



FRIENDS of FLORENCE

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## CHAPEL OF ST. NICHOLAS IN THE BASILICA OF SS. ANNUNZIATA IN FLORENCE RESTORED THANKS TO SUPPORT FROM FRIENDS OF FLORENCE

*Florence, Italy...* The Chapel of St. Nicholas in the Basilica of the Santissima Annunziata has been restored to its original splendor thanks to support from Friends of Florence Foundation and The Giorgi Family Foundation. The project began in October 2021, was completed in January 2023, and formally presented this month with Deputy Mayor and Councillor for Culture Alessia Bettini, Friends of Florence President Simonetta Brandolini d'Adda, and the restoration experts in attendance. This is the most recent project funded by Friends of Florence in the Basilica which dates to the 14th century.

“Another wonderful project restoring an important piece of the city’s inestimable heritage,” said Deputy Mayor Bettini. “As we can see once again from the work performed and the results achieved, these operations are extremely meticulous. They reveal a level of care and commitment which must never flag and which we, as the local authority, cherish immensely. Once again, we thank Friends of Florence which is by our side safeguarding and enhancing the city’s artistic beauty, displaying both love for art and boundless generosity.”

Brandolini d'Adda said, “The Friends of Florence’s involvement with the Basilica della SS. Annunziata, which began in 2011, continues with the restoration of the Chapel of St. Nicholas. Thanks to the skilled team of restorers, the exquisite artworks and design details can be admired again as originally intended. Obscured for centuries by candle smoke and the effects of time, the Chapel reemerged in its dazzling brilliance—both in terms of color and composition. We thank the Comune di Firenze, through its Ufficio Belle Arti e Fabbrica di Palazzo Vecchio which directed operations, and the Soprintendenza who supervised them. We are also grateful to the Servite Fathers for enabling the process to take place on site. Our heartfelt thanks to The Giorgi Family Foundation for making it possible and for its unflinching support for our projects.”

### Background

Under the patronage of the Del Palagio family since 1353, the Chapel is adjacent to the Chapel of the Virgin which houses the miraculous fresco of the Annunciation which Michelangelo called a “divine thing.” The only surviving element of its original 14th century arrangement is a tomb adorned with heraldry set into a wall. While the Chapel still maintains its 15th century architectural structure, its aspect was completely transformed by 17th century artists with a dazzling decorative scheme comprising lavish stucco work, gold, and precious polychrome marble now restored.



Chapel of St. Nicholas in the Basilica of the Santissima Annunziata. 14th Century. Back wall frescoes by Matteo Rosselli and Domenico Pugliani, 1628. After restoration. Photograph by Ottaviano Caruso.



Chapel of St. Nicholas in the Basilica of the Santissima Annunziata. 14th Century. Detail of frescos on back wall by Matteo Rosselli and Domenico Pugliani, 1628. Before and after restoration. Photograph by Ottaviano Caruso.

It is believed that the Chapel was once decorated with a cycle of frescoes by Gaddi, an assistant/pupil of Giotto. According to Giorgio Vasari in his "Life of Taddeo Gaddi," the artist painted St. Nicholas saving the lives of sailors, a scene so admired that on the strength of that work alone Gaddi was commissioned to paint the chancel with stories from the life of the Virgin and an altarpiece for the high altar. That work is now lost.

During restoration, traces of a red pigment were discovered at the base of a wall and are thought to be a surviving fragment of Gaddi's fresco cycle. The evidence remains on view as a historical record. Reopened in its Baroque mien in April 1628, the Chapel decoration

included frescoes by Matteo Rosselli and Domenico Pugliani, an altarpiece by Jacopo Chimenti, and sculptural and architectural stonework using the finest materials. An inscription commemorates the founders, Tommaso del Palagio, Gonfaloniere di Giustizia for the Republic of Florence, and the better-known Guido del Palagio who twice held that post.

The skillful composition relies on the interplay of the narrative murals with the Chimenti altarpiece and the sculptural and architectural elements. At the top of the lunette on the front of the Chapel, two stucco putti hold back drapery bearing the Del Palagio family's coat-of-arms in the composition's center. In the middle of the split pediment, above the high altar, there sits a transcendent marble bust of Christ which recent scholarship has attributed to Giovan Battista Caccini, surmising that it was carved before he died in 1613 and later placed in the Chapel.



Chapel of St. Nicholas in the Basilica of the Santissima Annunziata, 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Bust of Christ, 1613. Marble. Attributed to Giovan Battista Caccini before, during, and after restoration. Photograph by Ottaviano Caruso

### Condition and Restoration

The project encompassed the Chapel's frescoes, stuccowork, and stonework. Prior to restoration, the wall paintings were so badly darkened by layers of candle soot that it was virtually impossible to identify their subject matter. Additionally, an organic fixative used in an earlier restoration campaign had deteriorated and was now very dark. Also, damp had seeped in from the roof over centuries.





Chapel of St. Nicholas in the Basilica of the Santissima Annunziata, 14th Century. Frescoes on right wall by Matteo Rosselli, 1628. Before and after restoration. Photograph by Ottaviano Caruso

Restorers detected at least one earlier, and particularly invasive, restoration campaign datable to the mid-19th century. After strengthening the solidity of the paint, the restorers proceeded to clean the surfaces, lunettes, and Rosselli's two scenes in the lower register.

All the gilded areas were given a coat of protective solution. The broad range of deterioration and painting techniques used by the artists demanded different restoration techniques. Before-and-after photographs show the extraordinary contrast.

Regarding the stonework, the fine quality and variety of the materials were seriously dulled by uneven surface blackening caused chiefly by the presence of a considerable amount of lampblack and by the deterioration of oil- and wax-based treatments applied for conservation purposes in the past. Restoration revealed luminous marble surfaces and details and the harmony of the Chapel's parts.

### **Friends of Florence and the Santissima Annunziata Complex**

Before restoring the Chapel of St. Nicholas, Friends of Florence has been actively supporting other projects in the Basilica della Santissima Annunziata complex. Between 2011 and today the Foundation has contributed to the conservation of various works of art both in the convent and in the Basilica proper. The first projects in process between 2010 and 2012 concerned Andrea del Sarto's fresco depicting the *Madonna with the Sack* in the main cloister and the *Crucified Christ* and six bronze reliefs with *Stories from the Passion* made by Giambologna for his funerary chapel.



Chapel of St. Nicholas in the Basilica of the Santissima Annunziata, 14th Century. Frescoes in the vault after restoration, 1628. Photograph by Ottaviano Caruso

Also in Giambologna's chapel, in 2016 Friends of Florence funded the restoration of a panel depicting the *Madonna of Succour* attributed to Bernardo Daddi. That same year, through the Friends of Florence's annual Salone dell'Arte e del Restauro di Firenze award, the Foundation supported the restoration of a wood Christ by Antonio of Francesco da Sangallo in the Chapel of St. Luke. Restoration of the entire Cloister of the Vows (Chiostrino dei Voti) was completed in 2017, and the Chapel of St. Luke was restored by Friends of Florence in the midst of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

### **About Friends of Florence**

Friends of Florence is a non-profit foundation supported by individuals from around the world who are dedicated to preserving and enhancing the rich cultural heritage of Florence and Tuscany and conserving irreplaceable artistic and cultural treasures. Friends of Florence identifies significant projects spanning centuries in need of restoration, secures funding, and works in collaboration with local authorities to complete projects.

Since its founding in 1998, the Foundation has raised and donated \$10 million for conservation projects in the region. Friends of Florence works directly with Florence's famed conservation laboratories to ensure restoration is done at the highest level, has the approval of the City of Florence and the Italian Ministry of Art, and is completed on time and on budget.

Through its work, Friends of Florence creates opportunities for the study and appreciation of paintings, sculptures, architectural elements, places of worship, and collections at the Uffizi Gallery, the Accademia, the Baptistry, the Piazza della Signoria, the Museum of San Marco, and dozens of other museums, churches, and public sites.

A model of high-impact, low-overhead philanthropy, Friends of Florence is the primary source of funding for the city's conservators, a respected partner with museums and cultural authorities in Italy and the U.S., and a publisher/producer of publications, multimedia offerings, seminars, lectures, and cultural travel opportunities. For more information, visit its newly designed website at [www.friendsofflorence.org](http://www.friendsofflorence.org).

#### For more information:

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