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A City of Feuds:
Competitive Spirit, Architecture, and Brunelleschi's Individual Renaissance in Florence

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Daedalus, the unparalleled inventor and master craftsman of Greek mythology, fashioned wax wings for his son Icarus by which they attempted to escape Crete. Flying too close to the sun, Icarus' wings soon melted, causing him to plummet into the sea. If "Icarus has come to symbolize hubris, in his failure to respect the limits of human flight imposed by nature, Daedalus' ability to construct tools to transcend nature's limits effectively symbolizes the triumph of technology over nature."¹ This transcendence of human nature came to be Filippo Brunelleschi's (1377-1446) mythic achievement. While both philosophers and artists of the Renaissance period embodied the same humanistic movement centered around the rebirth of science, culture, art and philosophy of classical Greece and Rome, the way they viewed their contemporaries is in stark contrast. While the knowledge of the philosophers cascaded within their collaborative and interconnected circles of scientists, scholars and translators, the works of the artists, eclipsing that of their classical ancestors, were driven by fierce competition. Best embodying this competition is the Daedalus-like Filippo Brunelleschi. Engendered by

* The author would like to thank Professor Clay Burlingham for his continued academic support and inspiration.
1. Mary D. Garrard, *Brunelleschi's Egg: Nature, Art and Gender in Renaissance Italy*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010), 35.

competition with Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378-1455) and the imminent construction of Florence's Cathedral dome, Brunelleschi, subsequently consumed by his transformation from artist to architect, characterized the Renaissance not only through works, but actions as well.

Florence, the home of the Renaissance, "was a city of feuds: Guelfs and Ghibellines, Blacks and Whites; Magnate and Popolo, Grasso and Minuto; Albizzi and Medici[;] ... stagnation or rebirth."² Unlike most feuds however, the feuds between guilds at the crux of Florentine societal structure did not always result in bloodshed, but instead harnessed competition amongst artists from around Europe to create art and architecture which embodied and laid a foundation for the Renaissance and Brunelleschi's transformative outburst. Guild patronage was intertwined in Florentine civic participation. From 1293 on, "when the Florentines passed the Ordinances of Justice, citizenship in the commune of Florence was restricted to members of twenty-one guilds, ... seven 'great guilds' and fourteen 'lesser guilds,'"³ defining the crux of citizenship in Florence to guild membership. The *Calimala* (merchants), the *Lana* (wool manufacturers), the *Seta* (silk manufacturers), and the *Cambio* (bankers) all possessed the most political and economic sway and "sponsored many of the great artistic and construction projects for the beautification of the city and the glory of their guilds."⁴ In a city where individual identity was strongly influenced by guild membership, art and architecture held a highly prioritized and competitive role amongst the public sphere.

With guild patronage at the core of Florentine civic participation, art competitions and competitive commissions spurred rivalry amongst guilds and artists, encouraging creative and artistic excellence. The merchant Giovanni Rucellai (1403-1481) wrote that "from 1413 until

2. Paul Robert Walker, *The Feud That Sparked the Renaissance: How Brunelleschi and Ghiberti Changed the Art World*, (New York, Harper Collins, 2002), XIV-XV.

3. Ibid., 14.

4. Ibid., 15.

1423, for ten years... we joined a tranquil peace, without any fear; the commune had few expenses for troops, and few taxes were levied, so that the region became wealthy.”⁵ Although historian Paul Robert Walker partially disputes this “rose-coloured” claim, insisting that the Florentines still faced hardship, notably from the plague of 1417 and the famine of 1421, the end of hostilities with Naples ushered in an increased surplus of wealth.⁶ In the hands of the guilds, much of this wealth was directed towards art and architecture. The *Lana* continued its work on the Cathedral and its decoration, the *Calimala* on the baptistery doors, and the *Seta* sponsored some of the construction at the Orsanmichele.⁷ The Orsanmichele church statue commission came to best embody the artistic struggle between guilds which exemplified Florence.⁸ Fourteen external niches adorn the walls of the Orsanmichele, each assigned to a major or minor guild for which they may sculpt their patron saint. *St. Mark* was constructed by Donatello (1386-1466) for *Linaiooli Rigattieri* (linen-weavers and peddlers)⁹ and was considered by his contemporaries, and later admirer Michelangelo (1475-1564), to be the most realistic statue created in the Western World since the reign of ancient Rome.¹⁰ Lorenzo Ghiberti’s *St. John*, constructed for the *Calimala*, was the first solid bronze statue since Roman times. Costing close to ten times more than marble of comparable statues, Lorenzo’s statue came to stir “the masses as surely and powerfully as did Donatello’s *St. Mark*.”¹¹ With a chance to “flaunt their wealth and proclaim the honor of their guild,”¹² art became a competitive focus for Florence, visible to the masses and artists alike, financing the constant pursuit of innovation amongst artists. Florence’s guild-based

5. Ibid., 74.

6. Ibid.

7. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, (London, The Folio Society, 1993), 180.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 179.

10. Walker, *The Feud That Sparked the Renaissance*, 74.

11. Ibid., 79.

12. Ibid., 81.

societal structure of artistic competition was evident in the construction of the Orsanmichele church. This collective of competitive spirit would soon be eclipsed by the spark of an individual feud that it had laid the foundation of, that of the baptistery doors.

Furthermore, in the *Inferno*, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), longing for his city, recalled the octagonal baptismal font of “my beautiful San Giovanni.”¹³ The poet “was not alone.”¹⁴ The Baptistery was central to Florentine life and was believed to have been constructed on a temple to Mars, drawing “a direct connection to republican ideals of ancient Rome.”¹⁵ The commission for the second set of bronze doors, announced in 1401, would soon come to eclipse any of Dante’s old notions of beauty and art, renew the great artistic competitions of ancient Rome, and provide an opportunity for an artist to make an eternal name and career.¹⁶ Filippo Brunelleschi’s loss to Lorenzo Ghiberti in the competition to gain the privilege to construct the second set of doors provided the artist with the competitive motivation and freedom for a personal rebirth.

Lorenzo won the competition, and for him, “it was natural to see it as a defining moment.”¹⁷ This moment, however, not only belonged to him in victory, but to Brunelleschi in defeat. Son of politically-engaged notary, the intelligent young Brunelleschi, born in 1377, was quick to master multiple mediums of art, eventually dawning the title of goldsmith.¹⁸ In examination of Florence’s artistic spark, known by contemporary scholars as the Renaissance, Brunelleschi was later to be credited by historians with the first complete implementation of the linear perspective, the use of geometric lines and a vanishing point to establish depth in a mathematically precise and realist fashion.¹⁹ Such a break grounded art in the temporal, ushering

13. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, (New York, W.W. Norton, 1977), 150.

14. Walker, *The Feud That Sparked the Renaissance*, 13.

15. Ibid., 16.

16. Ibid., 17.

17. Ibid., XII.

18. Ibid., 5.

19. Ibid., 8.

in the Modern world, where the Middle Ages once stood and inspiring, if not guiding, the great artists to come. In Florence, during the Renaissance, “art was revolutionary, and there was little doubt that the man behind the revolution was Brunelleschi.”²⁰ Defeat at the hands of Lorenzo would induce the naturally competitive Brunelleschi to plot such a course of history. Lorenzo’s *commentaries* recall a competition centered around the construction of a single panel depicting the sacrifice of Isaac,²¹ offering an “interesting iconography to test the skills of potential craftsman.”²² Although Lorenzo depicts a battle between many artists hailing from Italian soil, no two captivated the judges more than Lorenzo and Filippo. A divided judicial team picked Lorenzo’s panel, in a hotly contested decision which not only divided the two artists but the whole city.²³ After putting so much work and pride into his panel, Filippo was just “as naked as Isaac on the altar.” The loss came as a “defining moment of his life.”²⁴ Lorenzo’s very nature, an “illegitimate upstart... [too young and inexperienced to] sign a contract for the commission he had won,”²⁵ only added to the devastation of defeat. The loss, as painful and humiliating as it must have been, fostered a lifelong competitor in Lorenzo, provided Brunelleschi with motivation to leave the goldsmiths trade, and recast his image to eclipse the talents of his “illegitimate” competitor, ultimately giving him the new-found freedom from employment to hone his skills in anticipation for Florence’s greatest artistic competition yet.

Moreover, the looming opportunity to construct the Cathedral dome fine-tuned Brunelleschi’s focus. From the little that is documented regarding Brunelleschi’s life, the two

20. Ibid.

21. Lorenzo Ghiberti, “The Commentaries” In *Literary Sources of Art History: An Anthology of Texts from Theophilus to Goethe*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1947), 83-94.

22. Walker, *The Feud that Sparked the Renaissance*, 16.

23. Antonio Manetti, *The Life of Brunelleschi*, (University Park and London, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1970).

24. Walker, *The Feud That Sparked the Renaissance*, 25.

25. Ibid.

primary accounts, Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives of Artists*²⁶ and Antonio Manetti's *Vita di Filippo*,²⁷ present the artist as being fueled by competitive zeal. Given Brunelleschi's consuming competitiveness and newfound foe in Ghiberti, it is likely that his subsequent abandonment of the goldsmith's trade and turn to architecture and engineering was not only due to a sense of defeat, but also to a renewed sense of competition and the anticipation of the newest commission. Beginning "around 1296, the Cathedral had been envisioned as the largest and most magnificent in the world."²⁸ A century later, the building was still unfinished and "Brunelleschi would have known the greatest challenge of all, the construction of the dome, lay waiting in the future, just as he would have known that no one had yet found a means to solve it."²⁹ In November of 1404, "Brunelleschi was appointed to the Duomo, the organization which oversaw construction and maintenance of the Cathedral, where he joined a commission of nineteen artists and artisans formed to consider a problem in the ongoing project now entering its second century of sporadic and difficult work"³⁰. For the many models of the Cathedral presented over the century, all could only speculate on the construction of the dome. The goldsmiths, sculptors, and painters of the Duomo, like Filippo, with skillsets unqualified to construct the dome, gawked at the absent space overhead. In the early *Quattrocento*, there was no clear concept of architect as a profession³¹. For Brunelleschi, with attention redirected from doors to dome, triumph over nature in the construction of the dome required a rebirth of ancient knowledge and, subsequently, a rebirth of the self.

26. Vasari, *The Lives of Artists*, 131-175.

27. Manetti, *The Life of Brunelleschi*.

28. Walker, *The Feud That Sparked the Renaissance*, 6.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 36.

31. Ibid., 6.

Finally, with the competitive drive fostered not only by the Florentine artistic environment, his personal freedom from large-scale artistic commissions due to his defeat in the baptistery doors competition, and his artistic redirection from the baptistery doors to the dome, Brunelleschi is believed to have devoted the years following the committee and baptistery commission to studying antiquity in preparation for the rebirth of knowledge needed to raise the dome. Because of this, he subsequently entered a personal renaissance. Brunelleschi left Florence in search of insight across Italy.³² Vasari and Manetti both expressed that Brunelleschi's genius conveyed in the creation of the dome was a result of meticulous study and measurement of the Pantheon in Rome. The Florentine dome however, according to contemporary architects, also reflects Byzantine and Eastern Mediterranean domes. This suggests that Brunelleschi's years of meticulous architectural study were not only focused on the Pantheon, but on the ruins and buildings of eastern Italy, Venice, Padua and Ravenna. It is even possible that "Brunelleschi ventured beyond the Italian peninsula, perhaps to Constantinople...where the great church of Hagia Sophia was crowned with a huge pendentive dome, while structures emanating from the dome featured a system of iron and stone 'chains' similar to the system Brunelleschi would later use on the dome in Florence."³³ With no record of Brunelleschi in the year 1406, it is possible that he joined or interviewed a group of Italian workmen in Constantinople who rebuilt a fallen section of the Hagia Sophia that year. Further complicating his work, the "Herringbone" style of masonry later implemented on the dome would reflect that of early-fourteenth century Persian architecture and his use of a double-shelled dome was an anomaly outside of the Middle East.³⁴ All influences of his later-constructed dome

32. Ibid., 26.

33. Ibid., 60.

34. Ibid.

point to an intensive architectural study of not just the Pantheon of Rome, but a wide and obsessive examination of all forms architecture that, if not through scouring foreign and ancient records, models and interviews, possibly took Brunelleschi across the known world in a journey of meticulous measurement.

Brunelleschi's intensive study likely not only revisited antiquity through architectural examination, but also through literary inquiry. If "there is a single key to the puzzle [of Brunelleschi's creative outburst], it may be a Greek geography book that arrived in Florence around 1400 in the hands of Manuel Chrysoloars (1350-1415)."³⁵ In Ptolemy's *Geography*, the Greek mathematician and astronomer suggested three different ways to map the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional plane. One of these approaches required the viewer to gaze at the world through a single point, expressed then by laying out the resulting image in a system of grids and coordinates, perfectly mirroring Brunelleschi's later perspective-panels.³⁶ Whereas "other men involved in designing buildings at this time generally relied on models...Filippo could [now] draw his buildings on paper in accurate perspective and scale."³⁷ Enabled by his intensive study of antiquity, both textually and mathematically, Brunelleschi's newfound architectural skill triumphed over Lorenzo, securing his place as architect and engineer of the Cathedral dome. Now lying in a crypt under the dome, the Latin inscription "FILLIPUS ARCHITECTOR" marks his resting place.³⁸ In inquiring into all manner of architecture and engineering, Brunelleschi not only raised the largest dome the world had ever

35. Ibid., 62.

36. Samuel Y. Edgerton, *The Mirror, the Window, and the Telescope: How the Renaissance Linear Perspective Changed Our Vision of the Universe*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2009), 69.

37. Walker, *The Feud That Sparked the Renaissance*, 89.

38. Ibid., 189.

seen, but subsequently underwent a personal renaissance from goldsmith to Daedalus-like architect, exemplifying the Renaissance in not only works, but in character as well.

Brunelleschi's individual rebirth from an artist to architect was engendered by the competitive foundation laid by Florence's guild-based society, his defeat by Lorenzo Ghiberti in the baptistery doors competition, the looming Cathedral dome competition, and Filippo's subsequent architectural study and individual transformation. For the Daedalus-like architect, sight was a defining characteristic. It was "God and God alone who looked at the world."³⁹ But for Brunelleschi, sight and observation grounded in life, a refocus from the divine to the temporal, enabled his own eternal transcendence.

About the author

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39. Ibid., 63.