background. Four of them stand in the left foreground, while three kneel in the right foreground.⁷ Below I will demonstrate that this panel illustrated the *Entry of St. Helen into Jerusalem*.

The next panel shows *Chosroes Enthroned* and the *Dream of Heraclius* (Fig. 5, lower panel). To the left Chosroes, surrounded by his kneeling subjects, sits in an elaborate palace. To the right of the building Heraclius lies in his tent and looks up at the angel, now almost completely

⁵ Procacci, *Sinopie*, p. 227 and Lazzeroni, pp. 153-154, state that this fresco panel represented the *Testing of the Cross* and *St. Helen in Procession towards Jerusalem*.

⁶ Procacci, *Sinopie*, p. 227.

⁷ *Ibid.*, states that the left-hand part may be the *Making of the Cross*. Lazzeroni, p. 153, says that the scenes may have been the *Extraction of the Wood from the Piscina* and the *Making of the Cross*.



4 Masolino, Remains of the painted loggia with donor figures. Left wall, bottom panel. Empoli, S. Stefano.



5 Masolino, The Entry of St. Helen into Jerusalem (above); Chosroes Enthroned; The Dream of Heraclius (below). Left wall, upper panels. Empoli, S. Stefano.

destroyed, who announces the emperor's coming victory. Three soldiers sit in front of the tent.⁸

The last panel of the cycle represents the *Beheading of Chosroes* and the *Entry of Heraclius into Jerusalem* (Fig. 6). A semicircular group of warriors occupies the left half. In the foreground the kneeling king awaits the death blow of the headsman above. To the right of this scene we see the *Entry*. A large prancing horse advances at the head of a procession. The outlines of mountains and a city gate are seen in the badly damaged right background.⁹

There are thus three questionable scenes; the right-half of the top panel right; the right-half of the third panel right; the whole of the top panel left. The key to their reconstruction is Agnolo Gaddi's True Cross fresco cycle in Florence. This occupies the two side walls of the choir of Santa Croce and can be dated around 1390.¹⁰ There are four scenes on each wall.

What Masolino did was simply to adapt the Santa Croce scheme to the walls of the Chapel of the Holy Cross by reducing Gaddi's eight narrative panels to six, thus leaving the bottom registers free for the portraits of members of the Compagnia della Croce. He eliminated the *Death of Adam* (Gaddi's top right panel) and began his own cycle with Gaddi's second scene, *The Queen of Sheba before the Bridge*. He then adapted the remaining scenes of Gaddi's right wall to the right wall at Empoli, namely; *Sheba before the Bridge*, and the *Burial of the Wood*; the *Extraction of the Wood from the Piscina*, and the *Making of the Cross*; the *Finding of the Cross* and the *Testing of the Cross*. Masolino began his left wall with the *Entry of St. Helen into Jerusalem* which he took from Gaddi's top left panel. He then surpassed Gaddi's *Flight of Chosroes* (the second panel of the left choir wall) and adapted the Santa Croce scenes of *Chosroes Enthroned* and the *Dream of Heraclius*; the *Beheading of Chosroes*, and the *Entry of Heraclius into Jerusalem*.

Now let us see how closely Masolino followed his model. In the Sheba scene (Fig. 3, upper panel) he carefully reproduced a number of major motifs from the left hand side of Gaddi's panel (Fig. 7). The kneeling queen is almost an exact copy and her retinue, the large horses and the bridge all derive from the Santa Croce formula. The right side of Gaddi's panel represents the *Burial of the Wood*. This must have been the theme of the destroyed right side of Masolino's fresco (Fig. 3, upper panel).

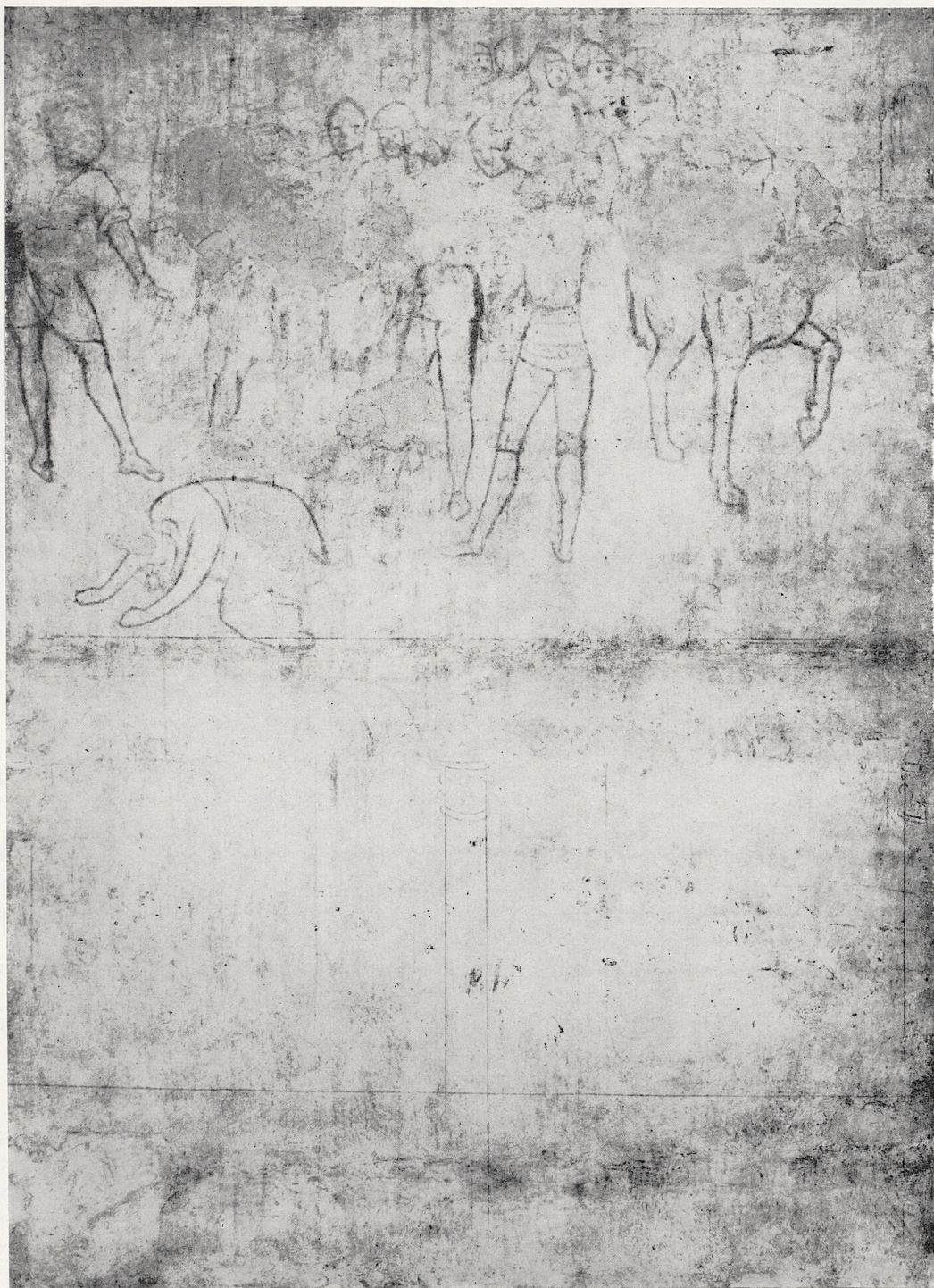
Masolino's second panel right (Fig. 3, lower panel) shows the *Extraction of the Wood from the Piscina* and the *Making of the Cross*, just as in Santa Croce (Fig. 8). In the left-half he compresses Gaddi's group standing before an arcade into a smaller space and directly repeats the position of the workmen hauling the wood from the pool. In the right-half he adapts from Gaddi the large building in the background, the group of men in front and the carpenters, but simplifies the scene by eliminating a number of figures.

The left-half of Masolino's third panel right (Fig. 1) is very close to Gaddi's fresco of the same scene, the *Testing of the Cross* (Fig. 9). The boy sitting on the bier, the stance of the men around him and the position of the Cross are all taken over directly. From this close borrowing we can safely infer that the subject of the right-half of the panel was the same as Gaddi's, namely, the *Finding of the True Cross*. Gaddi divides the scene into three parts, the workmen

⁸ Procacci, *Sinopie*, p. 227, also identifies this scene as *Chosroes Enthroned* and the *Dream of Heraclius*. Lazzeroni, p. 153, who does not identify the left-side of the *sinopia*, calls the subject of the right-side the *Dream of Heraclius*.

⁹ Procacci, *Sinopie*, p. 227 and Lazzeroni, p. 154, both identify the subjects as the *Beheading of Chosroes* and the *Entry of Heraclius into Jerusalem*.

¹⁰ See Roberto Salvini, *L'arte di Agnolo Gaddi*, Florence, 1936, pp. 31-67.



6 Masolino, The Beheading of Chosroes; The Entry of Heraclius into Jerusalem (above); Remains of painted loggia (below). Left wall, lower panels. Empoli, S. Stefano.



7 Agnolo Gaddi, *The Queen of Sheba before the Bridge; The Burial of the Wood*. Florence, S. Croce.

digging up the crosses in the middle and groups of figures at either side. Masolino's *sinopia* has the two groups of figures, but the center portion is lost. This, no doubt, showed the workmen uncovering the Cross.

The top left-hand panel (Fig. 5, upper panel) is badly preserved and hard to read but the dependence of Masolino's *sinopia* on Gaddi's scene of the *Entry of St. Helen into Jerusalem* (Fig. 10) in the corresponding position in Santa Croce is clear, though the number of figures is reduced and their poses are altered. Masolino has condensed the crowd on the right of Gaddi's scene into one kneeling citizen. This is the one panel of the Empoli cycle in which Masolino, again relying on Gaddi, depicts a single rather than a double scene. Moreover, by eliminating Gaddi's *Death of Adam* (on the top panel of the right choir wall) Masolino was able to balance the *Entry of St. Helen* on the left with the *adventus* of the Queen of Sheba on the right, thus emphasizing a typological relation between the two rulers.

Masolino's second panel left shows *Chosroes Enthroned* and the *Dream of Heraclius* (Fig. 5, lower panel). Gaddi's corresponding panel (Fig. 11) contains these two scenes together with another in the right background, the *Battle of Heraclius*. Masolino eliminated the battle episode and directly copied the *Chosroes Enthroned* and the *Dream of Heraclius*. In the left-half of the Empoli panel the palace, the monarch, and the kneeling subjects are all taken over directly. On the right-side Masolino borrowed the tent, the figure of Heraclius and the guards.

The final panel (left) of the Empoli cycle (Fig. 6, upper panel) illustrates the *Beheading of Chosroes* and the *Entry of Heraclius into Jerusalem*. Gaddi's last panel shows three scenes; the *Beheading of Chosroes*, the *Angel Admonishing Heraclius* (in the middle background), and the *Entry of Heraclius into Jerusalem* (Fig. 12). Masolino eliminated the scene of the *Angel*



8 Agnolo Gaddi, *The Extraction of the Wood from the Piscina; The Making of the Cross*. Florence, S. Croce.



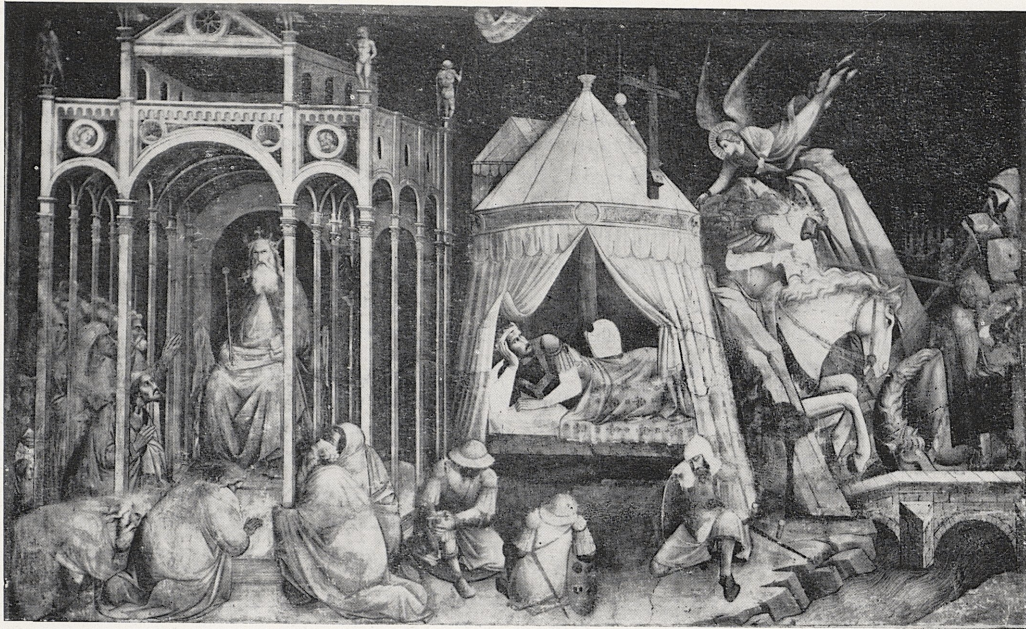
9 Agnolo Gaddi, *The Testing of the Cross; The Finding of the True Cross*. Florence, S. Croce.



10 Agnolo Gaddi, *The Entry of St. Helen into Jerusalem*. Florence, S. Croce.

Admonishing Heraclius and borrowed the *Beheading* and the *Entry*. In the left-half of the panel Masolino compressed Gaddi's group watching the execution into a smaller space but changed the entire psychological impact of the scene. In Gaddi's fresco Chosroes has been executed and two men bend down to pick up his severed head. Masolino's scene takes place a split-second before the beheading. The sword of the headsman is just about to strike. In the right-half of the Empoli panel Masolino borrows, but simplifies. He reduces the large procession of Heraclius to a small group of warriors led by a single horse.

During the last two decades of the Trecento Agnolo Gaddi was the leading artist in Florence. His progressive painting greatly influenced the generation of artists which came to maturity during the first years of the fifteenth century. It is, therefore, not surprising that one of these men, Masolino, freely borrowed from Gaddi's Santa Croce cycle. Masolino, however, did not simply reproduce his model, he changed it. He modified its iconographical program to fit a new context. He compressed Gaddi's scenes into a more compact, unified space, while reducing or eliminating their decorative details. His frescoes, unlike Gaddi's, illustrated only the central drama of their scenes. But the differences between the two cycles reflect more than the personal attitudes and tastes of their authors. They mirror a change in the art of Florence. A change which occurred between the generations of Masolino and Agnolo Gaddi. A change which eliminated overcrowded scenes, which emphasized unified space and which focused on the central drama of its monumental compositions.



11 Agnolo Gaddi, Chosroes Enthroned; The Dream of Heraclius; The Battle of Heraclius. Florence, S. Croce.



12 Agnolo Gaddi, The Beheading of Chosroes; The Angel Admonishing Heraclius; The Entry of Heraclius into Jerusalem. Florence, S. Croce.

RIASSUNTO

Gli affreschi di Masolino, documentati e datati 1424, che si trovano nella Cappella della Santa Croce nella Chiesa di Santo Stefano degli Agostiniani a Empoli, sono stati danneggiati nel 1792 fino ad essere ridotti a pochi resti. Tuttavia nel 1943, sotto la guida di Ugo Procacci, sono state ritrovate le sinopie degli affreschi che rappresentavano un ciclo di leggende della Santa Croce.

L'autore, esaminando i resti degli affreschi e le sinopie, ricostruisce l'intero ciclo. Le scene, completamente distrutte, possono essere ricostruite tramite un confronto con il ciclo di Agnolo Gaddi nella cappella maggiore di S. Croce a Firenze. Da questo esame risulta che Masolino si è attenuto, fin nei particolari, alla composizione ed agli atteggiamenti di Agnolo Gaddi. Tuttavia, a causa del poco spazio a sua disposizione, egli ha dovuto contenere la composizione rispetto al modello, riducendo il numero delle figure e tralasciando alcune scene per intero. Ma anche così gli affreschi mostrano la differenza nelle concezioni artistiche fra la generazione di Agnolo e quella di Masolino. In Masolino la rappresentazione dello spazio è unificata e le scene di massa sono state eliminate per concentrare lo sguardo sul soggetto centrale.

Photo Credits:

Soprintendenza alle Gallerie, Florence: Figs. 1 - 6. - Alinari: Figs. 7 - 12.