



LA RENAISSANCE DES ORIGINES

Commencement, genèse et création
dans l'art des XV^e et XVI^e siècles

Dirigé par
Sefy Hendler, Florian Métral
& Philippe Morel

Collection | Études Renaissance

BREPOLS

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Captive Origins. Giorgio Vasari's *Tavola della Concezione* as a Manifesto for Artistic Success

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Introduction

At the centre of this article is Giorgio Vasari's *Tavola della Concezione* for the church of Santi Apostoli in Florence and its many derivations in sixteenth and seventeenth century Tuscany. Focusing on the novel iconography of the altarpiece, and in particular on the genesis and meanings of the theme of Adam, Eve and the Patriarchs represented in the lower section of the painting as tied figures in the process of being liberated by the Virgin Mary, the essay highlights not only the ratio behind this theological invention and some of the wider meanings of the Christian theme of the liberation of original (biblical) humanity from sin, but also the incredible regional success of this pictorial invention authored by Vasari to represent the much contested theme of the Conception of the Virgin. While existent scholarship has already demonstrated that part of the iconography derives from previous solutions created in particular by Rosso Fiorentino, this essay will argue that the visual theme of the liberation of both the naked and dressed figures of the Patriarchs from the laces of sin, as chosen and developed by Vasari, can be interpreted, not only, as an ingenious solution for the iconography of the *conception* of Mary outside original sin, but also as a metaphor for artistic 'conception' and creation, execution, and success.

Origins in Prison

According to the scholar of ancient Biblical cultures Gian Luigi Prato, narratives of origins are "visioni globali di un cosmo che riflette su sé stesso e in essi si rispecchia", "un *unicum* irripetibile": the story of the origins remains beyond historical time and intends to explain its genesis.¹ This applies to images and stories of *Genesis* as well as of other myths, for example the myth of Prometheus. In an illustration by Bernard Salomon for the translation of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* by Clément Marot, the image of Prometheus making the first "statue" or simulacrum of a man recalls in its structure and poses the image of God creating Adam in the Sistine Ceiling (fig. 1).² Following ancient sources (Lactantius), in the sixteenth-century Prometheus was indeed seen as an inventor and initiator, who was also commonly interpreted as the prototype of the first

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1 Gian Luigi Prato, *Gli inizi e la storia, Le origini della civiltà nei testi biblici*, Roma, Carocci, 2013, p. 12.

2 Clément Marot, *Les Traductions*, in *Oeuvres*, vol. II, Lyon, De Tournes, 1549, p. 45.



Fig. 1 - Bernard Salomon, *Prometheus forming the first man*, in Clément Marot, *Les Traductions*, in *Œuvres*, p. II, Lyon, De Tournes, 1556, p. 45.
© Bibliothèque nationale de France

sculptor.³ At the same time, original beginnings, such as man creation or the creation of the world, or any other event initiating historical time, are often tied with subsequent “symbolic exercises of re-creation(s).”⁴ The fundamental typological structure, which characterizes the whole Christian history of salvation, might be indeed considered as a symbolic exercise of re-creation of the original and unique beginning as told in *Genesis*. The story of the ‘origins’ of the world and subsequent history of humanity is told in the Old Testament. However, subsequent Christian imagination and the hermeneutical construction of the so-called ‘history of salvation’ were able to—literally—cast a shadow (*umbra*) on the whole human history before the coming of Christ; circumfused in such shades, all the figures and events recounted in the Bible became only “types” (*typoi*), or prefigurations (*figurae*) of the true history.⁵ According to this aggressive hermeneutical scheme of cultural appropriation, which, since the nineteenth century, is known with the name of typology, human history can only be accomplished after the coming of Christ and will end with the events of the Final Days (*novissimi*). What is peculiar to the entire Christian hermeneutical enterprise is the way in which the Biblical ‘origins’ were linked, or better ‘tied’, with an imposed act of submission, to Christian history of salvation—an history that, ultimately, can be read as an attempt to capture and finally ‘liberate’ again these ‘origins’, but only at certain conditions (that is after subordination and reduction of their powers).

For this symbolic exercise of re-creation visibility played an enormous role. The role of art and artists in this re-staging and recreation of the origins (for both theological and art-theoretical

3 For the common description of Prometheus as an inventor of the art of making images, statues, and simulacra, see, for instance, Guillaume Rouillé, *Prima parte del prontuario de le medaglie de’ più illustri, et fulgenti huomini et donne, dal principio del mondo insino al presente tempo, con le lor vite in compendio raccolte*, Lyon, Rouillé, 1553, p. 24: “prima d’ogn’altro, formò di tenero loto statue d’huomo, et che da esso provenne prima l’arte del fare et formare i simulachri et imagini”.

4 To use an expression, which was present in the original *Call for Papers* of the conference *The Renaissance of Origins. Beginnings, Genesis and Creation in the Art of the 15th and 16th Centuries*, organized in Tel Aviv and Paris by Sefy Hendler, Florian Métral and Philippe Morel. See also Florian Métral, *Figurer la création du monde. Mythes, discours et images cosmogoniques dans l’art de la Renaissance*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2019.

5 Eric Auerbach, “Figura”, *Archivum Romanicum*, t. 22, 1938, p. 436-89. For a re-reading of this text, with a survey of recent pertinent scholarly debates, see James I. Porter, “Disfigurations: Erich Auerbach’s Theory of Figura”, *Critical Inquiry*, t. 44, 2017, p. 80-113.

purposes) was clearly recognized by Christian writers and observers since early times.⁶ Already in his *Descriptio Terrae Sanctae* of 1160-70, the cleric and pilgrim Johannes von Würzburg, having visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, provided the following description:

As our Lord was thus dying on the cross, and of His own will giving up the spirit, the veil of the Temple was rent (*scissum est*) from the top to the bottom, and the rock in which the cross was fixed was split through the midst, in the place where it was touched by His blood; through which opening the blood flowed to the lower parts, wherein Adam is said to have been buried, and who was thus baptized in the blood of Christ. It is said to be in representation of this (*ad cuius rei designationem*) that a skull is always represented in paintings at the foot of the Cross; but this baptism of Adam in the blood of Christ means nothing more than that Adam was redeemed by the blood of Christ, since the Scripture tells us that he was buried at Hebron. It is rather Death and destruction which is designated by the hideous human face (*per deformem hominis faciem*), which is usually put below at the feet of the crucifix, because our Lord said: “*O mors, ero mors tua*, that is thy destruction.”⁷

The reference in this text is not only to the altar of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which was supposed to be built on the ‘tomb’ of Adam (fig. 2, in the present form, which certainly differs from that of the 12th century), but also at *every image* (“ubique depingi”) of the crucifix with Adam’s skull at the foot of the cross.⁸ While censoring the belief concerning the real location of the tomb of Adam, Johannes von Würzburg’s passage underlines and justifies, at the same time, the power of Christian painters in creating effective symbolic images representing the ‘new origin’ brought by Christianity (in this case, a skull at the foot of the cross, which, admittedly, could be interpreted as Adam’s skull “baptized” through Christ’s blood, or, more generally, as “death and destruction” overcome by salvation). This new life does not start with an act of creation (of man and/or the world), but with a ‘crucial’ event in the life of one single man: his death on the cross. In the framework of the figural and typological thinking which was developed by

6 Since the visual impact of this interpretative scheme was pervasive, and not only for Medieval art, it would be impossible to signal here all the relevant literature; however, it is worth mentioning that several recent contributions have tried to unveil all the complexities of visual typology into the early modern period, for which see most recently: *Visual Typology in Early Modern Europe. Continuity and Expansion*, ed. by D. Eichberger and S. Perlove, Turnhout, Brepols, 2018 (with previous bibliography).

7 “Domino nostro sic in crucis patibulo exspirante et animam suam sponte deponente velum templi scissum est a summo usque deorsum et eadem petra, in qua crux erat defixa, in ea parte qua tangebatur sanguine est per medium fissa, per quam fissuram sanguis eius fluxit ad inferiora, in quibus dicitur a quibusdam Adam fuisse sepultus et sic in sanguine Christi baptizatus. Ad cuius rei designationem dicunt quasi caput mortui ubique depingi ad pedes crucifixi, sed nichil est aliud Adam in sanguine Christi baptizatum quam per sanguinem Christi redemptum, cum in Ebron Scriptura referat eum fuisse sepultum. Per deformem autem hominis faciem, quae solet apponi subtus ad pedes crucifixi, mors et eius destructio designatur, unde dominus: ‘O mors, ero mors tua, id est destructio tua’” (Robert B. C. Huygens, *Peregrinationes tres* (= *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*, Band 139), Brepols, Turnhout, 1994, p. 119). The English translation in the text is based on the one provided by Aubrey Stewart (Palestine Pilgrims’ Text Society, *Description of the Holy Land by John of Würzburg (A.D. 1160-1170)*, transl. by A. Stewart, London, Adelphi, 1890, p. 32), with some adaptations. See Michele Bacci, “La croce dipinta in Oriente. Alcune riflessioni”, in *La pittura su tavola del secolo XII. Riconsiderazioni e nuove acquisizioni a seguito del restauro della Croce di Rosano*, ed. by C. Frosinini, A. Monciatti, G. Wolf, Florence, Edifir, 2012, p. 153-162 (on p. 156-158 and 161, n. 32). My warm thanks to Michele Bacci for having pointed out to me this passage and discussed it with me.

8 As an example among many see Giotto’s *Crucifix* at Santa Maria Novella (1290-1295) where the rocky formations above the hole containing the skull of Adam redeemed by Christ’s blood are impressively rendered.



Fig. 2 - View of the Rock of Golgotha from Adam's Chapel through a glass enclosure, Church of the Saint Sepulchre, Jerusalem. © Photo by the Author

Christians, which transformed previous Biblical history into a sort of prehistory or a prefiguration of the 'true' history, the death on the cross had the power to 'liberate' the prisoners.

Well into the late Middle Ages and the early modern period artists were stimulated in all sorts of ways to visualize this particular structure of history and the act of liberation of the original humanity performed by Christ's death. Among the chosen visual forms, the representation of the Biblical figures as being closed or relegated in a cave, or grotto (as in the above-mentioned case of the skull of Adam), or somehow represented as prisoners just awaiting their liberation were among the most popular solutions, sometimes following the apocryphal narrative of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and sometimes not.⁹ I will review only few examples showing how artists interpreted their power to visualize this liberation in original ways, which were not based on one single text or legend, but rather on a combination of inputs filtered through pictorial imagination.

Notwithstanding Johannes von Würzburg's early scepticism, the powerful idea that the skull represented at the foot of the Cross was indeed that of Adam, and that therefore his 'tomb' was directly placed below the Crucifix, persisted at least at an imaginative level, through the whole history of Christian iconography. Following this idea, in certain instances, this space even underwent a sort of expansion that turned the cave of Adam's skull into the space in which all the dead Patriarchs were waiting for liberation. As for Adam, the theological rationale for their im-

⁹ For the relation between the Gospel of Nicodemus and images of the Harrowing of Hell, see Chiara Franceschini, *Storia del limbo*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2017 (with previous literature).

prisonment was constituted by their lack of baptism, that is the 'second birth', which Christians considered to be necessary for cleaning the stain of original sin. Without this necessary rite of passage, access into the body of the Church and therefore to salvation had been allegedly denied to them, due to the persistent original burden. Those who remained in-between, and more specifically those who, although otherwise innocent, died before the accomplishment of this passage assumed a liminal state: the special place and condition, which was reserved to the prisoners of original sin in the context of the imaginary structure of the Christian afterlife, was limbo. A well-established iconographic line, in Italy as well as elsewhere, tended to transform the cave of Golgotha into limbo and to depict it as increasingly crowded.¹⁰

In one of the works executed by Simone dei Crocifissi, perhaps for a female congregation in Bologna in the second half of the fourteenth century, the cave below the cross is shown as hosting not only Adam, but also Eve, who are in the process of being liberated by 'the hand of God', which is depicted at the end of the cross: a sort of embryonal case of *Living Cross*, that is the type of the cross with active arms as defined by iconographers.¹¹ While a full interpretation of this iconography would go beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to underline here that in this visual solution the figure of Mary acts as a mediator between Christ and the hand of God for the 'liberation' of not only Adam, but also of the naked Eve.

Stemming from a completely different context, a later painting by an anonymous Netherlandish painter, about which not much is known (fig. 3), shows well how the cave, from hosting only Adam and Eve, has now become completely crowded with the many different figures of the Patriarchs recognizable by their attributes.¹² The extent to which the theme of the liberation of the Progenitors from underneath the cross did inspire ingenious artistic inventions can be further demonstrated by looking at how both the refined book illuminator Giulio Clovio, in his *Libro d'Ore Farnese* from 1546 (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library), or the sophisticated Netherlandish painter Gilles Mostaert (fig. 4) played with placing the cave of limbo right beneath the cross, literally in the lower frames of these two *Crucifixions*.¹³

10 See *ibid.* for all references to the theological debates, the metaphorical origins of the notions of limbo as a liminal space, and the visualization of it in Christian art between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

11 For this iconography and Simone dei Crocifissi's painting in the context of the visual imagination of limbo see *ibid.*, p. 72-74, plate VIII.

12 Sotheby's, New York City, 2007-06-08, nr. 224. Another example is provided by Garofalo's complex *Allegoria della Croce*, an elaborated image developing the already mentioned anti-Jewish iconographic scheme of the *Living Cross*: the cross's right hand crowns Ecclesia, while the left hand violently kills Synagoga. Here, the theme of the 'captivity' of the Jews is even contextualised with an image of the ruins of the *Templum Salomonis* (for which see C. Franceschini, *Storia del limbo*, *op. cit.*, p. 135-136, plate XVIII).

13 I refer to a painting in the Palazzo Bianco, Genoa (inv. PB 1621, legato G. Ricci 1892), which was recently re-attributed to Gillis Mostaert since after restoration the monogram 'GM' was found on the frame. On this typology of paintings by Gillis Mostaert and his workshop in which the frame is painted in grisaille with scenes related to the main subject see Carl van de Velde, "Tafeleren met grisaillelijsten van Gillis Mostaert", in *Essays in Northern European Art presented to Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann on his Sixtieth Birthday*, Doornspijk, Davaco Publishers, 1983, p. 276-282. On the decorative system of Giulio Clovio's *Farnese Hours*, in which the *Descent to Limbo* is also painted in grisaille in the lower frame, just below the main scene with the *Crucifixion* (New York, Morgan Library, M.69, f. 102v), see Elli Doulikaridou-Ramantani, "Fonctions de l'ornement dans les *Heures Farnese* de Giulio Clovio", *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, t. 58/3, 2016, p. 348-375. See also in the present volume *id.*, "Sanctifier le temps, le monde et l'humanité. Figures des origines dans deux manuscrits farnésiens", p. 201.



Fig. 3 - Northern Netherlandish painter, *Crucifixion with Mary, St. John and Mary Magdalen, and the Patriarchs in limbo*, first quarter of the 16th century, New York, Sotheby's. © Image Courtesy of Sotheby's / Sotheby's, New York City, 2007-06-08, nr. 224



Fig. 4 - Gillis Mostaert, *Crucifixion with grisaille frame including Christ in limbo*, before 1598, Genova, Palazzo Bianco. © Musei di Strada Nuova - Palazzo Bianco

La Tavola della Concezione

This type of vertical visual scheme, in which the prisoners' place (cave or else) is represented in the lower part of the depicted space and the agent of salvation in the upper part (not the most common arrangement for scenes of the *Harrowing of Hell* or *Christ in limbo*), resurfaced in a subsequent and different invention, which was equally linked to the visualization of the destruction of original sin: the altarpiece painted between 1540 and 1541 by a thirty-year old Vasari for the chapel of the rich banker Bindo Altoviti in the church of Santi Apostoli in Florence (fig. 5). Thanks to the extant documentation and a large set of available studies, the circumstances leading to the creation of this painting are well known. Most useful for the genesis of this work are, on the one hand, the important study on Vasari's drawings by Florian Härb, and, on the other, a series of articles by Marianna Lora, focusing on the discussion of this particular altarpiece in the context of the larger development of the iconography of the Immaculate Conception.¹⁴ These previous studies constitute my point of departure to tackle two further questions. First, I will discuss in more detail the meanings of the bounded or semi-bounded figures of the Progenitors and Patriarchs in this particular iconography; second, I will dwell on the visual success of this invention, which was replicated in many local churches in Tuscany. In conclusion, I will suggest to understand this work and its replicas in a context, which is not limited to the iconography of the Conception of Mary, but invest a larger set of references and implications, not only connected with the power of Mary, but also with the creative powers of art.

Retrospectively, in his autobiography included in the 1568 edition of *Le Vite*, Vasari described as follows the complex iconography. The tree of sin is represented in the middle of the painting. At its roots ("alle radici di esso"), the two naked, reclining and bounded figures of Adam and Eve are depicted as the first "transgressors" of a group including other nine tied figures: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, David, all them tied to the tree with both hands ("tutti ... legati per ambedue le braccia"), plus Samuel and Saint John the Baptist, "i quali sono legati per un solo braccio, per essere stati santificati nel ventre".¹⁵ Surrounded by small angels, the Virgin Mary is descending upon the tree: she is depicted in the act of trampling with her naked right foot over the head of the Serpent, also represented as tied to the tree and presiding over the prisoners' group. Two small angel busts, on the left and the right of the Virgin, hold two *cartigli* inscribed respectively with "Quos Evae culpa damnavit" and "Mariae gratia solvit": "Those whom Eva's fault had damned, Mary's grace untied/loosened/released". The Latin word "solvit" cannot be simply translated as "paid for it" (Cheney) or as "les a sauvés" (Lora). These two meanings are certainly implied, but "solvit" primary refers to the literal meaning of *sciogliere*: that is, to loosen from ties. Indeed, Vasari himself used the word *sciogliere* in another shorter de-

14 Florian Härb, *The drawings of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574)*, Rome, Ugo Bozzi editore s.r.l., 2015, p. 184-88; Marianna Lora, "De Rosso à Vasari: genèse de l'*Allégorie de l'Immaculée Conception* pour Bindo Altoviti", *Bulletin de l'Association des Historiens de l'Art Italien*, t. 14, 2008, p. 157-163. See also Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's *The Conception of Our Lady*: A Divine Fruit", *Cultural and Religious Studies*, t. 4/2, 2016, p. 87-114.

15 "Figurato l'albero del peccato originale nel mezzo della tavola, alle radici di esso, come primi transgressori del comandamento di Dio, feci ignudi e legati Adamo et Eva; e dopo agl'altri rami feci legati di mano in mano Abram, Isac, Iacob, Moisè, Aron, Iosue, Davit, e gl'altri Re successivamente, secondo i tempi: tutti, dico, legati per ambedue le braccia, eccetto Samuel e S. Giovanni Batista, i quali sono legati per un solo braccio, per essere stati santificati nel ventre" (*Descrizione dell'opere di Giorgio Vasari*, in Giorgio Vasari, *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori, 1550 e 1568*, ed. by R. Bettarini and P. Barocchi, 6 vols, Florence, S.P.E.S., 1966-1987, vol. 6, p. 369-408, on p. 380-381).



Fig. 5 - Giorgio Vasari, *Tavola della Concezione di Nostra Donna*, 1540-1541, Florence, Santi Apostoli, Altoviti altar.
© Su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo

scription of this painting. In the *Ricordanze* (which were “entirely composed in retrospect”¹⁶), Vasari remembers the circumstances of the making of this important *tavola*, which should have represented “l’albero del peccato al quale sia legato Adamo et Eva e molti Patriarci e profeti et a sommo la Nostra Donna che vestita di sole con la grazia dello splendor suo *gli scioglie* e coi piedi calca la testa del serpente legato et avvolto in torno all’albero”.¹⁷

The altarpiece for the Altoviti Chapel in Santi Apostoli was the first large scale altarpiece painted by Vasari in a Florentine church for a most prestigious patron. In his autobiography, after remembering that Altoviti allocated the commission to him having seen his 1540 *Deposition* for the church of SS. Donato and Ilarione in Camaldoli, Vasari specifies that the work for Santi Apostoli provided him with the chance of a true *ballon d’essai*: “E perché aveva a dare saggio di me a Fiorenza, non avendovi più fatto somigliante opera, [e] aveva molti concorrenti e desiderio di acquistare nome, mi disposi a volere in quell’opera far il mio sforzo e mettermi quanta diligenza mi fusse mai possibile”.¹⁸ In order to be free of any other *pensiero* (“potere ciò fare scarico di ogni molesto pensiero”), he even took care of marrying his third sister and to buy a house in Arezzo.¹⁹ In other words, according to these retrospective self-narrations²⁰, he made *tabula rasa* of every other practical need in order to be free to focus and create this work with the maximum of *diligenza*: Vasari perceived this commission as the potential *origin* of his own career in Florence.

I would like to argue that the altarpiece was designed to play an even more important role: not only, it was Vasari’s first essay as a painter of big altarpieces in Florence; it was also consciously planned to originate a new image of the *Conception of Mary* and more specifically of her Immaculate Conception (that is the fact that she was conceived as free from the original sin). Since there was still a variety of iconographic solutions for the cluster of themes connected to the Immaculate Conception, if successful, this new invention could become not just one of the images, but “the image” to have on every altar dedicated to this particular devotional theme. In other words, a big artistic achievement and also a business opportunity, implying perhaps a possible material profit, for Vasari and his followers, given the contemporary proliferation of altars and confraternities dedicated to the Conception of Mary in Florentine and Tuscan territories of the time.²¹

The operation proved to be a complete success. Not only the Santi Apostoli altarpiece marked the beginning of Vasari’s career in Florence, but he was also requested to produce at

¹⁶ Philip J. Jacks, “The Composition of Giorgio Vasari’s *Ricordanze*: Evidence from an Unknown Draft”, *Renaissance Quarterly*, t. 45/4, 1992, p. 739-784 (p. 743).

¹⁷ “A dì 10 di agosto 1540 Messer Bindo di Antonio Altoviti, cittadino fiorentino, mi allogò una tavola da farsi nella chiesa di Santo Apostolo di Firenze alla Capella sua drentovi l’albero del peccato al quale sia legato Adamo et Eva e molti Patriarci e profeti et a sommo la Nostra Donna che vestita di sole con la grazia dello splendor suo *gli scioglie* e coi piedi calca la testa del serpente legato et avvolto in torno all’albero” (Giorgio Vasari, *Ricordanze*, 1527-1573, c. 10, transcription of the ms. available online at: <memofonte.it/home/files/pdf/vasari_ricordanze>; accessed 10 February 2020). Italics are mine.

¹⁸ *Descrizione dell’opere di Giorgio Vasari*, op. cit., p. 380.

¹⁹ “Prima maritai la mia terza sorella e comperai una casa principiata in Arezzo, con un sito da fare orti bellissimi nel borgo di San Vito, nella miglior aria di quella città” (*ibid.*).

²⁰ For some incongruences in the retrospective (20-28 years after the facts) descriptions by Vasari of his own works cf. *Raphael, Cellini and a Renaissance Banker: The Patronage of Bindo Altoviti*, ed. by A. Chong, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2004, p. 406-412 (entry by Florian Härb, p. 408).

²¹ Some preliminary indications (with previous bibliography) on the spread of devotions and lay confraternities entitled to the Immaculate Conception in Tuscany see Adriano Prosperi, “L’Immacolata a Siviglia e la fondazione sacra della monarchia spagnola”, *Studi Storici*, t. 47/2, 2006, p. 481-510, especially p. 489 sq. and notes 12-15 (also for previous bibliography on the instable iconography of the Immaculate Conception).



Fig. 6 - Giorgio Vasari, *Tavola della Concezione di Nostra Donna* (Small replica), ca. 1541-1544. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum. © Ashmolean Museum

least two smaller replicas (one currently in the Ashmolean Museum, fig. 6, and one in the Uffizi, which is usually identified with the small replica requested in 1544 by the same Altoviti for his house in Rome) as well as reiterations and variations for other patrons, namely for Biagio Mei in the church of San Piero in Cigoli in Lucca.²² Also, Vasari's followers and other Tuscan painters were commissioned all along the following century (until at least 1620) to repeat or adapt the same invention not only for private patrons, but also for many other altars of the Conception in Tuscan churches. Among the most prominent and faithful to the original, we can mention the altarpieces by Jacopo Chimenti (l'Empoli) in Fucecchio (Abbazia di San Salvatore, 1588) and Empoli (Cappella della Concezione attached to the important Franciscan convent of Santa Maria a Ripa, 1596, fig. 7), followed by the different rendering at San Miniato

²² According to Paola Barocchi, *Vasari pittore*, Milano, Edizioni per il Club del libro, 1964, p. 22, the altarpiece in Lucca (1544) "propone varianti più decisive. Una esibizione di vistose contorsioni e melodrammatiche accosciature si oppone in essa al dimesso clima della prima redazione e sottintende le recenti esperienze di un viaggio a Mantova e a Venezia (1541-42), in particolare la suggestione di Giulio Romano".



Fig. 7 - Jacopo Chimenti (detto l'Empoli), *Concezione Altarpiece*, 1596. Empoli, Santa Maria a Ripa, Chapel of the Conception. © Sonia Marrese



Fig. 8 - Jacopo Chimenti (detto l'Empoli), *Concezione Altarpiece*, San Miniato al Tedesco, Convento di Santa Chiara, Chapel of the Conception. © Sonia Marrese

al Tedesco (Cappella della Concezione, in the convent of Santa Chiara, fig. 8).²³ Further and even more independent variations stemming from the same fundamental idea were painted by Agnolo Bronzino and his workshop (*Immaculate Conception*, Florence, church of Santa Maria Regina della Pace, 1570-72), Ludovico Cigoli (Pontorme, Chiesa di San Michele, Altar of the Conception), Niccolò Circignani (Volterra, Duomo), Santi di Tito (Volterra, San Girolamo), Francesco del Brina (Volterra, San Pietro in Sleri and Florence, San Michele Visdomini) among others. The adaptations and remaking made all along the sixteenth century in different styles and medias reached the Cathedral of Seville, where in 1561, after his Italian visit, Luis de Vargas completed an altarpiece developing on same iconography²⁴, while at the end of the sixteenth century the Vasarian invention was replicated in an engraving by Philippe Thomassin (fig. 9).

Neither the entire series of these iterations, nor the implications of this multiplication have been discussed in depth. While this is not the place to enter into many details, I would like at least to discuss some of the changes which are detectable among the different existing versions, and in special relation with the inscriptions, in order to focus on the significance and meanings of this invention for both the theme of the 'liberation' of the 'original' humanity and as a metaphor for artistic creation and 'originality'.

Both Marianna Lora and Florian Härb noted the oscillations and changes of the inscription on the *cartiglio* held by the little angels. According to Härb, it is a "curious fact" that none

²³ A first comprehensive list of replicas and adaptations was compiled by Julian Kliemann in *Giorgio Vasari. Principi, letterati e artisti nelle carte di Giorgio Vasari*, (Atti del Convegno Arezzo, Casa Vasari, Arezzo, 26 Settembre-29 Novembre 1981), Firenze, Edam, 1981, p. 107-108. See the Appendix to this essay for more information.

²⁴ Cf. Benito Navarrete Prieto, "Salviati como modelo: su influencia en Luis de Vargas," *BSAA Arte*, t. 75, 2009, p. 115-126 (with an illustration of Luis de Vargas' altarpiece).



Fig. 9 – Philippe Thomassin (after Vasari), *Tavola della Concezione di Nostra Donna* (engraving for Alessandro Gambalunga), London, The British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum

of the inscriptions present on the three autograph drawings appears on the painted versions.²⁵ In the drawing from the Uffizi, which has an arched top and is squared for transfer, but differs in several details from the Altoviti alterpiece, we read the most common quotation from the *Song of Songs*, 4.7: “Tota pulchra es amica mea / et macula non est in te”.²⁶ The same inscription is to be found in the other inscribed original drawing from the three extant ones.²⁷ In the small replica at the Uffizi the script is different: “Quod Eva tristis abstulit / tu reddis almo germine”, from the Marian hymn *O Gloriosa Domina*. In the Altoviti altarpiece as well as in the small replica now in Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, the inscriptions read, as we already saw: “Quos Evae culpa damnavit / Mariae gratia solvit”. Instead of insisting (like it happens in the drawings) on the *loci classici* of the theological construction of the Immaculate Conception (“macula non est in te”), the solution adopted for the final altarpiece puts aside the highly debated problem of the

²⁵ Raphael, Cellini and a Renaissance Banker, *op. cit.*, p. 409.

²⁶ Florence, GDSU, inv. 1183 E (F. Härb, *The drawings of Giorgio Vasari, op. cit.*, p. 185, n° 45).

²⁷ Paris, Louvre, Département des Arts graphiques, inv. 2082 (*ibid.*, p. 185, n° 44).

absence of the ‘macula’ at the moment of the ‘conception’ of the Virgin (a passive act) to focus instead on her active power to liberate not only the Progenitors, but also the Patriarchs from the ‘laces’ and ropes, which still keep them tied to the tree of sin. In many of the replicas, the phrase remains unchanged, even if other more traditional quotations are dispersed often on the framing structures (like for example in Empoli: “Tota pulchra est”, inscribed in the architectonic frame in pietra serena, fig. 7). The centrality of the theme of the liberation from the laces was correctly understood, and emphasized with interesting variations, in the engraving made by Thomassin for Alessandro Gambalunga, where the reference to the ‘laces’ is repeated twice: “Solve vincla reis, et mala nostra pelle / nos vinclis solutos, mites fac et castos” (fig. 9).

In early modern Catholicism, the question concerning which inscriptions to use for images of the Immaculate Conception was not a secondary issue, given the controversial character of these images. For example, in 1644, the brothers of the Company of the Immaculate Conception of Faenza informed the Holy Office in Rome that the local inquisitor wanted to forbid the diffusion of a printed image of the Virgin, which was contested not for its visual appearance, but only for its *titulus*.²⁸ A further dispute in Bologna concerned the question whether on printed materials and invitations it should be used the title of “Immacolata Concettione” or that of “Concettione della Immacolata Vergine”: in 1644 the Holy Office decreed that only the title of *Conceptio Immaculatae B. Virgins* was permitted.²⁹

When Vasari started to work on it, that is to “una storia che dimostrasse la Concezione di Nostra Donna”³⁰, he must have been aware of the possibility, if not the necessity, to combine text and image to render the theme at best. Admittedly he consulted with many “uomini letterati” and common friends of himself and Altoviti in order to devise its visual demonstration. The decision was to focus on the visual theme of the liberation of the tied figures and on the active role of the Virgin Mary. It is well known that Vasari was not inventing it *ex novo*: as it has been already demonstrated, he took consistent (and almost unacknowledged) inspiration from the never executed project by Rosso Fiorentino for the Madonna delle Lacrime in Arezzo, which Rosso had discussed with Giovanni Lappoli, il Pollastra, and which Vasari knew well (since he possessed a model of the entire project; and mentions it in the life of Rosso).³¹

28 Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede (Vatican City), St. St, M 6 b, “Acta in Controversia Congregationis Immaculatae Mariae Virginis ab Anno 1618 ad 1658”, f. 164r: “Molto reverendo padre signor e padron colendissimo: Li comfrati della nostra compagnia dell’Immacolata Concettione, eretta nella nostra Chiesa, suol’ogn’anno fare stampare l’imagini simili all’inclusa, e dispensarle al popolo. Altre volte li Padri Inquisitori si sono provati d’impedire, e di levare le lettere *sine peccato concepta pro peccatoribus intercede* ma perché s’è ricorso costì alla S. Congregatione del Sant’Ufficio gli è stato subito ordinato che si cessino di stampare. Hora ci troviamo nel medesimo laberinto perché ci viene negato di stamparle con tali lettere. Supplico V.P.M.R. con tutto l’affetto acciò si degni ottenere la gratia sudetta ottenutaci altra volte da Patri Consultori, et in specie doppo ch’io son qui dal Padre Fratta, mentre era in detto Ufficio, ch’oltre il merito n’havrà da dio e dall’Immaculatissima Vergine, li restaremo tutti qui obbligati e qui per fine” (Fra Matteo Guardì from Faenza to a member of the Holy Office in Rome, 20 October 1644).

29 *Ibid.*, f. 168v.

30 *Descrizione dell’opere di Giorgio Vasari*, *op. cit.*, p. 380. He never uses the expression “Immacolata Concezione”, which even at the level of iconographic description is a later definition.

31 M. Lora, “De Rosso à Vasari”, *art. cit.* and *id.*, “*Ut rosa spineti compensans flore rigorem*. La Vierge Immaculée comme Nouvelle Ève dans la peinture italienne du XVI^e siècle”, *L’Atelier du Centre de recherches historiques* [en ligne], t. 10, 2012, especially p. 13-15 (with the relevant images), retrieved from <<http://journals.openedition.org/acrh/4345>>, accessed 20 July 2020.

However, while in Rosso the visual theme of the enslavement to the tree concerns Adam and Eve only, Vasari expanded and applied it to the entire generation of the Patriarchs until Saint John the Baptist, that is the group of people which was normally represented in images of the *Harrowing of Hell* or *Christ in limbo*: in this way, the theme of the 'release' from the different degrees of enlacement to the tree became the painting's *Leitmotiv*, which is also echoed in the chosen inscription for the painted *cartigli*. Slightly different from the order given by Vasari himself in his later description, the figures of the Altoviti altarpiece can be identified as follows, from left to right: Abraham (with the exposed attribute of the knife), Isaac (the younger figure behind him), Aaron (with the tiara), David, John the Baptist and Samuel (the latter two only tied with one hand because they were sanctified in the womb), Jacob, Joshua (with the helm) and Moses. Furthermore, when compared with Rosso's model, the imposing figures of Adam and Eve, who are tied to the tree only by one hand and are almost equated to the tree's 'roots', acquire a more reclined, abandoned, and almost ecstatic posture, which, in the intention of the artist, evidently stresses the active process of liberation operated by the Virgin.³²

Furthermore, as already noted by Paola Barocchi in 1964, not only the smoky atmosphere of the painting and the way in which the old patriarchs are depicted recall the manner of Andrea del Sarto, but the two figures of the Progenitors establish a clear reference to Michelangelo's themes and figures in the Sistine Vault and in the Sagrestia Nuova.³³ In her examination of the "radice buonarrotiana" of the altarpiece, Barocchi did not mention the *Prigioni* (fig. 12), probably because they were not accessible to Vasari at the time of the Altoviti commission. However, as the Altoviti Progenitors, they are released from the laces tying them, as well as from the stone that enclose them. Considering all these various strong references, I would like to suggest that Vasari's insisted and visually loaded references to the theme of the figures in the process of being liberated goes beyond the religious meanings and intentions of this iconography. In the remainder of this article, I would like to suggest that the particular insistence on the theme of untying the laces (*solvere*) in the ambitious Altoviti altarpiece was indeed a visual theme that suited perfectly the larger intentions of a still quite young Giorgio Vasari to be recognized as a promising artist and as the inventor of ingenious *storie*. The difficulty of "demonstrating" such an obscure and still unstable theological theme provided the perfect challenge for such an exploit in 1540-41 Florence. Indeed, a reading through some of his letters from 1539-1543 reveals that Vasari often used the themes of imprisonment and liberation in relation with ideas of career progress and artistic advancement. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the 1540-1541 commission was exploited by Vasari to develop a sort of programmatic manifesto for a successful artistic career.

A Metaphor for Artistic Conception and Success

In one of the emblems by Andrea Alciato "Poverty prevents the advancement of the best minds (*summis ingeniis*)": "My right hand holds a rock, the other bears wings. As the feathers lift me, so

32 On the accentuation of the active role of the Virgin and the links with images of limbo see also the observations by Marianna Lora in *ibid.*, especially p. 21-28. Also relevant is the connection between the location of the altarpiece in the church of Santi Apostoli and the fact that around this church there was probably a ground for the burying of the dead unbaptized children (at least according to the fact that the square on which the church is placed was later called Piazzetta del Limbo).

33 P. Barocchi, *Vasari pittore, op. cit.*, p. 21-22: "i nudi roseo-grigi dei Progenitori che spiccano su tralci grigio-verdastri si rifanno alla Volta Sistina ed alla Sagrestia Nuova, e nella loro sospesa, studiattissima contrapposizione quasi annunziano le invenzioni del Pontormo per il *Giudizio Finale* di San Lorenzo o quelle del Bronzino per la *Risurrezione* della SS. Annunziata".

the heavy weight drags me down”, by means of a rope (fig. 10). In 1539, just before he met Bindo Altoviti, Vasari wrote from Rome to Ottaviano de’ Medici exposing a similar concept, by using the theme of the prison. The beginners of every art or science, especially if they are of poor or humble origins, are like “men strictly enclosed in narrow prisons”:

E questo nasce, che tutti quegli uomini che ciò cominciano, somigliano uomini serrati in strettissime prigioni di una altissima torre, dove nel fondo per l’altezza è impossibile veder luce, onde non possono per l’oscurità vedere né da altri esser veduti; dove passato il mezzo, qualche spiracolo li fa vedere e da altri esser veduti; e tanto quanto la scala di essa salgono, più si fanno chiari e ad altri più noti vengono.³⁴

The minds of the humble initiators are imprisoned until they are able to climb up and come to the light of fame. Similarly, the theme of the light filtrating from above through the branches of the tree down below until it almost reaches the prisoners plays a central role also in the Santi Apostoli altarpiece and its replicas, enhancing the significance of the liberation from the laces as the central theme of the painting.

Shortly after the completion of the Altoviti altarpiece, and one year before its adaptation for the Mei commission in Lucca, Vasari comes back to the theme of the ‘imprisonment’ in a second letter, where he plays with the words “prigione” and “prigionia” in relation with the release of a new visual invention. Writing to the young Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, who had asked him an *Allegory of Justice*, he sent him the preparatory drawing “prigione in un guluppo legato”. Once the cardinal would have opened and scrolled the sheet, he would have seen Vasari’s clever invention: Aetrea with at her belt seven chains “quali sette abominevoli vizii sono da essa in prigionia sostenuti”.³⁵ Here the represented theme of the imprisoned vices (fig. 11) provides the ground for the linguistic pun regarding the material condition of the presentation drawing on reception (enrolled in an envelope, *guluppo*, imprisoning it).³⁶ Similarly, the theme of the liberation from the different gradations of enlacement in the *Tavola della Concezione* could have suggested similar associations, beyond the strictly theological meaning of the painting.

Finally, the breaking of laces and chains as a metaphor for artistic freedom and originality resurfaces in a famous passage from Michelangelo’s *Vita* (1550 and 1568) where the *Sagrestia Nuova* is confronted with the Old Sacristy:

vi fece dentro un ornamento composito nel più vario e più nuovo modo che per tempo alcuno gli antichi e i moderni maestri abbino potuto operare; perché nelle novità di sì belle cornici, capitelli e basi, porte, tabernacoli e sepolture fece assai

34 Giorgio Vasari to Ottaviano de’ Medici, 30.11.1539 (BRE, 2354, f. 56v-59v), retrieved from <www.memofonte.it>. The passage starts as it follows: “Iddio e voi solo mi avete fatto conoscere, quali sieno quelli che per la fama e per le opere al mondo son chiari, stimati, riveriti, onorati [...] non ci essendo termine di facultà o di grado a chi per virtù di nascita e per istento di beni non può al mondo apparir chiaro, sendo il senno di tali tenuto abito, via non si trova migliore quanto quella del seguitare gli studii di quale scienza si voglia, per venir da tanta bassezza a qualche principio di eminenza”.

35 Giorgio Vasari to Alessandro Farnese, 20.01.1543 (C. Frey, *Il carteggio di Giorgio Vasari*, München, Georg Müller, 1923, p. 121-124), retrieved from <www.memofonte.it>. The drawing is preserved (Giorgio Vasari, *Farnese Justice*, 1543, Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth) and the painting in question is now in Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte. See Antonella Fenech Kroke, *Giorgio Vasari: la fabrique de l’allégorie. Culture et fonction de la personification au Cinquecento*, Florence, Leo S. Olschki, 2011, p. 172-191.

36 Salvatore Battaglia, *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, Torino, Utet, 1961-2008, vol. VII, p. 174: “*Guluppo*, sm. Ant. Involto, viluppo”.



Fig. 10 - *Paupertas*, in Andrea Alciato, *Emblematum libellus*, Paris, 1534
© Bibliothèque nationale de France



Fig. 11 - Giorgio Vasari, *Giustizia Farnese*, 1543, Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte. © Archives Alinari, Florence, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Luciano Pedicini

diverso da quello che di misura, ordine e regola facevano gli uomini secondo il comune uso e secondo Vitruvio e le antichità, per non volere a quello aggiungere. La quale *licenza* ha dato grande animo a questi che hanno veduto il far suo, di mettersi a imitarlo, e nuove fantasie si sono vedute poi alla grottesca, più tosto che a ragione o regola, a' loro ornamenti: *onde gli artefici gli hanno infinito e perpetuo obbligo, avendo egli rotto i lacci e le catene delle cose che per via d'una strada comune eglino di continuo operavano.*³⁷

Here the discourse concerns the origin of a new art, born out of Michelangelo's impulse to break the laces and chains of traditional and normative art and architecture: having broken the rules through *licenza*, as a new originator, Michelangelo liberated art from its 'captivity' (another sort of limbo), providing a model to his followers. Vasari's passage resonates with the interpretation given by Condivi to the *Prigioni* from the tomb of Julius II (fig. 12), as "statue legate, come prigionieri, le quali rappresentavano l'arti liberali, similmente Pittura, Scultura, et Architettura [...] denotando per queste, insieme con Papa Giulio, esser prigionieri della morte tutte le virtù, come quelle che non fusser mai per trovare da chi cotanto fussero favorite et nutrite, quanto da lui". Once again, the theme of artistic invention intersects with that of the favour of a patron to release artistic powers.

As we have seen, in Vasari's auto-narrations the Altoviti commission in Florence is presented as a career turning point; at the same time, in the description of its visual invention, Vasari insists on the themes of the *sciogliere i lacci* to liberate the prisoners; the reference to *solvere* is, in fact, the final choice for the textual references in the *cartiglio* for the Santi Apostoli altarpiece and its smaller replica in the Ashmolean Museum, against the series of other more common immaculist textual sources, which are used in some of the drawings and in the Uffizi replica.³⁸ When looking at the Santi Apostoli altarpiece, as well as at its many reiterations, the viewer cannot doubt that the main visual subject is the group of prisoners in the very foreground of the depicted surface (a group corresponding to that of the Patriarchs in limbo), and in particular the two leading and ecstatic bodies of Eva and Adam, who are certainly the first ones that the eye encounters, when looking at the altarpiece and its iterations in their original locations. The figure of Mary is perceived only in a second moment, as it is more distant from the viewer. Descending from above, she provides the source of light and liberation to the group, but she has a smaller size, when compared to the Progenitors' naked bodies. Differently from the



Fig. 12 - Michelangelo, *Prigione* or «Schiavo giovane», 1525-1530, Florence, Galleria dell'Accademia (in Rome until 1564). © Su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo

³⁷ G. Vasari, *Vite*, *op. cit.*, vol. 6, p. 54-55 (the passage is the same in the two editions, a part from small formal changes). Italics are mine.

³⁸ In the replica at the Uffizi, the cartiglio reads "Quod Eva tristis abstulit / Tu reddis almo gemine". It also presents a different arrangement in the upper part of the depicted space, and the inclusion of eight more figures of small angels – a larger number of figures that might perhaps suit the rectangular format of the replica, but not the arched top of the original altarpiece.

previous Florentine attempts to render the theme of the Immaculate Conception, and in particular different from previous solutions representing the theme of the *Disputa sulla Concezione di Maria* (in particular, that by Giovan Antonio Sogliani, from circa 1530, now in the Gallerie dell'Accademia), the role of the upper figure of Mary is not a passive one (as in the image of the Dispute, where she is the *object* of discussion among the Church Fathers and other saints), but is of an active nature, since here she actively performs the act of liberation (from the Original Sin, and from the laces), in a similar way to the figure of Christ in limbo in images of the *Harrowing of Hell*.³⁹ Certainly, even if heavily drawing on previous inventions by Rosso as well as on the help of several *letterati*, Vasari succeeded here in “demonstrating” in an innovative way the difficult theme of the *Concezione della Vergine* (“una storia che dimostrasse la Concezione di Nostra Donna”). The proof of that are the following commissions he received, as well as the fact that this new invention was adopted for so many other altars dedicated to the Conception of Mary: the new solution designed by Vasari became normative for this subject, at least on a regional level (and not only).

To conclude, in this essay I have focused on different visual declinations of the theological theme of ‘imprisonment’ and ‘liberation’ (under conditions) of the Biblical original humanity in premodern art, discussing in particular two different series of images sharing a basic iconographic scheme: a group of prisoners in the lower part and an agent of liberation in the upper part. Both the images of Christ liberating the Patriarchs from limbo and the Vasarian Virgin liberating the same group of prisoners from both the shadows and the laces of original sin refer to the Christian historical scheme of salvation. According to this ideological scheme, the coming of Christ provided a new origin. However, in the case of Vasari, it is possible to argue that the insisted focus on the theme of the liberation of tied figures, while mirroring Rosso’s and Michelangelo’s precedents, was not deprived of intentions that went beyond the mere theological theme. Developed in a moment in which he was still trying to establish himself as promising painter and inventor for influential patrons (Bindo Altoviti, Ottaviano de’ Medici, Paolo Farnese), for both profane and religious allegories, the particularly prominent Altoviti commission could offer the occasion to develop a visual manifesto in Florence. The particular insistence on the liberation of the figures from ties and ropes could have acted as a metaphor for artistic invention and success.

This hypothesis brings forward another question: that of the value of artistic invention and originality in the specific case of such disputed theological themes as the Conception of Mary. I would like to suggest that, at least in the period under consideration, the challenges posited by the visualization of disputed theological themes was even greater than those emerging from any other profane commissions. Given the contested status of the theme of the Immaculate Conception, especially in the centres where the theological and political debate around it was more intense (such as Florence or, later, Seville), painters competed among each other to provide

39 It is certain that Sogliani’s altarpiece provided a model, which Vasari had in mind when devising his solution. In fact, Sogliani was called to assess the value of the Altoviti altarpiece together with Pontormo and Rodolfo del Ghirlandaio: “Fu stimata detta tavola a dì 4 di settembre 1541 da Iacopo da Pontormo pitore, da Giovannantonio Sogliani, [e] Ridolfo Grillandai scudi 300. Et io mi contentai di scudi 250” (G. Vasari, *Ricordanze*, *op. cit.*, c. 10; P. Barocchi, *Vasari pittore*, *op. cit.*, p. 117, Sibylle Appuhn-Radke, “Thesenschrift und Merkbild: Franziskanische Katechese in der ‘Disputation über die Immaculata Conceptio’ von Giovanni Antonio Sogliani”, in *Kunst des Cinquecento in der Toskana*, ed. by M. Cämmerer, Munich, Bruckmann, 1992, p. 219–236, especially p. 231).

the more adequate rendering of such an abstract theme.⁴⁰ The extent to which artists could really have the *poteſtas* to impose their own visualizations was also a topic for discussion. Raffaello Borghini, for example, one of the most conservative Florentine writers, discussed the topic in his dialogue *Il Riposo* (1584). Asked to comment on yet another derivation from Vasari's invention (the altarpiece considered by Francesco Poppi for San Michele Visdomini, but modernly attributed to Francesco Del Brina), the main character of the dialogue ſtates that a painter had to be very bold and *temerario* to depict the Conception, because "it is not described or defined in the sacred writings". However, he adds, one has to admit that:

when it is agreed that the Conception ſhould be painted [...] I would praise more in this, the invention of Giorgio Vasari on this ſame ſubject in this panel in Santo Apoſtolo. There he did Adam and Eve and the other Fathers attached by their arms to the trunk of the tree of ſin. But to tell the truth, I would conclude that until the Holy Church has determined more about the Conception, it ſhould not be painted in any manner.⁴¹

This paſſage by Raffaello Borghini hints at the ſubtle differences between the various iterations of the model. Already from the very few examples illuſtrated here (for example, Chimenti's San

⁴⁰ See Mirella Levi D'Ancona, *The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance*, New York, College Art Ass. of America, 1957; Suzanne Stratton-Puit, *The Immaculate Conception in Spanish Art*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1994; M. Lora, "Ut rosa ſpineti", art. cit.; A. Proſperi, "L'Immacolata a Siviglia", art. cit.

⁴¹ Raffaello Borghini, *Il Riposo*, Florence, Marescotti, 1584, p. 117-118 (*Il dipignere la Concezione della Vergine eſſer temerarietaà e che non ſi doverebbe dipignere*): "Io non ſo", riſpoſe il Vecchietto [Bernardo Vecchietti, the owner of the villa Il Riposo, and moderator of the diſcuſſion], 'chi primo haveſſe tanto ardire di voler dipignere la Concettione, la quale nelle ſacre carte non è deſcritta, né diterminata: et io per me eſtimo gran temerità il dipignerla, ſicome non ſarebbe ancora ſenza arroganza il voler dipignere Salamone in gloria et Enoch in cielo figurando il luogo dove foſſe, che abito aveſſe e di che cibi ſi nutriſſe. Ma quando pur foſſe conceduto che la Concettione ſi haveſſe a dipignere, credo che molte conſiderationi biſognerebbe haveſſe, che in coteſta tavola non veggo: e non ſo perche Adamo et Eva abbiano a fare ſi ſforzate e poco oneſte attitudini, e non più toſto ſtare in atto umile e modeſto dimoſtrando o ſperanze d'aveſſe a eſſer liberati dalle catene del peccato per la Concettione o vero rendendo gratie alla Genitrice del ſommo bene, ſe vogliono che eſſi la conſiderino, come già concetta; e quelle corde ſortili, che eſcono di bocca al ſerpente, che racceſſembrano fila di ſpago e tengono legati quegli antichi padri eziandio non hanno del veriſimile; perciò più loderei in queſto l'invenzione di Giorgio Vaſari ſopra queſta medeſima materia nella ſua tavola in Santo Apoſtolo, dove egli ha fatto Adamo et Eva e gli altri Padri attaccati con un braccio a' tronchi dell'albero del peccato. Ma io per dir vero conchiuderei, che finché la Chiesa ſanta non ditermina altro ſopra la Concettione, che ella in niun modo ſi dipigneſſe' ". The English translation follows the one provided by Lloyd H. Ellis Jr (Raffaello Borghini, *Il Riposo*, ed. and transl. by Lloyd H. Ellis Jr, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2007, p. 98-99): "I do not know", reſponded Vecchietti, 'who firſt had ſo much boldneſſe as to want to paint the Conception. It is not deſcribed or defined in the ſacred writings. And for myſelf I eſteem it a great temerity to paint it, as it would alſo be not without arrogance to want to paint Solomon in glory and Enoch in Heaven, portraying the place where they were, the clothing they had [...]. But when it is agreed that the Conception ſhould be painted, I believe that much caution would need to be taken, which I do not ſee in this panel. And I do not know why Adam and Eve were done in ſuch forced and immodeſt poſes, rather than with humble and modeſt geſtures. They demonſtrate either the hope of being freed from the chains of ſin by the Conception of truly giving thanks to the Genetrix of the Supreme Good, if they want to conſider her as already conceived. And thoſe thin cords coming out of the mouth of the ſerpent that reſemble lines of ſtring and tie up thoſe ancient fathers are alſo lacking in veriſimilitude. Therefore, I would praise more in this, the invention of Giorgio Vaſari on this ſame ſubject in this panel in Santo Apoſtolo. There he did Adam and Eve and the other Fathers attached by their arms to the trunk of the tree of ſin. But to tell the truth, I would conclude that until the Holy Church has determined more about the Conception, it ſhould not be painted in any manner' ".

Miniato altarpiece, fig. 8) we see that the degree of depicted ‘enslavement’ of the Progenitors changed from case to case, as well as their nudity, which in later examples was often covered.⁴² Leaving to another occasion further considerations about how the model provided by Vasari was adapted to different contexts and intentions, I would like to conclude by going back to the moment of ‘conception’ of the Altoviti Altarpiece.

When taking up this crucial commission, Vasari made *tabula rasa* of any other commitment in order to be able to tackle the challenge. Taking inspiration from all possible literary and visual sources (Rosso’s unfinished project for Santa Maria delle Lacrime *in primis*; then the long-standing iconography of the *Harrowing of Hell*; plus the idea of the foreground leaning figures partially related with Sogliani’s positioning of the figure of Adam; and, above all, a manifest reference to Michelangelo’s figures) he set out to create something new, which indeed proved to be very successful as a new way of visualizing a difficult theological theme. At least locally (in Tuscany and surroundings) this new image became normative.⁴³ Given the consistent use in his contemporary and later writings of imprisonment metaphors and references to breaking “i lacci e le catene delle cose” (i.e.: existent artistic and iconographic traditions), it is conceivable that the choice to focus on the theme of the release of tied figures was not made by chance by Vasari, in the moment in which he was asked to visualize a theological notion related to the liberation from sin as an act of ‘recreation’ and restoration. Depicted just before being released to paradisiac glory, these figures might have evoked the situation of the still emerging artist aspiring to achieve fame. In this sense, the powers of art could make the prisoners free – and the liberation of the prisoners could become a metaphor for artistic creation.

⁴² I intend to extend the mapping of the iterations and variations of the Vasarian invention in a chapter of a new book currently in preparation.

⁴³ I have developed some initial considerations on the ‘normative image’ in “‘Too many wounds’: Innocenzo da Petralia’s Excessive Crucifixes and the Normative Image”, in *Sacred Images and Normativity: Contested Forms in Early Modern Art*, ed. by C. Franceschini, Turnhout, Brepols, 2020, p. 46-67.

Appendix:

Provisional list of works connected with the Altoviti Altarpiece (*Tavola della Concezione*)

This list is based on the list organized by artists provided by Julian Kliemann in 1981 (cf. above note 23). Kliemann's list (references to which are indicate with *) is here re-organized by media and in an approximate chronological order. References to other authors or sources are indicated in parenthesis.

Drawings:

1. Giorgio Vasari: 3 extant drawings (Härb, *The drawings*, nn. 43- 45).
2. Andrea Boscoli (c. 1560-1607), GDSU 8251 F*.
3. Andea Boscoli, GDSU 9386F*.
4. Andrea Boscoli, British Museum, 1949.4.11.5282*.
5. Jacopo Chimenti (1551-1640), GDSU 948 F*.
6. Giovanni Naldini, GDSU 15519*.
7. Gregorio Pagani, GDSU 10499 F*.
8. Francesco Vanni, Louvre, Cab. d. dess., inv. 1994*.

Engravings:

1. Philippe Thomassin, Engraving for Alessandro Gambalunga, London, British Museum.

Small Replicas:

1. Giorgio Vasari, Small replica of the Altoviti altarpiece, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum.
2. Giorgio Vasari, Small replica of the Altoviti altarpiece, 1544, Florence, Uffizi.

Altarpieces (replicas and adaptations):

1. Giorgio Vasari, *Tavola della Concezione*, or Altoviti Altarpiece, 1540-41, Firenze, Santi Apostoli.
2. Giorgio Vasari, *Mei Altarpiece* for San Piero in Cigoli (Lucca), 1543, Lucca, Museo di Villa Guinigi (adaptation in the form of a tryptic with two laterals with saints).
3. Giorgio Vasari/Giulio Mazzoni, Altarpiece, Arezzo, Museo Statale di Arte Medievale e Moderna (Cheney).
4. Carlo Portelli, Altarpiece, 1555, Firenze, museo dell'opera di S. Croce* (adaptation).
5. Luis de Vargas, *Immaculate Conception*, 1561, Cathedral of Seville (Navarrete) (adaptation).
6. Carlo Portelli, Altarpiece, 1566, Museo di San Marco* (adaptation).
7. Francesco del Brina, Altarpiece, 1570, Firenze, San Michele Visdomini (Borghini, 1584, p. 117, come Poppi)* (adaptation).
8. Francesco del Brina, *Immaculate Conception with St. Peter and Paul*, Volterra, San Pietro in Selci* (adaptation).
9. Agnolo Bronzino and workshop, *Immaculate Conception Altarpiece*, 1570-72, 502 × 291 cm. Florence, Church of Santa Maria Regina della Pace (adaptation).
10. Niccolò Circignani (detto Pomarancio), Altarpiece, 1573 circa. Città di Castello, Pinacoteca* (adaptation).
11. Niccolò Circignani (detto Pomarancio), Altarpiece, 1590, Volterra Duomo* (adaptation).
12. Santi di Tito, Altarpiece, 1578, Volterra, San Girolamo, Cappella dell'Immacolata*.
13. Jacopo Chimenti, detto l'Empoli (1551-1640), Altarpiece, 1588. Abbazia di San Salvatore, Fucecchio* (replica).
14. Jacopo Chimenti, Altarpiece, 1596, Empoli, Santa Maria a Ripa, Chapel of the Conception (replica)*.
15. Jacopo Chimenti, detto l'Empoli, Tabernacle Altarpiece, Prato, Sant'Agostino* (adaptation).
16. Jacopo Chimenti, Altarpiece, San Miniato al Tedesco, Convento di Santa Chiara, Chapel of the Conception (adaptation)*.
17. Cigoli (Lodovico Cardi), Altarpiece, 1590, Pontorme, San Michele (adaptation)*.
18. Nicodemo Ferrucci (1575-1650), Altarpiece, Firenze SS. Simone e Giuda* (adaptation).
19. Matteo Rosselli (1578-1650), Altarpiece, 1605, Firenze, Santissima Annunziata* (adaptation).
20. Giovanni da San Giovanni, Altarpiece, 1621, Vico di Val d'Elsa, Palazzo Mainoni-Guicciardini, Cappella* (adaptation).

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CENTRE D'ÉTUDES SUPÉRIEURES DE LA RENAISSANCE

Dans l'histoire occidentale, la première modernité n'est pas seulement l'âge de l'« Humanisme », des « génies » de l'art, des « Grandes découvertes » et de la « Révolution scientifique », elle marque aussi l'avènement d'une réflexion inédite sur les origines, où les individus se prennent à imaginer et à réinventer les commencements pour mieux penser un présent qui ne cesse de se reconfigurer.

Cette Renaissance des origines se nourrit des divers mythes et croyances cosmogoniques et anthropogoniques, mais aussi des généalogies symboliques du pouvoir qui, se multipliant dans toute l'Europe, témoignent de l'investissement politique du temps originel. Pour les artistes – dont les productions furent les principaux agents de cette réflexion –, la figuration des origines apparaît inséparable des mythes de naissance de l'art et de la mise en scène du travail artistique.

Voir ou revoir la Renaissance à la lumière des origines – du monde, de l'humanité, de la *polis* et de l'art –, telle est l'ambition de ce volume qui réunit les contributions de spécialistes en sciences humaines – histoire de l'art, histoire, géographie, littérature ou philosophie –, intervenus à l'occasion du colloque *La Renaissance des origines* qui s'est tenu en juin 2018 à l'Université de Tel Aviv et à l'Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

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