

Giorgio Vasari's Tondo for the *Madonna of the Rosary*: Angels With Roses, Emblems of Love*

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In 1569, Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) completed painting an altarpiece of the *Madonna of the Rosary* and a Tondo of angels dispersing roses. The commission was for the private chapel of the Capponi family in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. In his *Ricordanze* (Book of Records), Vasari explained the commission as well as documenting the assistance of his favorite Florentine pupil, Jacopo Zucchi (1541-1590), in the completion of the commission. This essay focusses on Vasari's design, location, and meaning of the Tondo and its emblematic symbolism of love through the rose motif.

Keywords: Giorgio Vasari, Tondo, *Madonna of the Rosary*, cross and rose symbolism, Santa Maria Novella

Introduction

At the end of 1569, the Florentine artist, art historian, and writer, Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), completed the painting the *Madonna of the Rosary* and an accompanying Tondo for the private chapel of the Capponi family in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. In his *Ricordanze* (a book about recorded commissions, payments received, and purchased materials), Vasari explained the commission as well as documenting the assistance of Jacopo Zucchi (1541-1590) in the completion of this altarpiece.

In his *Ricordo* 48, Vasari noted:

I remember that close to end of this year [1569] I completed a painting on the Rosary that was sent to the Church of Santa Maria Novella, it was of 7 braccia high and 4 braccia long. [The painting] was for reverend friar Angelo Malatesta of Pistoia, the prior of said convent [Santa Maria Novella]; above [the painting] there was a tondo containing putti that disperse roses. For such a commission [painting], I received payment of 200 [florins]; 100 [florins] were given to Jacopino [Jacopo Zucchi].¹ (Frey, 1930, 2:881; Spinelli, 2017, pp. 78-92; Hall, 1979) (Figures 1 and 2)

The altarpiece was praised by the Florentine art critic, novelist, and poet, Raffaello Borghini (1537-1588),

* Versions on this theme were published in Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Giorgio Vasari: Artistic and Emblematic Manifestations* (Washington, DC: New Academia, 2012), pp. 384-403; and Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's Madonna of the Rosary: A Rose Garden of Blessings", *Journal of Cultural and Religious Studies*, 10(1) (February 2022), 1-31; and recently presented at the *Annual Virtual Conference of the Renaissance Society of America* on 1 December 2022.

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¹ Karl Frey, *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris*, 2 Vols. (Munich: George Müller, 1930), 2:881, *Ricordo* 348: "Ricordo come alla fine di questo anno si fini la tavola del Rosario, che ando nella chiesa di Sant Maria Novella, alta braccia 7, largha quatro, per il reverend padre Fra Angelo Malatesti da Pistoia, priore di detto convento; con un tondo sopra; con putti che getton rose. Ebesi per pagamento di detta tavola dugento che sene da cento a Jacopino". See also Riccardo Spinelli, Ed., *Santa Maria Novella: La Basilica e Il Convento* (Florence: Mandragora, 2017), pp. 78-92, Vasari's altarpieces in this church; and Marcia B. Hall, *Renovation and Counter-Reformation: Vasari and Duke Cosimo in Sta Maria Novella and Sta Croce 1565-1577* (Oxford: Warburg Studies/Clarendon Press, 1979), for a study on Vasari's artistic interactions in the Church of Santa Maria Novella.

in *Il Riposo* (1584), stating: “The painting shows a very beautiful composition, the Glorious Virgin [is very well portrayed], and the color is very charming” (p. 140).² Borghini continued:

This painting [Vasari’s *Madonna of the Rosary*] depends almost entirely on the invention of the craftsman himself. It does not seem to me that it is possible not to greatly praise the invention. I see he [Vasari] has depicted the Mother of the Highest God in the act of receiving all those who kneel in his holy prayer, and the angels, who hold her skirt [mantle] wide, give comfort to those who wish to flee the falsehood of the world and shelter under her. (Borghini, 1584, p. 140)



Figure 1. Giorgio Vasari and Jacopo Zucchi, *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1569, oil on panel. Originally for the Camilla Capponi Chapel. Now in the Bardi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

² Raffaello Borghini, *Il Riposo* (Florence: Giorgio Maescotti, 1584), p. 140. For an English translation, see Lloyd H. Ellis, Ed., *Raffaello Borghini's Il Riposo* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2007).



Figure 2. Giorgio Vasari and Jacopo Zucchi, Tondo for the *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1569, oil on panel.
Now in the Convent, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Photo credit: Beni al Fondo edificio di Culto amministrato dal Ministero dell'Interno, Firenze, and the Padri dell'Opera di Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

This presentation considers two aspects: (1) the history of the commission and (2) the symbolism of the Tondo painting for *Madonna of the Rosary*, focusing on the symbolism of the rose motif.

History of the Commission

There are several complexities and vicissitudes associated with this commission regarding its location and relocation within the chapels of the church. The Capponi chapel and altar were the last bequest in the will of Camilla Capponi. According to her will of 4 August 1568, Camilla wished not only to have a chapel and altar with a panel painting of the *Madonna of the Rosary*, but also that every morning a mass and rosary should be ministered in the chapel for her soul. Following her wishes, her inheritors contacted Angelo Malatesti, Prior of Santa Maria Novella and executor of Capponi's will, and the painter, Giorgio Vasari, to arrange for the creation and implementation of the altarpiece. The chapel was completed six months after Capponi's death. The installation of the painting in the chapel took place in May 1570, as recorded in the church inventory (Archives AFS, 1568).³

³ At the end of 1569, Vasari recorded the completion of the painting and the receiving payment from Malatesti. AFS Conv. Suopp. 102, Vol. 90, Fos. 35v-36r, dated 20 March 1568, and recorded as "Debitori e Creditori" Segnato A a.c. 153.

The original Capponi commission consisted of two parts: an altar with a *Madonna of the Rosary*, oil on panel, and a Tondo, oil on panel, with angels dispersing roses (Figures 1 and 2).⁴ It is unclear, however, how the Tondo was installed in the chapel. Although Vasari claimed that the Tondo was located above the painting, the type of frame around the painting and the window above the altar prevents this placement. Another uncertainty is about the change of ownership of the chapel from the Capponi family to the confraternity of the Compagnia del Rosario. In her will, Camilla Capponi did not mention the confraternity. Still visible today is the original stained-glass window with the coat-of-arms of the Capponi family that once was part of the Capponi Chapel in the church of Santa Maria Novella (Figure 3). The Capponi's crest is composed of an oval cartouche with an interior design containing two separate areas by a dark or blue/black color and silver color (Figure 4). It is likely that the Capponi family were members of the Compagnia del Rosario, but the area of the chapel originally belonged to the Capponi family and not to the confraternity.⁵



Figure 3. Cheney's possible reconstruction for the Capponi Chapel before 1569. Window with Capponi's coat of arms, still in situ. Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

⁴ I am very grateful to Dr. Roberto Giorgi, Padre Manuele Russo, and Padre L. Graziano of the Opera per Santa Maria Novella, and Dr. Calogero Ragusa, Dirigente, Prefettura di Firenze, for the permission to reproduce Giorgio Vasari's Tondo in the church of Santa Maria Novella, Florence. See Anna Bisceglia, "Spazio ecclesiale e pale controriformate in Santa Maria Novella", in Riccardo Spinelli, Ed., *Santa Maria Novella: La Basilica e Il Convento* (Florence: Mandragora, 2017), pp. 77-120; describing the historical and present location of Vasari's Tondo and the *Madonna of the Rosary*; and Hall, *Renovation and Counter-Reformation*, p. 115. The author noted that in 1979 the Tondo still existed, and it was visible in the Capitolo del Nocentino, the convent of the church, behind the refectory of Santa Maria Novella.

⁵ For the history of the Confraternity of the Rosary founded by the Dominican Order, see Herbert Thurston and Andrew J. Shipman, "The Rosary", in D. D. Remy Lafort, Ed., *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), Volume 13, online <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13188b.htm> (accessed on 15 December 2022).



Figure 4. Capponi Family's coat of arms. Palace Capponi-Vettori Lungarno, Florence.

Four years before the installation of the Capponi altar, in 1565, during the Florentine church renovation for the Tridentine Reform requested by the Duke Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-1574), Vasari renovated the interiors of the Gothic churches, including the Franciscan Basilica of Santa Croce and the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella (Figures 5a and 5b; 6a and 6b) (Hall, 1979, p. 115; O'Malley, 2002; Bosch, 2020). One of the major renovations consisted of composing stone altars in pietra serena along the aisles of the church. Each of these framed the space around the standing frescoes painted by earlier artists. To preserve them, the frescoes were covered by superimposing panels or canvas paintings by 16th-century artists. This architectural design of stone altars was then an original method of preservation and renovation (Cheney, 2022, pp. 1-31). The frame design of Santa Croce differs from those of Santa Maria Novella in that the tabernacle contains a lunette format or semicircular arch above the rectangular framework while the frames from Santa Maria Novella are rectangular and horizontal on top (Crowe & Cavalcaselle, 1883, 2:316-317).



Figures 5a and 5b. Basilica of Santa Croce, Exterior and Interior, 1294-1565, Florence.



Figures 6a and 6b. Santa Maria Novella, Exterior and Interior, 1279-1565, Florence.

Records reveal that until 1906, the Capponi altar with Vasari's *Madonna of the Rosary* was located on the left side of the nave, covering the precious fresco work by Masaccio, the *Trinity* of 1427 (Figure 7) (Patz & Valentiner, 1952-1954, 3:795, n. 219; Cibelli, 2020).⁶ Scholarship on the concealment of Masaccio's *Holy Trinity* by Deborah H. Cibelli explains how Vasari created a stone altar over the fresco for the placement of his panel painting, *Madonna of the Rosary*. Recently, the interior of the church of Santa Maria Novella has gone through further renovation and reconstruction of the stone altars along the side aisles of the church, unveiling some of the original formats for covering frescoes of early Renaissance painters and the manner of Vasari's renovation (Cheney, 2022, pp. 1-31).

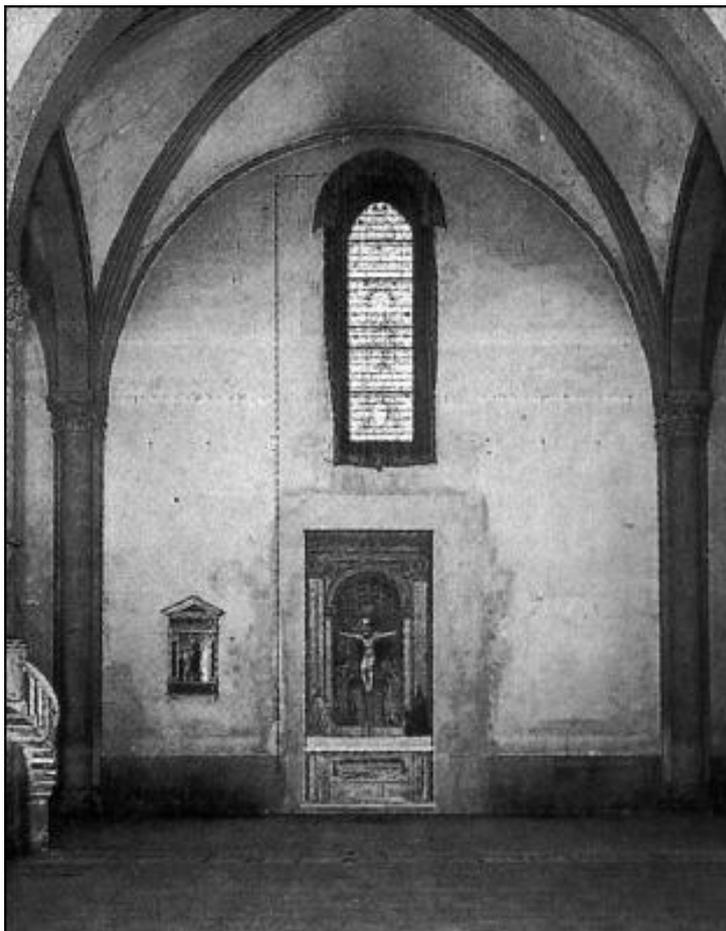


Figure 7. Masaccio, *Holy Trinity*, 1427, fresco. Santa Maria Novella, Florence. Photo after 1906.
Photo credit: Fratelli Alinari, Fondazione Zeri, University of Bologna.

When in 1906 the unveiling of the fresco of Masaccio's *Holy Trinity* occurred, the Capponi altarpiece of the *Madonna of the Rosary*, an oil on panel, was removed from the stone altar and transported to another chapel in Santa Maria Novella, the Bardi Chapel, which is located in the right transept of the church (Figures 8a and 8b)

⁶ Walter Patz and Elisabeth Valentiner, *Die Kirchen von Florenz*, 6 Vols. (Frankfurt: Vittorio Kostermann, 1952-1954), 3:795, n. 219, on Santa Maria Novella; Deborah H. Cibelli, "Vasari Aretine Gonfalone as and Exposition on Style," *Iconocrazia* (18 December 2020), retrieved <http://www.iconocrazia.it>.

(Dempsey, 1972, pp. 279-281; Casazza, 1998, pp. 65-89, esp. 70).⁷ Even at that time, the Tondo was not incorporated with the painting. Its location was not disclosed, although it is now in the Convent of Santa Maria Novella.



Figures 8a and 8b. Giorgio Vasari and Jacopo Zucchi, *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1569, oil on panel.
Bardi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

A recent article by Anna Bisceglia, “Spazio ecclesiale e pale controriformate in Santa Maria Novella”, formulated a plausible reconstruction of the altar and the placement of the Tondo (Figure 9) (Bisceglia, 2017, pp. 77-120). An interesting possibility, but there are two architectural concerns with this suggested reconstruction, in particular the design of the frame for the altarpiece and the space between the frame of the altarpiece and the window above it. First, Bisceglia’s reconstructions show a frame design used in the Basilica of Santa Croce (Figure 5b) but not in Santa Maria Novella. For church of Santa Maria Novella, the design of the top of frame is horizontal and not curved (Figure 6b). And secondly, in Bisceglia’s reconstructed design, the spatial relationship between the window and the large frame of the new altarpiece would have covered up or interfered with the stained-glass window located above it (Figure 3). This might be one of the reasons why Vasari originally set the Tondo apart from the overall design. He realized the architectural and spatial problems involved in integrating or inserting the Tondo within the framework of the altarpiece and below the window above in the Capponi chapel, hence, the separation of these two paintings, then and today.

⁷ Charles Dempsey, “Masaccio’s Trinity: Altarpiece or Tomb?” *Art Bulletin*, 54(3) (September 1972), 279-281, claiming Vasari’s damaging Masaccio’s fresco; and Orenella Casazza, “Masaccio’s Fresco Technique and Problems of Conservation”, in Rona Goffen, *Masaccio’s Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 65-89, esp. 70, contesting the opposite as indicated by Vasari’s praising remarks on this work in Masaccio’s *vita*.



Figure 9. Anna Bisceglia's 2017 reconstruction of Giorgio Vasari's Tondo and *Madonna of the Rosary*
 Photo credit: Anna Bisceglia and Riccardo Spinelli (2017).

The Tondo's Design and Symbolism

The second part of essay discusses the design and symbolism of the Tondo for the *Madonna of the Rosary*. For general historicity and iconography on the Florentine tondo, please see the writings of Roberta Olson and Alessandro Cecchi on this subject (Olson, 1993, pp. 31-65; Cecchi, 1987, pp. 21-24). Vasari's Tondo is not a *desco da parto*, a tray for carrying gifts to new mothers on the birth of a child (Figure 10), or a funerary decoration, designed with heraldic devices of the deceased on top or placed in center of a lunette shaped decoration located above the effigy (Figure 11). Vasari's Tondo is a singular devotional painting, similar to Botticelli's *Adoring Madonna With Angels*, c. 1490, tempera on panel, now in the Baltimore Museum of Art, MD (Figure 12).



Figure 10. Lo Scheggia (Giovanni di ser Giovanni Guidi), *The Triumph of Fame*, Medici desco da parto, c. 1449, tempera, silver and gold leaf on panel. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.



Figure 11. Bernardo Rossellino, *Tomb of the Cardinal of Portugal*, 1451-1467, marble. San Miniato al Monte, Florence.



Figure 12. Botticelli, *Adoring Madonna With Angels*, c. 1490, tempera on panel.
Baltimore Museum of Art, MD.

Vasari's Tondo consists of a circular composition or painted oculus (Figure 2). The exterior is made of a poplar gilded frame, probably original, or at least from that time. It is decorated with classical architectural motifs: The inner circle contains a bead and reel motif; the outer circle a type of tongue motif or decoration of small corbels.

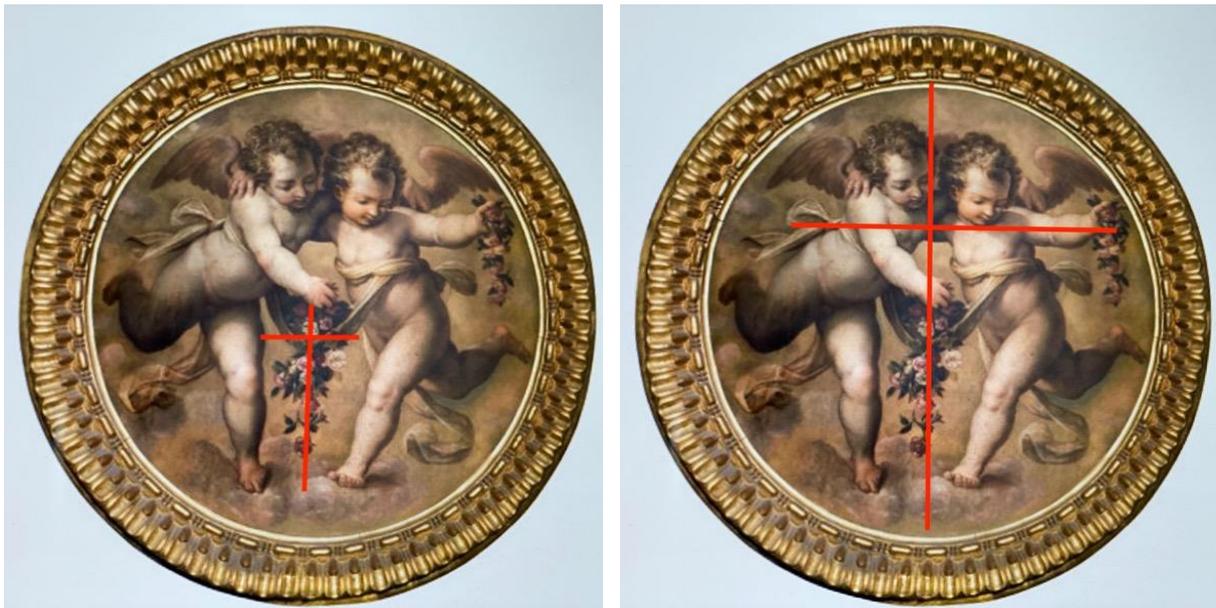
The background of the Tondo is painted with mixture of gold, pink, and white colors to represent a heavenly sky with fluffy clouds. Two cherubim (winged angels) embrace while floating among these cumulus clouds, balancing on two fluffy ones to support their activity. Their placement forms the foreground of the composition. These nude angels are painted with curly golden hair and wearing two interlocking sashes that wrap around their waists. The color of the sashes matches the color of their golden hair. Vasari played with the design of the two sashes encircling their bodies. One wraps around above their waists and loops behind them to form a love knot, a symbol of bond or unity (Boschius, 1701/1702),⁸ while the remaining ribbon floats freely among the celestial clouds. The second sash also drapes around both of them and unites them. The center of this sash swags in front of them, forming a concave receptacle to carry their precious gifts: pink and white roses. The cherubim are choosing roses and then scattering them as blessing of love from the celestial realm to the terrestrial realm. The cherub on the left holds a rose cane with mostly pink roses. The gesture of his stretched arm with the rose cane indicates that he will drop this divine gift from the realm of Heaven to the realm of Earth. Meanwhile, the cherub on the right, imitating his counterpart, is also selecting roses from the sash to drop into the terrestrial realm, hence moving them from Heaven to Earth. This metaphorical terrestrial realm is the panel below where it shows the Madonna with the faithful surrounded by rosaries beads. In this inventive manner Vasari united the two paintings (Figure 13).

⁸ Jacobus Boschius, *Symbolographia, sive, De arte symbolica: Sermones septem* (Augsburg; Dillingen: Bencard, 1701/1702), Class. II, Tab. III, XLV, on the love knot, a traditional symbol of love and union, for the image see, <https://archive.org/details/symbolographias01bosco/page/n343/mode/2up> (accessed on 26 December 2022).



Figure 13. Cheney's possible arrangement, without frame, for the Camilla Capponi Chapel in Santa Maria Novella. Giorgio Vasari and Jacopo Zucchi, Tondo and *Madonna of the Rosary*, 1569, oil on panel.

Skillfully, Vasari has designed two Latin-cross motifs symbolizing divine love and metaphorically further bonded the cherubim through the compositions of sashes, scattered roses, and a rose cane. The small cross is formed by the pink and white roses dangling from the sash. The long line of the large cross extends perpendicularly from both cherubim's heads, down to the scatter roses from the sash, and disappearing into the clouds. The short line of this cross moves horizontally across, from left to right, starting from the love knot formed by the sash across both cherubim's chests, and ending at the rose cane held by the cherubim on the right (Figures 14a and 14b). This composition visually and symbolically connects the two paintings—the Tondo and the *Madonna of the Rosary*—above with the cherubim's cross sign, and below with the Trinity's symbolism depicted in the *Madonna of the Rosary*. Although Vasari composed two separate panels, this separation is technical and not spiritual.



Figures 14a and 14b. Cheney's designs of the cross motif in Vasari's Tondo.

Artistically, to engage the viewer spiritually and visually, Vasari created an inverted perspectival illusion showing two views from the interaction of these two paintings. One view is downward from the angels' point of view. From their facial expressions, the cherubim are looking down, that is, their visual perspective is metaphysically outside their heavenly realm and/or physically outside the picture plane. The other illusionism is upward, from the viewer's perspective, outside the picture, that is, a view from the frame below and then up to the top of the painting, a *di sotto in sù* perspective, hence, metaphorically, with the human eyes entering the natural realm of the painting and with the human soul raising to the spiritual realm of its religious signification.

In his artistic career as a painter, Vasari delighted in depicting putti or cherubim floating in the air carrying some type of symbolic attributes. Some putti are secular in nature and placed in the corners of decorated ceilings or lunettes, while others are spiritual in nature, such as the cherubim included in religious scenes. There are usually of two types for these depictions. One is the solo cherub carrying an attribute, as in the corner of a chamber of the Cornaro Palace (now known as Corner-Spinelli) in Venice (dismantled and now in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice). These angels carry scrolls which once had visible inscriptions in Latin. Recently

discovered and auctioned in London by Sotheby's are two dismantled panels of putti holding attributes of the seasons, Summer and Winter (Corti, 1989, p. 87).⁹ Maybe they were once placed on one of the ceilings of the Cornaro Palace in Venice or in Bindo Altovito's ceiling for his palace in Rome. Other examples are the putti carrying the Medici family devices on the stairway of the second floor in Palazzo Vecchio,¹⁰ and in Vasari's homes in Arezzo and Florence, where the putti display his coat of arms.¹¹

A second type of depiction includes small angels or cherubim inside an altarpiece or devotional painting. Usually, the cherubim carry specific attributes supporting the symbolism of a narrative scene, in which they partake, e.g., the cherubim in the *Allegory of Charity* of 1540-1541, oil on panel, which is the central panel of one of the ceilings in the chambers of the Cornaro Palace in Venice.¹² These cherubim are carrying crowns of laurel to crown the virtues below, Faith, Hope, and Fortitude or Justice. In other instances, Vasari depicted the angels inside and atop the painting, crowning the religious scene below. In this type of celestial appearance, the cherubim reside in Heaven and are partaking of the religious event below like in *sacra conversazione*, a holy conversation between the Madonna and Child with saints, religious figures, or patrons, as seen in the *Adoration of the Magi* of 1556, oil on panel, now at the National Galleries of Scotland, and the *Nativity* of 1546, oil on canvas, now in Borghese Gallery in Rome (Corti, 1989, p. 67).¹³ But in the *Madonna of the Rosary*, Vasari provided a separate panel for the placement of the cherubim: This separation was physical and not metaphysical.

The Symbolism of the Rose

In composing the Tondo scene, Vasari was inspired by Filippino Lippi's *Pala degli Otto* (A Body of Eight Magistrates) or Signoria Altarpiece of 1486, tempera on wood, in the Sala dei Duecento in Palazzo Vecchio, now at the Galleria degli Uffizi (Figure 15). In the 1560s, having done many architectural renovations and painted several rooms in the palace for the Duke of Florence, Vasari saw Lippi's painting hanging in the *sala*. In this *sacra conversazione*, there are two floating angels carrying and dispersing white and pink roses above the enthroned Madonna and Child (Figure 16). They have brought from Heaven a coronet of roses and ribbons to garland a terrestrial jeweled crown for the Mother of God. This composition, of two floating angels surrounded by ribbons and carrying and distributing pink and white roses, must have fascinated Vasari, as he appropriated not only the design for his Tondo but also the cherubim scattering roses and its symbolic meaning. No doubt Lippi's shield with the cross of Saint George painted above the cherubim must have inspired Vasari in the allusion of the cross motif in the Tondo (compare Figures 2 and 16).

⁹ For the images see <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2016/master-paintings-evening-sale-n09460/lot.21.html> (accessed on 26 December 2022). See Laura Corti, *Vasari* (Rome: Cantini, 1989), p. 87.

¹⁰ For the image see <https://www.madeofuscany.it/the-secret-passages-of-palazzo-vecchio/> (accessed on 16 December 2022).

¹¹ For the images see <http://www.travelingintuscany.com/art/gutenberg/vasarilives.htm> (accessed on 26 December 2022); and <https://m.fx361.com/news/2021/0303/10107143.html> (accessed on 26 December 2022).

¹² For the image see <https://www.veniceinperil.org/paintings-drawings/ceiling-panels-from-palazzo-corner-spinelli-giorgio-vasari-accademia-galleries> (accessed on 26 December 2022).

¹³ For the images see <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/85879> (accessed on 26 December 2022) and <https://www.wikiart.org/en/giorgio-vasari/the-nativity> (accessed on 26 December 2022). See Corti, *Vasari*, p. 67.



Figure 15. Filippino Lippi, *Pala degli Otto* (Signoria Altarpiece), 1486, tempera on wood.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 16. Filippino Lippi, *Cherubim*, det., *Pala degli Otto* (Signoria Altarpiece), 1486, tempera on wood.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

In the depiction and iconography of the rose in the Marian scene, Vasari assimilated the conflation of pagan and Christian meanings about the portrayal of the rose from Antiquity to Tridentine times. Christian meanings contained Neoplatonic allusions that prevailed in pictorial representations of many 16th-century imagery, including in Vasari's religious paintings.

According to ancient legends, and as visualized in Italian Renaissance art, there is dual signification about the symbolism of the rose which contains physical and metaphysical conceits (Winston-Allen, 2005, p. 101). This duality implies positive and negative significations as well. The aspect of the flower, such as the color, the shape, and the scent of the rose, reveals natural and physical meanings. The positive implication associated with the physical beauty of the rose also imparts positive metaphysical conceits associated with feelings of honor and love. The other signification infers a negative implication, relating to the physical component of thorns in the rose's stems, and metaphysically alludes to negative feelings of pain and sorrow.

In classical antiquity, white roses were mostly associated with the birth of Venus, the Goddess of Beauty and Love, recalling the *Odes* of the Greek erotic and lyric poet Anacreon (585-485 BCE): "A lovely rosebush [white] sprang up from the earth when Venus rose from the sea" (Anacreon's *Odes*, 44 and 51). The white rose is here associated with the white foam of the sea formed around the shell that carried Venus from the sea to land (D'Ancona, 1977, p. 330). These rose colors of pink and white implied good omens that were appropriated in Renaissance culture and imagery from Antiquity, as seen in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* of 1485, tempera on canvas, now at the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence.¹⁴ In contrast, the red rose and its thorns were associated with negative meanings because of its red color, which alludes to passions and bloodshed, as recounted in pagan mythology by Aphyonius' *Progymnasmata* (13-19), in which he describes the death of Adonis by the boar (D'Ancona, 1977, p. 331). The myth was later visualized in Christoph Schwartz's *Death of Adonis* of 1580, oil on canvas, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.¹⁵ And in Christian iconography the metaphysical implication of bloodshed is represented in images of the Crucifixion, as seen in Giorgio Vasari's *Crucifixion* of 1545, oil on canvas, now in the church of San Giovanni a Carbonara in Naples.¹⁶

In classical literature, pink roses (from the Latin *rosa*, which means pink) were linked to Venus's earthly appearance, symbolizing not only a birth but also a rebirth associated with transformation and "initiation into Mysteries".¹⁷ In the *Golden Ass* (*The Metamorphoses*, Book XI), Apuleius recounted Lucius's transformation from a human form to an animal form, an ass, and how when the ass ate roses was transformed back to human form. Lucius's first mutation was a punishment for his dishonorable act of stealing magic ointments. His second transformation is due to his repentance and constant pleas for forgiveness to Isis, the Egyptian Goddess. She took pity on him, instructing him to eat roses, and reverted him to a human form. Once this second transmutation occurred, Lucian dedicated his life to religion and the Mysteries, especially those related to Isis and Osiris (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994, p. 814). In this legend, the rose, a perennial plant, takes new symbolic meanings, such as restoration, salvation, and rebirth, similar to Christ's Crucifixion, a human/divine act for the redemption and salvation of human beings in Christian iconography.

¹⁴ For the image see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_Venus (accessed on 26 December 2022).

¹⁵ For the image see <https://www.bridgemanimages.com/en-US/schwartz/the-death-of-adonis-painting-16th-century/nomedium/asset/4574586> (accessed on 26 December 2022).

¹⁶ For the image see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chiesa_di_San_Giovanni_a_Carbonara._%286646%29.jpg (accessed on 26 December 2022).

¹⁷ For a detailed summary of Book XI, see <https://apuleiusmetamorphosesbystockton.wordpress.com/the-golden-ass/> (accessed on 30 December 2022).

In ancient times there were also several customs associated with roses. Roses were a favorite flower for composing crowns and praising living poets (Anacheon, *Odes*, 15:51). The blooming of roses during the month of May was celebrated with festivities in Roman times, such as *floralia*, a springtime dedication to the transformation and birth of Flora, the Goddess of Spring, and Venus, the Goddess of Love. But also during the *floralia* ceremonies, the graves of loved ones were decorated with roses as an act of remembrance.

In *The Garden of the Renaissance*, Mirella Levi D'Ancona further noted that, in the 15th century, the symbolism of the rose in relation to the Rosary was associated with Venus and the Virgin Mary, again fusing pagan and Christian significations (D'Ancona, 1977, p. 33; Winston-Allen, 2005, pp. 82-83).¹⁸ Not by accident, Vasari composed his Madonna with a similar contrapposto stance and placement of hands as in Botticelli's Venus. In doing so, Vasari paid homage to the classical and beautiful composition of Botticelli's figure of Venus but, most of all, he selected such an image to compose a "glorious" depiction of Mary, as Borghini proclaimed in *Il Riposo*.

Thus, ancient physical and metaphysical symbolisms of the rose continued to carry a duality of meanings in Christian iconography. In the Middle Ages, the Virgin Mary was celebrated and honored with spring flowers, especially roses, during the month of May. The German Dominican friar, Henry Suso (1295-1366), initiated the ritual of crowning and decorating the statues of the Virgin Mary with wreaths of flowers containing roses.¹⁹ Alfonso X, King of Castilla y Leon, known as *El Sabio* (1221-1284), composed hymns, *Cantigas de Santa Maria* (Songs to the Virgin Mary), as a reverence to the Virgin Mary, addressing her as "Rosas das rosas, flor das flores" (Winston-Allen, 2005, pp. 101-103).²⁰ These hymns were chanted by the devotees during the religious festivities in the month of May. Another Christian tradition initiated in the Middle Ages, which continued into the Renaissance, was the reading of a German psalter, a Medieval allegory called *Our Lady Mary's Rose Garden* that contained 150 salutations of the Virgin Mary (Winston-Allen, 2005, pp. 100-101). It was recited by monks along with devotees. In 1430, this allegory became known as the *Psalter of Our Lady* (Winston-Allen, 2005, p. 100; Bonaventure, 2016).²¹

In the *Stories of the Rose*, Winston-Allen (2005, pp. 82-83) explained that, during the 12th century, the monks and devotees recited these Marian salutations daily: "Ave Maria full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed are you among women". At an unknown time, the greeting was modified to include: "and blessed is the fruit of thy womb" (Luke 1:42), hence focusing on the concept of the incarnation of God's Son, Jesus (Winston-Allen, 2005, pp. 100-101).

¹⁸ D'Ancona, *The Garden of the Renaissance*, p. 33; Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*, pp. 82-83. It is interesting to ponder on astrological comparisons about love and the month of May: In Christian symbolism, the loving embrace of the cherubim and the month of May is dedicated to Mary but also in pagan iconography it is celebratory of Venus, the Goddess of Love, and her zodiac signs (Taurus and Gemini). The cosmic or astrological associations of the first part of the month of May with the zodiac sign of the bull and the constellation of Taurus representing the Earth are governed as a symbol of love and strength, while the later part of the month with the twins and the constellation of Gemini represent Air because of their fraternal bond symbolizing union and wisdom similar to the bonded cherubim.

¹⁹ Henry Suso, German Dominican Friar, is illustrated by an unknown artist in the *Eternal Wisdom*, a manuscript from the 13th or 14th centuries, now at the Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg, Inkunabel K. 7. For the image see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Suso#/media/File:Suso_bild.jpg (accessed on 26 December 2022).

²⁰ Alfonso X, King of Castille, *El Sabio*, *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, manuscript, T.j.1 ("E2"), also known as Códice Rico, in the Biblioteca del Monasterio, El Escorial, Spain. For the image see <https://www.omifacsimiles.com/brochures/cantigas.html> (accessed on 26 December 2022). It is not the purpose of this short essay to compare the many allegories, canticles, and psalters of the Virgin Mary and the rose, see Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*, pp. 101-103, and the bibliography.

²¹ Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*, p. 100. In the *Our Lady of Mary's Rose Garden*, in Lines 64 and 65 the allegory states so. See also Saint Bonaventure, *The Psalter of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 17 May 2016).

Since most of the devotees could not read or articulate these salutations, they substituted the initial verbal prayer “Ave Maria” of each salutation with the insertion of a rose in a chaplet (garland) (Winston-Allen, 2005, pp. xiii, 1). Hence, a rose garland was formed by the collection of verbal utterances of the word “Ave”. This verbal annunciation recalled the greeting of the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary: “Ave Maria”. The divine messenger’s salutation emphasized the incarnation of God’s Son: “The Word was made flesh” (John’s *Revelation*, 1:14). Thus, the word “Ave” was metaphorically visualized as a rose, alluding to God’s word and God’s salutation to Mary, proclaiming the incarnation of Jesus.

Italian Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation capture this religious symbolism by depicting a pergola and a trellis decorated with roses around the closed gate (*porta clausa*, Ezek. 44:1-2), symbolic of the Virgin Mary’s purity (Hall, 1974, p. 327), as seen in Domenico Veneziano’s *Annunciation* of 1445, a tempera panel, now at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, UK (Figure 17), originally the predella panel for the Santa Lucia de’ Magnoli Altarpiece, now at the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence.²² In a private loggia, the Archangel Gabriel appears to Mary and, kneeling, greets her and announces God’s blessing and divine message: “Ave Maria, gratia plena Dominus tecum” (“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you”, Luke 1:28). Domenico captures the solemn moment of Mary’s humble acceptance of her motherly/divine role as she stands and crosses her arms, responding to the archangel: “Ecce ancilla Domini” (“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord”, Luke 1:38). The post-lintel architecture of the loggia contrasts with the adjacent arcuated entrance to the enclosed locked garden, which is a perfumed garden (“hortus conclusus”, in Solomon’s *Song of Song*, 4:12) covered with a pergola of roses. The enclosed garden with roses alludes to the Mary’s purity as well as Her love and union with Jesus (Daley, 1986, Colloquium 9, pp. 255-279).²³



Figure 17. Domenico Veneziano, *Annunciation*, predella from the Santa Lucia de’ Magnoli Altarpiece, 1445, tempera on panel. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

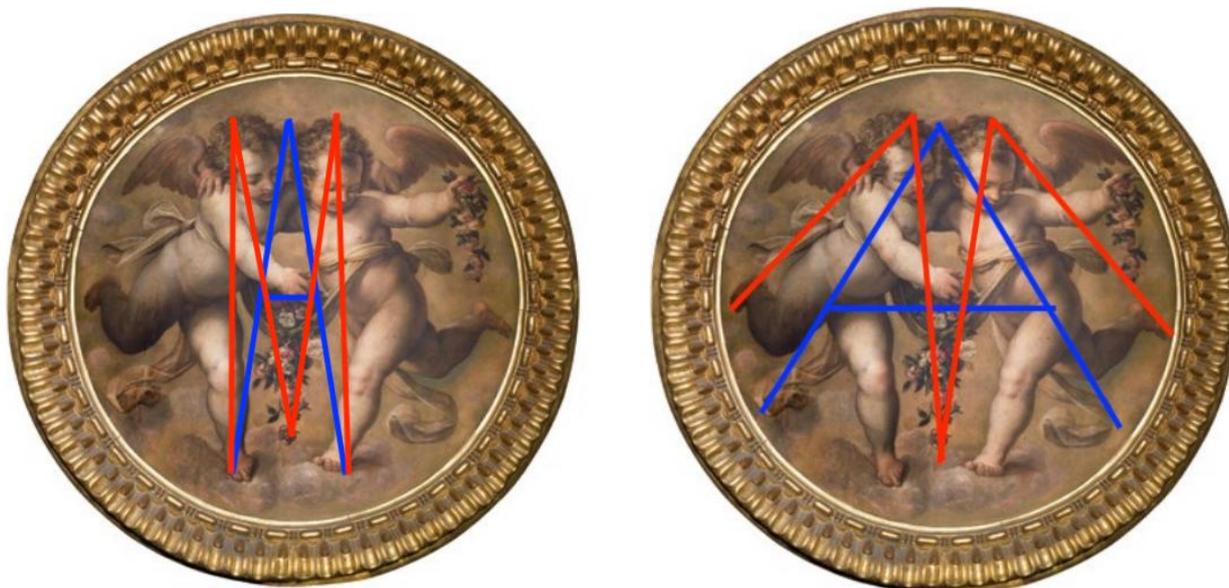
Since the Middle Ages, roses were inserted in a chaplet (garland) to form a rosary and the color of the rose was chosen according to the different significations of the mysteries of the rosary. For example, white roses were associated with the purity of Mary and the Joyous mysteries; red roses with Christ’s blood and suffering with the

²² For the image see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Lucia_de%27_Magnoli_Altarpiece (accessed on 26 December 2022).

²³ Brian E. Daley, “The ‘Closed Garden’ and the ‘Sealed Fountain’: *Song of Songs* 4:12 in the Late Medieval Iconography of Mary”, in Elizabeth B. Macdougall, Ed., *Medieval Gardens* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1986), Colloquium 9, pp. 255-279, tracing the development of the Virgin Mary in a *hortus conclusus*.

Sorrowful mysteries; and yellow roses, whose color resembled divine sunlight, with the Glorious mysteries (D'Ancona, 1977, p. 339; Winston-Allen, 2005, pp. 101-103). Although not associated with any specific mysteries of the rosary, the pink rose—since Antiquity and continued in the Renaissance era—symbolized beauty, gratitude, love, and peace.

In Marian iconography, the rose's color and design of the flower were associated with other references to the Virgin Mary, such as her appellation "Maria". The five petals in a rose alluded to the five letters for the formation of her name, "Maria", accompanied by Archangel Gabriel's salutation to her as "Ave" [Maria] (Winston-Allen, 2005, p. 101). Cleverly, Vasari embedded religious significations in the cherubim, embodying them as embracing twin figures, forming with the posture of their bodies, heads, arms, and legs the initial "M" for the name of Mary and the initial "A" for her salutation of Ave [Maria] while carrying and dispersing roses (Figures 18a and 18b). In depicting the *Madonna of the Rosary* and the Tondo, Vasari intertwined the symbolism of the rose with the rose garden, a *rosarium*, or the rosary. He also provided for the Christian devotee an image of love, charity, and piety following the Tridentine devotional reform, at the same time abiding by the wishes of the departed, Camelia Capponi, to daily pray the rosary in her memory.



Figures 18a and 18b. Cheney's designs of the initials A and M (Ave Maria) in Vasari's Tondo.

Conclusion

The fascination with allegories and mystical symbolism in the 16th century derived from Renaissance Neoplatonism as well as from the literati and artists' interests in the devices, emblems, and rebuses found in books on hieroglyphs, emblemata, and mythography as well as in astronomical and botanical texts. Vasari, too, was inspired by these texts. His travels in intelligentsia circles in Bologna, Florence, and Rome facilitated his knowledge of the emblemist Andrea Alciato (1492-1550) and the humanists Paolo Giovio (1483-1552), Vincenzo Borghini (1515-1580), and Cosimo Bartoli (1503-1572). In addition, his early education in the classics with the grammarian Giovanni Pollastra (1465-1540) and the mythographer Pierio Valeriano (1477-1558), along with the fortunate patronage of the Medici and the Church, provided him with a rich repertoire of knowledge and resources for the symbolism in his paintings.

In composing the Tondo and the *Madonna of the Rosary*, Vasari was abiding by the wishes of Camilla Capponi as well as making two significant statements: one religious and the other artistic. Spiritually, he was honoring the foundation of the Santa Maria Novella, a Dominican church, and in depicting the theme of the Madonna of the Rosary was referencing the promulgator of the rosary, Saint Dominic of Guzman (1170-1221), founder of the Dominican Order, who experienced an apparition from the Virgin Mary in the Dominican monastery of Saint Mary of Prouille, located in the region of Languedoc in France. In this vision in 1208, the Virgin Mary donated a rosary to Saint Dominic, encouraging him to pray with the prayer beads of the rosary instead of Psalms (Kasten, 2011, p. 8; Miller, 2002, pp. 7-15; Réau, 2000, 1:394-396; Borghini, 1584, pp. 84-85).²⁴ However, the cult of the rosary did not fully develop until 1470 when Alano de la Roche (Alanus de Rupe, 1428-1475), a Dominican theologian and follower of Saint Dominic, formed a Confraternity of the Rosary at Douai, revitalizing the cult of the rosary as a devotional manifestation of love toward the Mother of God (Réau, 2000, 1:46). During the Italian Renaissance, the images indicated that a type of rosary with beads was used but not in the structure and organized collection of prayers that would be established later during the Tridentine Reformation (Fragnito, 1997; 2001; 2005).

The rosary iconographically was associated with the symbolism of the rose or a rose garden (*rosarium*). During the 11th century, as noted earlier, in Irish monastic centers, there was a tradition of placing a crown of roses selected from a *rosarium* (Latin for a garden of roses, place with roses, or garland of roses) above the head of the statue of the Virgin Mary on her feast days (Dubin, 2009, pp. 79-82; Kasten, 2011, pp. 7-11, esp. 9; Winston-Allen, 2005, p. 60; Mitchell, 2009, pp. 5-15).

Artistically, Vasari was honoring his fellow Tuscan artist, Masaccio, and his interpretation of the *Holy Trinity*, located in the Capponi Chapel. He covered the fresco with his *Madonna of the Rosary* to comply with Camilla Capponi's will. But, purposefully, Vasari incorporated the symbolism of the Holy Trinity in his *Madonna of the Rosary*. In this manner, he continued to visually pay homage to his artistic predecessor as he had done earlier in his book, *The Lives of the Artists*, where he paid tribute to Masaccio with a biography (*vita*) (Bettarini & Barocchi, 1966-1976, 3:123-136).

Vasari's *Madonna of the Rosary* is composed of two parts: a heavenly realm and a terrestrial realm (Figure 1). Her open mantel, painted in a blue celestial color, unites these two realms. In the heavenly realm of divine light, puffy white clouds, and a celestial blue sky, God the Father appears from the Heaven holding a celestial globe with an entourage of different types and sizes of angels—small, medium, and large. Accompanying God is the Holy Spirit, a third member of the Trinity, in the shape of a white dove. These holy figures are perpendicular above the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, and Queen of Heaven, who carries in her arm Baby Jesus, the second member of the Trinity (Hall, 1974, pp. 309-10).

In the Tondo, Vasari encapsulated the symbolism of the name of Mary and the Cross through the design of the cherubim carrying roses (Figures 14a and 14b; 18a and 18b). He paralleled the rose motif in the Tondo with the bead motif of the rosary in the large panel. Here, the messengers of God appear in the sky carrying a large and majestic rosary containing blue/green, silver/white, and red colored beads. With a beautiful and repetitive

²⁴ Patricia Ann Kasten, *Linking Your Beads: The Rosary's History, Mysteries, and Prayers* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2011), p. 8; and John D. Miller, *Beads and Prayers: The Rosary in History and Devotion* (London: Burns and Oates Publishers, 2002), pp. 7-15; and Louis Réau, *Iconografía del arte cristiano: Iconografía de los santos*, translated by Daniel Alcoba and edited by Joan Sureda Pons, 3 Vols. (Barcelona: Del Serbal, 2000), 1:394-396; and Borghini, *Il Riposo*, pp. 84-85, on the history of the Rosary in 1584.

pattern of infinity—∞—the celestials beads encircle large medallions containing narrative scenes of the mysteries of the rosary: The Joyful, the Sorrowful, and the Glorious. Following God's guidance, two small angels crown the Madonna with a jeweled golden crown while the large angels hold above the crowned Madonna another crown, this one composed of the shapes of pearl-beads surrounding the mysteries of the rosary. The medium size angels open and extend the blue colored mantel of the Madonna, indicating that she is not only the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven but also the Madonna of Mercy (Charity and Love) (D'Ancona, 1977, pp. 330-355; Hall, 1974, pp. 325-326; Jameson, 1903, pp. 83-114), thus, a daily visual celebration for Camilla Capponi.

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