A Madonna and Child with Saints in the Fine Arts Museum, Valletta

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A MADONNA AND CHILD WITH SAINTS IN THE FINE ARTS MUSEUM, VALLETTA

JOANNA LACE investigates the *conversazione* style in relation to a fifteenth-century painting.

The fifteenth-century painting of the Madonna and Saints in the Fine Arts Museum in Valletta, attributed to the Florentine artist Domenico di Michelino[1] is described as a *sacra conversazione* (Fig.1). An important art exhibition held earlier this year in Bruges, as City of Culture 2002, has renewed discussion of the earliest examples of the *conversazione* style for altarpieces, making this an opportune moment to place the Valletta version in context.[2]

Although artists developed this style during the fifteenth century, the term *sacra conversazione* would not have been known to contemporaries. It began to be used later on, to describe a painted scene in which a group of figures was designed in a particular way. And to the modern viewer, the label 'conversation' may seem somewhat vague and indeterminate - hardly conveying the full richness and diversity of the messages that an artist and his patron were seeking to convey. Its basic features are best described by looking at an early Florentine *conversazione* of the late 1430's by Fra' Angelico: the central panel of his 'San Marco' altarpiece (Fig. 2). Figures of saints were grouped on either side of a central sacred figure (often the Virgin or Virgin and Child); and by a gesture or a glance, they appear to take part in a unified expression of devotion. This unity is one of *space*. Space became a crucial element of a *conversazione*. As Fra' Angelico shows here, by the use of perspective with an overall, single vanishing point, not only does the whole scene take place within a shared pictorial 'space', but our mind extends the lines of perspective forward and outward, creating the illusion that we, the onlooker, are also part of the gathering - are taking part in the *conversazione*. This was an entirely new concept. The creation of what he considered to be a congenial 'space' became, in fact, a key concern of a progressive artist when designing an altarpiece.

The new close relationship with the viewer engendered in this way meant that any glance or gesture made by one or more members of the assembled company was being addressed to an already present and welcome participant. In the case of the San Marco altarpiece, for example, the message reaches us from two figures shown in the foreground to our left: St. Laurence, standing, and St. Cosmas on his knees - two patron saints of Cosimo de' Medici, who commissioned the altarpiece. (Fig.2)

The use of gesture within the new formula was an important consideration, and no survey of early fifteenth century *conversazioni* would be complete without reference to the contemporary

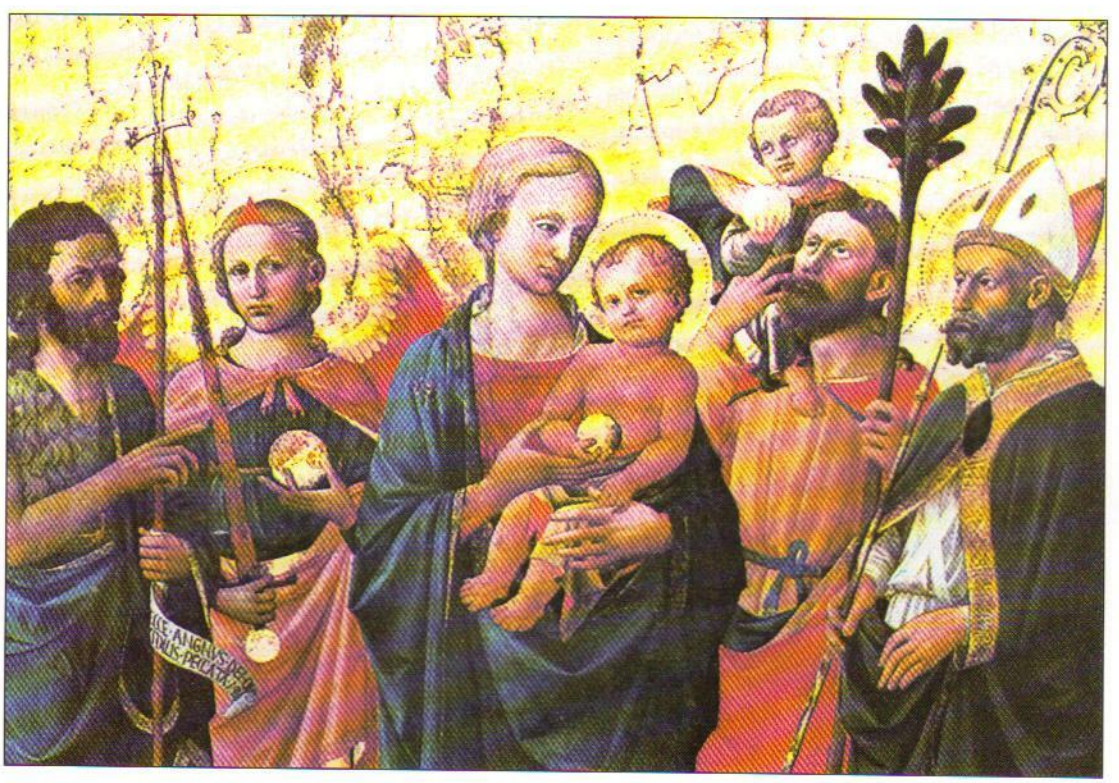

Fig 1. Madonna and Child with Saints: Domenico di Michelino (attrib.) (1417-1491). *(Fine Arts Museum, Valletta.)*

writings of gesture's chief promoter, the influential humanist and artist Leon Battista Alberti. On returning to his native Florence in 1434, inspired by the sensational achievements of avant-garde artists throughout the city, he set down his theories concerning art. Its aim, he said, was "to move the soul", and where the requisite dignity of figures would inhibit the transmitting of "emotions", he suggested the use of a 'commentator'. "I would like to see", he wrote in *Della Pittura* (1435-36), "someone who points out to us what is happening, or beckons with his hand to see, or invites us to weep or to laugh together with them." [3] Thus where perspective had formed the spatial link, this 'commentator' was to establish the emotional link with the viewer. Alberti's treatise caused a stir, and rapidly became a 'best-seller', its influence soon spreading far over Europe. He was a populariser in the best sense of the term. He wrote in the wake of the masterpieces he saw around him, bringing the reader to a closer understanding of the vitality of contemporary painting as it appeared to the patrons and painters of his time, encouraging rather than directly instigating current innovations. Fra' Angelico's San Marco altarpiece - an early example of the 'Alberti' style - became a forebearer of many *sacra conversazioni* to come. Within about ten years almost all-Florentine painting showed his influence; in the hands of academics, in fact, Alberti's suggestions became rigid rules.

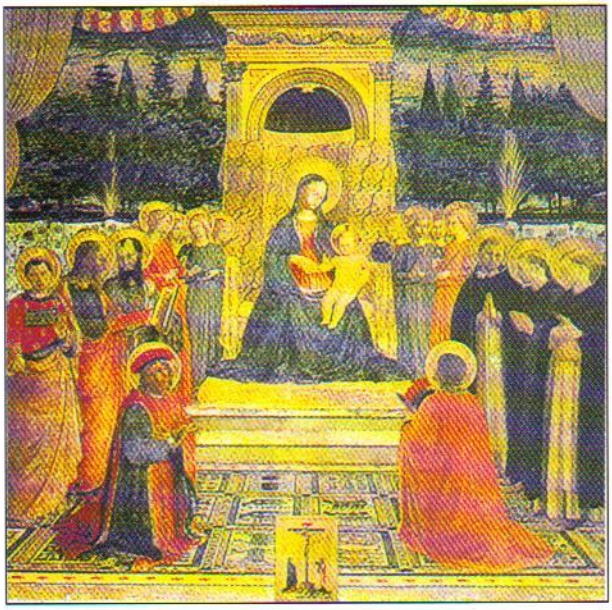

Fig 2. The San Marco Altarpiece (central panel): Fra' Angelico (late 1430's). *(Museum of San Marco, Florence.)*

With reference to this Albertian advice on the need for a 'commentator', we are reminded at this point that from ancient times 'gesture' itself had always served to reinforce the power of figurative paintings, mosaics, and sculpture to strengthen devotion, to console, to uplift, and to illustrate the sacred tests. The difference now was that the spatial context could be manipulated at will by the artist through the new facility with perspective. Just how fundamental was the concomitant change in attitude expressed in this way, becomes clear when we recall the style of earlier, conventional, altarpieces. The imagery of the great sixth-century apse mosaic of the Church of Sts Cosmas and Damian in Rome, for instance, directly over the main altar, shows St. Paul and St. Peter introducing Sts Cosmas and Damian with sweeping gestures, in open acknowledgment of our presence as we approach the very heart, the central focus of Christian worship. (Fig.3) Such acknowledgments of the viewer's presence, always common in western art, became particularly so, it seems, in central Italy during the decades immediately preceding the fifteenth century, the period we are concerned with here. But the point to stress is that in all these earlier scenes, the gestures and glances that reached the onlooker, acknowledging his presence, consoling and encouraging, came to him, as it were, from 'another world'. Intercessory saints were often ranged in rows on either side of the central sacred figure, marked off within individual fictive frames, so that even where shown gesturing or glancing outwards, they appear pictorially removed both from us and from the object of their devotion. (Fig 4) Again, a gold background to sacred figures had served to emphasize the divine, supernatural source of their power, but it was in all cases, a power that came from 'elsewhere'.

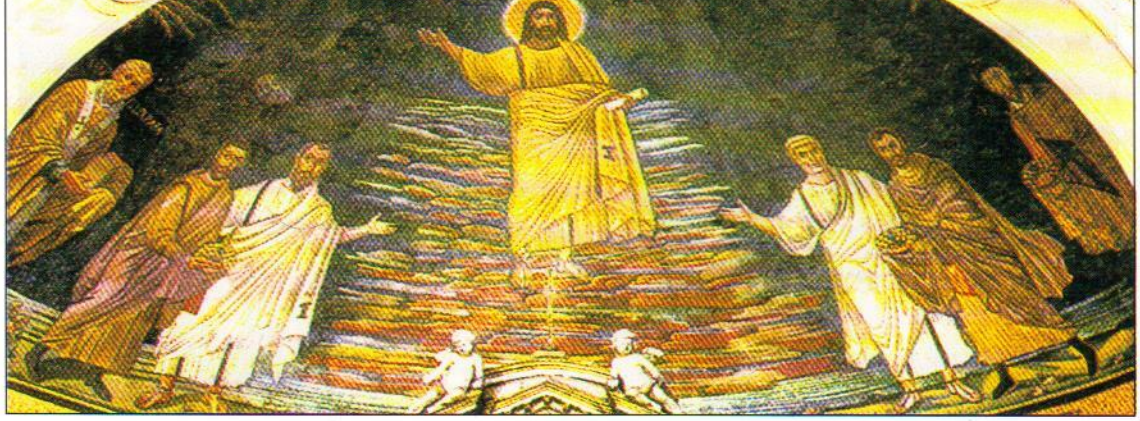

Fig 3. Apse mosaic with Christ and Saints. Sixth century. *(Basilica of Sts Cosmas and Damian, Rome.)*

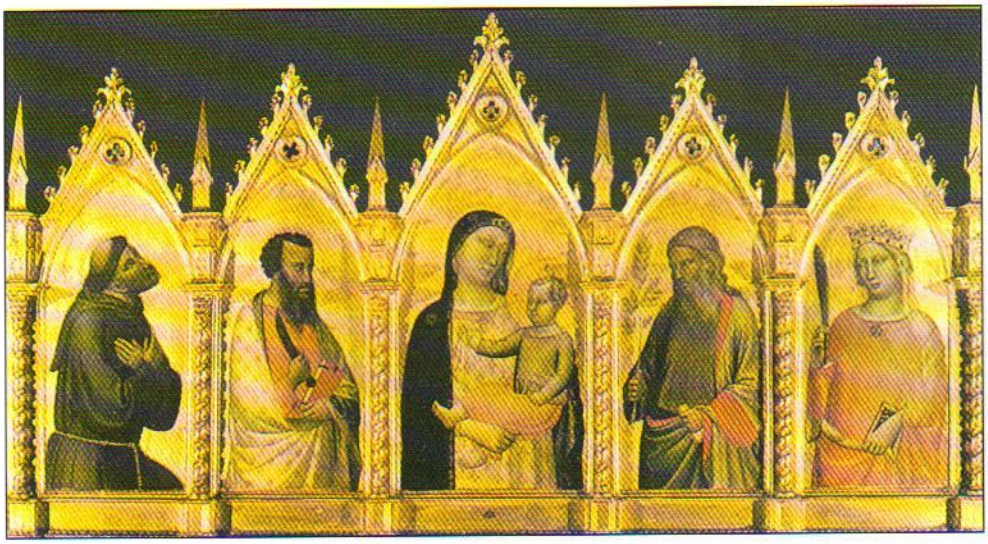

Fig 4. Polyptych: Bernardo Daddi (1325-1335). From the Hospital of the Misericordia. Prato; now in the Pinacoteca, Prato.

Very different was the three-dimensional space often provided for them now by the painter of a *conversazione,* in which the viewer, encouraged by Alberti's 'commentator', is drawn directly into their presence, their halos signaling a Divinity that has become immediately more accessible.

Were other factors involved in this change to an 'all-inclusive gathering' ? We have mentioned the purely practical aspect of artists' increasingly effective use of linear perspective, and it seems that in general terms changing attitudes in devotion may also have played a part. The innovative creations of avant-garde artists came at a time when the age-old devotion to sacred images had assumed a more personal role, centred upon the power of personal prayer on the part of the laity to evoke divine response to personal needs. This personal response was encouraged by the exhortations of the great preachers of the day. It was exemplified by the fervour with which individual citizens -rich and poor, laity and clergy - came together in vast crowds to celebrate the Holy Days. It would seem that the horrifying experience of the Black Death , when it came around the mid-century, only served to increase an already ever-present sense of personal danger due to the frequent wars and political strife of the preceding decades. Harsh circumstances, in fact, had favoured the emergence of the *conversazione* as a public expression of a personal faith.

Opportunities for such public expression were certainly not lacking. Unprecedented artistic activity had followed upon the building programmes of the Franciscans and Dominicans, and already in 1310 a major Church council had decreed that every church altar should display a text, sculpture or painting referring to the saint in whose honour the altar had been erected.[4] Later, when the chosen style for a new altarpiece became a *sacra conversazione*, the fact that the relevant saint or saints were almost invariably depicted in the hallowed presence of an enthroned Virgin, reflected the continuing influence of the mendicant orders in their promotion of the over-riding importance of Mary as chief intercessor and her sovereignty as *Regina Caeli*. And it seems that the pervading climate of experimentation and innovation, with wide interchange between distant centres of artistic activity, and wealthy patronage, made for a situation where the venue of a *conversazione* - that is to say, the decor of the Court of Heaven - now varied over time according to the taste of the patron and/or the predilection of the artist. Although these variations became too widespread to be covered in a short article, a brief summary of the main trends will provide a guide to the preferences shown by the artist of our Valletta version.

We saw earlier how the *conversazione* style opened up 'the other (spiritual) world' and let the viewer in. It was still a picture world, distinct from his earthly world, but also one in which furnishing, buildings, distant hills and forests, were instantly recognisable, and in which he felt comfortable, while at the same time he was caught up into a new spiritual reality. Thus Fra' Angelico, in his San Marco altarpiece, not only gave prominence to the patron saints of his benefactor, Cosimo de' Medici, but placed in the background of his grandiose Court of Heaven a stately - one might say 'princely' - Florentine version of the Garden of Paradise.(Fig. 2)

Another famous early *conversazione*, the St. Lucy Altarpiece of 1445-1447 by Fra' Angelico's contemporary in Florence, Domenico Veneziano, displays a complex system of perspective for an architectural setting of some sophistication, not to say ambiguity.[5] (Fig. 5) We find within it the intermixing of an avant-garde *conversazione* composition with some older traditions of Western Christian iconography. For example, he creates a unified space, but keeps the tripartite or triptych form of the four-

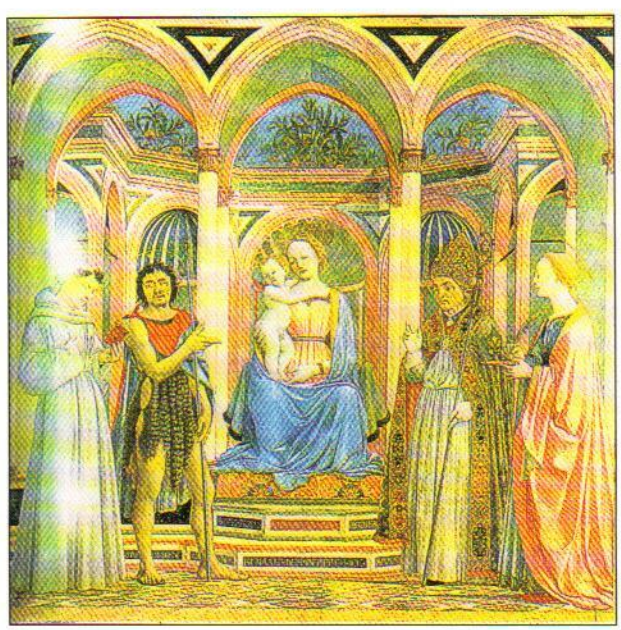

Fig 5. The St. Lucy Altarpiece: Domenico Veneziano (c. 1445). *(Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.)*

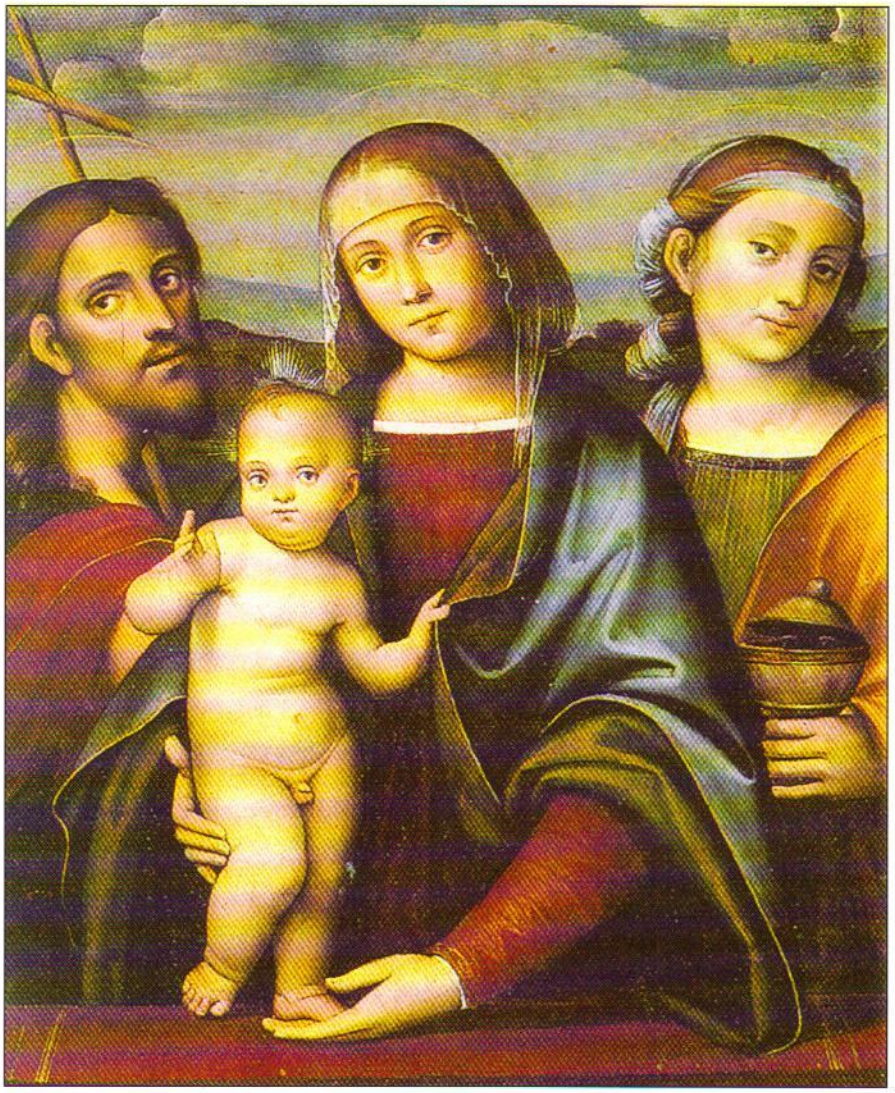

Fig 6. Madonna and Child, St. John the Baptist and St. Lucy: School of Francesco Francia (c. 1447-1517). From the Church of St. Lucy, Velletri, now in the Diocesan Museum, Velletri (Rome).

teenth century, where pointed 'gothic' arches separate the space into three bays. And though the setting is otherwise in contemporary 'classicizing' mode, some columns are moved from their logical position so as not to obscure our view of the figures - a legacy from the medieval world.

These two *conversazioni*, the Heavenly Court of Fra Angelico and the church interior of Domenico Veneziano, are early, and different, interpretations of what we may call the 'majestic' style. Variations on this theme were numerous: in the arrangement of figures within the chosen venue, for example, and in their degree of formality. Their architectural backgrounds also evolved over time, and have been the subject of detailed study.[6] The 'majestic' style, in fact, was to remain a popular choice for high altars and other prestigious sites right through to the end of the century and beyond.

If the relation between our simple Valletta *conversazione* and the masterpieces we have described is not immediately apparent, it becomes clear when we recall how the initial conception of a *sacra conversazione* had evolved. It was understood as the public expression of a contemporary emphasis upon personal prayer. A few decades later, the natural urge of patrons to express their Christian hopes and desires in a more personal idiom - and given the fund of talented, innovative artists at their disposal - gave rise to an alternative, revolutionary, intimate style - the style, in fact, that our Valletta artist has aspired to emulate.

Filippo Lippi's *Mother and Child with Two Angels* of c. 1465 (see page 2) is an early example of the new idiom. The figures are given an idealised but at the same time entirely earthly beauty, and are grouped so as to form a geometric design that encompasses the entire picture plane. Their gestures not only portray devotion, but form part of this design. Changes relating to the Virgin herself were fundamental. In past centuries she had been shown of greater size in relation to other figures around her, and though when enthroned in the *conversazioni* of Fra' Angelico and Domenico Veneziano she had already become of equal size, this was not always so in the case of other artists of the period. Again, with examples of the 'majestic' style we can follow the gradual

lowering of the steps and podium of her centrally placed throne, until Virgin and assembled company all occupy the same ground. It is when we come to Filippo Lippi, whose popular 'close-up' viewpoint further enhances the new 'nearness' and intimacy, that we find the throne has all but disappeared.

This clearly was the milieu in which the artist of the Valletta painting was working. (Fig. 1) On close inspection we find that his *conversazione* is a striking example of compromise, of the admixture of age-old iconography with new attitudes. Its informal nature is stressed perhaps by the casual varying of the heights of the silhouetted half-length figures, and by the way these overlap below shoulder height (with the resulting intertwining of St. John the Baptist's slender staff with the tip of St. Michael's sword.). But the tightly-knit group is still in essence the traditional arrangement of 'central Virgin with an equal number of saints on either side', and is depicted, not in some comforting contemporary milieu, but in the 'elsewhere' world of Heaven, denoted by the gold background. Also, the figure of the Virgin is shown marginally larger in size, though it must be said that the difference is somewhat mitigated by the positioning in silhouette of the proverbial 'giant' St. Christopher to her left. With her right hand she makes the ancient gesture taken over from the Byzantine 'Hodigitria', the gesture of presentation, whereby she shows to us her son: or again, as she glances in his direction, she may be seen as presenting us, the faithful, to him. This hand appears to join with his, as, following ancient tradition, he holds the globe of the earthly world. The Child glances at the viewer, but does not, as so often, make a sign of blessing: instead, with his left hand , he takes hold of the Virgin's thumb - an unusual, affectionate gesture that is quite in keeping with the new intimate idiom. The saints for their part, carry their traditional symbols of identity, though St. John the Baptist has lost his usual text bearing the words "Ecco Agnus Dei.....": and the bishop at the opposite right hand margin carries no obvious identification . The pointing finger of the Baptist was an integral part of his established, traditional iconography as the Precursor or Forerunner of Christ, so is not necessarily fulfilling the requirement for a *conversazione* of a 'commentator'. This need has been met, not by gesture, but by the gentle glance of the child and also of St. Michael.

Glances, rather than gestures, also seem to have characterised other *conversazioni* in 'half-length' format, giving them a similar calm, contemplative aura. An altarpiece from the high altar of the Church of St. Lucy in Velletri, with landscape replacing the gold background, is a case in point. (Fig. 6) The absence of drama in our Valletta version is certainly noticeable, but what has been called its "air of unruffled serenity" is a powerful substitute [1]. And its particular interest for the art historian lies in the artist's subtle combination of 'old' and 'new', as fifteenth-century Christian imagery took to new paths.

NOTES

1. This short essay will not be concerned with the identity of the artist. Besides Domenico Michelino, the painting has been attributed over the years to the Master of The Buckingham Palace Madonna, and to Zanobi Strozzi. For a catalogue of relative studies (referred to as "attributional blind man's buff"!), see C. Marchisio, *Il Monumento Pittorico a Dante in Santa Maria del Fiore*, Rome, 1986. (The Dante monument is Domenico Michelino's only documented work, commissioned in 1465.)
2. Discussions usually involve proposal as to where the styled appeared first. Recently M.L. Koster has given Van Eyck credit for designing the first *sacra conversazione*, but goes on to describe the intense interaction between the Netherlands and Italy – through the copying and trading of designs – so that the styles become truly international. See ed. Till-Holger Borchert, *The Age of Van Eyck: The Mediterranean World and Early Netherlandish Painting, 1430-1530*, London, 2002, especially M.L. Koster, 'Italy and the North: A Florentine Perspective', pp. 89 ff.
3. See J.R. Spencer, *Leon Battista Alberti, Della Pittura, Book II*, Yale 1966.
4. See O. Von Simpson, "Uber die Bedentung von Masaccio Trinitas-fresko in S. Maria Novella", *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, 8, 1966, p. 122, note 9.
5. This altarpiece has long been the subject of close analysis and interpretation: see, for example, H. Wohl, *The Paintings of Domenico Veneziano, 1410-1461*, Oxford, 1980.
6. The recent survey of the *conversazione* altarpiece, that also covers later developments in Venice, see J. Shearman, *Only Connect ..... Art and Spectator in The Italian Renaissance*, Princeton, 1992.
7. Possibilities include Archbishop Antoninus (1289-1459), Founder of the Convent of San Marco, Florence; and St Zenobius, a patron saint of Florence.
8. A quotation from Dominic Cutajar's *Commentary on the Museum of Fine Arts and Selected Works*, Valletta, 1991.