



Fig. 1: Bartolomeo Ammannati,
Fountain of Neptune, detail,
1550–65, marble, H 560 cm.
Piazza della Signoria, Florence

Civic Values and Rivalry between Artists in Florence

From the 1401 Competition to the Arrangement of Piazza della Signoria

There are some memorable moments in Benvenuto Cellini's account of the conversation he had with Cosimo de' Medici and Eleonora di Toledo in a room at the Villa di Poggio a Caiano.¹

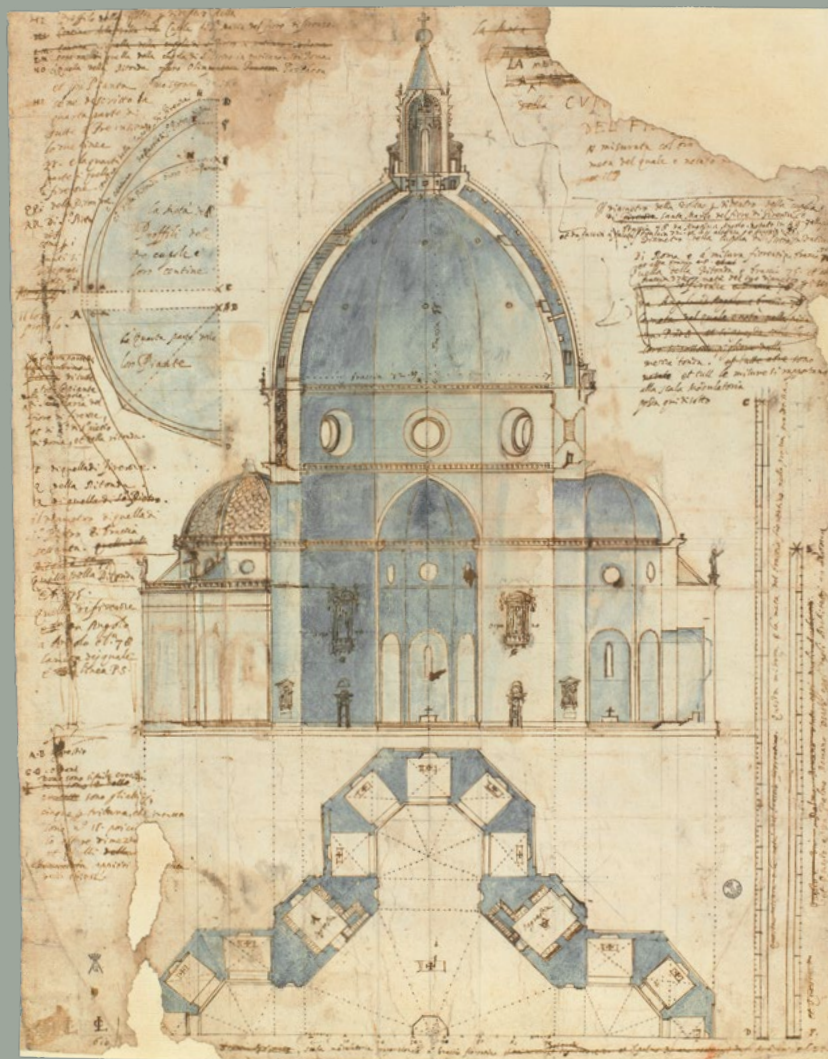
This was the end of 1559. The marble for the *Neptune* that was to be placed at the centre of the fountain next to the Palazzo Vecchio was being taken to Florence, on its way to the workshop of Baccio Bandinelli; that is, the workshop of he who had been commissioned to carve the work.² Cellini says that he had been to see the marble, to have studied and measured it, and then, once back in Florence, to have made 'several little models'.³ A few days later he went to the Poggio a Caiano villa where the ducal couple were staying. He did not arrive at the most opportune moment: it was lunchtime and everyone was at table, including Cosimo and Eleonora, though they had preferred to dine in a different room from the rest of the court. Cellini did not lose heart and entered into conversation with the young Francesco until the duke should summon him. The conversation with the ducal couple then immediately turned to the topic closest to the artist: 'I moved the discussion towards the subject of that splendid block of marble I had seen'.⁴ The reference of most interest to us appears in the words that follow:

*I was reminding her how their ancestors had made their noble school as brilliant as it was only by encouraging rivalry among all the various artists; and it was in that way, I said, that the magnificent cupola and the beautiful doors of San Giovanni had been brought into being, as well as all the many other fine churches and statues which provided the city, unparalleled from the days of the ancients, with such a brilliant crown.*⁵

Cellini was not beating about the bush. His aim was to convince the ducal couple to change their plans regarding Bandinelli's commission for the piazza fountain and announce a 'contest' between artists, as had been done in the past, with the splendid results that were there for all to see.

As shall be seen below, the sculptor's plan was successful, partly because Bandinelli died early the following year. What primarily interests us here, though, is the strategy he adopted. He makes the point that the reason the Florentine figurative language had become so 'brilliant' was primarily because of the custom of 'encouraging rivalry' among the artists, that is, by going back to the formula of the competition for commissioning works that would alter the appearance of the city. Cellini could not but mention two of these, being emblematic works in the artistic

Fig. 2: Ludovico Cigoli, *Plan and section of the cupola and tribune of the Florence cathedral*, 1610. Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence



perception of every Florentine: the ‘magnificent cupola’ of Santa Maria del Fiore (*fig. 2*), and the ‘beautiful doors’ of the Baptistery. These were both the result of competitions held in the previous century, so had been conceived in political and cultural contexts quite different from that in which he was writing. And yet Cellini decided to evoke precisely these events to change Cosimo’s mind, a sign that they had become a kind of urban mythology to which the duke himself must have been sensitive, but also a sign that it was impossible not to note their capacity for advancing artistic research, inducing artists to give the best of themselves. This was simple reasoning, but undoubtedly conducive to achieving his aims. The city’s mythology, the strength of

tradition and the solemnity of those works went so well with the good sense of his argument that it was easy to make his ideas prevail. There was nevertheless also some risk in his proposal. Making reference to the republican Florence of the early fifteenth century, and emphasizing the virtuous way in which public affairs had been managed, could have been somewhat jarring to Cosimo’s ears, a grating that risked having the opposite effect.

According to what we know of the conversation, however, this did not occur, not least because, shortly after, Cellini himself specified that ‘Your Most Illustrious Excellency ... will know how to choose the best; and in this way you neither throw your money away nor dis-

hearten a splendid company of artists, who are unique in the world today'.⁶ The sculptor could certainly not have questioned Cosimo's role as being the person responsible for the final choice. Although obvious, it was a qualification intended to lower the threshold of the risk Cellini was taking. However, it was also the way in which what we see as one of the most exciting characteristics of the competitions he had referred to was lost: their distinguishing collective nature, which meant not only opening up to the artists invited to take part, but especially the civic value represented by those who would make up the judging commission.

This was precisely what had happened in 1401, when a competition was held for the bronze decoration of a door for the Florentine Baptistery, as a result of the plan launched with Andrea Pisano in 1330 to replace the old wooden doors. The competition was originally announced for the most solemn door, that facing the cathedral entrance.⁷ Without wishing to over-idealize this – I do not think there is a single art history book that does not begin its chapter on the Renaissance with this competi-

tion – it is not possible to understate the exceptional nature of what was organized on that occasion, if only because it marked the debut of two artists like Filippo Brunelleschi and Lorenzo Ghiberti (cats. 8a & 8b). The collective stimulus and civic impulse that drove the competition ought to be noted, given that it related to the management of the city, its dignity and its prestige on a cultural and figurative level. In short, it was a question that closely concerned the governing mechanisms of the oligarchic power, which may have meant confirming the administrative capacity of the trade corporations called on to manage projects of a high symbolic value for the city's community. Indeed, one ancient custom was that of involving the Artes in governing the religious bodies. For example, the Arte della Lana was entrusted with the exclusive management of the Santa Maria del Fiore site,⁸ and the Arte di Calimala, the merchants' guild, that of the Baptistery, at least from the middle of the twelfth century onwards.⁹

It may of course be assumed that there was fierce competition between the Artes and, indeed, it is precisely by looking at what had

Fig. 3: Santa Maria Novella, west wing of the Chiostro Grande, Florence



taken place on the cathedral site during the fourteenth century that we can find the origins of a process the consequences of which may be related to what then took place in the Baptistry. It is known that the institution of the *opera* was established for the cathedral at the end of the thirteenth century. This was a body made up of a few citizens (from four to eight) appointed in rapid rotation (terms lasted four or six months), who were entrusted not only with the administrative management of the building site, but also with decisions of an aesthetic and technical nature.¹⁰ In order to better deal with the situation, the *operai* adopted the custom of assessing various solutions for individual architectural problems, such as the structure of the pillars, the design of the capitals, or that of the windows.¹¹ These were not yet genuine competitions, but, as the work progressed and different opinions emerged, there was an increasingly felt need to give a more collegial sense to such decisions. The easiest way was to seek the advice of experts, possibly those already involved on the building site. Nevertheless, on 19 November 1367,

when the final decisions had to be made on the design of the nave, following a series of meetings and proposals that had begun the year before, a public consultation was held to consider the two remaining solutions.¹² The assessments were made on the basis of drawings or models, which were requested in order to facilitate the decision for those not conversant with the drawings. The models could be of various materials such as wood, stucco, or terracotta.¹³

At the end of the year 1400, when the Calimala decided to relaunch the project for the decoration of the Baptistry doors, it was natural to look to what had by now become the normal way of proceeding on the adjacent site of Santa Maria del Fiore. We shall not go back over the stories related to this, already excellently told by Richard Krautheimer.¹⁴ Nor shall we try to formulate new interpretations on a subject already covered at length and in depth. We shall restrict ourselves rather to pointing out some aspects of relevance to this essay. For example, let us note how that competition was a choice until then quite new in the figurative



Fig. 4: Michelangelo, *Study for the Battle of Cascina*, c.1504, pen and ink on paper, 179 × 251 mm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, inv. WA1846.40



Fig. 5: Leonardo, *Male heads*, c.1504, black chalk and traces of sanguine on paper, 192 × 188 mm. Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, inv. 1775

arts; excluding reference to a custom that, according to Pliny, was fairly widespread in antiquity.¹⁵ It is true that in seeking the origin of this procedure we have recalled similar cases in the second half of the fourteenth century, but these were related to building site requirements, such as the solution of problems concerning the architectural decoration culminating in the competition of 1367. Several factors were substantially different in the case of the Baptistery door. This was not a question of architectural problems arising as the work progressed, but a request for an independent work of figurative art;¹⁶ the decision was not entrusted to commissions made up of members of the public or technicians, or both, but to a committee appointed from the very

start in order to set the rules once and for all; finally, expertise already available on site was not included, but a competition held that was open to artists of different backgrounds, ages, and origins.

These are differences of a programmatic nature, which are best understood with reference to the different political context and new cultural needs. Concerning the former, we recall that the families of the economic aristocracy had firmly regained their control of power from 1382. The decades at the turn of the fourteenth century were characterized in Florence by what John Najemy has called ‘an ideology of consensus and paternalistic leadership [that] replaced the republicanism of separate interests’; what could now be seen was rather the ‘absence of social conflict, the inadmissibility of dissent, and the dutiful acquiescence of good citizens in the natural and benevolent leadership of the elite.’¹⁷ Although it is impossible to separate a story like that of the Baptistery doors from its contemporary political situation, the building representing the ‘synthesis of a series of shared values, which kept together the city’s collectivity’,¹⁸ the American scholar’s observations may explain the need for the more stable framework of a commission, with a more precise and less improvised regulatory structure. There was no longer any room for dissent, as there was also no place for unsolicited proposals, which ended up provoking argument, counter-proposals, and difficult situations.

In the face of this social conformity, two aspects contributed to the exceptional nature of what took place: on one hand, the novelty of the commission’s duties, called on to make an assessment that also took aesthetic values into account;¹⁹ on the other, the memorable response made by the artists involved, at least as far as we are able to know this, since only Ghiberti’s and Brunelleschi’s panels have survived (cats. 8a & 8b).²⁰

It is on this second point that we would like to add something. The two fifteenth-century sources describing the competition are known to be not entirely reliable, as Ghiberti’s memoirs and Antonio Manetti’s *Life of Brunelleschi* each present different versions of its final outcome.²¹ What is certain is that Ghiberti was declared the winner and, as such, it is no surprise that his



Fig. 6: Donatello, *Judith*,
1457–64, bronze, H 236 cm.
Palazzo Vecchio, Florence



Fig. 7: Piazza della Signoria,
Loggia dei Lanzi

panel was kept.²² The survival of Brunelleschi's is more surprising, though, for at least two reasons. The first is of an economic order, given that bronze is a very precious and reusable material. To understand the other, though, we must refer to the document of 19 November 1367, which decreed that the designs presented at the competition were all to be destroyed, apart from that of the winner.²³ Keeping the other entries, in short, could have been seen as a sign of weakness on the part of the judging commission; even more so, if, as Manetti states on the events of 1401, the final result was controversial.²⁴ We do not know what became of Brunelleschi's panel immediately after the competition. It reappeared towards the start of the 1430s in the ownership of Cosimo de' Medici, who 'subsequently had it placed in the old sacristy of San Lorenzo, at the back of the altar, where it is today'.²⁵ It is difficult to believe that the young Brunelleschi would have been able to keep the panel; it is more likely that some eminent figure in the city had been able to buy it, and the name on which most roads converge is that of Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici, Cosimo's father. This is not only because the panel was already in the Medici collection

when it reappeared, and not only because he was a member of the commission for the Baptistery competition,²⁶ but also because of the relations he had with Brunelleschi himself, from whom he was to request the design for the family chapel in San Lorenzo a few years later.

We are now inclined to place the panels in a broader figurative context. That of Ghiberti seems like the splendid development of the atmosphere prevailing at the end of the fourteenth century on the Porta della Mandorla, on the north side of the Florence cathedral, where, between a plastic, neo-Arnolfo style and Gothic naturalism, figurative ideas of a classical origin were gaining prominence.²⁷ Parallels with that of Brunelleschi, rather, all severity and expressive straining, may be found in painted works such as Lorenzo Monaco's youthful predellas. It has been written that 'the figures' in the *Agony in the Garden*,²⁸ 'are characterized by solid, compact bodies, defined by sharp contours and high chiaroscuro contrasts that mould the surfaces as if they were made of metal', and the compositions are thus animated as if by a continuous impetus.²⁹ A similar force is also seen in the panel, in the form and the expressions, the decisive

gestures, and a story that seems to burn with a narrative urgency. Suggesting links of this kind confirms the acceleration we noted, of a haste nourished by a creative tension such as to anticipate future solutions in one bound: the highly elegant and calibrated world of Ghiberti, and Brunelleschi's expressive impetus and spatial agitation that, a few years later, was to find its ideal interpreter in Donatello.

The competition also triggered a desire by the artists for personal assertion and, obviously, feelings of fierce rivalry. It is not clear how the relationship between Brunelleschi and Ghiberti continued after that contest, although we do know they had to face one another again, this time for the works on the cathedral cupola.³⁰ The real misunderstandings arose during the management of that building site, at least according to what may be deduced from the documents and from Manetti's account. Brunelleschi's proposal, despite having won the 1418 competition, continued to arouse much perplexity, such that, when he became the *Provveditore della Cupola* two years later, he was obliged to share the title with Ghiberti and Battista d'Antonio, a technician who had already worked for the *opera*. This threesome continued for five years, until there was no longer any need for further guarantees and the management of the work was entrusted solely to Brunelleschi. Ghiberti's gradual separation from the site coincided, moreover, with the drafting of the contract for the *Porta del Paradiso* at the start of 1425.³¹

In the words of Cellini to Cosimo, the story of the cupola was placed on the same level as that of the Baptistery, as if they were founding moments in the art history of Florence. A key aspect of his aim was to highlight the contest between artists called on to compete on a single work. However, we must also consider a much more frequent variant on the subject: that which put different artists into comparison on a matching decoration, such as a cycle of frescoes, a sculptural programme, or a uniform series of paintings. There are many cases to recall, even remaining in Florence, but one in particular is as renowned as that for the Baptistery door, because it was a public commission, because of the artists involved, and because of the explosive effect it had in the art world. This was for the

two frescoes that Leonardo and Michelangelo were to paint for the *Sala Grande* in the Palazzo Vecchio, portraying the battles of Anghiari (1440) and Cascina (1364) (*fig. 4 & 5*). However, it failed. Commissioned in 1503, the two frescoes were never produced for various reasons. We do know, though, that both artists drew the cartoons in the dimensions intended for the fresco. Leonardo had the pope's apartment in Santa Maria Novella at his disposal, while Michelangelo worked in a room at the Sant'Onofrio hospital. Vasari and Cellini agree in assigning a central place to the two cartoons, and not only for their consequences in Florentine art, given that 'other draughtsmen both native and foreign'³² were already studying them, such that 'while they remained intact they served as a school for all the world'.³³ There is no certain information on the cartoons, which were first the cumbersome victims of a rapidly changing political situation, then of neglect and unscrupulous collecting. But if we put together that which is found in the sources, there is a possibility that the two cartoons were for a short while placed alongside one another, not in the *Sala Grande*, but in the convent of Santa Maria Novella (*fig. 3*).³⁴ It was there that they became astonishing examples of a new monumentality, a new dynamism, an explosive expressive charge, in line with what Vasari was to define as the 'modern manner'.

Once again a comparison. Perhaps not exactly a competition, but certainly an opportunity for unleashing inspiration and pushing the imagination towards untravelled roads; for the young artists able to see them alongside one another, it was a chance to try out the figurative solutions most suited to their own creativity. Although he was too young to be part of the group, Cellini would certainly have been well aware of the importance they had had for Florentine art, but still could not recall them in his conversation with the ducal couple. He was hindered by reasons of political expediency, but also the awareness that, though this too was able to instigate rivalry, and so lead to excellent results, it should not be subject to anyone's opinion. It was a clash that had more to do with the world of artists and that of informed and interested patrons; that is, with a cultural situation



Fig. 8: Giambologna, *Rape of the Sabine*, detail, 1582, marble, H 410 cm. Piazza della Signoria, Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence

that was turning towards a gradual loss of civic vocation.

The sixteenth-century story of the arrangement of the Piazza della Signoria may also be seen in this light. When Donatello's *Judith* (fig. 6) was taken there from the Palazzo Medici in 1495, it was certainly not thought this would be the first step towards such a complex staging. The bronze group was placed near the main door, on the *arengario*, the raised space in front of the Palazzo Vecchio.³⁵ It remained there for only a few years, as in 1504 it was decided to also place Michelangelo's *David* in the piazza, in the position where the *Judith* stood, which was thus moved beneath the Loggia de' Lanzi (fig. 7).³⁶ They were sculptures conceived for different contexts, but both conveyed ethical and political meanings, with allusions to the subject of civic *libertas* and the success of the just against the bravado of the impious: values that constituted a line of continuity between fifteenth-century political culture and the Soderini republic. It was in this same climate that, in 1508, the idea of asking Michelangelo for a marble *Hercules* developed, to be placed on the other side of the main entrance to the palace for reasons of visual and iconographic symmetry.³⁷ But with the return of the Medici to power, and with Michelangelo engaged on the Sagrestia Nuova, the commission passed to Baccio Bandinelli in 1523.³⁸

When the sculpture of *Hercules and Cacus* (fig. 7) was unveiled in 1534, the poor reception it received was due partly to the reaction of the anti-Medici party – to whom it seemed an image of a violent assertion of power on the part of the Medici – and partly due to the slight made to Michelangelo. The presence of the *David* must certainly have weighed heavily on Bandinelli, with the forced comparison in his mind concerning problems of style and technical skill, and possibly also touching on political choices and cultural responses.

Nevertheless, it was with Cellini's arrival that the piazza was to take on the appearance of a genuine contest. In 1545, having just returned from France, he had proposed making 'a great statue ... for that fine piazza of his'³⁹ to Cosimo I, and the duke was equally resolute in asking him for a *Perseus* (cat. 12a). Nine years later the big

bronze was delivered and placed under the Loggia, alongside the *Judith* (fig. 7). Leaving aside Cellini's account, his *Perseus* was conceived precisely in relation to Donatello's work: it was like the development of a conversation, in the overturning of the man/woman relationship, in the finally delivered sword stroke, in the hero as allegory of the peace-bearing prince, and, as for the *Judith*, *exemplum salutis publicae*.⁴⁰ It was a challenge for Cellini concerning his technical ability of casting and his conviction of the superiority of bronze over marble; but it was also a more subtle game that had to do with *Medusa's* ability to petrify with her beauty anyone crossing her gaze.⁴¹ The same effect was extended to the figure of *Perseus*, according to a recurring theme in the poetic compositions dedicated to the group. As in the myth, the modern observer also risked being turned to stone by the great beauty of the bronze and, indeed, before it, the other sculptures in the piazza seemed scorned and dumbstruck.⁴² Perhaps thanks to the skilful direction of his friend Benedetto Varchi, this was the sophisticated and artful way in which Cellini asserted the superiority of his work in the piazza, dictating the rules of a new narrative that had its aesthetic and semantic focus in the *Perseus*.

No matter how much Cellini manoeuvred, Bandinelli remained Cosimo I's preferred sculptor. Indeed, it was from him that the duke commissioned a fountain around 1552 'in the middle of which was to be a Neptune in his chariot, drawn by sea-horses'.⁴³ We are going back to where we started: Cellini's attempt to persuade the ducal couple to reopen the games of that commission by holding a competition. The sculptor's insistence won out in the end, despite Eleonora's hostility; however, thanks to Vasari's protection, Bartolomeo Ammannati was added to the contest. The competition suddenly entered a new stage when Bandinelli died at the start of 1560: the claimants were joined by Giambologna, Vincenzo de' Rossi, Vincenzo Danti, Francesco Mosca, and possibly Montorsoli. The sources show that the real contest took place between Cellini and Ammannati. They were the only ones able to use the Loggia to shape their models, and it was only their models that Cosimo went to see. The others 'worked solely for their own

personal publicity' and, moreover, 'they had to personally find a place in which to work and the money to pay for the material'.⁴⁴ Despite this, Cellini's forecast had hit the mark. Although now difficult to reconstruct, it is undeniable that an exceptional, creative climate developed in those months around the *Fountain of Neptune* (fig. 1). Although it is no longer possible to gain an idea of the various proposals, it is likely that the decision to entrust the commission to Ammannati may have hinged on the pose of his *Neptune*, with its head turned towards the two heroes who guard the palace entrance. Even though its gaze looks beyond, towards the Uffizi, as a further homage to Cosimo, there continued to be 'a subtle but solid common weave' between the various statues, a narrative that each time sought to add something to that dialogue of forms, looks, and thoughts.⁴⁵

The coherence of all this survived for less than two decades. In 1583, when Giambologna's spectacular group (fig. 8; see cat. 13) was positioned under the loggia, a rift emerged in the civic discourse that continued to unfold within the piazza. It was perhaps Raffaello Borghini,

according to what he himself wrote, who managed to concoct a subject for a sculpture conceived 'only to demonstrate the excellence of his art and without selecting any subject'.⁴⁶ The writer's efforts gave rise to a title befitting that tangle of mighty bodies, but no new significance could link the *Rape of the Sabine* to the other sculptures in the piazza, at least not without altering the increasingly fine weave that had been established. The direction of this decisive turn must be attributed to Francesco I. It was he who wanted to place the sculpture in the Loggia, and the decision to distort the ethical values and political warnings of the piazza that were still a priority for his father may also be attributed to him.⁴⁷ His preferences went in decisively more private directions, more rarefied thoughts, more sophisticated references.⁴⁸ And Giambologna's choices could also take their place along those same directions, with his technical expertise and, especially, his firm wish to measure himself against Michelangelo. Despite the complication of meanings, the piazza remained the public space in which contention between artists could survive.

1 Cellini (1986), 378–9.

2 See Heikamp 2011.

3 Cellini (1986), 378.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Cellini (1986), 380.

7 On this competition, see also Krautheimer 1983, 31–43.

8 This began in 1331; see Haines 2002, 22. The Arte della Lana was the powerful corporation of the textile manufacturers.

9 On the beginning of the management by the Calimala and the conservation of documents concerning the Opera di San Giovanni Battista, see Grote 1959, 15–18, and Fabbri 2017, 73–4.

10 Haines 1996, 271; Fabbri 2001, 325. For a useful summary, see Najemy 2006, 398–402.

11 Grote 1959, 96–128.

12 Ibid., 111–28. Concerning the new design of 1367, see Saalman 1964, 483–87 and Haines 1989, 103–107.

13 Grote 1959, 153–60 and Middeldorf Kosegarten 1980, 181.

14 Krautheimer 1983, 31–49.

15 Pliny, *Naturalis historia*, 34.53; 35.58 and 35.95.

16 Middeldorf Kosegarten 1980, 182.

17 Najemy 2006, 182.

18 Fabbri 2017, 81.

19 Middeldorf Kosegarten 1980, 182–183.

20 The other participants were Jacopo della Quercia, Francesco di Valdambrino, Simone da Colle, Niccolò di Luca Spinelli, and Niccolò Lamberti (Ghiberti (1998), 93).

21 Ghiberti (1998), 92–93; Manetti 1812, 300–303.

22 As noted by Krautheimer, the lesser quantity of material used by Ghiberti, with a considerable reduction in cost, was decisive for the final outcome (Krautheimer 1983, 46).

23 Guasti 1887, 207 doc. 192.

24 Manetti 1812, 302–303.

25 Vasari (1965), 139. It is also recalled in that location by Manetti.

26 Saalman 1993.

27 Neri Lusanna 2012, 31–2.

28 Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, inv. 438.

29 Daniela Parenti in exh. cat. Florence 2006, 134.

30 Saalman 1993. On the relations between the two on the cupola site, see also what is written by Franco Borsi in exh. cat. Florence 1978/79, 455–8.

31 Krautheimer 1983, 159.

32 Vasari (1965), 130.

33 Cellini (1986), 31.

34 On the fate of the cartoons, see Campigli 2019, 298–300. They are thought to have remained in the Sala del Papa from the end of 1512 to

November 1515, when the papal apartment was renovated for Leo X's visit.

35 Caglioti 2000, 294–310. One the *arengario*, see Heikamp 2011, 192–4.

36 On the layout of the piazza in the early sixteenth century, see Caglioti 2000, 329–44.

37 Hirst 2004.

38 See Bush 1980. A useful summary on the story of the *Hercules and Cacus* is found in Heikamp 2011, 201–212.

39 Cellini (1986), 313.

40 According to the inscription on the base of Donatello's bronze (Caglioti 2000, 1–21).

41 Wolf 2003.

42 Shearman 1992, 44–56.

43 Vasari 1568 (1912–14), vii, 96.

44 Heikamp 2011, 232.

45 Pizzorusso 2000, 217.

46 Borghini (2007), 70.

47 The Loggia became a genuine exhibition space over the subsequent centuries: the ancient works that were part of the Medici collection in Rome were first placed there (1791); then Giambologna's *Hercules and the Centaur*, the *Menelaos and Patroclus* (both in 1841), and the *Rape of Proserpine* by Pio Fedi (1866). Vossilla 2006, 40.

48 Del Bravo 1997, 170–72.