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Lost Architecture Remodeling: An Iconographic Reading

Abstract: In the Middle Ages, images had useful functions, particularly among illiterates. In holy places pictorial representations helped to instruct illiterates, making them understand the stories that were represented, recognize the Saints, and perceive the meaning of their attributes. The representation of a miniature model of a church associated with a saint often denotes that he had erected holy places as symbols of the 'building up' of the Church through the Doctrine and his own theological writings. A model of a town often refers to the town where the church holding the painting was located. A miniature model of a medieval town is usually offered to the Virgin by the patron saint of the city which is represented. This article intends to illustrate how the representation of an architectural miniature model, as the main attribute of a saint in medieval iconography, has influenced the process of remodeling lost architectures that have changed shape over the centuries due to reconstruction or restoration. Architectural miniature models, represented as an iconographic attribute of a saint, are shown in numerous 14th to 15th century paintings. The usefulness of a maquette, in remodeling both the aspect and the style of a structure, is underlined by impressively precise architectural details which characterize the suggestive and eloquent examples of maquette examined in this study.

Keywords: iconography; miniature model; medieval architecture.

Back to the Past: An Unconventional Cityscape

The convention of a model of a city, depicted in images as being held by its patron saint or by a saint whose intercession with the Virgin or Christ was sought, had been widespread in the 14th and 15th centuries. The representation of diminutive towns often refers to some communities in Italy's Marche region. This is probably due to the fact that, in the late Middle Ages, these communities were autonomous towns with an own administration.¹

¹ Vieri Favini and Alessandro Savorelli, "I santi 'vessilliferi'. Patroni e araldica comunale", in *Santi, patroni, città: immagini della devozione civica nelle Marche*, ed. Vieri Favini and Alessandro Savorelli (Ancona: Quaderni del Consiglio Nazionale delle Marche, 2013), 28.

The *Annunciation*, painted in 1486 by Carlo Crivelli for the Observant Franciscan convent of the Annunziata in Ascoli,² is partly a votive picture, depicting the gratitude of Ascoli to the Virgin for the reception of the grant of *Libertas Ecclesiastica* on the feast of her Annunciation and invoking her protection and that of the Archangel Gabriel on the city (Fig. 1). Crivelli was asked to depict the *Annunciation* in the setting of Ascoli.³

The composition is divided into two parts: on the right is the Virgin's house, on the left the buildings of the city. A long tunnel of open space is between the two groups of buildings. It is crossed by transverse spaces, creating the illusion in the foreground of a narrow street, typical of the late medieval Ascoli.⁴ In the street, in the foreground, Archangel Gabriel and Saint Emidio are kneeling before the Virgin, who is reading the book in the ground floor of her magnificent house. Saint Emidio holds a great model of Ascoli, of which he is protector and patron. Emidio is represented as a young man, wearing a bishop's ceremonial dress.⁵ In an attitude of gentle petition, with his gloved hand raised, he appeals for Gabriel's protection over Ascoli.

The model of the city is figured naturalistically and before its main gateway. On the right is the green hill of the Annunziata, or Colle Pelasgico.⁶ The town is surrounded by crenellated walls. Several tall towers, mainly located in the midtown,⁷ are made of local travertine. The gabled houses, also made of travertine, are one or two-story buildings that still exist in Ascoli. They are characterized by arched windows and are located in narrow streets,⁸ as shown in the left part of the model. One of these *case-torri* shown in the model are also represented in the left upper part of the entire panel, beyond the dove-haunted tower-house.

In the foreground of the maquette, it is possible to identify the 13th century *Porta Solestà*, one of the seven city gates that used to give access to the town during the Middle Ages. The two low walls abutting the gate suggest the crossing of the Tronto

² The 15th century Venetian Carlo Crivelli spent most of his career in the Marche region. Here he developed a distinctive personal style. He did numerous polyptychs showing detailed architectural maquettes associated with a Saint. He worked especially in and near Ascoli Piceno. The *Ascoli Annunciation*, which Paul Buschmann considered as the most fascinating and lovely of Crivelli's works, is now preserved in the National Gallery in London. Paul Buschmann, "Carlo Crivelli e le sue opere alla 'National Gallery' di Londra", *Emporium* 13, 77 (May 1901): 332.

³ Ronald Lightbown, *Carlo Crivelli* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 329. The *Libertas Ecclesiastica*, the Papal Bull issued by *Pope Sixtus IV* on 25 March 1482, gave administrative autonomy to the town. Vittoria Camelliti, "Tradizione e innovazione nell'iconografia dei santi patroni marchigiani tra Medioevo e Rinascimento", in *Santi, patroni, città: immagini della devozione civica nelle Marche*, ed. Vieri Favini and Alessandro Savorelli (Ancona: Quaderni del Consiglio Nazionale delle Marche, 2013), 98.

⁴ Giuseppe Fabiani, "Aspetti della città", in *Ascoli nel Quattrocento* (Ascoli: Società Tipolitografica Editrice, 1950), 1: 179.

⁵ While working in the Marche region, Crivelli continued the traditions of the ancient Venetian School. His style shows a revival of a decorative and ceremonial manner, evoking a Venetian Byzantinism. Buschmann, "Carlo Crivelli", 326.

⁶ Lightbown, *Carlo Crivelli*, 339.

⁷ Fabiani, "Aspetti della città", 1: 171, 180.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

river.⁹ The monumental arch of *Porta Solestà*, which is made of travertine like the other constructions, has a barrel vault and shows the typical medieval battlements at the top.¹⁰ As the city of Ascoli is naturally protected – along three edges – by the sloping riverbanks of the Tronto and Castellano rivers, the scale model underlines the sloping ground of the steep ravine of the Tronto.

This realistic representation of the town is supported by the fact that some medieval structures in the city of Ascoli correspond to those represented in the model painted in the *Annunciation* by Pietro Alemanno for the *Cappella degli Anziani* in the *Palazzo del Popolo*, to celebrate the *Libertas Ecclesiastica*.¹¹ Alemanno's work dates to 1484 and shows the city of Ascoli as it appeared in the 15th century. The maquette is in the foreground, between Gabriel and Mary. There are similar characteristics shown in Crivelli's altarpiece, such as the sloping ground of the town, the *Porta Solestà* in the foreground, the typical tall towers and the battlemented walls surrounding the city. The Ascoli gabled *case torri*, pierced by small arched windows, are – as in Crivelli's work – along narrow streets.¹²

It is significant to note that Crivelli's city view, unlike Alemanno's, is entirely secular and no churches are shown, possibly to underline the fact that the trust in a patron saint of a town was linked to his effectiveness as an *advocatus*, devoted to interceding for citizen salvation.

As patron saints, risen to symbols of civic identity, in medieval municipal Italy were “protectores, gubernatores et defensores”,¹³ they embodied the town itself, which really appears with its churches, towers, *case torri*, gateways, *piazze*, defensive walls, held by the saint in order to take charge of it before the Lord.¹⁴ In Crivelli's *Triptych of Camerino*,¹⁵ the model of a 15th century view of Camerino, is held by its patron Saint Venanzio, who was a Christian martyr who defended Camerino at the head of a troop

⁹ Outside the city walls, in front of *Porta Solestà*, a Roman bridge connects the east bank to the west bank of the Tronto river.

¹⁰ Although today *Porta Solestà* does not display battlements at the top, they may have originally existed as defensive devices placed at the top of perimeter towers, gateways, and surrounding walls, as were usually employed in medieval towns.

¹¹ Both the *Annunciations* by Crivelli and Alemanno were commissioned to commemorate the *Libertas Ecclesiastica*, which had been accorded to the city of Ascoli exactly on the Annunciation day. Thus, in both paintings the model of the late medieval city of Ascoli is represented.

¹² Alemanno represents the double-arched *Porta Romana* in the background, flanked by the original towers which no longer exist. In addition, Alemanno, unlike in Crivelli's painting, shows two religious buildings clearly recognizable, i.e., the basilica of Saint Francis, flanked by the twin towers, and Saint Angel church.

¹³ Giulia Orofino, “Il ‘Comune dei santi’. L'iconografia dei patroni nei libri cittadini”, in *Forme e modelli della santità in Occidente dal tardo antico al medioevo*, ed. Massimiliano Bassetti, Antonella Degl'Innocenti and Enrico Manestò (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2012), 159.

¹⁴ Chiara Frugoni, *A Distant City: Images of Urban Experience in the Medieval World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 83–85.

¹⁵ The triptych, preserved in Milan in the Pinacoteca di Brera, is part of the large altarpiece that Crivelli realized in 1482 for the 14th century church of Saint Dominic in Camerino. The other panels of the altarpiece are in Frankfurt and Zurich.

of soldiers.¹⁶ Saint Venanzio, who also holds a standard of Camerino, is attending the Virgin enthroned in the central panel (Fig. 2).¹⁷

Some scholars see the view of the town as a conventional representation which generally evokes the image of Camerino.¹⁸ On the other hand, the view of the medieval city allows us to identify some structures as they possibly originally appeared, even if they have been partially modified over time due to restoration.¹⁹

Saint Venanzio church shows its medieval façade, which was spared by the 1799 earthquake and was then incorporated into a neoclassical *portico*. The Romanesque rose window still exists. Standing above the Saint Venanzio church is Saint Dominic church,²⁰ of which today faded tracks remain in the external fronts.

The bell towers in the foreground recall that of Saint Venanzio church represented in the maquette of the city which appears in a fresco attributed to Girolamo di Giovanni and painted for the church of Saint Francis in Camerino,²¹ where Saint Venanzio kneels before the Virgin holding a model of the city. The representation of Saint Venanzio church seems also to correspond to that which stands out from the crenellated wall, represented in the maquette of the city held by Saint Venanzio, painted in a 14th century fresco from the monastery of the *Clarisse* of Gualdo Tadino.²²

The classical *rotunda* surmounted by a dome recalls the shape of the chapel of Saint Ansovino in the Camerino cathedral before the 16th century restoration.²³

¹⁶ Originally the patron saint of the city was Saint Ansovino, a holy Carolingian bishop of the city, until the Varano family, as rulers of Camerino, preferred the third-century Christian martyr Venanzio to Ansovino. While Ansovino's cult emphasized the Church and was essentially an ecclesiastic cult, Saint Venanzio inspired devotion as a *miles* and local martyr in a family of *condottieri*, such as the Varano (Lightbown, *Carlo Crivelli*, 291). Thus, the Saint with a vexillum and a maquette of Camerino frequently appears in coins minted during the Varano government.

¹⁷ Saint Venanzio is in the right-hand panel of the triptych, flanked by the Dominican Saint Peter Martyr. In the left-hand panel are Saint Dominic, the founder of the Dominican order, and Saint Peter in papal dress, referring to the Dominican mission to preach and support the papacy.

¹⁸ Camelliti, "Tradizione e innovazione", 87–88.

¹⁹ The earthquake which struck Camerino in 1799 damaged several buildings which have mainly been reconstructed.

²⁰ Lightbown, *Carlo Crivelli*, 290.

²¹ The fresco, realized in 1462, is now preserved in the Pinacoteca Civica of Camerino.

²² This fresco is now preserved in the Museo Civico of Gualdo Tadino, near Perugia.

²³ Lightbown, *Carlo Crivelli*, 290.

Miniature Churches' Impact in Remodeling Lost Architecture

The original construction of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua was altered while work was in progress.²⁴ A reduction in the scale of the original design, and of Enrico Scrovegni's plans for the building, was caused by the hostility of the neighboring Eremitani friars, who underlined the necessity to construct the chapel following the original project,²⁵ which can be seen from the scale model of the chapel offered by the patron of the Church to the Virgin Mary, as represented by Giotto in the reverse façade of the building (Fig. 3).

The maquette shows a church that is similar (for the parts shown) to the one that was actually erected, except for the entrance doorway and the area of the apse where there should have been a transept. The miniature model shows the outside of the church made of brick and a sloping roof with the top decorated with hanging arches, like in the existing construction. The *tympanum* above the entrance and the transept with two pointed façades pierced by tall windows – which were not realized in the final building – amplified and beautified the building, as stated by the initial work in progress contested by the Eremitans. A bell tower, the apse of the nave and a row of small square-windows in the lower part of the longitudinal wall do not appear in the model, as they were realized later.²⁶

As the polygonal apse and the sacristy were added after the construction of the original chapel, it has been noted that the original plan was based on mathematical proportions, marked by a spatial module based on the square form.²⁷ The square modules are repeated in the nave and the presbytery. Thus, by adding two square side-presbytery bays, the south transept would correspond to the projection represented in the model.

The scale model of the Chapel shows architectural details which recall 13th century local religious buildings. Brick walls marked by half pilasters, a gabled façade decorated with hanging arches and a marble arched entrance are to be found, for instance, in the Basilica of Saint Anthony and in the Church of the Eremitani in Padua.

²⁴ Commissioned by Enrico degli Scrovegni, the chapel was built after February 6, 1300, and decorated by Giotto, with the Stories of the Virgin Mary and Christ. The author's name of the architectural project is still uncertain, although some scholars attributed it to Giotto (Vittorio Dal Piaz, "La storia e l'architettura della Cappella", in *The Scrovegni Chapel in Padua*, Essays, ed. Davide Banzato, Giuseppe Basile, Francesca Flores d'Arcais and Anna Maria Spiazzi /Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 2005, 19, 41). The church, dedicated to the Virgin in 1303, was probably consecrated on March 25, 1305, when a procession from the Cathedral to the Arena was followed by the liturgical drama of the Annunciation which took place in the Arena itself.

²⁵ In January 1305 the Eremitani friars protested the building's size intent, i.e., to build a church larger, with more altars, a new bell tower, and big and new bells. The intent was not that for which Ottobono dei Razzi, bishop of Padua, had granted Enrico permission to *aedificare unam parvam ecclesiam in modo quasi cuiusdam oratorii, pro se, uxore, matre et familia tantum, ad quam concursus non fieret populi* (Dal Piaz, "La storia e l'architettura della Cappella", 28–29). Thus, the permission was to build a small church or oratory, intended for the patron and his family members, and closed to public. Serena Romano, *Giotto's O* (Roma: Viella, 2008), 168, 173–174.

²⁶ Dal Piaz, "La storia e l'architettura della Cappella", 30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35–39.

The Romanesque Benedictine church of San Pier Maggiore in Florence was rebuilt, between 1304 and 1352, on the basis of a possible drawing done by Arnolfo di Cambio in 1296.²⁸ The miniature model held by Saint Peter, as represented in the church altarpiece realized by Jacopo di Cione and his Workshop in the 1370s, reproduces the church as it appeared in the second half of the 14th century. It shows an austere style, typical of the Benedictine Order, with Gothic features, but with an absence of decoration (Fig. 4).

The painting,²⁹ commissioned by the nuns of the church, shows a detailed representation of the Gothic church, with a T-shaped-cross plan and three naves.³⁰ which are marked – in the façade – by three entrances separated by half pilasters.

A rose-window above each portal, as well as an octagonal dome in the intersection between the transept and the main nave, possibly followed the scheme employed in Arnolfo di Cambio's project for the Florentine façade of Santa Maria del Fiore, a few years before San Pier Maggiore construction.

The entrance to the lateral nave may have given access to the Nuns' Choir which existed at least since 1317 in the upper right nave of the church.³¹

In the 16th century the structure of church was significantly modified. In the early sixteenth century a series of vaulted chapels were added adjoining the left nave aisle.³² Until 1569, when further transformations were made in the interior of the church, there would still be a transept, as represented in the model. During the transformations, which included the removing of three chapels and the Men's Choir,³³ it is possible that the roof changed shape from a clerestory roof into a gable roof and – consequently – the probable dome may have been removed. The map of Florence drafted by Stefano Buonsignori in 1584 shows, in fact, a church with a gabled façade.³⁴ The drawing also shows a new Renaissance-type main entrance, flanked by two trabeated half-pilasters, recalling Brunelleschi's Florentine architectural features. The entrances to the lateral naves, as well as the belltower, are the same as those represented in the maquette.

²⁸ Monica Bietti, "Dal Savonarola al pontificato di Leone X: artisti e patroni in San Pier Maggiore a Firenze", in *Nello splendore mediceo: Papa Leone X e Firenze*, ed. Nicoletta Baldini and Monica Bietti (Livorno: Sillabe, 2013), 135.

²⁹ The altarpiece is now preserved in the National Gallery in London. The *Coronation of the Virgin* is represented in the central panel, while the attendant saints are on the side panels, of which the left one includes the figure of Saint Peter with the maquette.

³⁰ Several piers, belonging to the original transept, have been identified in the façades of the buildings which were erected in the place of the old church in the 19th century. Donal Cooper, "Firenze scomparsa: le chiese di Santa Chiara e San Pier Maggiore e la loro ricostruzione digitale presso i musei di Londra", *Archeologia e Calcolatori* 10 (2018): 75.

³¹ Joanne Allen, *Transforming the Church Interior in the Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 225.

³² Bietti, "Dal Savonarola al pontificato di Leone X", 129.

³³ Allen, *Transforming the Church Interior*, 231.

³⁴ Stefano Buonsignori. *Map of Florence* (Florence, 1584).

Some remains of the church, which was demolished in the late 18th century,³⁵ have been found and are part of nineteenth-century constructions that reused walls and foundations of the former church. Remains include fragments of arches and piers that originally supported the northern side of the church. Also, lion-faced gargoyles for draining water are still intact. Other pieces of the church have emerged, such as part of the tower, a section of the church's medieval belltower and its spiral staircase, preserved in a private apartment.³⁶

Conclusion

The representation of architectural diminutive models in medieval iconography has played a fundamental role in understanding and reconstructing shape and style of the original structures at the time they were built. This study has attempted to clarify the importance of iconographic attributes in devotional representations in supplying a significant contribution to the knowledge of medieval architecture, impacting on the remodeling process.

Scale models deal with vernacular and religious architecture. Identifying a conventionalized reality, Crivelli's cityscapes have provided a clear picture of medieval towns as well as detailed descriptions of ancient structures. The representation of miniature churches has shown how a detailed scale model of the church, as it was at the time it was built, can greatly influence its remodeling. For instance, the significant case of the disappeared San Pier Maggiore church demonstrates that by combining the maquette features with architectural remains and the results of city surveys, it has been possible to certainly remodel a great example of historical heritage.

³⁵ In the 17th century the church was partially rebuilt. When, in 1783, a column inside the church that had been compromised during an earlier renovation collapsed, it gave Grand Duke Leopold the pretext he was waiting for. Although the columns' failure in no way made the building unstable, Leopold ordered the church to be demolished as part of his strategy to reduce ecclesiastical influence in Tuscany and to redevelop the area. The classicizing triple-arched entrance *loggia*, built in 1638, still exists. The *loggia* establishes the location of the church and confirms that the street which currently runs through the central arch, in via San Pier Maggiore, once formed the church's central aisle.

³⁶ It is opportune to note that the *Virtual San Pier Maggiore* project carried out by a team of experts from Cambridge University and the National Gallery in London in 2015, has aimed to produce a virtual three-dimensional reconstruction of the church, starting from historic plans and maps, and combining city surveys and photogrammetric techniques. The digital reconstruction clearly recalls the three-dimensional shape of the maquette. Cooper, "Firenze scomparsa", 72–78.



Figure 1. Carlo Crivelli. *The Annunciation* (1486), detail of the model of Ascoli held by Saint Emidio, London, National Gallery.



Figure 2. Carlo Crivelli. *Triptych of Camerino* (1482), detail of the model of Camerino held by Saint Venanzio, Milano, Pinacoteca di Brera.



Figure 3. Giotto and workshop. *The Last Judgment* (1303–1305), detail of the Chapel presented by Enrico Scrovegni to the Virgin Mary, Padua, Scrovegni Chapel.



Figure 4. Jacopo di Cione and workshop. *Coronation of the Virgin* (ca. 1372–ca.1373), detail of the model of San Pier Maggiore held by Saint Peter, London, National Gallery.

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