

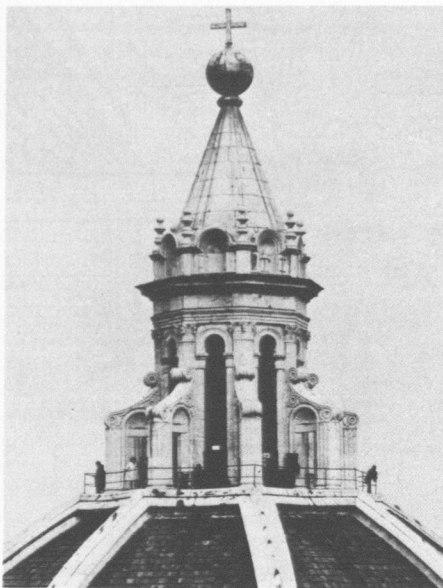
REVIEW

FILIPPO BRUNELLESCHI

Eugenio Battisti, **Filippo Brunelleschi**, Thames and Hudson, London, 1981, (Electra, Milan, 1975) 400 pages, 358 illustrations, hardback, £32.

We would know very little about Brunelleschi were it not for a reliable manuscript written by an anonymous author (usually identified as Antonio di Tuccio Manetti) who, it seems, knew the artist personally and who wrote the biography for a specific purpose: he wished to expose the clumsy alterations made to Brunelleschi's projects by his successors. The architect had, in fact, adopted and perfected a new planning system which was no longer based on models, but mainly on drawings reproducing to scale the plan, elevation and section of the structure. This is one of the reasons why only a few were able to interpret Brunelleschi's intentions, and why most of his projects were modified after his death. At his death on 16th April 1446, nearly twenty years after his removal from the Ospedale degli Innocenti project, the *exedrae* and lantern of Florence Cathedral, the churches of San Lorenzo and Santo Spirito, the Palazzo di Parte Guelfa and Santa Maria degli Angeli were still unfinished. The last two were not completed during the Renaissance and were restored in modern times, whilst San Lorenzo was substantially altered by Brunelleschi's successors. Significantly, his projects for the lantern of Florence Cathedral and the church of Santo Spirito were faithfully carried out thanks to wooden models (even if the dome of Santo Spirito was changed by Salvi di Andrea). Paradoxically, therefore, most of Brunelleschi's projects were not realised according to his plans because of his own revolutionary working method.

This explains why there is much debate about which works can be attributed to him, and about his role in the development of architectural practice. In order to understand Brunelleschi's style fully, therefore, it is necessary, as already noted by the biographer, to extrapolate those parts of the schemes which conform to Brunelleschi's original plans. This can be done by examining surviving documents and existing structures, an approach that is profitably exploited in Professor Battisti's book. For example, he rejects on documentary grounds such traditional attributions as the Palazzo Pitti and the part of the Cappella Pazzi still accepted in standard general works like Benevolo's *Storia dell'architettura del Rinascimento* (Palazzo Pitti) and



The Lantern, Santa Maria del Fiore
Abbreviated pilaster in transept chapel of San Lorenzo



Heydenreich-Lotz's *Architecture in Italy 1400-1600* (the portico of the Pazzi Chapel, as Heydenreich himself admits, was probably erected by Giuliano da Maiano). The newest information, however, comes from the excellent survey drawings especially executed for this book. Preceding analyses of Brunelleschi's architecture were based on imprecise survey drawings traced in the late 19th century; the new ones, therefore, allow for a re-examination of the architect's technique. This task led Battisti and his collaborators to explore the buildings' foundations and attics, an investigation which has given the author a profound understanding of their structures. For this reason he never discounts the buildings' functions and their state prior to Brunelleschi's intervention as possible factors conditioning his designs; these observations, however, are always cleverly balanced by acute and sensitive descriptions of the buildings' formal values (eg the excellent entry on the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo).

Apart from the practical information derived from the direct analysis of structures and documents, the great merit of this work is its clarity. Every aspect discussed in the text is precisely illustrated with drawings which reconstruct the different building phases, survey drawings of the present edifices, wooden models which try to reconstruct the complicated mechanisms planned by Brunelleschi for the *sacre rappresentazioni* (theatrical-religious happenings which took place on the *tramezzi* of the churches to celebrate specific festivities or even visits of foreign rulers), and Paolo Monti's superb photographs.

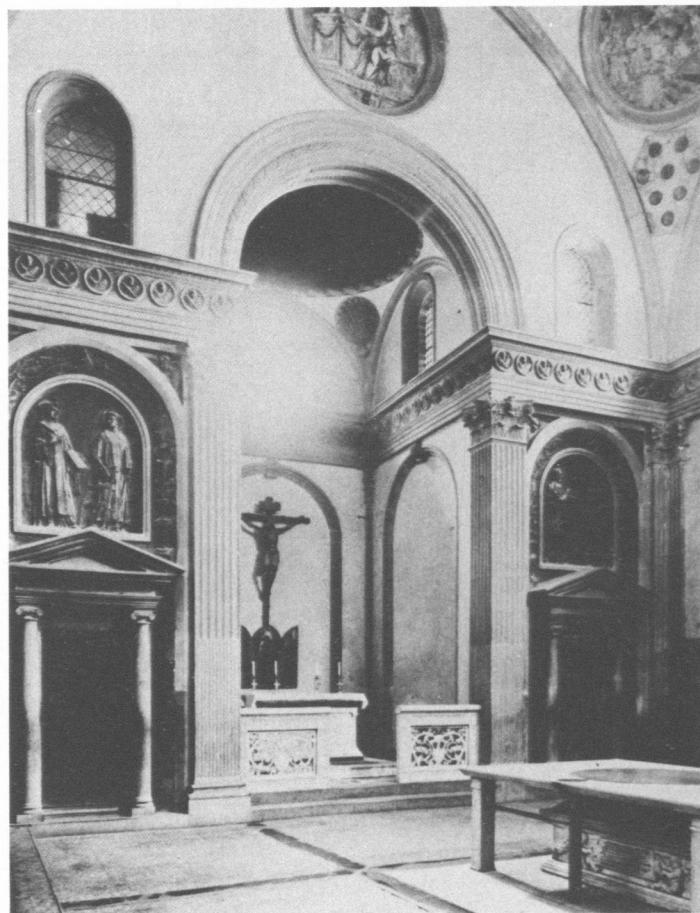
The quantity and quality of this visual material reflect the clear structure of the text. The book cannot be described as a monograph, for which general notes and information are chronologically listed at the end; it is more like a catalogue *raisonnée* (preceded by a concise, valuable introduction) suitable for three different kinds of reader: 1 the art historian, who will find all the problems of Brunelleschi's works and personality thoroughly investigated (I would advise students to read the notes before the text); 2 the professional architect, who can form an overall idea of Brunelleschi's style and achievement; 3 the interested general reader, who will learn much about Brunelleschi simply by looking at the photographs and survey drawings which are accompanied by excellent and unusually long captions.

All of these readings will give the reader a satisfactory image of Brunelleschi: Professor Battisti analyses his work from all angles, and arrives at a balanced survey of Brunelleschi's achievements not only as an architect, but also as sculptor and goldsmith, civil and hydraulic engineer, inventor (he planned and built a barge for transporting goods and marble up and down the river Arno), town-planner (the author's ideas concerning the Piazza SS Annunziata are most interesting) stage designer and expert in fortifications. This comprehensive portrait of the artist complements that of the man, since Brunelleschi's literary and mathematical education, his studies of Dante and his poems (extremely dull, to tell the truth) are also discussed.

The catalogue also gives the right emphasis to the technical aspect of Brunelleschi's genius. It is well known that the dimensions of the dome of Florence Cathedral had been fixed in 1367, following a much earlier design by Arnolfo di Cambio;



Interior of Pazzi Chapel, Florence



Interior of Old Sacristy, San Lorenzo

and that the practical obstacle was how to build a dome of much the same size as the Pantheon. To solve this problem suitable instruments and machines had to be invented, and Brunelleschi's response to these difficulties demonstrated that he possessed a profound knowledge of mechanics (eg endless screw, pulley with multiple transmissions). It is therefore not surprising that Carlo Marsuppini's epitaph to Brunelleschi in the Cathedral recorded his ability in this field.

Brunelleschi, however, was not an isolated genius and the success of the enterprise was also due to its administrative organisation and to the professionalism of his collaborators. One of Battisti's most original contributions is his emphasis on Brunelleschi's relationship with the Guilds, the Parte Guelfa and the leading figures of contemporary Florence, who not only commissioned public buildings from him but also *sacre rappresentazioni*, and military fortifications.

Three other fundamental themes of Brunelleschi's work are mentioned by the author: the feeling for and study of ancient architecture, perspective and its implications and the architect's research into a new proportional ratio between the parts and the whole—so well expressed in the Old Sacristy. Battisti does not give these topics as much attention as usual, however, partly because they require more thorough investigation and partly because they have tended to become art historical clichés in

Brunelleschi studies.

Some criticisms, however, may be offered, even if most are of an editorial character. Firstly, in the discussion of each individual building it would have been useful to have given its chronology (including work both before and after Brunelleschi's participation). This is standard practice for a catalogue and would have provided a valuable reference for the reader. Secondly, lost and doubtfully attributed works are not discussed in a separate section; somewhat incongruously, they appear at the end of the notes on the Palazzo di Parte Guelfa, there being no cross-references in the text. Thirdly, Giuliano da Sangallo's important drawing of Santa Maria degli Angeli is not reproduced.

Other points are more debatable. When discussing the Barbadori Chapel in Santa Felicità, the author acknowledges the importance of Professor John Shearman's article, but does not mention that Shearman's reconstruction of the original state of the chapel is completely different from the usually accepted one. Shearman convincingly argued that the Barbadori Chapel was not originally covered with a dome but with a flat ceiling which must have been the prototype for the similar structure built by Michelozzo in SS Annunziata. Secondly, Battisti's evidence supporting the hypothesis that the Ospedale degli Innocenti was in some way inspired by Plato's *Republic* is very weak: it is hard to believe that the

Florentine ruling class was interested in the abandoned children adopted by the hospital as future members of a utopian and greatly expanded Florence (and in their education and control by means of wet-nurses); and it is even harder to believe that this idea was reflected in the layout of Brunelleschi's plan.

These, however, are minor criticisms compared with the substantial advance made by Professor Battisti towards a greater understanding of Brunelleschi's art and achievements. The architect's style was a source of inspiration for decades, and it is extraordinary that at the end of the 15th century his drawings were still studied and admired. Today, sadly, they are lost, but his works (or rather what has survived of the original projects) bear witness to the fundamental role he played in the history of Western architecture.

With characteristic modesty, Professor Battisti acknowledges that the most comprehensive monograph on Brunelleschi will soon be written by Professor Howard Saalman, who has edited and translated the *Life of Brunelleschi* attributed to Antonio Manetti, and has recently published a monumental book on the dome of the Cathedral. Meanwhile Professor Battisti has succeeded in isolating Brunelleschi's historical importance from the confused mass of subsequent interpretations, and for many years hence it will be the standard reference for studies on the great Florentine architect.

Alessandro Nova