

Bernardo Daddi's Madonna: The Success of Orsanmichele after the Black Death

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The mid-14th Century was a difficult and frightening time for the people of Florence. Not only was there flooding, famine and uprising, but between 1338-1346 nearly 300 manufacturers, bankers, and merchants went bankrupt. If the economic collapse was not enough, just two years later came the most devastating hit for Florentines, the first wave of the Black Death during which over half the population succumbed to the epidemic. After this first sweep of the Black Death, reports of a second oncoming disease or the coming of the anti-christ spread wildly.¹ The thriving city, previously of 95,000 citizens was reduced to a mere 40,000 by the 1400s.² Confusion and fear became the prevalent attitude of the city, as well as an increased piety among the Florentines. In this culture of fear and the imminence of death by disease, miraculous images such as the Virgin and Child [Fig.1] at Orsanmichele by Bernardo Daddi became exceedingly popular.

Bernardo Daddi's Virgin, often called the *Madonna delle Grazie* (Madonna of the Graces) is the third rendition of this iconic image on the site of Orsanmichele [Fig. 2].³ Though the first two were destroyed, the Madonna at Orsanmichele has reportedly

¹ Meiss, Millard. *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951. Print.

² Trecento History Notes

³ Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. Third Edition. Prentice Hall, 2007. Print.

been performing miraculous cures since 1292. The Italians' believed strongly in the power of imagery, and it was believed that these miraculous abilities transferred between each reproduction of the painting. A religious cult was soon founded around the adoration of the image, called the *Compagnia della Madonna di Orsanmichele*. Daddi completed the *Madonna delle Grazie* in 1347, just a few months before the first wave of the Black Plague hit Florence.⁴ Many religious societies did exceedingly well following the plague, especially the *Compagnia della Madonna di Orsanmichele*, as they were flooded with donations, gifts, and new members seeking redemption or a cure.⁵ The popularity of Daddi's Madonna and the cult surrounding it provides insight into the tone of the era; a society suffering through epidemic, death, and fear that is difficult for contemporary viewers to grasp. The success of Daddi's Virgin after the Black Death led to notable benefits in two distinct groups: the *Compagnia della Madonna di Orsanmichele* and the guilds of Florence.

The first benefit the *Compagnia della Madonna di Orsanmichele* experienced was a rapid increase in membership. The members of the confraternity were often called *Laudesi*, referring to the lauds (hymns) that members pledged to worship the iconic painting with.⁶ Due to the presence of the miraculous Virgin painting, the confraternity was much larger than those affiliated with other churches of Florence. In fact, the society grew so much that a previous rule stating that members must live within the city walls was no longer enforced. Based off the income and number of

⁴ Kreytenberg, Gert. *Orcagna's Tabernacle*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishing, 1994. Print.

⁵ Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. Third Edition. Prentice Hall, 2007. Print.

⁶ Henderson, John. *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. Print.

donations, it is estimated that at its height, the *Compagnia della Madonna di Orsanmichele* may have had as many as two to three thousand members in and around Florence.⁷

These donations were another enormously important gain for the confraternity. The *Compagnia della Madonna di Orsanmichele* received so many gifts that the redistribution of these donations to the needy in Florence became one of the primary responsibilities of the Laudesi.⁸ The year following the first wave of the Black Death, Villani estimated that the confraternity received a sum of around 35,000 florins.⁹ It is unsurprising that citizens were so willing to give frequent and generous donations at a time when doing so was equivalent to an act of piety. According to Vasari, much of this sum went towards employing the famous Andrea di Cione, more commonly referred to as Orcagna, to construct a magnificent tabernacle to house the image. Though Bernardo Daddi's Virgin was already held in a small shrine, it was unimpressive. The confraternity "resolved to make over her a chapel, or rather a tabernacle, not only carved in marble and adorned with precious stones, but also with mosaics and bronzework so that it should surpass in material and in excellent work everything made before that time."¹⁰ Orcagna, being the greatest contemporary artist and architect active in Florence, was commissioned in 1352 to design and carry out the creation of

⁷ Henderson, John. *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. Print.

⁸ Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. Third Edition. Prentice Hall, 2007. Print.

⁹ Meiss, Milard. *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951. Print.

¹⁰ Vasari, Giorgio, *Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. 1511-1574. Edited and annotated by E.H. and E.W. Blashfield and A.A. Hopkins. New York, Scribner, 1902

the grand tabernacle to hold Daddi's miraculous icon.¹¹ Over the next eight years, Orcagna built an architectural masterpiece of marble, covered in reliefs depicting the life cycle of Mary and expensive stones [Fig. 3]. According to Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, the total cost of constructing both the loggia and Orcagna's tabernacle was a staggering 96,000 florins.¹² The willingness of the *Compagnia della Madonna di Orsanmichele* to invest so heavily in Orcagna's ornate tabernacle exhibits how truly significant this miraculous icon became to the Florentines. Such lavish materials and the astounding expenditure on Orsanmichele were a public display of power and piety for the confraternity, as well as the guilds associated with the church.

The importance of the guilds in Florence can not be stressed enough. They were heavily involved in government and politics and they were some of the city's greatest patrons; no artists could operate in Florence without first being a member of one or more guild. Orsanmichele functioned in many ways as a guild church thanks to their patronage.¹³ The reconstruction of the church was actually overseen by the silk guild for example.¹⁴ The now well-known sculptures that embellish the exterior of Orsanmichele first began in 1339, when the confraternity encouraged the city's guilds to invest in a statue for their designated niche.¹⁵ Due to this longstanding relationship with Orsanmichele, the guilds also benefitted

¹¹ Kreytenberg, Gert. *Orcagna's Tabernacle*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishing, 1994. Print.

¹² Vasari, Giorgio, *Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. 1511-1574. Edited and annotated by E.H. and E.W. Blashfield and A.A. Hopkins. New York, Scribner, 1902

¹³ Paoletti, John, and Gary Radke. *Art In Renaissance Italy*. Fourth Edition. Prentice Hall, 2012.

¹⁴ Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. Third Edition. Prentice Hall, 2007. Print.

¹⁵ Cassidy, Brendan. "Orcagna's Tabernacle in Florence: Design and Function." *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*. 1992: 180-211. Web.

from the increasing popularity of the *Compagnia della Madonna di Orsanmichele* and the construction of the tabernacle. The patronage of public arts was a significant indicator of status in Florence, and it is probable that multiple guilds contributed to the donations that funded the construction of the tabernacle for this purpose. Orcagna himself was a member of the mason's guild, and the prestigious commission would have been a source of great pride for them.¹⁶ The patronage of *religious* arts was especially important to Florentines after the panic caused by the Black Death. It was believed that an expenditure for religious purposes would reduce the patrons' time they must spend in purgatory. In a period where impending death seemed close at hand for everyone, this notion was especially appealing.

Though the Black Death and the hard times preceding it were in many ways devastating to the growth and prosperity of Florence, the church of Orsanmichele was fortunate in experiencing the opposite. Epidemic, panic, and death have historically been consistent catalysts for heightened religious devotion. The concept of miraculous healing through worshipping the iconic image of Bernardo Daddi's Virgin was captivating to the Florentine citizens. Contradictory as it may seem, this panic caused by the Black Death ultimately resulted in great benefits to the *Compagnia della Madonna di Orsanmichele* and the city guilds. Fortunately for contemporary viewers as well, heightened religious devotion stimulated increased patronage of the arts in Florence and led to the production of many pieces, such as Orcagna's tabernacle, that provide remarkable insight into the the character and atmosphere of the era.

¹⁶ Meiss, Milard. *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951. Print.

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Cassidy, Brendan. "Orcagna's Tabernacle in Florence: Design and Function." *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*. 1992: 180-211. Web.

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