PERSPECTIVES ON THE COMPETITION OF 1400-2

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ABSTRACT

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OF 1400-2

By

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This study is primarily a historiographical examination of the competition among artists for the commission to cast the second set of doors for the Florentine Baptistry in 1400-2. By examining perspectives selected from a vast store of writings on the subject, one may reconstruct the event, speculate on the views of those involved and learn some of the developments of art historical writing since the time of the competition.

Part I examines the scarce documentary evidence surrounding the competitions. Part II looks at the most representative cross-section of authors who have commented on the contest. Part III reconstructs the viewpoints of humanists, artists and merchants toward art at the time of the event itself. From this, one may see the historical importance the competition has as an indication of the changing views toward art; from medieval to modern.

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Competition relief by Filippo Brunellaschi
now in the Bargello National Museum, Florence.
Cast in six parts. Total weight: 25.5 kg.

Competition relief by Lorenzo Ghiberti now
in the Bargello National Museum, Florence.
Cast in one part. Total weight: 18.5 kg.

INTRODUCTION

The Florentine Baptistry competition of 1400-2 is a well worn topic in art history. It is a subject that has been discussed innumerable times by many authors ever since the 15th Century beginning some 40 years after the event. One purpose of this thesis is to ask how helpful or not these sources may be in making us understand what happened. A second purpose is to view them together as a kind of scholarly tool, a gauge of changes in attitude and approach in art criticism and art historiography from the Early Renaissance to the present. Given this variety of points of view that has developed through the centuries, I would then ask what were the points of view, especially towards art and artists, as of the moment of the competition and how might these points of view be discerned from the visual and physical evidence of Ghiberti's and Brunelleschi's trial pieces.

To accomplish these goals, the thesis is divided into three parts. Part I is a summary of the archival documentation concerning the competition. Part II is a review of the literary accounts and commentaries on the competition from the 15 Century to the present day. Part III is an essay of speculation on the perspectives on the event at the time of its occurence, 1400-2.

PART I: DOCUMENTS

Let us begin with the backdrop supplied by documents against which the literary sources to be discussed in Part II will contribute figures, actions and dialogue. The Operai, a committee established by the Arte di Calimala guild and charged with the Baptistry's upkeep, decided to hold a competition for the commission for the second set of bronze doors. The first set had been erected some 60 years previously by Andrea Pisano. The documents summarized here concerning the competition are transcribed in Richard Krautheimer's Lorenzo Ghiberti, pages 360 and following.

Documentary evidence of the competition, its date, its intent and its results is very sparse. The guild sponsoring the competition, the Arte di Calimala, kept careful records of all its meetings, decisions and projects, but the offices of the guild burned down in the 18th Century and apparently nearly all of its rich collection of documents was destroyed. Fortunately, a Florentine antiquarian and officer of the Calimala during the latter part of the 17th Century, the Senator Carlo Strozzi, had taken enough interest in many of the documents to transcribe them into several volumes. One of these volumes, now in the Archivio di Stato in Florence, preserves in broken and incomplete form the scant documents relating to the Baptistry competition.

Some documents Strozzi copied word for word, others he paraphrased; of still others he only copied the notaries' summaries in the margins.

The first document (Krautheimer's Doc. 1) is dated 1402 and records the Calimala's decision to entrust the bronze doors to Ghiberti, "Nencio di Bartoluccio." No mention is made in this document that a competition had preceded the decision.

Again, from 1402 a document (Doc. 80), possibly merely a notary's summary, records a payment by the Calimala of 30 florins to "Nencio di Bartoluccio." Krautheimer speculates that this payment may have been for work on the competition relief and if true would indicate that the competitors had to purchase the bronze (from the Calimala) with their own money and worked on the project on their own time.

The next document is not dated, but must have been drawn very soon after the competition (Doc. 33). It reveals the subject of the competition reliefs, "Storia d' Abramo," and that it was to prove the ability of "diversi Maestri," and that the best made "meglio facesse" was to be chosen. It calls for the gilding of one of the compositions, presumably Ghiberti's relief. That only one "composition" is slated to be gilded may be used as evidence that Ghiberti alone had been chosen as the best from amongst the many masters, contrary to some later literature. A program change from the Old Testament to the New Testament is then recorded.

The contract for the doors exists in three copies.

The first copy (Doc. 26) is dated November 23, 1403 and spells out the specific terms of the agreement. Ghiberti and "his father" Bartoluccio are named as principal parties. They are to work with "their hands, the figures, trees and other parts of the compositions." They are to produce three reliefs a year, invest only their labor and receive 200 florins a year. Three men were elected to supervise the undertaking; Matteo di Giovanni Villani, Palla di Nofri Strozzi and Nicolo di Luca di Feo. The second and third documents (Docs. 61 and 65) relating to the contract are only paraphrased. Krautheimer refers to the third document dated January 30, 1404 as the "final" arrangement with Ghiberti to work on the doors, as though there had been trouble establishing an agreeable legal document earlier.

I would also mention a document (Doc. 27) which was written over three years after the last contract. Although it is a few years distant from the competition itself, this new contract for the doors dated June 1, 1407 hints at something, namely technical finesse, the jury of the competition must have considered important in the judging. In this contract is the specification that Ghiberti "work with his hands the wax and bronze and, above all, those parts which require the most perfection, as hair, nudes and other such things."

PART II: LITERARY SOURCES

1. Ghiberti

Probably written around 1447, Lorenzo Ghiberti's own account of the contest is included in his I Commentarii.[2] This book was a novel invention for its time, combining art criticism, art history and art theory. Ghiberti may be credited with writing the first modern art history. His own long-term ambition seems to have been to gain some reputation for himself as a "man of letters." His book emulates in many passages the illustrious "literati" whom he greatly admired. Ghiberti knew at least a few humanists and participated in the private interlibrary loan network among them.[3] Diane Zervas has convincingly demonstrated a strong probability that he had access to and was influenced by the unusually large library of Niccolo Niccoli.[4] Throughout I Commentarii, one finds borrowings from classical and humanist literature. Even the title was a well worn device just previously employed by Lionardo Bruni.

Part one of the Commentarii recounts the artists of antiquity as had Pliny and Vitruvius. Part three deals with and can be seen as an attempt to give art respectability by expounding on the scientific learning the artist might master. Part two is a history of modern art in the vein of Florence's great historian and humanist, Filippo Villani. But, it sparkles with personal commentaries and also contains an unprecedented artist's autobiography. Primarily, this

autobiography is a list of Ghiberti's works with short descriptions. But, his sketch of the competition is comparatively lengthy and involved.

He begins his report with his fleeing the plague in Florence with a painter friend to the Duke Malatesta of Pesaro's residence where they painted friscoes. While Ghiberti was there, friends wrote to him about the competition, and he took leave of Malatesta, returning to Florence. Briefly, he outlines who the other competitors were (six in number; Brunelleschi, Jacopo della Quercia, Niccolo d' Arezzo, Niccolo Lamberti, Simone da Colle and Francisco di Valdambrino), how much bronze each was given (four tables), the subject all were to undertake (the Sacrifice of Issac) and the time allowed (one year). Ghiberti attempts to give an ancient grandeur to this contest. All of Italy has heard of this "combat," he cries, a word to be used later by the humanist, Landino, in translating Pliny on the subject of artistic contests in antiquity.[5] Later, his account speaks of the victory of the better artist as the presentation of the "psalm of victory." He inserts the Latin word Etruria to replace the Italian Toscana and describes the competition as involving the skills of fashioning "statuary."[6] On the other hand, Ghiberti says little about the competition rules and the grounds on which the final decision would be made. Certainly there were more rules and of the few he does describe he is skimpy on the details. Perhaps it was convenient for him, as we shall later see, to say less rather than more

of these rules.

When he does delve vigorously into particulars, he is dealing with the judging of the seven reliefs. He states unequivocally that he was the victor, not once or twice, but three times. He is emphatic that the decision was unanimous that not only the judges but his competitors too believed his relief had surpassed all. Repeatedly, he stresses the importance and expertise of the judges. They were 34 in number, coming from Florence and other neighboring lands; all 34 were experts among painters, sculptors, goldsmiths and silversmiths. But, the decision did not come quickly. There was "long deliberation and examination."[7] The Operai charged with the decoration of the Baptistry demanded a written testament from the jury, whereupon the Operai, the Consuls of the guild and the entire membership of the guild itself reaffirmed the decision in another written testament. By emphasizing the seemingly unusual carefulness of the judgment, Ghiberti hopes to demonstrate its decisiveness and finality. But then one may ask why such a carefulness occurred if the victory had been so decisive and unanimously agreed-upon to begin with? A later source will dispute Ghiberti's statements on the decisiveness of the judgment, suggesting that there was controversy instead. At the time Ghiberti wrote his autobiography, the controversy was apparently still alive. His repeated emphasis on the expertise of the judges and the decisiveness of their judgment is his answer to the controversy. Ghiberti seems indeed to be on

the defensive.

2. Manetti

The next source that discusses the competition may be characterized as being on the offensive. It is part of the first modern biography of an artist, The Life of Brunelleschi, probably by Antonio di Tuccio di Marabottino Manetti and written about 1482.[8] Born in 1423 of a well-to-do-Florentine family who were members of the Calimala, this Manetti was an avid reader and copyist of humanist works. He also worked in the government occasionally as an architectural consultant and through this work he may have become personally acquainted with the aging Brunelleschi. In fact, it was he who finished Brunelleschi's Santo Spirito after the architect's death. He may even have been a guest at the architect's home and may have heard Brunelleschi's own version of that famous contest.

Manetti's Vita is highly polemical. He constantly lauds his hero while deflating the opposition. Manetti offers a different angle from that of Ghiberti. Where Ghiberti is defensive, Manetti is aggressive and where Ghiberti's measured historical style evokes ancient grandeur, Manetti's fitfully volatile style illustrates the personalities of those involved. Manetti's narrative may be based on historical events, but they are overshadowed and distorted by his interest in portraying personality.

In dealing with the competition, Manetti stresses

heavily those incidents which illustrate more vividly Ghiberti's and Brunellischi's polar personalities. So that our attention is centered solely upon the protagonist and antagonist, he ignores completely the other contestants, not even mentioning their names. After all, hatred and accusations are more effectively intensified when localized on one person than when spread among many. Briefly, he mentions that the Operai of the Baptistry in 1401 considered the reputation (fama) of many sculptors but decided on the two Florentines "for there were none better." Actually, Ghiberti and Brunelleschi were the two least known sculptors. This distortion is due to Manetti's Florentine patriotism and his conviction, as well as that of nearly every Florentine citizen the century before and the century after, that anything Florentine is far and away better than anything produced elsewhere. In Manetti's mind, the two Florentines were better simply because they were Florentine.

Ghiberti, writes Manetti, was called from the service of the Malatesta of Rimini for the competition. It is more convenient to place Ghiberti in the disreputable court at Rimini than at Pisaro, Ghiberti's actual location. Manetti takes every opportunity available to discredit him.

Manetti says next to nothing about the competition rules, only that the shape of the reliefs was to fit the quatrefoil design of the earlier Baptistry doors by Niccolo Pisano and that the subject was the sacrifice of Isaac. Neither does he comment on the final basis for judging the

reliefs. Instead, he proceeds directly to the events in the rival workshops. Brunelleschi, being very good at this sort of thing, made his relief quickly and stowed it away discussing it with no one. Manetti pictures him as both competent and confident, but also secretive. Ghiberti, on the other hand, does not have this confidence, but is pictured as making up for this lack by means of shrewdness. By hook or by crook he sought to win the contest. He tried to find out all that he could about Brunelleschi's relief. He sought out the advice of those people who would judge the relief and cast and recast his relief to their tastes. Despicable to Manetti in a time when artists were taking greater pride in themselves and their creations during the long, uphill battle to be free of the medieval craftsman mold, Ghiberti's twice mentioned method of humbling himself, of degrading himself so that he might get influential help. Manetti may have read Ghiberti's Commentarii or perhaps knew its contents for seemingly mocking Ghiberti's thrice manifested insistence of his unanimously declared victory, he three times insists that Ghiberti sought to influence the judges' decision through consultations. There was probably no rule against this or Manetti would have been quick to have pointed it out. Still, these behind-the-scenes operations were viewed by Manetti as unethical.

But, when the time of confrontation came and Brunelleschi revealed his relief, the judges were astonished at the "dificulta" he had set for himself and how he had

successfully overcome them. Manetti describes Brunelleschi's relief completely ignoring Ghiberti's work. The judges admired the complexity, the lifelikeness, the delicacy, the attitudes and gestures. These it seems are the criteria Manetti believes the judgment was supposed to have been made on. The judges, writes Manetti, were in a quandry. They had already stated to anyone who would listen that surely none could surpass Ghiberti's relief. Yet, Brunelleschi's work was an outstanding achievement in "dificulta" which was a concept from Manetti's time concerning the problems artists set for themselves.[9] Therefore, in retreating from an embarrassing situation, they decide to give the commission to both and that they should work as partners. This is not so far fetched for throughout the century many competitions ended with decisions for collaboration amongst major artists. But Brunelleschi refused, exhibiting his legendary stubbornness. He answered that he wanted all of it or none of it. He received none of it. As a result, writes Manetti, public opinion was completely divided. The competition had caused quite a sensational controversy and one suspects strongly that it was still alive when Manetti wrote. Since Brunelleschi's talents were unappreciated, he left Florence to study the architectural remains of ancient Rome. Such is Manetti's lively narrative.

3. Anonimo Magliabecchiano and Libra di Antonio Billi

From there, one must look to the 16th Century for additional sources. The next two are lumped together because they both were written for the same purpose—the glorification of Florence. Their form is that of short biographies, listing the works of each artist as well as recording a few anecdotes. There are the 15th Century precedents of Filippo Villani's Liber de origine civitatis Florentiae et eiusdem famosis civibus and Antonio di Tuccio Manetti's Uomini famosi which these two used as format guides, but they are unique in that they are concerned only with the artists. For this reason, they are frequently cited as prototypes for Vasari's Lives.

The earliest of the two is the Anonimo Magliabecchiano, written around 1505.[10] It was written by an unknown humanist[11] who managed to enliven the measured chronicle of Ghiberti's autobiography without having to choose sides or indulge in polemics, as had Manetti. The unknown author had access to I Commentarii, and this is made most clear in his biography of Ghiberti. He recounts how Ghiberti had asked the leave of the Malatesta of Pesaro after hearing of the competition. The list of competitors is the same, in fact, in the same order given in I Commentarii. The number and qualifications of the judges are repeated, as is their unanimous decision and its written finality. The anonymous author even borrows the word "statuario" from Ghiberti. But, this author makes a new addition to our conception of the contest

and one which will continually reoccur in later accounts. He states that the subject, the sacrifice of Isaac, was chosen because it required the artist to depict interacting figures, both young and old, as well as animals, mountains and trees. Here is a statement of the purpose behind the choice of subject, but from where did this author get this information? Although documents on the competition may have been easily accessible to him, he apparently made no use of them, depending instead on the writings of other "literati." He seems to have had in mind the concept of "dificulta" as did Manetti and others of the later 15th and 16th Centuries, but he seems not to have known or to have ignored Manetti's Vita. The account this author gives of the contest in his section on Brunelleschi is but a brief summation. However, here again he adds something new, this time an anecdote that will later be picked up by future art historians. Brunelleschi refused to help Ghiberti with the doors, but he was unable to keep himself away so he returned to lend a hand. This foreshadows Vasari's efforts to make all his artists appear magnanimous. In this case, Brunelleschi could not keep himself from so noble a project. To further glorify a glowing monument in a proud city, the author supplies a list of the illustrious men who also helped; Donatello, Luca della Robbia and Antonio Pollaiuolo.

The second source is known as the Libro di Antonio Billi, written between 1516-25[12] apparently by different hands.[13] This manuscript received its name from its first

known owner. The original is lost, but the text survives in two copies made approximately 50 years after it was written. The copy known as the "Strozzianus" copy is incomplete with many lacunae. The other copy, called the "Petrei" copy is without lacunae, but the copyist has evidently summarized some passages from the original rather than rendering them verbatim. Thus, one must compare both copies to speculate on what the original must have contained.

This source says next to nothing about the competition. Its tone is anti-Ghibertian in mentioning that many masters worked on the doors, but the "palmo et al victoria" are attributed to Ghiberti. When discussing Brunelleschi's inability to keep himself from the casting of the doors, the author uses nearly the exact same wording found in Anonimo Magliacchiano. The list of illustrious collaborators is the same (and in the same order) and the purpose is not only to enhance Florence's fame, but also to diminish Ghiberti's importance. Where Anonimo Maglisbecchiano made additions to to boost Ghiberti's feat in winning the contest, the Libro di Antonio Billi deletes the event, attempting so it seems to reduce his achievement.

4. Gelli

There is one last proto-Vasari source of importance. This is an unfinished book of 20 biographies, Vite d' artisti by Giovanni Battista Gelli. It was probably left unfinished because of his death in 1563 or the appearance

of Vasari's first edition of Lives in 1550. His book follows the now familiar, short, biographical compilations seen previously; his style is one of an authority, one who is certain of his facts.

But, when consulting Gelli about the competition, one is left skeptical as to what kind of sources he used. The consuls, he writes in his section on Ghiberti, decided to hold a contest for the doors stipulating only that each master cast a story in either bronze or brass within one year and submit it to a jury. The jury was composed of 30 artists, namely sculptors and painters and four "consoli" who were not included on the earlier lists of judges. That Gelli omits goldsmiths and silversmiths from the jury reflects the increasing stratification of the arts: the emerging distinction between "fine arts" and "minor arts." Gelli may have reasoned that such an important contest had no place for minor artists, mere craftsmen. His infiltration of four businessmen into the jury may have been documented or again may have been surmised. He could have thought that after all the prudent merchants who established the competition would certainly want some say in the final judgment. Gelli lists six rather than seven masters who answered the call, combining the two Niccolo's into one person. But, of the six only Brunelleschi and Ghiberti, he says, submitted reliefs, for the others withdrew, dismayed at the prospect of having to be compared with those two exceptional artists. Finally, the judges decided upon Ghiberti whereupon

Brunelleschi renounced the art of sculpture. In Gelli's section on Brunelleschi he is more graphic about Brunelleschi's reaction to losing. Brunelleschi, according to Gelli, declared that he desired to be first in his art thus elevating him in Gelli's mind. For Brunelleschi was desirous of eternal fame in the best of an ancient Greek tradition. He was not merely anxious for a job. That he should desire this fame in art demonstrates that art was, at the time of Gelli's writing, becoming established as an exalted practice. Here, we see art being placed on a pedestal.

After making such a noble declaration, Gelli reports that Brunelleschi returned home and ignobly smashed all his designs, models, paintings and sculpture. Here, Gelli apparently makes use of oral tradition in illustrating Brunelleschi's legendary tempestuous anger. Gelli's account of the competition is seemingly nonpartisan, but nevertheless appears to stray away from the actual events.

5. Vasari

Giorgio Vasari is the next writer whose account we shall examine. At the behest of his patron, Cardinal Farnese, Vasari began in 1546 to organize his collection of notes, letters and other memorabilia in order to write a modern comprehensive study of the lives of artists. Incredibly, he accomplished this monumental task in one year and had it proofread, copied and published by 1550.[14] A second edition appeared in 1568. Vasari's Lives of the Most Eminent

Painters, Sculptors and Architects has ever since been the cornerstone of Renaissance art historical studies.

But, neither is Vasari to be trusted completely. In the 16th Century artists were increasingly viewed as not mere technicians, but as gentlemen, learned and well mannered courtiers. Vasari gives each artist a certain dignity and to some of them he gives an air of exaltation. Men and events often tend to be characterized not as they were, but as they should have been. The biographies are full of anecdotes, many based on oral tradition and some perhaps invented by Vasari himself. In reading Vasari's report of the competition it becomes apparent that he was aware of the accounts of Gelli, Anonimo Magliabecchiano, Manetti and Ghiberti. He was familiar with the major opposing opinions and here he attempts to conciliate them, to use the conflicting reports to create a homogeneous, harmonious rendition.[15] He shuns strife and factionalism, stressing repeatedly (especially in the 1550 edition) the love (amore) of artists for their art and mankind.

In the introductory passages of his life of Ghiberti, Vasari discusses how difficult is artistic labor, but how rewarding the praise and fame. Nevertheless, talent often brings the persecution of envy. But Ghiberti's truest excellence sustained itself throughout these attacks. Vasari is referring, of course, to the polemic attacks of Manetti. He continues to contrast this vileness with the virtue of Brunelleschi and Donatello who graciously stepped aside to allow

the better sculptor, Ghiberti, to advance the progress of art. Even before discussing the contest, he alludes to its resolution. After praising the merits and virtues of the major participants, Vasari begins his account of the contest in a conciliatory manner by reporting that Ghiberti was in both Rimini and Pesaro when the competition was announced (in the 1568 edition, he deleted Pesaro). Bartoluccio himself wrote Ghiberti convincing him to return to Florence and try his hand in the contest so that they should not again have to rely upon their manufacture of earrings. One is unsure whether mention of the family earring business is a snub by Vasari or represents his realization of the social change from a time 150 years before. Back then, the lowly craftsman of everyday commodities and the lofty artist of profound designs were one and the same. Ghiberti and all other Florentine goldsmiths thought nothing of satisfying the desires of Florentine consumers, no matter how insignificant the objects in demand seemed. But, at the time of Vasari's writing, artists were more independent and proud. Intelligence and nobility of spirit no less than manual skill had become prerequisites. Vasari's book is itself a product of this new view in his attempt to dignify every artist about whom he writes. The mention of the family earring business is seemingly out of keeping with the lofty events and personalities he depicts as the account continues.

Many artists sought to compete, but only seven were chosen, writes Vasari. He lists them using the six from

Gelli's account and adding Donatello. Instead of receiving bronze the contestants received money from the Calimala and were given a year to prepare their entries. The sacrifice of Isaac was chosen as the subject because of its pictorial difficulties comprising landscapes, nude and clothed figures as well as animals, as had been stated in the Anonimo Magliabecchiano. Vasari adds on his own that the figures were to be cast in full, half and low relief. However, neither of the two surviving plaques show this concern for distances conveyed through relief. This concern was to emerge only later in maturer works of Ghiberti as well as of Donatello. Vasari mentions no other rules.

Concerning the events of the year set aside for making the reliefs, Vasari uses Manetti's account, but with a different twist. While all the other artists kept their labors secret, Ghiberti, with Bartoluccio to guide him, openly sought useful advice from other artists. Here, Ghiberti's consultations are made to appear gentlemanly rather than devious. He had opened his mind to the collected wisdom of all artists; he therefore achieved a perfect rendition of the subject according to Vasari. But, if one still wished to accuse Ghiberti of underhanded dealings the blame could easily be shifted to Bartoluccio who, Vasari is careful to point out, was guiding Ghiberti. Surely, Bartoluccio played an important role and Vasari is the first to realize it. But the nature of his role remains unclear. Ghiberti himself does not mention him apparently because the victory would

have seemed less glorious. Neither does Manetti for then Ghiberti's consultations would have seemed less despicable.

At the time of the judging, the reliefs, Vasari states, were given to the guild. After differing opinions were discussed, 34 artists were invited to submit opinions. In describing the reliefs, Vasari stresses their composition, finish and especially the naturalness of the figures. On the basis of these criteria, Ghiberti's work was recognized as the best although those of Brunelleschi and Donatello also showed merit. In the 1550 edition, Ghiberti's superiority is less emphasized leading one to believe there was a three-way tie. There was no cut-and-dried decision. There was instead gentlemanly discussion, but no controversy. In order to see that the just get their deserved reward and that the public be best served, Donatello and Brunelleschi withdrew. In the 1550 edition, Vasari even includes a speech Brunelleschi supposedly delivered to the consuls. He asks that they chose Ghiberti for the glory and honor of Florence for he is the better sculptor, as well as being young and famous. He informs them that he will refuse any offer of collaboration because he was not placed first in this art and wishes to seek such a position in some other art. Compare our reliefs, he cries. Such an important monument should not be split between two styles, but should be done by one artist alone. After hearing this the consuls finally allocated the commission to Ghiberti. Donatello and Brunelleschi freely sacrificed fame and fortune for the good of

Florence and mankind. They are depicted as martyrs for the cause of great art. Comparison between Manetti's and Vasari's treatments illustrates a change of view. To Manetti the commission is just another job. But to Vasari it is seen as a glorification of art. Here, art is spelled with a capital "A." To be first in such a discipline is, for Vasari, the noblest aspiration.

The competition is covered with less detail in Vasari's life of Brunelleschi; the account here is primarily a summary of that found in the life of Ghiberti. In his account of Jacopo della Quercia, Vasari devotes a couple of lines to the contest stating that had he not been competing against Donatello and Brunelleschi he, Quercia, would have won. No mention is made of Ghiberti, oddly enough, as being a competitor also. In Donatello's biography, the contest isn't mentioned at all.

Vasari's inclusion of Donatello in the competition was probably his own invention and an attempt to further glorify an already famous artist and to amplify the telling of the story. His account of the competition gives the appearance of being the most complete of all; it has more details, factual and fabricated, than any other account. As with the humanist writings that preceded it, Vasari's Lives was written to commemorate and glorify human achievement and in this Vasari was more successful on behalf of artists than any writer before him.

Vasari's contribution to the history of art was to

remain the mainstay of information for art historians as to this very day. Since the publication of the Lives, those that have commented on the competition have tended merely to repeat Vasari's account. There are some notable exceptions however; several scholars have added to our knowledge by digging into archives and discovering documents such as those mentioned in Part I or by speculating on various holes in the previous arguments.

6. Baldinucci and Piacenza

Baldinucci is a good example of an important scholar who depended heavily on Vasari. In 1681, he began publishing his enormous Notizie dei Professori del Disegno in which an account of the competition occurs in volume one. Throughout his books, Baldinucci cites many documents, some archival in nature, some personal journals and a few personal letters to back up his histories. He anticipates by some 200 years the positivist approach taken by many present-day historians. But his account of the competition cites no records and merely condenses Vasari's version of the event.[16]

Baldinucci's example of archival research was influential on at least one of his early editors. In the 1768 edition of the Notizie, Guiseppe Piacenza added a footnote concerning the competition. He wishes to clear up the conflicting lists of competitors left us by Vasari and Ghiberti. He states that the two Niccolo's listed by Ghiberti are actually one and the same person.

The question about the number of contestants was the first question to be tackled by historians attempting a more objective approach than had ordinarily been tried in the Renaissance. The 18th Century saw this new objectivity develop, especially in France. But this century, except for Piacenza, does not seem to have been interested at all in the once-famous event of 1400-2. Indeed, even Ghiberti himself was pushed into the background by the commentaries and histories appearing at this time.[17]

7. Cicognara

The 19th Century saw a revival of interest in Ghiberti and his period and again the question of the number of contestants was taken up, this time by Leopoldo Cicognara in Storia della Scultura, first published in 1813. He attempts accuracy with a long, in-depth discussion all properly footnoted of Donatello's place in the contest. The discussion is dominated by the Donatello question, but Cicognara wanted thoroughness and precision and would not close his discussion until all aspects were viewed and conclusions drawn. In this discussion he includes a brief report of the accounts found in earlier sources. Here, then we have our first account of the historiography of the event. Cicognara begins the discussion with a short statement about the nature of artistic competitions in 1400; this too is a new kind of historiographical consideration. He is also the first to include an in-depth, side-by-side, formal analysis of the

two surviving reliefs.

8. Perkins

As the 19th Century progressed, the field of art history developed into a discipline with many new approaches. Winklemann's earlier divisions of art historical periods were expanded and subdivided. Alois Riegl laid the groundwork for the broader cultural approaches later cultivated by Dvovak and Warburg. Wölfflin promoted an intensive study of form. Underlying all these new directions was a growing concern toward a scientific method of research. The Germans were the primary advocates of this thorough, documented, objective and painstakingly accurate approach. The English and the new American art historians were then under the sway of Ruskin, whose approach was subjective and which stressed aesthetics. Although they were dependent upon the work of their German colleagues, they frowned upon their scientific or positivistic approach.

One exception in this English-American circle was Charles Perkins. In 1864 he began publishing his five works, researched in the thorough German manner, of which Ghiberti et son Ecole was his last and most important. His method had little immediate effect on American and English schools, but his Ghiberti book was absorbed eagerly by the Germans and was a major source of information for them. For 60 years his book was to be the only important study on Ghiberti available.

Although his main source of information is Vasari's Lives, Perkins made use of much archival material as is readily apparent at the outset of his discussion of the competition. He places Ghiberti in Rimini, determining in what building he had painted and whom his painter friend probably had been. Perkins speculates that many answered the summons of the Baptistery Operai, but only seven were chosen and of the seven Brunelleschi and Ghiberti were favored from the start because they were locally known. He produces a brief biography based on the sometimes scanty documentary evidence then available of each contestant on Ghiberti's list. He admits Ghiberti may have had outside help, but concludes that it was only Bartoluccio who had advised him to remake the model until it was perfect. Perkins seems to steer away from Manetti's account. He favors Ghiberti and does not wish to tarnish his hero's halo. Vasari's treatment of the judging is recounted with everyone appearing magnanimous. Perkins adds a technical note to this discussion. He had been to the Bargello in Florence and had examined the two reliefs. He reports that Ghiberti's plaque is technically superior, having been cast in one piece, while Brunelleschi's plaque was cast in several. He then goes on to discuss their design and forms and concludes with a brief examination of what the viewpoint must have been in 1400 based on some cultural and societal aspect of that time (an anticipating of the future preoccupations of the Warburg-oriented scholars).

But although Perkin's examination of the factual

evidence is unprecedently careful and detailed, his attitude towards the event is hardly detached or objective. He is clearly and enthusiastically on Ghiberti's side. Such "parti pris" in favor of one or the other artist has characterized much of the more recent no less than the earliest accounts of the competition. Modern authors who write on Ghiberti take his side when discussing the contest. Those who write on Brunelleschi generally prefer Manetti's account.

9. Fabriczy

Opposing the partisan views of Perkins are the partisan views of Cornel von Fabriczy. In 1892, he wrote the first great monograph on Brunelleschi. But despite the new mass of recently discovered documents brought to light by Milanesi and Frey, his interpretations are cautious and traditional.

Fabriczy uses Vasari's list of contestants, maintaining that the two Niccolo's were one and the same person. After being selected from the many who sought the commission these six were paid a year's expenses by the Operai. Fabriczy is the first to speculate on the rules of the contest, determining that the number of figures and the moment chosen from the story must have been established as guidelines. In reporting the judging he relies heavily upon Manetti because, he claims, Manetti was closest to the source (meaning presumably Brunelleschi). He also uses Vasari to some degree, but expresses his dislike for the unlikely personalities

Vasari portrays. Ghiberti's Commentarii is vigorously condemned as an exercise in self-adulation. Fabriczy adds his own observation that there must have been a split decision. The evidence for this, he states, can be seen in the careful preservation of the two rival reliefs while all the others have disappeared. Implicit in Fabriczy's writing is his anger that his hero Brunelleschi lost this contest to the devious Ghiberti.

10. von Schlosser

Such partisanship continued into the 20th Century with one of the most respected scholars of Ghibertiana, Julius von Schlosser. His contribution, Leben und Meinungen des Florentinischen Bildners Lorenzo Ghiberti, published in 1941 treats Ghiberti not as an artist, but as a writer, collector and art historian. Schlosser's account of the competition was then the most objective to date even though he plays down those reports which make Ghiberti look bad. He raises some interesting new questions and clears up some old confusing issues.

The question as to the number and identities of the contestants is neatly brought to rest by Schlosser. He maintains Ghiberti's list, reinforcing it with a more complete biography of each contestant and their ages at the time of the contest. He verifies that Niccolo Lamberti and Niccolo d' Arezzo were two different people settling once and for all the old dispute surrounding them. In reconstructing the

event he depends wholly on Ghiberti's account. Schlosser does feel the need nevertheless to mention that Ghiberti did receive outside help, but that this came from his stepfather Bartoluccio which makes it appear to the reader ethically acceptable. A question previously overlooked is brought up concerning the judging. Why had the Operai chosen mostly young, unknown artists to compete, he asks, and why did it eventually choose the youngest and most unknown? Schlosser gives no answer, but his inquiry is a significant step away from the drawn-out attempts to reconcile the differences between the accounts of Ghiberti, Manetti and Vasari. Finally, we come to someone who thought beyond the limits of a few limited sources. Schlosser is willing to explore areas that previous authors had left untouched.

11. Sanpaolesi

Not all art historians followed Schlosser's lead. In fact, the next author we'll discuss is reactionary by comparison. In his treatments of the competition, Piero Sanpaolesi has looked back to Fabriczy as his model. The accounts in the World Encyclopedia of Art and in his critical study Brunelleschi exhibit a partisan view stronger than any before him. He is especially conservative in his almost blind acceptance of the early sources.

In both of his accounts, details concerning the competition are sketchy. Of the contestants only Jacopo della Quercia, Ghiberti and Brunelleschi are mentioned. By

mentioning only the better known names and ignoring the other four lesser known and presumably less talented artists, Sanpaolesi implies an extremely stiff competition among that period's greatest sculptors from which the losers will be compensated by the fact that the other contestants were the toughest around and to be a loser certainly did not diminish one's reputation. He sums up Manetti's version of the judges' final decision. But, this head-to-head combat and Brunelleschi's defiant refusal to work with Ghiberti did not make the two enemies, he claims. One may see from their later cooperation in finishing the doors that they remained friends, Sanpaolesi concludes. He is depending upon the late 15th and early 16th Century humanist writings which record such an occurence. Sanpaolesi does not acknowledge however that these accounts were distorted apparently to glorify the harmony among Florentine citizens and the importance of their monuments.

12. Krautheimer

In 1956, Richard Krautheimer published what may seem to be the definitive study of the competition in his monumental monograph Lorenzo Ghiberti. Krautheimer was one of the German transplants to America who changed art history here from a gentlemanly diversion to a scholarly discipline. In his work, we find the German scientific approach. He is most thorough, most accurate and most proper in his presentation of facts and speculations. He is the most objective

to date and follows the lead of his German predecessors in reading between the lines of well worn sources and looking beyond them. The competition receives the attention of a whole chapter and the reliefs have a chapter also.

Krautheimer begins by conjuring up a feeling for the initial decision to stage a contest. This contest, he convincingly demonstrates, was very important to the Florentines then for it involved the city's most important architectural symbol, their most important group of patrons, and its outcome would result in a monumental set of doors which were to compliment the earlier doors, then the only monumental bronze work in Florence. A brief objective discussion of the faults and merits of the three major sources follows. Then, Krautheimer attempts something new and daring; a reconstruction of the machination of the competition. For this, he uses information found in the three main sources and information gleaned from archival documents of other similar contests from near that period. The discussion as to why the sacrifice of Isaac was chosen and what rules governed its rendering is also thorough. Krautheimer considers the climate of thought and religious imagery in 1400, the number and activities of the figures in the final reliefs (as already noted by Fabriczy) and the truth of previous statements that the subject was chosen for its "difficulta." There is a more thorough account of each of the contestant's place in the art world at the time of the competition. Krautheimer exceeds his predecessors in every area of

discussion, elaborating the points they had hinted at, bringing a broader range of documentation to bear on the subject and filling the gaps with acceptable speculation.

Krautheimer shines the brightest in his discussion of the judging. The problem of reconstructing what went on here, as we have already seen from the outset in the conflicting accounts of Manetti and Ghiberti, is a labyrinth with diverse and conflicting directions. Krautheimer considers each of these directions. He also speculates on the various objections and assertions the jurors must have felt when the judgment was made. The technical aspects and the weight of each relief is compared and the impact these factors must have had on the jurors is discussed. His many discussions, speculations and conclusions are the most helpful in reconstructing the competition.

13. Shapley and Mantovani

Finally, we'll discuss the contributions made by Shapley and Mantovani. Both deal exclusively with the reliefs themselves rather than the event of the competition. They are especially useful for the excellent photographs they provide. Shapley, who approaches the reliefs as a connoisseur in an article in the Art Bulletin (1922), supplies us with excellent fine grain close-ups and sensitive observations of their aesthetic qualities. Mantovani's approach in articles appearing in Critica d' Arte during 1973 and 1974 deals with both a study of form in Wölfflin's tradition and

a study of iconography. He includes schematized composition drawings and photographs taken at unusual angles demonstrating the projections of each relief. With Mantovani, one may best study the much discussed technical efficiency of the two artists if a trip to Florence is impossible.

Footnotes - Part II

[1]Richard Krautheimer, Lorenzo Ghiberti (Princeton, New Jersey, 1970), p. 307.

[2]Lorenzo Ghiberti, I Commentarii, ed. by O. Morisani (Naples, 1947).

[3]Krautheimer, p. 310.

[4]"Ghiberti's St. Matthew Ensemble at Orsanmichele," Art Bulletin, LVIII (March, 1976), p. 42.

[5]I am indebted to Dr. Webster Smith for this bit of information.

[6]Dr. Webster Smith discusses the significance of this word in medieval and Renaissance writers in "Definitions of Statua," Art Bulletin, L (September, 1968), p. 263-7.

[7]Krautheimer (translating Ghiberti), p. 12.

[8]Howard Saalman, introduction to The Life of Brunelleschi (University Park, Pennsylvania), p. II.

[9]John Shearman, Mannerism (Baltimore, Maryland), p. 21 discusses the concept of "dificulta" of the 15th and 16th Centuries.

[10]Krautheimer, p. 19.

[11]Karl Frey, introduction to Il Codice Magliabecchiano (Berlin, 1892), p. LXXXIII.

[12]Krautheimer, p. 19.

[13]Luigi Salerno, "Historiography," Encyclopedia of World Art, Vol. 7 (London, 1963), p. 512.

[14]Blashfield and Hopkins, introduction to Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects (New York, 1926), p. XXXIII.

[15]Vasari's harmonious image was even made pictorial. In the Palazzo Vecchio of Florence, Vasari painted a fresco showing Ghiberti and Brunelleschi presenting a model of the Cathedral to Cosimo de' Medici in concert.

[16]Baldinucci also wrote Vite di Brunelleschi which was unpublished until the 19th Century under Moreni's

editorship. I have not seen it, but references I have seen to it indicate the account of the competition in this book was unchanged from his earlier report.

[17]Krautheimer, p. 21-22.

PART III: THE CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

Having examined the perspectives of a number of author' writing long after the competition had occurred, we now turn toward a consideration of the perspectives from which it was viewed as it was taking place. What did people think of it in 1400? Very little has been done on this particular question. Cicognara briefly discussed the competitive air of the medieval city-states as conducive to the contest to be held. Perkins lightly touched on the impact that interest in classical antiquity had on the reliefs. Krautheimer does not treat the contemporary perspective on the event as a subject in itself, but does point out essential considerations of the moment when he discusses the importance which the Florentines must have given the event and the impact Brunelleschi's technical deficiency and therefore added cost, due to more bronze use, must have had on the judging of artistry by the prudent merchants. And his observations on the attitudes of humanists and artists in the later 14th and early 15th Centuries are invaluable.

I shall consider the newness, as of 1400, of the artistic competition as a means of deciding on commissions. And I shall examine the views that may be attributed to the principle parties involved in the Baptistry competition; the humanists, the artists, and the merchants.

The decisions of the Calimala concerning the decoration of the Baptistry were arrived at in a competitive air, for across from the Baptistry was the new Cathedral whose caretakers were their chief economic rivals, the Arte della Lana. This was a new guild; it had split off from the Calimala only recently, in 1371 or possibly some years earlier.[1] By 1400, the Lana was already the Calimala's major competitor in the flourishing textile industry.[2] It was at this time that they were considering the continuation of the building and decorating of the Cathedral's facade.[3] Not to be bested in either business or art, the Calimala may have been moved to begin work on the doors of the Baptistry, already delayed over 60 years, which would face the new facade.[4]

The decision to further decorate the Baptistry must have stirred the pride and interest of many Florentines. Richard Krautheimer has sufficiently demonstrated the great importance such a project must have held in their minds.[5] For centuries the Baptistry had been the symbol of the city's nobility and antiquity. To commence further decoration of this most important building was no slight matter. The Calimala wanted to be cautious and judicious, exercising the prized virtue of all businessmen--"prudentia." Thus, it sought to find the best possible master for the job and evidently it seemed to them the best way to do this was to hold a competition.

This event of 1400-2 may be cited as the precedent which led to a flurry of competitions throughout the next

two centuries. The Baptistry competition itself however was not entirely unprecedented as a kind of event. A public referendum had been held in 1367 to decide between two rival designs for the Florentine Cathedral.[6] In 1357, the Operai for the Cathedral had held a competition for the designing of the Cathedral's piers. After several decisions, indecisions and political manueverings, perhaps similar to those of the 1400-2 Baptistry competition, a pier design was finally selected.[7] But no official declared contest in the figurative arts is known of from the 14th Century or earlier (except, of course, the ancient events recorded in Pliny). One may speculate that the brothers, Ambrogio and Pietro Lorenzetti, competed with one another unofficially while painting altarpieces for the Siena Cathedral in 1342. Both painted interior scenes and both included the same number of figures and thus observed the "contest rules," so to speak, of the sort Fabriczy and Krautheimer surmised for the Baptistry competition.

All other known previous contests had occurred in ancient times. But as of 1400, Florence had already begun its golden age of humanism, and the contests recorded in Pliny were supposedly well known to many Florentines. Perhaps the competition of 1400-2 was decided upon as an emulation of the ancient ways no less than as a device of "prudentia."[8] After all, what better way was there to initiate this new project for Florence's monument of Antiquity than to employ the antique practice of a contest of artistic

prowess?

But for the Florentines the Baptistry competition was in a sense without precedent. The earlier Florentine contests concerning the cathedral had been architectural and were concerned especially with the utility and the feasibility of the designs submitted. They were judged on questions of structural stability as much as on aesthetic considerations. The primary concern in the Baptistry competition, on the other hand, were artistic form and technique. The artists were not asked to submit designs for a structurally sound door, but for a small relief panel having little if any structural significance. For Florentines this was their first contest in which works of figurative art were to be judged.

Florentines were at this moment fast becoming aware that art and artists, especially those of Florence, played more than functional, artisan's roles. Filippo Villani included artists in his book of 1404,[9] Le Vite D' Uomini Illustri Fiorentini. Already a sort of campaign was underway to proclaim Florence as the most important center of artistic activity. The competition of 1400-2 was a means of demonstrating their pride in the standard of their art and their desire to continue their great tradition. The comments of the time on the "naturalism" of Giotto and the stylistic break from the "Greek manner" were observations that required an awareness of style. Aesthetic and stylistic qualities in art were slowly coming to the forefront in the public mind,

and the Baptistry competition is concrete evidence of this growing awareness.

The phenomenon of Florentine humanism deserves much of the credit for this public "consciousness raising." At the end of the 14th Century, humanism had emerged from its scholarly cocoon and was advocating the "vita activa." With a few exceptions, learned men now took every opportunity to hold government and guild offices, to act as public envoys and to dispute the issues of the day. The difference between humanists and merchant-politicians was becoming less clear. The most influential Florentine humanist in 1400, Coluccio Salutati, was also the most influential domestic politician. The Calimala had a fair share of learned men among its most powerful families; the Strozzi, Uzzano and Castellani. One important humanist, Vanni Castellani, was a Calimala consul at the time of the competition.[10] The importance of any move toward changing the appearance of the city's most important monument surely attracted the humanists, giving them an opportunity to serve the city, promote public opinion and indulge in their favorite past-time—"disputazione."

They may have used this opportunity to develop their skills into them, a new form of rhetorical and literary exercise: "ekphrasis." Michael Baxandall's excellent book on art and humanism speaks extensively of this exercise and its introduction to the Florentines.[11] This new form was first introduced to the Florentines between 1396 and 1403. These are the years the eminent Byzantine professor Manuel

Chrysoloras taught Greek in Florence to many of the most important Italian humanists. He had a tremendous influence on their studies that continued to be felt 50 years after his departure. One of the basic principles of Greek literature certainly taught by Chrysoloras was the progymnasmata, a set of 12 rhetorical exercises codified by Hermogenes of Tarsus in the 2nd Century, A.D. The very few writings left by Chrysoloras indicate he preferred to indulge himself in the tenth exercise, "ekphrasis." As Hermogenes defined it:

> Ekphrasis is an account with detail; it is visible, so to speak, and brings before the eyes that which is to be shown. Ekphrasis are of people, actions, times, places, seasons, and many other things...The special virtues of ekphrasis are clarity and visibility; the style must contrive to bring about seeing through hearing. However, it is equally important that expression should fit the subject; if the subject is florid, let the style be florid, too, and if the subject is dry, let the style be the same.[12]

By its emphasis on visible things, "ekphrasis" lent itself easily to descriptions of works of art. One may surmise that Chrysoloras' Roman activities from 1411-13 where he wrote that his fascination with art objects had made him a virtual "peeping tom"[13] are indicative of how he behaved in Florence ten years earlier. One might be tempted to imagine him walking the streets of Florence with a flock of enamored students and here and there improvising an ekphrasis on this or that building or work of painting or sculpture. His written judgments on art reveal the usage of some of the standard stock phrases such as "it lacks only breath," but overriding

the cliches is an enthusiastic interest in variety. Had Chrysoloras voiced an opinion at the Baptistry competition, he may have favored Ghiberti for his lizard scampering across the smooth rocks or the finely embroidered borders of Abraham's cloak. But, he may just as well have preferred Brunelleschi for his ram, scratching its ear with its hind leg as rams do, or the straw showing through the worn saddle of the donkey. Palla Strozzi, Chrysoloras' most important student, the man who paid for the Greek professor's passage from Constantinople and bought the books for his lectures, most likely favored Ghiberti. We know he must have taken a special interest in this contest in that he was appointed as one of three special supervisors of the doors at the time the commission was officially given to Ghiberti.[14] Could it be that Ghiberti's relief lent itself more easily to the humanist's concept of ekphrasis and variety than did Brunelleschi's relief?

The humanists may also have looked for references to classical antiquity in the reliefs. They sought to refine their own studies by considering classical antiquity as their common standard and the model by which all cultural activities were to be guided. Ancient texts, unmarred by medieval copyists, were highly prized. Ancient sculpture, coins and other objects began to find their way into the homes of learned men. Apparently responding to this intensified interest, both Brunelleschi and Ghiberti included poses from antiquity in their reliefs. The humanists must

have enjoyed recognizing the "Spinario" in Brunelleschi's panel and the classical-looking torso of Ghiberti's Isaac.

The discussions on classical forms could well have led to discussions on naturalism. The most admired aspect of classical sculpture was that it "lacked only breath." The artist Cennino Cennini, in his book Il Libro dell 'Arte first circulated around 1400, refers to nature as "the most perfect steersman. . .and the best helm."[15] for the aspiring artist. Cennino states further that one should not only capture an object's natural appearance, but its spirit also. Nature had two meanings around 1400: natura naturata, meaning the physical world, and natura naturans, meaning the creative force.[16] Artists at that time sought to capture both. To accomplish this, Cennino continues, "calls for imagination (fantasia) and skill of hand in order to discover things not seen, hiding themselves under the shadow of natural objects, and to fix them with the hand, presenting to plain sight what does not actually exist."[17] Naturalness was certainly a quality admired by all, but so was the rendering of those things not visible; as thoughts, emotions and spirituality. The Florentines probably placed great value on Brunelleschi's ability to make cold bronze scream in the figure of Isaac, whose taut struggling body conveys so well the feeling of fear, or Ghiberti's ability to convey Abraham's single-minded devotion through his piercing eyes and steady muscular arm.

At the time of the competition, there was in Florence

an increasing concern among writers for directness and legibility. Gombrich has made a plausible correlation between the humanist's search for a more direct and readable script and a change toward a more ordered architecture.[38] During the years surrounding 1400, the Florentine humanists revised the prevailing Gothic script, a beautiful but tiring form of lettering to the more direct Latin script. Some humanists were chided by their peers for having what seemed to them an overriding interest in the style of lettering at the expense of content. Ghiberti himself made an analogy in I Commentarii between the proportions of letters and of figures.[39] When comparing one competition relief with the other, the jurors may have posed the question, "Which design is better formed?" And this would have led, in turn, to a discussion of composition--How well are the figures arranged? Does the story move freely from one scene to the next? Are there overly distracting details? Perhaps, a distinction was made between Ghiberti's flowing composition and Brunelleschi's assemblage of isolated figures and scenes. Legibility would also have been a concern of those interested in the reliefs' religious intensity. The standard religious dictionary of that time, The Catholicon, defined an art work's strengths to be in its narrative power, memorable vividness and moving emotion.[19]

Manual skill and technique were a consideration too, as we have seen from the contracts specifying that Ghiberti work the figures with his own hands and also from the fact that Florentines had not seen a major display in the technique

of modeling and bronze casting since Andrea Pisano had erected the first set of doors on the Baptistry some 60 years previously. Ghiberti's skill must have seemed outstanding. He was then an unknown competing with sculptors already well known or who had at least done some work in sculpture. Although trained as a goldsmith under his stepfather, Bantoluccio, Ghiberti admits only to have been a painter ~~at Rimini~~ before the contest and one working illegally outside the painters' guild membership at that. Brunelleschi had also been trained as a goldsmith. He had had more experience in bronze casting as a workshop assistant, but he too was relatively unknown. "Fama" apparently had no place among the judges' criteria. For such an important monument skill was prudently set above reputation.

One must not forget patriotic pride either. This was a time of intensified pride in Florence and its citizens. Brunelleschi and Ghiberti may have been singled out by virtue of the fact that they were Florentine and therefore naturally better.

But probably neither chauvanism nor concern for craftsmanship were such overriding influences in the contest as matters of style and composition--purely artistic matters. The opening of the 15th Century witnessed a growing realization that an artist's mind is as important as his hands. Cennino is very vocal on this--holding that art is more than a craft, that it is a work of intellectual creation and "justly deserves to be enthroned next to theory and to be crowned

with poetry."[20] To him artists are gentlemen of soaring aspirations, attracted to art "out of loftiness of spirit."[21] The humanist Pier Paolo Vergerio in his book on education of 1404[22] includes drawing as a discipline all "men of distinction" should learn in addition to mathematics and other "artes liberales." Villani's book includes a brief sketch of Florentine art history among chapters devoted to astrologers, poets, politicians and doctors. By doing so, he had placed art on a level equal to science and philosophy making it an entity capable of growth and higher planes of achievement. But such an attitude was not, of course, typical among Florentines of the time. A good portion of Villani's chapter is an apologia for the inclusion of one of the "artes mechanicae" but he excuses himself by evoking the examples of Pliny and other classical literature which dealt with artists. One could just as easily have evoked the name of Aristotle who classified art as mechanical, or Plutarch who thought no man of a good family would want to be a Phidias. Generally, artists were regarded as no higher than small-time retailers.[23]

The competition of 1400-2 was geared in part toward finding merely a skilled craftsman, one who could match (but not necessarily surpass) the doors of Andrea Pisano. Ghiberti may have been chosen because at that time he may have appeared to exemplify just such a mentality. Ghiberti's ideal artist was the quiet, humble and very traditional Burgundian artisan, Gusmin, who entered a monastery to do penance for his vain pursuit of glory. Had Ghiberti humbled himself

before the judges as Manetti claims this surely would have ~~dis~~pleased some of the traditional-minded jurors. Brunelleschi's proud independence should have disqualified him quickly.

Brunelleschi's technical performance should have weighed heavily against him also. In judging the two surviving reliefs, many artists were probably displeased with Brunelleschi's gaping holes for supporting pins and the heaviness due to the separately cast and soldered figures, as opposed to Ghiberti's flawless surface and light single-case weight. Cennino's book emphasizes throughout that the artist's first concern must be the quality of technique, materials and method. The more prudent among the merchants may have looked askance at Brunelleschi's relief. They must have been looking, as businessmen are supposed to do, for quality at a bargain. They were offering 200 florins a year to the winner, a sum which would make his life comfortable.[24] This attracted artists of quality and the competition may be viewed as a means to find the best bargain possible. The doors were to be an expensive endeavor, eventually costing 22,000 florins.[25] Brunelleschi used 30% more of the costly bronze and this fact alone might have disqualified him in the eyes of the more cautious judges.

But evidence exists that indicates Brunelleschi was in fact not disqualified at all; in fact, if we are to believe Manetti, he was offered the commission in concert with Ghiberti. Although the reliefs were to be judged after a year's time, it was two years after the initial announcement of a

contest that the first contract was drawn. There was a "final" contract for the doors drawn after two other contracts had appeared earlier. Was this because the Calimala realized Brunelleschi would not go along with whatever plans they had first proposed? And, there is a sudden change in program for the doors from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Ghiberti's competition relief was saved perhaps to be used in the next set of doors which would illustrate the Old Testament. Presumably, all the other reliefs were melted down and "recycled" into the first set of doors. But Brunelleschi's plaque was also saved by the Calimala for many years after the contest. Would this indicate they still hoped Brunelleschi would participate on the next set of doors? So it might seem. This circumstance may have been the seed from which grew accounts of just such participation found in the Anonimo Magliabecchiano and later sources.

The competition may have been originally established as a means of finding an artisan who might provide well made products upon order without undue expense. If it had remained so, Ghiberti would have won it hands down. But victory seems not to have come so easily. We have the impression that despite Brunelleschi's pride and technical inferiority and his wastefulness, he, Brunelleschi, almost won! Other considerations must have played a role in the judging such as composition and style. The mind and ingenuity of the artist were indeed beginning gradually to replace his hands in importance. The traditional craftsmen and medieval artisan were slowly

being supplanted by a new liberating concept of art and artist. The competition of 1400-2 is a justly celebrated event in art history that forces attention on this change.

Footnotes - Part III

[1]Richard Krautheimer, Lorenzo Ghiberti (Princeton, New Jersey, 1970), p. 32.

[2]Frederick Antal, Florentine Painting and Its Social Background (London, 1948), p. 11.

[3]Howard Saalman, "Santa Maria del Fiore: 1294-1418," Art Bulletin, XLVI (December, 1964), p. 497.

[4]Krautheimer, p. 33.

[5]Ibid., p. 31.

[6]Saalman, p. 490.

[7]Ibid., p. 480.

[8]Ernst Gombrich, Norm and Form (London, 1966), p. 137, fn. 11.

[9]Krautheimer, "The Beginnings of Art Historical Writing in Italy," Studies in Early Christian, Medieval and Renaissance Art (New York, 1969), p. 259.

[10]Lauro Martinez, The Social World of the Florentine Humanists 1300-1450 (Princeton, New Jersey, 1963), p. 259.

[11]Giotto and the Orators (Oxford, 1971).

[12]Ibid., p. 85.

[13]Ibid., p. 81.

[14]Krautheimer, Lorenzo Ghiberti, p. 369, Doc. 26.

[15]Cennino Cennini, Il Libro dell' Arte, translated by Daniel Thompson (New Haven, Connecticut, 1936), p. 15.

[16]Peter Burke, Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy (London, 1972), p. 125.

[17]Cennini, p. 1.

[18]Gombrich, "From the Revival of Letters to the Reform of the Arts," Essays in the History of Art Presented to Rudolf Wittkower (London, 1967), p. 77.

[19]Baxandall, Painting and Experience in 15th Century Italy (London, 1974), p. 41.

[20]Cennini, p. 2.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Baxandall, Giotto and the Orators, p. 125.

[23]Burke, p. 68.

[24]Krautheimer, p. 368-9, Doc. 26. "The Value of a Florin is Found in Ludwig Goldscheider," Ghiberti (New York, 1949), p. 19, fn. 10.

[25]Lorenzo Ghiberti, I Commentarii, ed. by O. Morisani (Naples, 1947), p. 43.

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