The small church of San Leonardo in the quiet suburb of Arcetri on the south bank of the Arno is one of the least known churches in Florence. So unassuming is its simple brick façade that it is easy to walk by it without a second glance. But that would be a mistake, for inside the narrow and dark nave is a large and impressive marble Romanesque pulpit (Figure 1) decorated with profuse and varied incrustation work and six exceptional reliefs illustrating episodes from the life of Christ.

The pulpit has attracted considerable scholarly attention: its discussion is mandatory in studies dealing with Romanesque sculpture of Florence and Tuscany. The earliest in Tuscany to combine incrustation work with an extensive cycle of narrative reliefs, it has justly been called the masterwork of Florentine Romanesque sculpture. The pulpit was first described and its sculptures illustrated (Figure 2) in a study of Florentine churches written in 1755 by the monk Giuseppe Richa. Since Richa it has been published, often in great detail, no less than fifty times.

Almost without exception scholars have focused their attention upon two problems. One is the date of the pulpit, which Richa considered to be ninth century or earlier; other historians have thought it to be as late as the mid-thirteenth century. More recently the Austrian historian Swoboda has argued that it was made in the period from 1180 to 1210.

A more difficult problem involves the original shape and size of the pulpit and whether an integral part of the sculpture cycle somehow became lost during the peripatetic life of the monument. It was originally made for the important basilica near the center of Florence called San Piero Scheraggio (owing to its proximity to the Scheradium, one of the largest sewer pipes in the city). San Piero was dedicated in 1068 and, until 1298, when the Palazzo della Signoria was constructed near its left side, was the seat of Florentine government and the meeting place for the council. Its priory was the residence for visiting bishops and ambassadors. In the early fifteenth century San Piero suffered the first of many changes in its original form—a form praised as being the closest of all Florentine churches to the proportions of the ideal basilica described by the

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ancient Roman architect Vitruvius. The year 1410 saw the destruction of the entire left side aisle of San Piero and the walling up of its left interior arcade in order to widen the Via della Ninna, a dangerously dark and narrow street between San Piero and the Palazzo della Signoria. In the second half of the sixteenth century the church was entombed within the walls of the great offices, or Uffizi, which Cosimo de' Medici had Vasari design to house the administration of Florence. Around 1560 the façade of San Piero was removed so that no trace of the ancient church would project beyond the arcades of the Uffizi and the rest of its medieval masonry was incorporated within the first arcade of that building. Although considerably altered in shape, San Piero was still used as a church. The remaining right side aisle was given to a charitable organization called the Compagnia degli Stipendiati and the shortened nave turned over to the Fathers of the Inquisition, who used it as a church until around 1782. The church was then deconsecrated, the Compagnia disbanded, and the nave and former side aisle transformed into what are today offices and the entrance hall of the Uffizi gallery.

Much less is known of the vicissitudes of the famous pulpit. Richa had written that it had been dismantled and the six sculptures divided into two groups of three. In 1782 Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo (the last Medici to rule Florence, a man fanatically interested in relics of Florentine history) ordered that the sculptures, columns, and other architectural elements that remained "be gathered up from all sides" and taken to the dependent church of San Leonardo "as a father gives a heritage to a son."
The pulpit as it was installed in San Leonardo at the time of Pietro Leopoldo is shown in a photograph (Figure 3) first published in 1906. In 1921 the bulky entablature and two wall pilasters were removed and the sequence of the sculptures altered (see Figure 1). Although these changes eliminated the most obviously incorrect eighteenth century arrangements, they left the pulpit still with reliefs on three sides, the fourth side being set squarely against the wall of the nave. At present the six reliefs are arranged in the following manner: on the left, the Adoration of the Magi and Nativity (Figure 4); on the front, the Deposition and Tree of Jesse (Figure 5); on the right, the Baptism and Presentation in the Temple (Figure 6).

The Florentine scholar Giuseppe Carraresi found this three-sided arrangement odd. In a lecture published in 1897 he speculated that originally in San Piero Scheraggio the pulpit was
not set against a wall but was freestanding. He thought the original pulpit had four sides and seven reliefs, i.e. two on each side except the entrance side. Hence Carraresi concluded that one relief had somehow been lost in the course of history. The essence of his idea was reiterated by Odoardo Giglioli in 1906; in 1921 Giglioli reconsidered, stating that the pulpit never had more than six reliefs. Edgar Anthony in 1947 agreed with Carraresi.

Until now no tangible evidence to support these claims has appeared. The purpose of this article is to show that the pulpit as it existed in San Piero Scheraggio must have had at least seven reliefs. The evidence is twofold: first, the discovery of the seventh relief (Figure 7), which has been added to the collections of Romanesque sculpture at The Cloisters; second, the discovery of part of an inscription still in situ in San Leonardo, which refers to the seventh relief.

The Cloisters' relief, like the other six, is carved from a single square piece of fine yellow-white Maremma marble, showing the Annunciation of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin and decorated with a dark green inlaid border of rosettes in the variety of serpentine usually called verde di Prato. Although the panel has suffered the loss of its lower right-hand corner and some chipping of the inlay, the damage does not detract from its high artistic quality. The carving is precise; the surface of the stone is smooth and lustrous. It is almost as if the marble panel, close to alabaster in texture, were a large piece of ivory inlaid with ebony and carved with all the care and detail usually given to that semiprecious material. Its measurements are practically identical with those of the other panels (see Note).

Comparison of the Annunciation with the other six reliefs leaves no doubt as to their stylistic association. The over-all format is the same throughout. There are obvious parallels between the architectural elements in the Annunciation and those in the Adoration of the Magi (see Figure 4); the egg-and-dart molding of the arches...
is the same and the edifices and crenelated battlements similar. The facial type of Gabriel and the Virgin—full cheeks, almond-shaped eyes inlaid with plugs of verde di Prato, heavy lips slightly arched, long tapering neck—appears throughout the other six reliefs. It is not necessary to make a long list of physiognomic comparisons; one has merely to compare the face of the Virgin in the Annunciation with that in the Nativity, the Adoration, and the Deposition. The figure of Gabriel in the Annunciation (Frontispiece) may be compared with the angels in the Baptism (see Figure 6), especially the angel in the top background.

The drapery style of the Annunciation, characterized by linear folds coursing in parallel lines over the bodies and terminating in a series of trumpetlike folds, is also consistent with that of the other sculptures. One might compare the drapery of the Virgin in the Annunciation to that covering the Virgin’s right leg in the Tree of Jesse panel (see Figure 5).

It must be admitted, however, that in certain ways the Annunciation differs in style from some of the other reliefs. The fluidity and harmony of the Annunciation are not matched by the Adoration, which has a hard and static style. In the former all elements have been carefully balanced in order to accent the structure of the arcade and the positions of the figures, and there is a subtle and expressive movement of figures and drapery somewhat foreign to the Adoration. Nevertheless, any stylistic variations that do exist are not so great as to disassociate the Annunciation from the Adoration or from any of the others. Giglioli recognized these stylistic differences and suggested that not one, but four sculptors had been responsible for the six reliefs then known. Perhaps he was right: the cooperation of several artists from one workshop even in such a small monument as a pulpit is not a rare phenomenon in medieval art. There are other possible explanations for the stylistic differences. Perhaps all seven were designed by one artist and executed with minor aid from assistants. The changes may have been caused by differences in the models the designer took; it is also conceivable that the style of the master himself evolved and developed as work proceeded.

That the Annunciation was one of the sculptures now in Florence seems indisputable. The question remains as to where it belonged among the others. Ironically, if Carraresi had studied the pulpit in greater detail he might have been able to tell the subject and position of the missing relief. For evidence hidden among the six sculptures has always identified what the missing scene must have been. This clue is minuscule—half a letter of a single word in one of the inscriptions.

Below the Adoration, Nativity, and Deposition, on narrow pieces of marble separated from the sculptures, are Latin verses (see Figures 4, 5). Accompanying the Adoration and Nativity is tres tria dona ferunt; trinum sub sidere querunt; nobis admixtum, cernunt animalia cristum, meaning “Three kings give three gifts; three each seek Him under the star; Christ, joined with us, is perceived by the animals.”
The slab of marble inscribed with these verses turns the corner and continues through the first word of the verse under the Deposition (see Figure 5). Since Richa first published the pulpit in 1755 this inscription has been read as ANGELI PENDENTEM; DEPONUNT CUNCTA REGENTEM, translated as “The angels let down the hanging King of Kings.” In the sculpture, however, the physical action of the Deposition is carried out by Joseph and Nicodemus, not by the angels. The word ANGELI was not originally meant to be placed under the Deposition, as is evident by the plaster fill between ANGELI and the word PENDENTEM. Whereas ANGELI must always have been linked to the verse beneath the Nativity, since it is carved on the same block of marble, the remaining words below the Deposition were not always joined to ANGELI. At some time before Richa saw the pulpit, the Deposition and the portion of the verse belonging to it were placed, without regard to the correct meaning, next to ANGELI.

ANGELI is the one word remaining from an inscription which identified a sculpture having to do with angels. That this sculpture must have been the Annunciation is proved by the fact that ANGELI was never intended to have a plural ending. The letter i is not the direct vertical stroke of other i’s throughout the inscriptions. It curves, as can be seen in a photograph of 1906 (Figure 8) showing the inscription before the two lateral borders of the Deposition had been restored. This curious shape is one half of the letter u. The word ANGELU makes no sense; one must add to it s to achieve the singular form, ANGELUS (see Figure 10). ANGELUS could not be a more specific reference to the angel of The Cloisters’ Annunciation.

Considering the narrative sequence of the seven sculptures of San Leonardo, the Annunciation fits perfectly between the Tree of Jesse and the Nativity. Arranged in this manner, the Jesse becomes the preface, the Annunciation the introduction, and the Nativity the first chapter in the life of Christ (see Figure 9). Thus, by means of the fortunate preservation of a portion of one letter of one word, the Annunciation is not only linked to the other panels but to its original inscription. It is difficult to guess at the rest of the inscription. Perhaps it was a verse, like those accompanying the Nativity and Adoration, or perhaps it merely identified the two participants—ANGELUS DOMINI and MARIA.

At what time the Annunciation was taken from the pulpit and separated from the others, and where it has been hidden for so many years, will no doubt always remain unsolved enigmas. But we can guess where the pulpit once stood in San Piero, and when The Cloisters’ relief was detached, by means of old descriptions of the church and a series of excavations made during the 1930s which give a fairly accurate picture of the medieval church.

The plan and elevation drawn up by Piero Sanpaolesi (Figures 11, 12) show that the church must have been a basilica of good proportions with a crypt and a raised presbyterium. It was on this presbyterium that the pulpit was no doubt placed. Sanpaolesi indicated this in his reconstruction, but he put the pulpit on the right, or Epistle, side of the church. Owing to the sequence of scenes it seems more logical that the pulpit was on the left, or Gospel, side (see “A” in Figure 11). There the Tree of Jesse and the Annunciation, the first two scenes in the narrative, would face across the presbyterium. The pulpit would have been supported by the two original columns still preserved in San Leonardo and by the low wall of the tribune. Access to the pulpit would be by means of a small staircase from the presbyterium. Whether there was a lectern between the Tree of Jesse and the Annunciation is not known, but it is probable.

Entrance to the pulpit could also have been gained from the left side aisle instead of the presbyterium. In this case, the order of scenes may have been: facing the altar, the Tree of Jesse and Annunciation; facing the center of the choir, the Nativity and Adoration; facing the entrance of the church, the Presentation and Baptism; and facing the left side aisle, the Deposition and the entrance to the pulpit. By this arrangement the scenes earliest in chronological order would be nearest the altar, and the priest would never have had to turn his back to the altar in entering the pulpit.

If this was the original arrangement—and we cannot be absolutely sure—it is likely that the pulpit was dismantled and the reliefs dismounted in 1410 when the left side aisle of the church was
Fig. 7. The Annunciation, marble relief. 26 1/4 x 24 inches Purchase, The Cloisters Collection
Fig. 8. Photograph taken in 1906, showing the inscription under the Deposition before the side borders were restored.

torn down. It was perhaps at this time that one group of three reliefs was placed in a smaller pulpit, the Annunciation was broken and set aside, and another group of three was set into the wall of the right side aisle where Richa saw them in 1755 “walled up in the Compagnia degli Stipendiati.”

A number of famous men, among them Giano della Bella, Dante, Saint Antoninus, and Girolamo Savonarola, are said to have spoken from the pulpit. If we are correct in the hypothesis that the Annunciation was separated from the whole in 1410 this means that whereas Giano della Bella may have ignited the riots of 1293 by his speeches from the intact pulpit, and Dante, too, may have spoken from it when it was whole, Saint Antoninus and Savonarola in the fifteenth century spoke, if they ever did so, without the support of the Annunciation.

We cannot determine the precise date of the pulpit, for no dedicatory inscription of the kind that sometimes accompanies pulpits has survived or been recorded. Style is the primary evidence for date. Among Tuscan pulpits in general, this one falls between the great pulpit of Guglielmo, once in Pisa and now in Cagliari, made around 1160, and one in Pistoia, made around 1250 by Guido da Como. Of specifically Florentine sculp-

Fig. 9. The sequence of reliefs as they might originally have been arranged.

Fig. 10. A: The inscription after the reconstruction of 1782 with the two side borders missing. B: The inscription at present. C: The inscription as it might originally have appeared.

Figures two are particularly relevant for stylistic comparison: the pulpit in San Miniato al Monte (Figure 13) of about 1160 to 1180, and the incrustation work and the two marble telamon figures supporting the cornice of the pediment on the façade of the same church, carved in the early thirteenth century. The richness and variation of this incrustation work is in the same spirit as the imaginative inlay of the San Piero pulpit;
the style of the two telamon figures is so similar to the sculptures on the pulpit that they may have been carved by the same workshop. It seems clear that the San Miniato pulpit was the model for the pulpit in San Piero Scheraggio and that the softening of the style of many decorative motifs, the change from a classical to a medieval rendering of the borders and capitals, and the use of both incrustation work and extensive figural sculpture indicate a later date for the latter. As Swoboda was the first to write, the San Piero pulpit most probably dates between 1180 and 1210. The earlier date seems more likely.

This date unfortunately casts doubt upon two charming legends. One local legend states that the pulpit cannot be dated at all, for it was made in such a remote age that perhaps it was created by angels, not men. According to another story, first documented by Richa, the pulpit was made in Fiesole and brought to San Piero in the year 1010 as a spoil of war and installed in the basilica with lavish ceremony. A drawing of the fourteenth century shows the pulpit actually in transit from Fiesole to Florence in a large carriage made, as one document relates, entirely of marble. But even this is a dream; for the word “carriage” turns out to come from a misreading of a text which described a marble window with a hub and spokes similar to a carriage wheel.

Giuseppe Carraresi suggested that all amateurs of historical art should conduct a search
for the missing elements of the pulpit throughout Florence and environs. It is not known whether his audience accepted his suggestion, but at any rate the Annunciation did ultimately turn up. Perhaps now a search should start for the broken right corner and remainder of the inscription.

The hunt might not be the needle-in-the-haystack proposition one might think. In 1755 Richa wrote that the original floor of San Piero Scheraggio had been raised six feet during the construction of the Uffizi. He said that between the old and the new level there were three subterranean passages which ran the length of the nave and which were filled with marble fragments, tomb slabs, and fragmentary inscriptions. Some of these passages were discovered by the excavators in the early 1930s, but owing to the difficulty of penetrating into the floor of the Uffizi they were only able to dig out a part of one.

There they found rubble mixed with fragments of old stone. It is intriguing to think of the possibility that the missing corner of The Cloisters’ Annunciation and the rest of its inscription lie somewhere in one of the underground passages and that in time they too may come to light.

**NOTE**

The condition of the figures on The Cloisters’ relief is good except for minor chips and abrasions. The lower right corner of the relief is broken off; the surface indicates that the fracture is not modern. The ground plane for the figures bears the graffito Francis. The inlay of the border and the battlements is considerably chipped. In certain areas there is evidence of restoration composed of the serpentine ground up and mixed with pitch. Traces of cement appear over the entire outer edge, including the break. Presumably the panel, as is, was once set into a wall. Three mounting pins of lead, sheared off, remain, at the top left, bottom left, and upper right side. Measurements of the six panels in San Leonardo in Arcetri are: Jesse, 26½ x 24¼ inches; Nativity, 26½ x 25¼ inches; Magi, 26 x 24¼ inches; Presentation, 25½ x 23¼ inches; Baptism, 26 x 22½ inches; Deposition, 26 x 25¼ inches. Our Annunciation measures 26½ x 24 inches, with a depth of 2¾ inches.

**REFERENCES**


