

Santa Maria del Carmine

A group of friars from Pisa founded the church of the Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Florence in 1268. Building began with the financial assistance of the Comune, or municipality, and of Florence's wealthiest families, and continued until well after the consecration date (1422), being completed only in 1475. The west front of the church was never finished, and it continues to sport a rough stone and brick façade to this day. As the community gradually began to purchase the surrounding land, the complex started to grow with the construction of the convent proper.

Building work began on the first cloister, the dorter, the frater, the chapter house and the infirmary in the late 13th Century. Decoration of the new buildings proceeded apace between the 14th and 15th Centuries, as shown by a series of frescoes either still in situ or since detached, and as the convent grew in importance, a number of lay fraternities made it their seat. In the 14th Century it was raised to the level of *Studium Generale*, or university with the power to award degrees. St. Andrea Corsini (1301-1374) took his monastic vows here.

The church was altered in the 16th Century when, like other churches in Florence, it was given a major overhaul to bring it into line with the precepts dictated by the Council of Trent. Working to orders from Duke Cosimo I, architect Giorgio Vasari removed the rood screen, placed the choir in the chancel and completely renewed the altars.

This was followed by a major modernisation programme in the convent itself. The first cloister was renovated between 1597 and 1612, leading to the loss of Masaccio's celebrated fresco entitled *La Sagra*.

This was followed by the erection of the second refectory, known as the Sala Vanni after the artist who painted the fresco decorating it (circa 1645), and of the new library.

A devastating fire broke out in 1771, destroying the interior of the church and the leading to the loss of most of its furnishings. Only the old Sacristy (with its early 15th Century frescoes), the Brancacci Chapel and the Corsini Chapel (1675-1683), a fine and rare example of the Roman Baroque

style in Florence, were spared. Within the space of a few years the church was totally renovated in the late Baroque style to a plan by architect Giuseppe Ruggieri with the assistance of painters Giuseppe Romei and Domenico Stagi, acquiring the aspect that it still has today.

The Brancacci Chapel

A wealthy merchant named Felice Brancacci commissioned the decoration of this chapel, which had been founded by the Brancacci family in the late 14th Century, on his return from Egypt in 1423.

Masolino and Masaccio worked together on the *Stories of St. Peter*, the saint to whom the chapel was originally dedicated. The frescoes were left incomplete when Masolino departed for Hungary and Masaccio for Rome in 1427.

After Brancacci was exiled in 1436 for sympathising with the anti-Medici faction in the city, the monastic community had all the portraits of people connected with his family erased and rededicated the chapel in 1460 to the Madonna del Popolo, placing a much-venerated 13th Century panel painting depicting her on the altar.

It was not until 1481-1483 that Filippino Lippi restored and completed the missing scenes. The frescoes have come dangerously close to destruction on several occasions in the course of their history: Grand Duchess Vittoria della Rovere opposed Marquis Ferroni's plan to transform the chapel in the Baroque style in 1680, but the paintings in the vault and lunettes were destroyed during renovation in the mid-18th Century.

Spared by the fire that devastated the inside of the church in 1771, the chapel was purchased in 1780 by the Riccardi family, who renovated the altar and floor. The frescoes, which were neglected throughout the 19th Century, were brush-cleaned in 1904, but it was not until the 1980s that a thorough restoration finally restored their clear and brilliant colours.



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CAPPELLA Brancacci

Masaccio, Masolino and Filippino Lippi

When the frescoes of the Brancacci Chapel were commissioned in 1423, Masolino was forty years old and Masaccio twenty-two. For a long time, blindly accepting tradition, scholars thought that they were master and pupil, but actually Masaccio joined the Guild in 1422 and painted a fresco with *St. Paul* and his celebrated *Sagra* (both now lost) quite independently.

The two painters may have been in close partnership, however, as the consistency and harmony of the cycle, on which they worked together, would tend to suggest. In these frescoes Masolino, a refined master of the late Gothic, tailors his style to match that of his younger and more innovative colleague while contriving to maintain his sophisticated, decorative touch. Masaccio's painting, on the other hand, has greater force, it is populated by figures endowed with a solid plasticity set in real space and marked by a deep, almost tragic sense of moral dignity.

The perspective imparts extraordinary visual unity to the cycle as a whole and the sense of reality is enhanced by the identification of a source of light casting the figures' shadows. Filippino Lippi, a Renaissance artist of some excellence, was commissioned with completing the cycle in 1481 to 1483. His restrained and respectful intervention in keeping with his predecessors' work contributes to the overall sense of stylistic unity that is such a feature of the Brancacci Chapel, to the point where it is difficult to identify the work of each master with any degree of certainty.



1 Masolino,
The Temptation of Adam and Eve
(righthand pilaster)

2 Masaccio,
The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden
(lefthand pilaster)

3 Masaccio,
The Tribute Money

4 Masolino,
St. Peter Preaching

5 Masaccio,
Baptism of the Neophytes

6 Masolino,
The Healing of the Cripple and the Raising of Tabitha

7 Masaccio,
The Distribution of Alms and the Death of Ananias

8 Masaccio,
St. Peter Healing the Sick with his Shadow

9 Filippino Lippi,
St. Paul Visiting St. Peter in Prison

10 Masaccio e Filippino Lippi,
The Raising of the Son of Theophilus and St. Peter Enthroned

11 Filippino Lippi,
St. Peter Being Freed from Prison

12 Filippino Lippi,
The Disputation of St. Peter and St. Paul with Simon Magus and the Crucifixion of St. Peter