It is the habit of nature, that when she makes someone very excellent in any profession, he does not stand alone.

Giorgio Vasari, *Life of Masaccio* (1568)

Of all the works of Masaccio, the Brancacci Chapel in Santa Maria del Carmine seems most crucial to our understanding of his contributions to Renaissance art and his place within it (see Plate 3). Painted by Masolino and Masaccio around 1425 and left unfinished until its completion by Filippino Lippi in the 1480s, the cycle portrays the original sin of Adam and Eve and its redemption through the life of the apostle Peter, Christ’s vicar and first pope. To many, these scenes seem illustrative (the dichotomy between tradition and innovation: what is generally deemed the late Gothic style of the older Masolino, and the nascent Renaissance sensibility of Masaccio, an artist, Vasari proclaimed, “so far in advance of that which had been painted until his time that his work surely can stand comparison in its drawing and color to anything modern.” For Vasari, who devoted much of his life of Masaccio to praise of the chapel, the frescoes became “a school of art for the most celebrated sculptors and painters,” from Fra Filippo Lippi through Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and “the most divine Michelangelo.” Vasari’s glorification of the Brancacci Chapel — as a monument so reflective of Masaccio’s genius that it seemed to transcend time instead of being a product of its moment — has decisively shaped the way in which we have been led to think about the chapel to this day.

Our distance from the Brancacci Chapel has increased dramatically since Vasari wrote his encomium in the mid-sixteenth century. Notwithstanding his praise, the chapel was regarded as outmoded 200 years after its completion. In the 1670s, the vogue for *pietre dure* inspired the addition of marble wainscoting, an elaborate balustrade, and a new altar and
frame for the *Madonna del Popolo*, which had been installed in the chapel by 1454. Between 1746 and 1748, the original vaults, painted with the four evangelists by Masolino, were replaced by Vincenzo Meucci's *Madonna Giving the Carmelites Scapular to Saint Simon Stock*, a fresco whose disproportionately large figures dwarf the scenes below. Joining Meucci's dome to the walls, architectural vistas by Carlo Sacconi obliterated Masolino's lunettes of the *Calling of Peter and Andrew and Saint Peter Walking on Water*. Replacing the *Denial of Peter and Feed My Sheep*, known only through their sinopie, a wide, arched window was installed above the original Gothic one. After the fire that swept the Carmine in 1771, restoration was undertaken to recover a luminosity lost centuries earlier, with unsatisfactory results.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the Brancacci Chapel was regarded primarily as a problem of connoisseurship—for Roberto Longhi, echoing Gaetano Milanesi, perhaps the single most important and intractable one in all of fifteenth-century art—to which innumerable solutions were proposed. Restoration of the frescoes, undertaken between 1984 and 1990, has resolved many questions concerning its authorship while revealing new information about the style, technique, and collaboration of the artists. Freed of the dirt of centuries and residue from the fire of 1771, the chapel's colors are no longer lugubrious but appear bright and luminous, in absolute accord with those found in late Trecento and early Quattrocento frescoes. The recovery of several fragments and of sinopie for the scenes above the window has brought us closer to the artists' intentions while raising new questions about their collaboration. Over the past few decades, documents concerning both the artists and Felice Brancacci, the patron of the decoration, have come to light. We now know more about the Brancacci Chapel as a work of art than earlier generations ever could have foreseen or imagined.

At the same time, much about the Brancacci Chapel eludes us as modern-day witnesses to its fame. We are precluded from knowing the work by our remoteness from the fifteenth century, our tendency to heroize Masaccio, and our obsession with attribution and dating, matters of less concern to its original audience. We can no longer view the church as it was when the murals were begun, for virtually nothing remains of the Carmine's original decoration: the Gothic vaults; the stained-glass windows of saints and martyrs; the chapels frescoed by such late Trecento masters as Agnolo Gaddi, Spinello Aretino, Lippo d'Andrea, and Starnina. Finally, we cannot experience the Brancacci as did the devout in the Quattrocento or even as did scholars through the early 1980s. Isolated from the rest of the church and accessed by a separate entrance, the chapel is a monument that we now view as spectators who must pay to regard its display.

This chapter seeks to situate the Brancacci Chapel within the historical and patronal ambience of Santa Maria del Carmine and the artistic
practices of the early Renaissance. To create a context for understanding the Brancacci Chapel, we begin by discussing the Carmine and the art visible in the church at the time that Masolino and Masaccio painted the frescoes. We then turn to the history of the chapel and the Brancacci family, focusing on Felice Brancacci, under whose aegis the paintings were commissioned. Next, the iconography and program of the murals are considered. A discussion of the frescoes, their date, and the collaboration of Masolino and Masaccio follows. We conclude by placing the chapel within the devotional context of the Carmine and its decoration.

Santa Maria del Carmine and Carmelite Devotions

Founded in 1268 in the working-class parish of San Frediano, Santa Maria del Carmine was one of several monastic foundations established in Florence in the thirteenth century. The special distinction of the Carmelites among all religious orders lay in its purported antiquity. The Carmelites professed their descent from the Old Testament prophet Elijah, who, they asserted, had originated an eremetic form of monasticism on Mount Carmel predating the birth of Christ. To signify the Order's origins in the Holy Land, Carmelites followed the liturgy of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem; to honor their patron, the Virgin Mary, alleged to have visited the early hermits on Mount Carmel, the monks celebrated her feasts with special ceremony and displayed icons of the Madonna and Child.

Notwithstanding papal approval of the Order in 1226, the legend of its descent from Elijah was challenged frequently. As early as the Historia orientalis of Jacobus de Vitry (c. 1250), the Carmelite claim to antiquity was denied and its origins dated only to the Crusades (begun 1096). Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the Order sought to assert its venerable foundation by Elijah, as attested by public disputations as well as by its art. In Carmelite churches, icons and panels of the Madonna and Child were venerated as ancient images brought from the Holy Land, in evident testimony to the Order's antiquity.

From its foundation, the Florentine church of Santa Maria del Carmine was renowned for its possession of the monumental Madonna del Popolo, then believed to have been transported from the Holy Land before its occupation by the Muslim infidels in the seventh century. The original location of the Madonna within the church is unknown. Although it generally has been assumed that the panel once was placed on the high altar, it instead may have served as la tavola di nostra Donna (the painting of our Lady) for the chapel of an important confraternity, the Compagnia di Santa Maria del Carmine. This confraternity, established by 1280, was a laudesi (laud-singing) brotherhood, whose members met to pray, sing songs of praise to the Virgin on selected church feasts, and commemorate their dead brethren. Believed to possess great miracle-working powers,
the *Madonna del Popolo* received pleas for grace from the populace and the prayers of women who sought cure of their infertility. In 1406, the spoils of war from Florence’s defeat of Pisa were placed before the image. At that point, the *Madonna* may already have been moved to the Brancacci Chapel. By 1454 if not earlier, a sodality of pious women had been founded to care for both the image and the chapel.

The Carmine also was famous for its performance of the *sacra rappresentazione* (mystery play) of the Ascension of Christ. This mystery play was performed on the feast of the Ascension as early as the 1390s by the Compagnia di Sant’Agnese, a confraternity that maintained an altar in the Carmine and counted many artists among its members. Performed in the nave outside the Brancacci Chapel, the sacred spectacle was described with great admiration by Bishop Abraham of Suzdal, the Byzantine prelate who visited the city during the Council of Florence (1439). The play was a multimedia event involving boy actors in festive costumes, a choir of singers, dancing and music-making “angels,” and scenery illuminated by lanterns, lamps, and candles. The performance climaxed in a glorious blaze of light as Jesus, surrounded by a radiant aureole, ascended to heaven – the vaults of the Carmine. This fantastic illusion was given reality with ingenious stage machinery designed by Brunelleschi and elaborate scenery that in 1425 was painted by Masolino.

Although the theatrical spectacle commemorated the feast of the Ascension, it inevitably would have inspired other associations because of its performance in a Carmelite church. The text of Elijah’s ascent to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kings:11-12) evidently was the basis of the account of Christ’s ascension (Acts 1:9-11); the prophet’s return to earth in witness of the Transfiguration (Mark 9:4) also was considered a prefiguration of this event. Attracting countless spectators and dignitaries, the Ascension play established the Carmelites’ prominence among the city’s churches. Propagandistically, it also reinforced the Order’s association with Elijah and confirmed as truth the legend of its antiquity.

**Santa Maria del Carmine before the Brancacci Chapel**

Little remains of Santa Maria del Carmine as it existed in the early Quattrocento, when decoration of the Brancacci Chapel was begun. To ascribe this to the fire of 1771 alone would be erroneous. Long before then, liturgical reform, modernization, changes of taste, and restorations had transformed the original Gothic church. Descriptions of the Carmine prior to these renovations are recorded in extant documents. They suggest that much of the church already had been decorated by the time the Brancacci Chapel, prominently located on the right transept, was painted. An image of the Virgin, Saint Agnes, and John the Baptist “bella e di bello colore” (beautiful and beautifully colored) was commissioned for the facade.
stained-glass windows with “immagini di santi e di sante” (images of male and female saints) once lined the nave; saints and their martyrdoms were portrayed on the walls. 10

By the early years of the Quattrocento, several chapels already had been decorated with frescoes and altarpieces. Virtually all of these have been destroyed over time. As is known from Vasari’s admiring description, the high altar chapel was decorated by Agnolo Gaddi with scenes from the life of the Virgin, to whom the Carmine was dedicated; 11 immediately to the right was the chapel of John the Baptist, thought by Vasari to have been painted by Giotto but actually by Spinello Aretino, Agnolo’s contemporary (see Plate 35). 12 Spinello frescoed two other chapels in the church, as Vasari recounted in vivid detail, one dedicated to James and John the Evangelist, the other representing scenes from the life of the Virgin that culminated in her Assumption, the chief Marian festival of the liturgical year. 13

On the left aisle, an altarpiece by Lorenzo Monaco (documented in 1400) adorned the chapel, frescoed by Lorenzo di Salvo, where the landesi Compagnia di Sant’Agnese worshiped. 14 Its walls resonated with the confraternity’s lauds, songs that were transcribed in a beautifully illuminated choirbook. 15 The oratory belonging to the Compagnia di San Niccolò di Bari (founded in 1334) was located beneath the high altar and transept chapels. Its walls were decorated with monochrome scenes of the Passion of Christ from the late Trecento. 16 The young Fra Angelico (then the lay painter Guido di Pietro) joined the confraternity in 1418 before he became a Dominican friar. 17 It might be proposed that his panels of Saints Catherine of Alexandria and John the Baptist and Saints Nicholas of Bari and Agnes (New York, Private Collection) once formed part of an altarpiece for this chapel, paying homage to the saints most revered in the Carmine. 18

The fresco that Masaccio painted of the Carmine’s ceremonial consecration on April 9, 1422, was destroyed in renovations during the early seventeenth century. 19 The mural of the Sagra (Consecration) was executed in terra verde (green monochrome) and located above a door in the monks’ cloister. There the image was continuously visible to the friars, bidding them to recall an illustrious moment of the church’s history. The Sagra is known by Vasari’s moving description (mel through several drawings by later artists. 20 Vasari praises the verisimilitude of its portraits, which represented Brunelleschi, Donatello, and eminent Florentine statesmen. He commends Masaccio’s great skill (discrezione) in distinguishing their physique, height, and appearance. Notwithstanding the great loss of this fresco, its appearance is likely to have been reflected in the varied groups of apostles and neophytes in the Brancacci Chapel. The date that Masaccio painted the fresco is unknown, although along with the Brancacci Chapel itself, it was executed in the 1420s and thus was later than most of the works in the Carmine.

Sadly, as we have seen, much of the Carmine’s original decoration has
Masaccio in the Brancacci Chapel

been destroyed. Only a few frescoes have survived from the early Quattrocento. They include the wrenching Flagellation and Crucifixion from the Chapel of the Passion (documented in 1402) by Lippo d'Andrea; the extensive cycle recounting the life of Saint Cecilia, also ascribed to him, in the sacristy; and the fragmentary saints by Starnina in 1404 for the Chapel of Saint Jerome (see Plates 36 and 38), scenes of which were engraved by Thomas Patch and Séroux d'Agincourt.41 Painted in the opening years of the Quattrocento, these frescoes incipiently reveal some of the same tendencies that would be developed in the Brancacci Chapel: clarity of dramatic exposition, concern with representing architecture in perspective, sculptural drapery, luminously modeled facial features, and bright colors. Along with the Madonna del Popolo; the lost works by Agnolo Gaddi, Spinello Aretino, and Lorenzo Monaco noted previously; and earlier works, including the Accademia Crucifixion (1343) by Bernardo Daddi;42 they shaped the visual culture of the Carmine of which the Brancacci Chapel was to be a part.

A crucial point must conclude this consideration of the church and its art. Many of the chapels in the Carmine, including the high altar chapel and the sacristy, had been decorated by wealthy families from the parish by the late 1390s (if not earlier) or in the opening years of the Quattrocento. Not so with the chapel of the Brancacci family. Its lack of adornment would have been embarrassingly conspicuous, given its prominent position. Located on the south transept, the Brancacci Chapel faced the high altar, confronted the chapel of the wealthy Serragli family across the nave, and was adjacent to the Chapel of the Passion. Considering the competitive momentum that characterized relationships between Florentine families of this time and the importance of private chapels as indicators of status, its bare walls would have been unacceptable. Its decoration was a strategy critical to the social and religious standing of the Brancacci among their peers and, as we will see, to the fulfillment of a long-standing family commitment. This obligation must have seemed especially pressing in light of the Carmine's consecration in 1422, which elevated the church's prestige in the city, and the chapel's visibility during the Ascension plays performed in the nave.

The Brancacci Family and Santa Maria del Carmine

The Brancacci had been worshiping in the Carmine for more than 130 years by the time that the family's chapel was frescoed in the mid-1420s.43 The family, comprised of wealthy cloth merchants, became active in the church within years of its foundation in 1268. In 1290, Branca el Brancacci served as one of two capitani (directors) of the confraternity of Santa Maria del Carmine, the laudesi confraternity that met in the church to sing hymns to the Virgin.44 Branca initiated an association with the con-
fraternity that his male descendents were to follow for generations: From his son Piuvichese through Felice Brancacci, the men were members of this sodality, several becoming gonfalonieri (officers and bearers of the group's processional standard). In addition, Brancacci men were active in Florentine government on the highest level, many serving terms as prior or gonfalonieri of the republic.47

Economically and politically, the most successful of the fourteenth-century Brancacci was Piero di Piuvichese.48 It was he who established the family chapel in the Carmine and, consequently, he whose patron saint had to be honored in the frescoes. This prosperous merchant was married to a daughter of the wealthy banking family, the Bardi, whose own chapel in Santa Croce had been painted by Giotto. The esteemed Piero served once as capitano of the Parte Guelfa, three times as prior of Florence, and six times as gonfaloniere of the Compagnia di Santa Maria del Carmine. In 1367, Piero wrote his testament, in which he endowed a chapel in the Carmine, promising the church five florins a year for forty years. His bequest was administered by his son Antonio, who died in 1391.49 In his own testament, Antonio bequeathed an additional 200 florins for its completion.50 By 1387, construction of the chapel was under way; in 1389, 50 florins were left by Serotino di Brancacci “for the adornment of, and to make paintings in, said chapel.”51 Notwithstanding these bequests, more than a quarter of a century would transpire before the chapel actually was frescoed.

Felice Brancacci and the Brancacci Chapel

As Richard Goldthwaite has demonstrated, the fifteenth century saw an unprecedented demand for private chapels in churches, even for those who were not extremely wealthy.52 Chapels commemorated the deceased, perpetuated their memory, and publicly demonstrated the status of the family. No surviving documents prove that Felice Brancacci paid for the chapel's decoration himself. However, it is probable that this was the case, since Felice by then had inherited rights to the chapel.53 By 1422, when he wrote his first testament, Felice referred to “the chapel or said testator and his predecessors” in the Carmine; a decade later, its decoration still unfinished, his will requested that it be completed by his heirs.54

Felice Brancacci experienced success as well as tragedy.55 He enjoyed his wealth as a silk merchant and commanded respect as the descendent of a venerable family. He received meteoric public acclaim after he won a joust celebrating Florence's defeat of Pisa in 1406. His fall from renown was equally dramatic. In 1436, he was formally expelled from the city by Cosimo de' Medici, de facto ruler of Florence and his one-time friend. Because of his marriage to the daughter of Palla Strozzi, Cosimo's great enemy, and his involvement in a plot against the Medici, Felice was pro-
hibited from ever returning to his native city. In 1447, he died impoverished and in exile. His only son, Michele, died in 1455.

Felice Brancacci served in a variety of prominent governmental and diplomatic positions in the years before his exile, especially during the 1420s. He became governor, vicar, and ambassador to several Tuscan towns from 1407 through 1421. In 1422, he was appointed ambassador in a dangerous mission to Cairo, the intriguing events of which he recorded in his diary. Indicating how greatly he was trusted, he became treasurer of communal accounts in 1425. In the Carmine, he twice served as gonfaloniere of the confraternity of Santa Maria del Carmine, following the tradition established by his ancestors.

Many documents concerning Felice's life have survived. However, none relate to the decoration of his family chapel. In the absence of any documents, it has been contended that funds for the frescoes were obtained from the fourteenth-century endowments of his ancestors and that Felice had very little to do with the chapel. However, funds for the chapel's construction are likely to have been exhausted by this time, as suggested by the long delay in decorating the chapel from the time of the bequests. Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that Felice may have raised special funds to pay for the frescoes himself.

As Felice's tax declarations reveal, he was well-to-do but not among the richest men in Florence. In 1427, he ranked 516th in terms of financial worth, as is known from his tax return. Between 1423 and 1425, he sold three houses belonging to the Brancacci family (including the ancestral home), forcing his family to rent lodging and liquidating a patrimony that custom required him to preserve. Indeed, his pressing need for money, for which no other explanation apart from decoration of the chapel has been found, led him to embezzle funds from the communal treasury in 1425, a crime that was not discovered until seven years later. This period coincides precisely with the time that Masolino and Masaccio were likely engaged in painting the chapel. Rights to the chapel by then had passed to Felice, as is known from his testament of 1422, which, as we have seen, designates it as his and his predecessors' place of burial. Decoration therefore must have occurred under his auspices and was undertaken to fulfill a family obligation.

The Iconography of the Chapel

Several critics have proposed that the life of Saint Peter was chosen for the chapel's decoration to demonstrate support for the prevailing government or the papacy. However, such arguments are inevitably problematic. The theme of the frescoes was not conceived as a response to contemporary circumstances or politics. Rather, it was determined by the obligation to
honor the apostle Peter because he was the patron saint of Felice’s ancestor, Piero di Piuvichese, who had founded the family funerary chapel in 1367. While scholars have sought allusions to Felice’s beliefs or the events of the day in certain episodes, it is mistaken to read these scenes as social commentary. The life of Saint Peter was portrayed on the walls of this funerary chapel in order to commemorate Piero di Piuvichese and to procure salvation for his descendants. In every respect, the scenes comprise a canonical account of the apostle’s life, from his calling to his martyrdom. In a narrative mode followed throughout late medieval and Renaissance painting, their sequence is thematic rather than strictly chronological to create a unity of meaning and compositional harmony. The only anachronistic elements in the cycle of the saint’s life are the Carmelite witnesses of Peter’s death and chairing of Peter—a necessary, propagandistic affirmation of the Carmelite Order’s antiquity—and the portraits in the scenes on the bottom register that were finished by Filippino Lippi. Such inclusions would have made the scenes relevant to the Carmine’s history and the lay patrons.

It is erroneous to suppose, as Frederick Antal contended, that the scenes in the chapel were intended to advocate an “egalitarian point of view . . . which proclaimed in principle the equality of men.” Such an ideology may have been propounded in humanist writings but was inconceivable in Florentine society of the early Quattrocento. Moreover, the Calling of Peter and Andrew and Saint Peter Walking on Water were portrayed not as allusions to Felice’s dangerous sea voyage to Egypt or his one-time service on the Board of Maritime Consuls, as has been stated, but because they were crucial episodes in the apostle’s life that initiated his ministry and tested his faith. Similarly, the story of the tribute money—in which the saint, at Christ’s command, retrieved money from a fish’s mouth to pay the Roman tax collector—was chosen as a paradigm of Peter’s obedience to Christ and his primacy in the Church. Recounted in Matthew 17:25–7 immediately after Jesus’ prophecy of his own death and resurrection, this subject would have had special relevance in a funerary chapel. Most certainly, the representation of the tribute money was never intended, as has been proposed, as a prophetic endorsement of the Florentine catastro (the city’s first graduated income tax), not even instituted until 1427. Contrary to what has been asserted, the subject is not rare. Every scene in the Brancacci Chapel emerged from a rich legacy—artistic, liturgical, and textual—that long predated the frescoes.

Iconographically, the illustrious prototype for the Brancacci Chapel was the now-destroyed cycle of the lives of Saints Peter and Paul, frescoed on the portico of Old Saint Peter’s, Rome, around 1280. This extensive series was copied by artists as the authoritative version of the lives of both apostles. Five scenes from the Roman cycle were quoted in the transept of San Francesco, Assisi, around the same time. About two decades later,
a complete and authentic copy – a true facsimile – was made by Deodato Orlandi for the church of San Piero a Grado, Pisa. It was painted in honor of Peter’s arrival in Pisa prior to his journey to Rome, an auspicious event immortalized in local legend. The still-preserved frescoes comprehensively recount the life of the apostle Peter, from his calling by Christ through his martyrdom. Except for three episodes – the saint’s denial of Christ, preaching, and baptism of the neophytes – each scene in the Pisa cycle, including the tribute money, was represented in the Brancacci Chapel.

The textual sources for the Brancacci Chapel include the Bible, the liturgy for the three feasts of Saint Peter, and most important of all, the Legenda Sanctorum (known today as The Golden Legend), compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, Bishop of Genoa, in the mid-thirteenth century. The Golden Legend is a lectionary of liturgical readings that recounts the lives of the saints in order of the Church’s calendar of feasts. It was extraordinarily popular in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. It served as the literary source for many fresco cycles, from the Arena Chapel in Padua by Ciotto (c. 1305) through the Legend of the True Cross by Piero della Francesca in Arezzo (c. 1455–60), and was used by preachers in preparing sermons.

As is known from an inventory of 1390, The Golden Legend was accessible in the library of Santa Maria del Carmine. It seems to have been the primary source for the chapel’s iconography. Voragine’s excursus on the Feast of Saint Peter (June 29) lists every event that was portrayed in the Brancacci Chapel except the episodes with Theophilus and the chairing at Antioch. These are included in the reading for the Feast of the Chairing of Saint Peter (February 22). The apostle’s liberation from prison by an angel is celebrated by the Feast of Saint Peter in Chains (August 1). The epistle to this feast commemorates the saint’s deliverance from bondage and his power to absolve humanity of its sins, a relevant theme for a funerary chapel. As proclaimed in the lesson for the Feast of Saint Peter, the apostle loosened “the fetters of our sins with the keys which he received from the Lord” and knew the glory of eternal life through his martyrdom.

The only scenes in the chapel not taken directly from Peter’s life are the Expulsion of Adam and Eve (Plate 58) and the Temptation of Adam and Eve (Plate 59) on the piers at the chapel’s entrance, a “deviation” that has long troubled scholars. Here we point out that Adam’s example is invoked by Peter himself in Voragine’s lesson for the Feast of Saint Peter. As Peter is being crucified, head downward, before a weeping crowd, he cries out:

Lord, I have desired to follow Thee, but I did not wish to be crucified upright. Thou alone art erect, upright, and high. We are children of Adam, whose head was bowed to the ground: his fall denotes the manner in which men are born, for we are born in such wise that we are let fall prone upon the ground. . . . Lord, Thou art my all and other than Thee have I naught. I thank Thee with all my soul, with which I live, understand, and call to Thee.”
Plate 58. Masaccio, *Expulsion of Adam and Eve*, detail of Plate 3. (Photo: Antonio Quattrone)
The presence of Adam and Eve is not an intrusion into the story of Peter, but is essential to its meaning. It is a reminder of humanity's sin, of the necessity for Christ's sacrifice, and of the redemption obtained through Peter's martyrdom. The advocacy of so worthy a saint, who exceeded "all the other apostles in his faith," as Voragine proclaims, 5 would ensure the salvation of the Brancacci.

**Organization of the Narrative**

Following the time-honored traditions of Tuscan mural painting, the cycle of the saint's life was organized in three registers below the vaults (see Plates 4 and 5). On the highest row, the narrative was initiated by Peter's calling to the apostolate and his rescue from drowning in the Sea of Galilee, represented in the now-lost lunettes. On the altar wall between them were two scenes whose sinopie have been preserved: the *Denial of Saint Peter* (see Plate 6), signifying a human weakness which later would be redeemed by faith, and *Feed My Sheep* (see Plate 7), in which Christ charges Peter to minister to the Christian flock.

The cycle continues on the middle register, with Jesus delegating Peter to pay the Roman tax collector money, miraculously retrieved from the mouth of a fish. It proceeds to the saint's apostolate in which Peter assumes the ministry of Jesus by preaching, baptizing, healing, and resurrecting. In the lowest register, the altar wall portrays the saint's acts of charity, including his healing of the lame with his shadow and his distribution of alms to the poor. The last episodes of Peter's life, witnessed by Saint Paul, are represented on the side walls. These include his imprisonment by Theophilus, whose son he resurrects; his chairing at Antioch; his confrontation with Nero and Simon Magus; and his martyrdom by crucifixion. The narrative thus traced Peter's apostolate from its doubt-ridden beginnings through his assumption of Christ's ministry and his martyrdom. These proved his worthiness to lead the Church.

The arrangement of the narrative did not follow strict chronological order. Instead, the scenes were disposed so they would balance each other thematically and compositionally. Thus, in the highest register, the lunettes of the *Calling of Peter and Andrew* and *Peter Walking on Water* faced each other as the cycle's only maritime episodes. On the altar wall, the episodes portrayed the apostle in his mission as he preached, baptized, healed, and gave charity in the name of Christ. Compositionally, the walls of the chapel are united. The arrangement of figures in the episodes balances each scene, as is especially evident in the episodes of the altar wall. Landscape extends across three scenes in the middle row, and urban settings predominate in the register below.
Attribution and Dating

Collaboration between artists was the norm rather than the exception in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, forming the financial and professional basis of the master/teacher relationship and the workshop system. It was often a temporary affiliation, according flexibility and economic advantage to artists. Such arrangements allowed masters to respond expeditiously to the demands of the marketplace, to share the cost of renting shops and buying materials, and to benefit from one another’s reputation and expertise. The professional association of Masolino and Masaccio was typical of the 1420s, a decade that also saw the productive affiliation of Donatello and Michelozzo.

Vasari’s *vite* of Masolino, Masaccio, and Filippino Lippi provide the foundation for attributing individual scenes. Vasari assigns the earliest parts of the chapel — the now-lost vaults and lunettes — to Masolino, describing the four Evangelists, the *Calling of Peter and Andrew* (known from a copy in the Matteini Collection: Plate 60), the *Denial of Peter* (known from its sinopia), and *Peter Walking on Water, Saint Peter Preaching and the Healing of the Lame Man at the Temple and the Raising of Tabitha* (called “Saint Peter curing his daughter Petronilla”) are noted on

Plate 60. After Masolino, *Calling of Peter and Andrew*, Florence, Ezio Matteini Collection. (Photo: Antonio Quattrone)
the second tier. The scenes on the second and third tiers by Masaccio include "the installation of Saint Peter as the first pontiff, the healing of the sick, the raising of the dead, curing the lame by his shadow falling on them as he approaches the Temple with Saint John"; the Tribute Money, which is praised effusively; and Saint Peter Baptizing the Neophytes, with its "very celebrated figure of a naked youth shivering with the cold."

Vasari's discussion of the chapel concludes with his vita of Filippino Lippi, who, as a young artist, had "completed the unfinished picture of Saint Peter and Saint Paul restoring the emperor's nephew to life" and the scene on the opposite wall showing Peter and Paul disputing with Simon Magus.

Vasari is accurate yet selective in discussing the chapel. His appreciation omits some scenes. He does not mention Masolino's now-lost Feed My Sheep opposite the Denial of Peter or Masaccio's Distribution of Alms and the Death of Ananias, nor does he describe the Temptation of Adam and Eve and Expulsion from Paradise. What remains important is not only the accuracy of his attributions but the sequence of execution that they imply. From Vasari's account, it may be assumed that Masaccio's collaboration with Masolino began only on the second tier. By the time this was complete, Masolino evidently had relinquished the chapel to Masaccio. Decades later, the frescoes of the bottom tier – and presumably, the dado, now covered by marble panels – were completed by Filippino Lippi.

Since the chapel is undocumented, its chronology is problematic. Widely divergent opinions have been proposed, with some scholars postulating a long-protracted execution spread over several years and as many as three separate campaigns, concluding with Filippino Lippi's intervention. More recent critics, aided by conservation reports, have reevaluated the physical and documentary evidence to hypothesize a different scenario. Close study of the frescoes reveals a total of ninety-two giornate – a giornata is a plaster patch indicating a single day's work – on the second register, which both artists frescoed. This signifies about forty-six days of labor for each. Masolino and Masaccio must have painted simultaneously on the same scaffolding, virtually matching each other's work day by day. In addition to the forty-six days required for the second register, there are fifty-four giornate in Masaccio's frescoes on the row below. Perhaps somewhat less than twice as many giornate can be reckoned for Masolino's lunettes and for the lost Evangelists – single figures against a starry blue ground – in the vaults. Taking into account the erection of scaffolding and the preliminary plastering of the wall (neither of which had to involve the painters directly), the preparation of drawings and sinopie, and the prohibition against working on church holidays, the frescoes could have been painted in forty weeks or less. Only forty-six days are certain to have been spent in actual collaboration on the scaffolding.

Indeed, it seems that the one-on-one collaboration of Masolino and Masaccio on this commission may have been confined to a relatively brief
and intense period during the summer of 1425. Given guild regulations, it must have followed the dissolution of Masolino's partnership with the painter Francesco d'Antonio sometime after March 23, 1424. Only then would the artist have been legally free to collaborate with Masaccio. It also came after Masolino completed his frescoes for the church of Santo Stefano in Empoli, for which he received payment in November 1424. Thus, Masolino could have begun his association with the Carmine any time from late winter 1424 through spring 1425. Since he painted scenery for the Ascension play performed on May 17, 1425, he had to have been there earlier. Indeed, he might have frescoed the now-lost Saint Peter at the entrance to the Cappella del Crocifisso as a trial piece, the counterpart to the remarkably foreshortened Saint Paul by Masaccio that Vasari describes. In any event, Masolino's presence in the Carmine seems to have been brief. In all probability, it had ended by September 1, 1425, when he departed for Hungary, expecting not to return to Florence for at least three years. From that point on, Masaccio worked without him.

The Collaboration in Practice: The Artists and Their Frescoes

The frescoes of the second register reveal the extraordinarily intense collaboration between Masolino and Masaccio as they worked together on the scaffolding. The scenes are unified chromatically, and compositional solutions seem to have been decided in concert. Thus, on the altar wall, the disposition of figures and landscape in Saint Peter Preaching (see Plate 10) and Saint Peter Baptizing the Neophytes (see Plate 11) seems deliberately alike, with the apostle flanked by a similarly composed group of standing, seated, and kneeling figures. At times, the artists even exchanged places on the scaffolding. This evidently was done to ensure visual and stylistic coherence between the scenes. Thus, Masaccio extended the stark landscape of the Tribute Money into the adjacent scene of Masolino's Saint Peter Preaching, while Masolino painted the peaked mountain range behind Masaccio's Saint Peter Baptizing the Neophytes. The perspective construction of the Healing of the Lame Man at the Temple and the Raising of Tabitha is identical to that of the Tribute Money on the opposite wall. Again, this was intentional, evidently devised to create unity within the cycle.

Such accommodations notwithstanding, the artists approached narrative and the figure in fundamentally different ways. In Saint Peter Preaching, Masolino massed the crowded audience into the foreground, their unvarying expressions showing little interest in the apostle's sermon. By contrast, in Saint Peter Baptizing the Neophytes, Masaccio placed the circle of men deep in the landscape, their bodies turned in different directions, from the shivering nude to the man whose clenched fingers seem
about to unfasten his garments. In the Healing of the Lame Man in the Temple and the Raising of Tabitha (Plate 61) – the latter inspired by Giotto’s authoritative Raising of Drusiana in the Peruzzi Chapel, Santa Croce – Masolino subordinated the figures to an ambitious architectural setting against which their gestures and expressions cannot clearly be read. Although a single-point perspective system – assuredly designed by Masaccio and virtually identical to that of the Tribute Money – is employed, its centric point lies between the two dandies in the center, who have no discernible relationship to the narrative. By contrast, in the Tribute Money (see Plate 8), the multiepisodic narrative, galvanized by Christ at its center, is supported by the dramatic landscape and architecture, which frame the figures and direct the viewer’s gaze. The centric point of the perspective, appropriately, is Jesus; gestures and expressions are solemn and dramatic; drapery appears weighty; and anatomy is modeled fully in light, suggesting the inspiration of sculpture.

The most striking difference in the approach of the two artists may be seen in the Temptation and Expulsion at the entrance to the chapel, executed after the narratives to which they are adjacent. The courtly elegance of Masolino’s Adam and Eve contrasts paradigmatically to Masaccio’s huddled, weeping figures. Their soft, pearly flesh serves as a foil to the vigorously modeled, sculptural anatomy of Masaccio’s progenitors, a visual encapsulation of their prelapsarian indolence on the one hand, and a prophecy of their toil after their expulsion on the other. As the giornate prove, these were the last of the scenes to have been painted on this register. From then on, Masaccio worked alone.

A different, more somber conception of narrative is apparent in the third register. Here the figures, their expressions weary and inscrutable, are subordinated to setting, their scale and proportions diminished in accord. Architecture is rendered in greater detail, from the classicizing portico in Saint Peter Healing with His Shadow (see Plate 12) to the partly rusticated tower in Saint Peter Distributing Alms.\(^4\) In the former, Masaccio shows the lame at progressive moments of their cure, from the once-crippled man who now stands, his hands clasped in prayer, to the youth still hunched on the ground. In Saint Peter Distributing Alms, Masaccio paints the crowded ranks of the poor as they stand in mute patience to receive charity, oblivious to the corpse of Ananias, struck dead for withholding his tithe from the church. Masaccio’s models were the lame and destitute of the city, who impart an extraordinary sense of realism to these scenes. This is further enhanced by his depiction of Peter in the Healing, who seems to be walking toward the worshipers as if to cure them as well. Although the two urban scenes were divided by the original window, their architecture recedes toward a single vanishing point to enhance their thematic coherence.

The dramatic immediacy of these two scenes is without precedent in
Florentine mural painting. They seem likely to have been painted some time later than the register above, for Masaccio's understanding of narrative and space is more advanced, the scale of figures to setting diminished, the rendering of figures more restrained. Only fragments remain of the scene between them, which was discovered by conservators during the chapel's restoration. Portions of an atmospheric sky and a freely painted landscape with trees, the luminously modeled knee of one man (Plate 62), and part of the jerkin and britches of another (see Plate 43), are all that are left of the original fresco. The style unmistakably is that of Masaccio; the subject is uncertain."

Masaccio's contributions after this point remain problematic. Although he painted a substantial part of the *Raising of the Son of Theophilus* (see Plate 9), the remainder of the scene was completed by Filippino Lippi half a century later, along with *Saints Peter and Paul Debating with Simon Magus before Nero and the Crucifixion of Saint Peter*. This has inspired speculation that the former once may have included portraits of the Brancacci that were destroyed in a *damnatio memoriae* after Felice's expulsion by the Medici. According to this hypothesis, Filippino was compelled to replace the alleged deletions with contemporary portraits. As intriguing as this argument might seem, such instances of literal defacement by the Medici are in fact unknown. Even after the restoration, there is no unequivocal evidence to support the proposal. It might be suggested that Masaccio never finished the scene, for he clearly left the opposite wall of the chapel unfinished. He may have abandoned the commission for financial reasons. Either he had not been paid, or, as was assuredly the case...
with Masolino, more lucrative opportunities presented themselves. On February 19, 1426, Masaccio received his first payment for the *Pisa Altarpiece*, painted for the chapel of Giuliano degli Scarsi in Santa Maria del Carmine in Pisa."

To what degree the scenes by Filippino followed the drawings or sinopie from the original project cannot be determined with certainty. However, it is important to note the compositional and iconographic coherence as well as the inventiveness of their conception. With their simplified, two-figured compositions, Filippino’s scenes on the piers complement those by Masolino and Masaccio above them. *Saint Paul Visiting Peter in Prison* and the *Liberation of Saint Peter* complete each other iconographically and compositionally, the angle of the prison walls directing the beholder to the adjacent scenes and toward the altar. On the left, the noble image of Saint Peter in the bishop’s cathedra, revered by the devout, serves as a foil to the irate Emperor Nero, enthroned on the opposite wall. Peter’s miraculous resurrection of the son of Theophilus, deceased for fourteen years, posits a contrast to his own ignominious crucifixion at Nero’s command, a death redeemed by martyrdom. Such symmetry of meaning could not have been fortuitous and must have been intended from the beginning. Indeed, it has been argued that even the location of this Petrine cycle in the right transept chapel was deliberate, for it followed the venerable example of Saint Peter’s in Rome and San Francesco in Assisi. If this is true, then its associations would have been even more resonant.

**The Brancacci Chapel within the Carmine**

The Brancacci Chapel must be understood as a participant within the dialogue of sacred ceremonies and images that shaped the experience of the worshiper within the church of Santa Maria del Carmine in the early Quattrocento, from the *sacra rappresentazione* of Christ’s ascension, performed in the nave outside the chapel, to the depictions of martyrs, saints, and the Passion of Jesus that adorned its windows, chapels, and walls. The
life of Peter, beginning with his calling and progressing through his assumption of Christ’s ministry and his martyrdom, honored the patron saint of Piero di Piuvichese Brancacci, the chapel’s founder, and served as an exemplar for the faithful to follow. For the Carmelite friars themselves, the depiction of their forebears witnessing Saint Peter as he preached, raised the son of Theophilus, and was chaired as Bishop of Antioch attested the Order’s antiquity. They would have beheld these images as they passed the chapel to enter the cloister, frescoed by Masaccio with the Sagra, which commemorated a less distant moment in their history. When the miracle-working Madonna del Popolo was transferred to the chapel, it would have amplified these associations, recalling the Carmelites’ devotion to Mary, reminding the worshiper of her infinite mercy and of the sacrifice of her son.

Too often, the Brancacci Chapel has been isolated as a monument to be studied or a problem of attribution to be solved. This approach impoverishes our understanding of the spiritual, artistic, and patronal ambience that inspired Masaccio and Masolino. By situating the Brancacci Chapel within these broader contexts of the history and devotional practices of the Carmine, we can reintegrate the frescoes into the artists’ work and world.