

Introduction

Maso di Banco's *Miracle of St Sylvester* in the Bardi di Vernio Chapel in Santa Croce, Florence (Fig. 0.1), presents an arresting architectural setting defined by two large, linear buildings. One is a ruin, while the other seems unfinished, with a round arch jutting out from the main structure. In the foreground, a broken archway and a single white column are surrounded by rubble, the delicate marble veins of the column's shaft and the precise acanthus leaves of its capital in marked contrast to the destruction around it. This unscathed column in a stark and fragmentary scenery acts as a spatial and chronological boundary between the episode in which St Sylvester ties the jaw of the dragon, and the episode in which he brings back to consciousness two men who had been nearly killed by the dragon's pestilential breath, his blessing figure framed by the arch in the background, whose colour echoes that of his robe.

The remarkable simplicity of this architectural setting is arguably more captivating than the narrative expounded by the figures. While the red structure on the left suggests an incomplete building project, the crumbled white palace and structures in the foreground reveal Maso's fascination for ruins, small shrubs already growing from the rubble. If Maso grappled with structural concerns in the fragmented background palaces, the column and collapsed arch in the foreground demonstrate his interest in architectural detail, especially evident in the eye-catching column dividing the representational surface into two asymmetrical parts. The column is the most salient characteristic of the image, showcasing both the artist's skill in rendering the materiality of marble and his attention to ornaments like the capital's blossom and volutes, and the grey marble impost (Fig. 0.2). Maso's eye for architectural detail also extends to the broken masonry on the floor, where the stone voussoirs of a collapsed arch lie. This fresco, painted around 1340, testifies to a growing interest in architectural forms on the part of Italian painters.

The time span between the mid-fourteenth and mid-fifteenth century marked a turning point for the representation of architecture in painting. This period saw an increase in the amount and complexity of structures included in narrative painting, proposing architectural settings that demonstrated a closer and more consistent engagement with built structures than previously seen, whilst at the same time including ambitious and innovative designs.



Fig. 0.1. Maso di Banco, *Miracle of St Sylvester*, Bardi di Vernio Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence, 1340.

This shift in architectural representation, where volumes and structures became more credible, is often explained in terms of artists' increased awareness of "pictorial space," whereby architecture in painting is understood as a "spatial box" articulating three-dimensionality.¹ Although six decades have passed since John White's hugely influential *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space*, after which scholarship moved in multiple directions, this interpretive approach continues to be extremely persistent, still permeating art historical literature on representations of architecture in any medium. Ironically, all analyses based on pictorial space underline the ultimately two-dimensional nature of architecture in painting, leading to interpretations of it as a lesser counterpart to large-scale three-dimensional buildings, exposing perspectival defects and sacrificing structural integrity to the needs of the supposedly more important narrative. This view is deeply rooted in a theoretical framework that can be traced back to Leon Battista Alberti, who rejected perspectival representations of architecture as deceptive in his *De re aedificatoria* while proclaiming the architect's debt to the painter in his *De pictura*.² Although scholarship traditionally sees Alberti as the originator of the "system of the figural arts,"³ these somewhat contradictory statements distinguish the work of the architect from the work of the painter as separate individuals, revealing anxieties around architectural representation that arose from the very fact that many sculptors and painters worked as architects, and that architectural practice developed fluidly across media.⁴

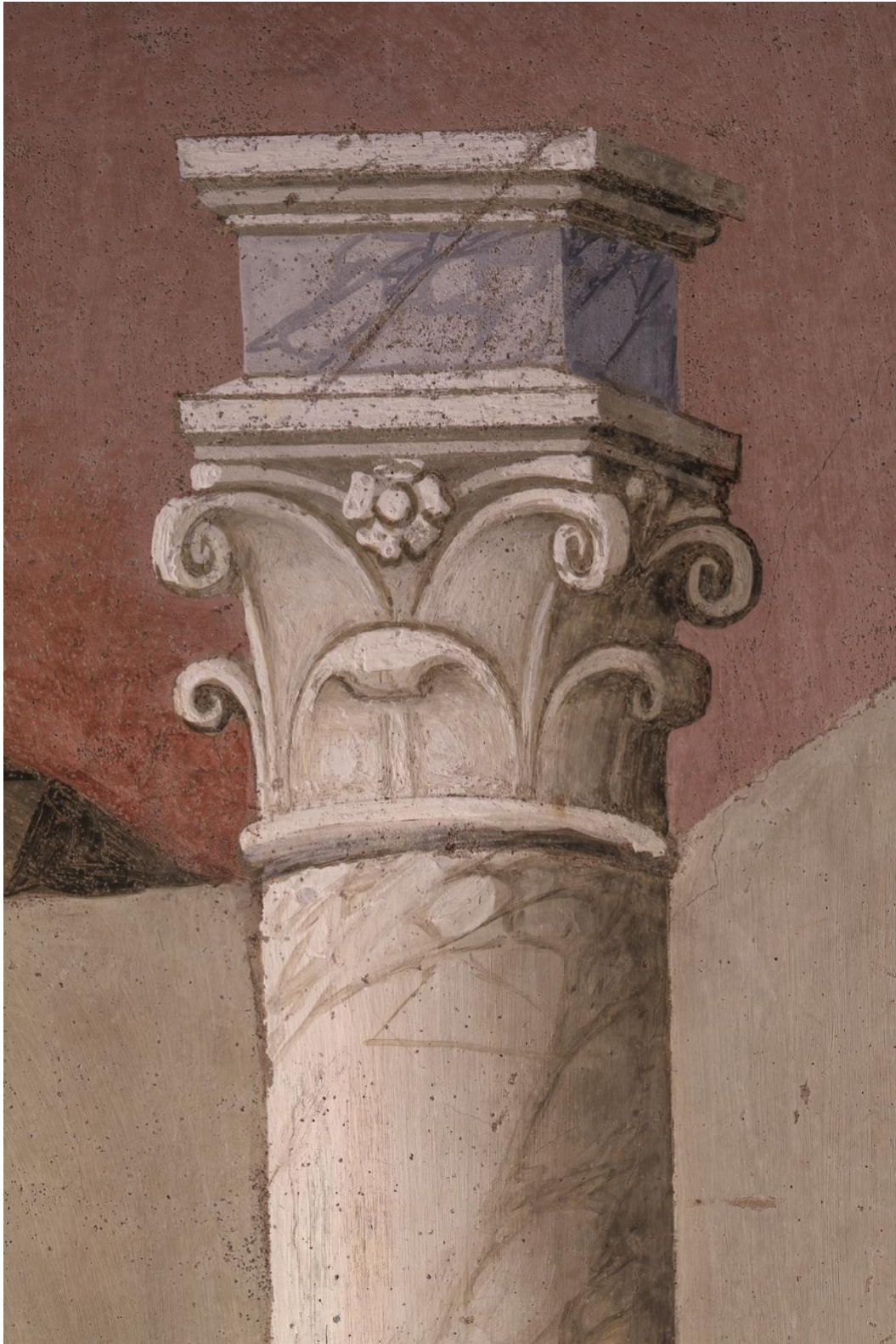


Fig. 0.2. Maso di Banco, *Miracle of St Sylvester*, detail of capital.

The present book does not deny that architecture in painting is free from the structural constraints of large-scale buildings, nor does it belittle the importance of three-dimensionality and depth in painting—the case studies in this book highlight the concerted efforts artists made to showcase their perspectival ability and reveal how the effects they achieved impacted the narrative in both visual and symbolic terms. Nevertheless, the book also contests interpretations that see fictive buildings as a purely spatial device, obscuring their inventiveness and thus undermining their architectural value.

Interpretations limited to the trope of “pictorial space” are pernicious because they arise from and reinforce the disciplinary boundaries between architecture and art history, while clear cut distinctions between the work of the painter or sculptor and that of the architect would have made little sense to Renaissance craftsmen. Feeding off the supposedly irreconcilable contrast between two- and three-dimensionality, this historiographical divide is especially insidious because it ends up informing even our approach to painting and sculpture as separate endeavours. While the tension between these media has well-established roots, first in the structure of guilds, which saw them as pertaining to two different groups, and then in the debate around the *paragone*, the art historical fixation on surface versus depth has created a broader rift between them that is especially evident in their relation to architecture. By virtue of its three-dimensionality, sculpture is considered as a more tangible, corporeal medium that systematically tackles architectural issues, for example in the design of microarchitectural objects like reliquaries or ciboria. Similarly, sculptors often designed or contributed in significant ways to building projects: Arnolfo di Cambio, Michelozzo, Lorenzo Ghiberti, Bernardo Rossellino, Francesco di Giorgio and Michelangelo are only some of the better known among them, tracing a tradition that closely ties sculpture and architecture together and that stretches at least from the thirteenth century. The facility and frequency with which these craftsmen seemingly shifted from one medium to the other has somewhat dulled our curiosity about how exactly they were able to transfer their set of skills: What were the practical challenges? What were the financial and social incentives, if any? These are still unanswered questions, since there is hardly any literature exploring intermedia practice as a phenomenon, beyond the remit of individual artists like Orcagna or Michelangelo.⁵

This gap in our knowledge appears all the more significant when we consider that some aspects of sculptural work channel representational strategies that are more commonly associated with painting: Donatello’s and Ghiberti’s stunning relief panels, for instance, testify to sculptors’ competent handling of narrative and perspectival effects. These observations are not meant to nullify the differences between architecture, sculpture and painting—rather, they aim to challenge our assumptions about individual media, probing the broad appeal of architectural forms and advocating for a more integrated understanding of craft.

On the other hand, the relationship between painting and architecture has been the object of more sustained study. Arguably, this is because these media are perceived to be more antithetical, embodying the tension between flat surface and depth that has fascinated art historians for generations: the majority of interpretations still rely, more or less consciously, on perspective, thereby establishing a hierarchical rather than dialectical relationship between painted and built examples. It might also be because we have considerably fewer examples of painters consistently practising as architects before the sixteenth century—the earliest documented instance is Giotto’s design for the bell tower of Florence’s Duomo, but even his contemporaries deemed Giotto an outstanding artist, and his contribution to architecture is generally considered as an exception rather than as representative of an established practice. These seeming idiosyncrasies have spurred scholarly curiosity in the subject, and over the last

ten years or so three monographs, two edited collections and one exhibition have focused on the representation of architecture in Italian painting between c. 1300 and c. 1600, offering important contributions.⁶

As Sabine Frommel's *Peindre l'architecture durant la Renaissance italienne* proposes a broad survey that includes examples from antiquity to Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain, the first, more focused studies are Francesco Benelli's *The Architecture in Giotto's Paintings* (2012) and Johannes Grave's *Architekturen der Sehens: Bauten in Bildern des Quattrocento* (2015). Benelli offers a clear analysis of Giotto's buildings, expertly highlighting his classical sources, while Grave presents a more theoretically informed reflection on the subject. Though they may not state so, both books centre their interpretations on pictorial space, ultimately emphasizing the structural deficiencies of architectural settings in comparison to large-scale three-dimensional buildings (Benelli) or viewing them as conduits for the symbolical reverberations of perspective and perception (Grave). As valid as these approaches are, they do not consider the architectural value of buildings in painting or the broader contribution artists made to architectural practice.

The tendency to interpret architectural settings in primarily spatial terms is especially rife in analyses of painted examples, and it is necessary to address this before tackling exchanges across art and architectural practice that include sculpture. This is why this book focuses on painting, though it does mention some sculptural examples as points of comparison. It aims to reorient the discussion away from perspective and pictorial space in order to emphasise artists' engagement with architectural forms per se, rather than as a means to achieve a more or less convincing three-dimensionality. In this sense, the present volume builds on Amanda Lillie's National Gallery exhibition *Building the Picture* (2014). Its catalogue offers an intellectually focused analysis whose greatest merit lies in underscoring the communicative potential of architecture in painting. Without eschewing perspectival and formal issues, Lillie explores how artists used architectural forms to create place and convey a sense of time as they pushed the structural and ornamental boundaries of existing built examples. Yet, our understanding of the interplay of narrative and architecture, and of artists' early contributions to architectural practice is still limited.

More specifically, existing publications address either key fourteenth-century figures like Giotto, Simone Martini and the Lorenzetti brothers (Benelli and Frommel), or the work of famous painters from the late fifteenth century onwards, from Andrea Mantegna to Tintoretto (Frommel, Grave, Grosso and Guidarelli, and to a lesser extent Lillie), leaving a gap between these two periods. This study contends that the generation of painters active in the first half of the fifteenth century is responsible for affirming architectural design as an integral part of their artistic practice, paving the way for both later explorations of architecture in painting and for innovative solutions in project drawings and large-scale buildings.

Architecture in painting can give us a precious insight into the profoundly architectural imagination of artists at a time when other routes for the investigation of architectural invention, such as drawings, are scanty. Research on Michelangelo's architectural drawings highlighted that his architectural practice is best understood in close connection to his activity as a painter and sculptor, demonstrating that the boundaries between the arts in the sixteenth century were much more fluid than our current disciplinary set up allows us to investigate.⁷ This book argues that painters long before Michelangelo demonstrated a strong architectural imagination inseparable from their figurative and compositional skills, proposing that the paucity of architectural drawings before the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries can be in

part compensated by a reconsideration of buildings in painting as both architectural designs and narrative devices.

Rather than being a hindrance, the inextricable relationship between narrative and architectural setting furthers our understanding of how architectural forms were perceived and valued. Why does a narrative need an architectural setting? What does the setting do for the narrative and vice versa? While scholarship is well aware of the communicative abilities of built architecture,⁸ architecture in painting has been left out of this discussion, even though its performative potential is arguably heightened by its interplay with narrative and freedom from structural constraints. As an active agent, architecture in painting can be described as a form of visual rhetoric, engaging with the viewer in a number of ways to deploy its powers of persuasion. Specific comparisons between architectural representation and rhetorical theory have proved especially fruitful, highlighting key connections with mnemonics and oratorical practices.⁹ But theoretical texts alone do not fully explain the inclusion of architecture in narrative painting as a widespread phenomenon. More specifically, they rarely shed light on artists' understanding of ornament and structure, often displacing the argument's focus from their craftsmanship to the potential intervention of erudite patrons.

This book therefore aims to trace the performative objectives of architecture in painting by analysing a broader array of visual and textual evidence, investigating how architecture in painting responded to an established tradition of architectural representation as well as to contemporary discourses on status, identity and authority. This approach underscores the pivotal role of patrons and other key figures well beyond a choice of subject matter, but it also highlights the acumen of artists in designing architectural forms—an ability informed by the trial and error of craft that patrons were unlikely to possess. More importantly, the book contends that artists' structural and ornamental innovations not only informed architectural practice but were also instrumental in shaping a new understanding of the cultural currency of architectural forms.

The book focuses on three fresco cycles. This medium presents the earliest and most audacious examples of architectural experimentation in painting, from Giotto to Altichiero da Zevio (Fig. 0.3), offering more extensive, cohesive visual material compared to individual paintings on panel, canvas or parchment. Enveloping whole environments, and potentially addressing a considerable number of people at the same time, fresco cycles represent a bold statement on the patron's part. More importantly, they are at one with built architecture, enabling us to reach more comprehensive conclusions about the extent to which artistic and architectural practice were intertwined. In this respect, frescoes appear especially apt case studies when we consider the scantily documented practice of sketching design ideas in chalk on the walls of a building under construction, a practice comparable to the *sinopie*, or preparatory drawings, that painters sketched on the walls to be frescoed. For example, in 1397 master masons working on the project for the Duomo in Milan were assigned a paved loft or attic ("grande solajo astregato") whose walls or floors they could use for their drawings, and in 1409 sculptor Jacopo della Quercia was tasked with producing a design for the Fonte Gaia on one of the walls of the Sala del Consiglio in Siena's Palazzo Pubblico, so the council members could consider it.¹⁰ Jacopo della Quercia's case in particular highlights that patrons, as well as master masons and artists, were familiar with this practice as a way to evaluate projects.

Although they are representative of the more markedly architectural approach to painting that began in the fourteenth century and characterises the fifteenth century (and arguably fresco painting in particular), all three cycles stand out for the prominence and innovative



Fig. 0.3. Altichiero da Zevio, *St George Destroys the Temple*, detail, Oratory of St George, Padua, 1379–1384.

design of their architectural settings. These are arguably the most striking of the early fifteenth century, but have not been the object of sustained analysis. At times the architecture overwhelms the figures, almost distracting the viewer and leading the eye within the picture away from the narrative. The buildings in these frescoes do not merely frame the figures but structure the narrative and draw attention to themselves, mesmerising the viewer with their complex decorative detail and their intriguing interaction with light and shade effects. These architectural settings demonstrate that artists dedicated a significant amount of thought, work and time to them, and suggest that they are not only an integral part of the decoration but contend with the figures for primacy.

This book's first case study, examined in Chapter One, is Masolino da Panicale's cycle in the baptistery at Castiglione Olona (1435). Depicting the life of St John the Baptist, these frescoes present precocious architectural solutions whose ambition echoes that of the patron, Branda Castiglioni, a highly educated and influential cardinal who sought to elevate the status of his native town with works of art and architecture. Although aspects of Masolino's painted structures have been noted before,¹¹ their agency as integral parts of Branda Castiglioni's plan for Castiglione Olona has not been studied in depth, nor has the innovativeness of their designs been fully examined. This chapter addresses this gap in our knowledge by focusing on the frescoes' architectural innovations and on their prominent rocky or stark landscapes, suggesting an interplay between nature and architecture, building and site. This characteristic is examined in connection with a long contemporary epistle describing Castiglione Olona and

including numerous rhetorical tropes on the site and its natural as well as architectural features. Resonating with numerous classical and Renaissance rhetorical texts that discuss the characteristics of building sites, this analysis highlights how Masolino's *all'antica* architectural inventions were not only instrumental in refashioning the identity of Branda Castiglioni and his hometown but are also indicative of a new understanding of architecture as a cultural marker.

The second chapter examines the cycle in the Pellegrinaio of the hospital of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena (1441–1444). Painted by three different artists, the Pellegrinaio represented an opportunity for competition more than collaboration, giving rise to structurally complex, profusely ornate settings for salient episodes of the hospital's history and charitable activities. Sitting between laity and spirituality, history and legend, the frescoes reflect the social and cultural ambitions of the hospital by blending architectural portrait with complete reinvention, and by creating for it an aura of magnificence. Although the cycle is a well-known case study,¹² discussions of its architectural settings have reiterated the trope of "pictorial space" or focused on the extent to which they represent Siena's urban fabric more or less faithfully. This chapter extrapolates the relationship between the narrative and the setting, exploring what the cycle's painted structures tell us about the hospital's aspirations, and examining the performative role of the cycle's daring architectural designs.

The last case study, Fra Angelico's frescoes for the Nicholas V Chapel in the Vatican Palace (1448–1450), is the subject of the third chapter. These frescoes set the lives of St Stephen and St Lawrence in striking basilicas, town squares and courtyards that evoke the built identity of Rome whilst at the same time proposing original ornamental details and captivating light effects. These remarkable architectural settings have been the object of careful analyses that focus on their perspectival and spatial credibility,¹³ and the extent to which they represent Nicholas V's architectural projects for the city of Rome and the basilica of St Peter's.¹⁴ This fascinating yet unresolved issue has distracted attention from Fra Angelico's own architectural inventiveness and from the interaction in his work between setting and narrative.¹⁵ This chapter proposes that figures and structures work in unison to address contemporary concerns relative to the authority of the pope, still threatened by the Conciliarist movement, and the role of Rome as recently reinstated papal See. In particular, Fra Angelico's settings subtly engage with rhetorical formulae adopted almost obsessively by members of the Curia to express the dignity of Rome and the authority of the papal office in light of the Council's threat to his primacy. Fra Angelico's exploration of structural and ornamental solutions, engaging with contemporary ideas developed by Michelozzo and Brunelleschi, therefore demonstrates the artist's and patron's awareness of the communicative value of architectural forms.

All three fresco cycles build on a tradition of more sustained architectural representation that took shape during the fourteenth century. Masolino, the Pellegrinaio artists and Fra Angelico all rely on the perspectival explorations and structural prototypes devised by artists from Giotto and the Lorenzetti brothers to Altichiero da Zevio and Gentile da Fabriano. If Masolino and Fra Angelico tend to prefer the linear clarity visible in Giotto's structures, Vecchietta and Domenico di Bartolo relish the same complexity and abundance that epitomises Altichiero's work. Yet, this book's case studies are characterised by an exploration of classical architectural forms to a more systematic, larger extent than previously observed. At the same time, these solutions are often paired with others we would identify as Gothic, suggesting that artists did not perceive these approaches as incompatible. As they showcase a broad, fluid understanding of the classical orders later canonised as Doric, Ionic and Corinthian, their

structural and ornamental proposals should be seen as a valuable contribution to the reinvention of antiquity, reminding us that the classical architectural heritage was still a level playing field in the 1430s and 1440s. Staking their work against that of craftsmen like Donatello, Ghiberti, Michelozzo, Bernardo Rossellino and Brunelleschi, the artists discussed in this book developed solutions that precede by decades those of key figures like Giuliano da Sangallo and Bramante. This highlights how painters, and not only sculptors and architects, had an active, early hand in the process of its re-elaboration.

More specifically, the bold *all'antica* designs discussed in this book reveal the sensibility painters had for structure and ornament, challenging still persistent teleological interpretations of artistic and architectural development. One should not disregard these artists' contributions because they also included Gothic elements alongside classical ones: rather than interpreting this as a symptom of their failure to understand classical architecture, we should see it as indicative of their precocious architectural insight. This generation of artists is representative of a more inclusive approach to designing architecture, which later became increasingly policed as a more normative understanding of classical forms developed. If, on one side, this confirms their assiduous engagement with architectural practice, on the other, their absence from recent re-evaluations of the reinvention of antiquity in Renaissance architecture underscores scholarship's continued resistance to work across art and architectural history.¹⁶ Yet, artists' architectural acumen is an important index of the increasing cultural value attached to architectural forms beyond built examples, their early *all'antica* proposals in particular alerting us to subtle changes in the status of architecture as both artists and patrons became fully aware of the persuasive potential of structure and ornament.

Throughout this book, frequent reference is made to both structure and ornament. These terms are used to describe characteristics that are either more pertinent to a building's ground plan, or to the relief on its frieze, the volutes of its capitals and other comparable elements. While this post-nineteenth-century use of the binomial structure/ornament aims to convey the book's argument as clearly as possible, it is not meant to suggest that structure and ornament were perceived to be separate entities in the period discussed. More importantly, the choice to use both structure and ornament as descriptive terms does not intend to pass judgement on the architectural forms discussed, whereby a "Gothic structure" with "classical ornament" is lesser than a wholly classical building, or vice versa. Close observation of the chosen case studies suggests that artists did not differentiate between structure and ornament, and yet these historical categories are still useful in highlighting precisely this to the contemporary reader. Architecture in painting is often discussed in terms of structure because this category best exemplifies the painter's perspectival ability (or lack thereof). The result is that their contribution to ornament (again understood as a historical category) is generally neglected. This book adopts the structure/ornament binomial to engage more clearly with existing scholarship on the subject, highlighting that artists were concerned with both as an indissoluble unit. In the words of Anne-Marie Sankovitch, "structure/ornament is a figuratively conceived heuristic device that provides architectural historians with spaces to be filled" — this book recognises this and employs structure/ornament to construct parts of its narrative.¹⁷

An understanding of structure as inseparable from ornament also emerges from artists' desire to challenge architectural practice. By including buildings that are structurally more daring and ornamentally more complex than any contemporary large-scale, three-dimensional example, painters engaged in an artistic contest with built structures that was driven by innovation. This lesser-known, early form of *paragone*¹⁸ relied on the interconnection

between artistic and architectural practice, and on a shared understanding of architectural invention as a symbol of prestige. Realising the impact of architecture in early Renaissance painting therefore gives us a precious insight into how architectural forms were perceived and deployed, be they two- or three-dimensional. Similarly, it contributes to clarifying the intersection of architecture and the figural arts in the work of later, influential figures like Giuliano da Sangallo, Raphael, Michelangelo and Baldassarre Peruzzi, whose work may not have been possible without the architectural experimentation of early fifteenth-century artists.