

Vernacular architecture and art. The representation of traditional buildings in Lorenzo Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise in the Baptistery of Florence

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Abstract

In the ten bas-relief panels of the Gates of Paradise of the Florence Baptistery, Lorenzo Ghiberti depicted episodes from the Old Testament, narrated through a succession of scenes, in which the figurative language also fulfils a catechetical function.

The master set the Istorie (Stories) of the main characters of the Bible against a background of landscapes depicting territories and architecture known to him, and sculpting in great detail the flora, fauna and human structures. With regard to the latter, in the fifth, sixth and tenth panels, the scenery consists of monumental architecture inspired by the Classical and Renaissance style, while in the second, third, fourth, seventh and eighth panels Ghiberti depicts dwellings and shelters linked to the local tradition. In a single artefact, the goldsmith-sculptor master offers an overview of the heterogeneous built landscape, providing a faithful description of a whole series of vernacular constructions which, due to their importance and diffusion in the area, are also frequently found in other contemporary artistic works. From this point of view, the panels can be considered an unprecedented source to allow the analysis of the salient features of those widespread traditional architectures in the early 15th century, which still characterise the rural landscape surrounding Florence.

Keywords: Vernacular architecture, Lorenzo Ghiberti, Digital Humanities, Gates of Paradise.

1. Introduction

“This immense handbook of man's constructive logic, creator of abstract forms and plastic fantasies that can be explained by clear links with the soil, the climate, the economy and the technology, is opened up before our eyes with rural architecture”. (Pagano & Guarniero, 1936, p.12)

With the book “Architettura rurale in Italia” (Rural Architecture in Italy), which contains the results of research presented during the exhibition held at the Venice Triennial in 1936, Pagano and Guarniero inaugurated a successful

season of studies on the artefacts that populate the peninsula's countryside, which over time has offered outstanding results (for example, see Biasutti, 1980; Cataldi, 1986; Cataldi, 1988; Sereni, 1961). In the attempt to reconstruct the process that leads from the circular hut to the farmhouse, the authors agree that the chain of these gradual transitions was broken up, as agricultural crops or economic and technical conditions changed. However, their memory is still alive in the barns, tool shelters and temporary dwellings used during the work in the fields in summer and autumn (Pagano & Guarniero, 1936, p. 14 - Fig. 1).

These same constructions were often immortalised in the works of artists, particularly painters and goldsmiths-sculptors.



Fig. 1. Tuscan hut at 'Le Croci', Florence (Source: Pagano & Guarniero, 1936, p. 85).

This is the case of Lorenzo di Cione di ser Bonaccorto Ghiberti (Pelago, 1378, Florence, 1455), known for his creation of the Gates of Paradise in the Florence Baptistery.

The possible connection between the rural landscapes¹ modelled by the human presence and those represented by the master (the landscapes of the art) in the panels allows the reading-interpretation of the characteristics of the Florentine countryside at the beginning of the 15th century and, for the purpose of this contribution, of the different forms of living that distinguished it² (Zuccagni-Orlandini, 1841).

2. The Landscape of the Lower Valdisieve at Lorenzo Ghiberti's time

Ghiberti worked in a political and cultural scenario resulted from a prolonged confrontation that can be placed around the central decades of

the fourteenth century, between the great feudal-ity that reigned in the countryside and exercised by the family of Counts Guidi, and the new bourgeois class in a "dominant Florentia".



Fig. 2. Domenico Veneziano, *The Adoration of the Magi* (tempera on wood, diameter 84 cm, 1439-1441 Gemäldegalerie of Berlin).

The creation of the new Florentine State led to the marginalisation of the Guidi family, the political expression of traditional local communities, and to the progressive transformation of castles and fortresses into farms (perhaps fortified) or villas, that were necessary to govern a new order of rural territory, in which sharecropping and parcelization of land dominated (Ginatempo, 2002, pp. 49-110; Rete Rurale Nazionale, 2016).

The open countryside was covered with isolated "worker's houses", alongside these modest dwellings, the Florentine land registers from 1427 reveal a whole network of "master's houses" and "lord's houses". These more solid dwellings were sometimes located near the peasants' houses and offered the small and bigger bourgeois owners the possibility to control

¹ Nowadays, we define it as a "rural" landscape rather than "agrarian" landscape, since it is argued that agriculture - although it gave the landscape its distinctive imprint in the 15th century - was not the dominant activity. The agrarian landscape is therefore considered a part of the rural landscape.

² The experience described in this paper is part of a complex, interdisciplinary and multi-scalar project called "Ghibertiana" (see www.ghibertiana.it) aimed at enhancing the link between the cultural heritage of the lower Valdisieve and the works of Lorenzo Ghiberti.

the activities of the agricultural year on the spot, as well as being a place to spend the summer holiday (Cherubini & Francovich, 1973, p. 902).



Fig. 3. Paolo Uccello, *Saint George and the dragon* (oil on canvas, 57 × 73 cm, about 1460, National Gallery of London).



Fig. 4. Benozzo Gozzoli, *The Chapel of the Magi* - East wall (fresco, 1459-60, Palazzo Medici Riccardi in Florence).

In the works of late 14th and early 15th century artists, the *extra-moenia* territory in which these two worlds coexist is often depicted; in painting, the works of Domenico Veneziano (Venice, 1410 - Florence, 1461, Fig. 2) and Paolo Uccello (Pratovecchio, 1397 - Florence, 1475, Fig. 3), as well as those of Benozzo Gozzoli (Scandicci, 1420 - Pistoia, 1497, Fig. 4) are probably among the best known examples.

Ghiberti's high-reliefs, close relatives of these depictions, describe this landscape in the same way; in fact, it was not uncommon, especially for artists of this period, to set episodes that took place elsewhere and in previous eras in contexts known to them and in the time in which they worked.

The Gates of Paradise of the Florence Baptistery, created by Lorenzo Ghiberti between 1427 and 1452, is recognised by art critics as one of the works that marked the transition from Medieval to Renaissance art (Krautheimer & Krautheimer-Hess 1970, pp. 298-305). From the iconographical and technical point of view, the ten bronze bas-reliefs panels are extremely different from previous pieces, even by the same master.

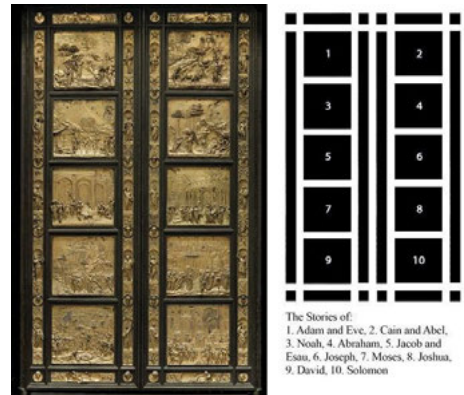


Fig. 5. *The Gates of Paradise* (Baptistry of San Giovanni - Florence) with the themes of the ten panels indicated.

Two of the three doors of the Florence Baptistery were commissioned to Ghiberti: the second (1403-1424) with the Stories from the Life of Christ and the third (1425-1452) with the Stories from the Old Testament (Fig. 5). With the latter, breaking with a millenary tradition that had seen bronze doors decorated with a great number of individual panels (twenty-eight in the case of the first door by Andrea Pisano and the second door as well), the author describes the events included in the first books of the Bible in just ten panels, abandoning at the same time the quatrefoil and using the square format instead (Giusti & Radke, 2012, p. 68).

3. Vernacular architecture in Valdisieve in the early 15th century

3.1. The Hut as Housing Archetype

The scenes in each panel (sometimes up to nine events in the same square) are depicted against a background of landscapes that recall those of

Valdisieve, where the master was born and invested part of his fortune in land and farms.



Fig. 6. Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Gates of Paradise*, second panel (gilded bronze, about 80x80 cm, 1425-1452, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo di Firenze).

In the second square, *The Story of Cain and Abel* (second panel - Fig. 6), the first scene depicts the Progenitors sitting in front of their circular hut, a construction made of wooden poles and reeds, covered with a thatched roof supported by poles placed radially, in turn sustained by a central support, as the top would show.

The circular form is the oldest in the history of human dwelling places. The primitive hut does not yet have perimeter walls: it only has a roof that starts directly from the ground. The need to exploit every interior part and the desire to use all the blind spots, created by the intersection of roof and base, suggested the solution of raising the roof off the ground. In the case under consideration, the walls are not yet perfectly vertical and form an interrupted truncated cone, roughly the height of an average man; the skeletal structure, similar to that of the roof, is filled with canes regularly arranged in vertical position and secured to the structure using wicker ties. The slope of the roof, the same as in the Nordic countries, is the logical consequence of the use of straw, which requires very steep pitches to prevent water from penetrating inside.

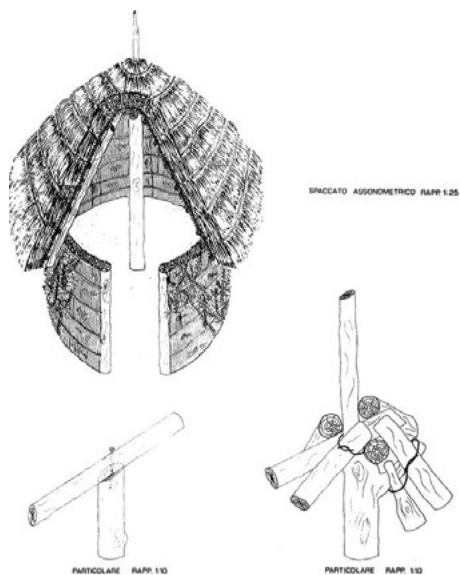


Fig. 7. Cylindrical-conical hut with central pole (from Tamburini, 1988, p. 207).

The hut is still common today in eastern Mugello and Valdisieve (municipalities of Vicchio, Dicomano, San Godenzo, Rufina, Londa), in the Tuscan Val Tiberina, in the Casentino, excluding the mountains, in the Val di Chiana and throughout the region, in the southern area of the Ombrone, excluding the Maremma. More generally, its structure is similar to the cylindrical-conical huts with a central pole found throughout the sub-Appennines area, on both sides of the ridge; this construction involves a wooden structure of poles driven into the ground along the circular perimeter, subsequently filled in with reeds, branches and straw with horizontal circles of branches. The central post with a fork termination constitutes the support for the roof beams, with a secondary frame in rafters to which the roof fronds are fixed (Tamburini, 1988, pp. 197-227 - Fig. 7).

The pair of oxen at the yoke pulling a wooden plough, widespread in the Florentine countryside and often depicted in contemporary paintings (see Virgilio Riccardiano, Fig. 8), confirm the hypothesis that the events take place against the background of a landscape contemporary to the artist.



Fig. 8. Virgilio, *Opere*, (Riccardiano, 492) c.018r, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Firenze.



Fig. 9. Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Gates of Paradise*, third panel (gilded bronze, about 80x80 cm, 1425-1452, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo di Firenze).

The hut depicted in the foreground of the third square, *The Stories of Noah* (third panel - Fig. 9), on the other hand, has a rectangular plan and a double-pitched roof with a wooden structure and a reed covering supported by pillars with two-part ends.

Even though it is a simple shelter, the type of roofing demonstrates a certain constructional skill; in order to realise the double frame it is

indispensable to arrange the various elements with a certain regularity that, for example, the four-pitch roof does not require (Cataldi, 1986).

A vine-covered pergola, also rectangular in shape, is placed next to the shelter, a very common construction in the Tuscan agricultural landscape. In the Florentine land registers from 1427, it is often mentioned the presence of pergolas and rushes (*perghole e channeti*) within the vine-covered lands (*di terra vignata*) (Conti, Guidotti & Lunardi, 1993, pp. 16-27) that characterised the Florentine countryside then, and that still does.

3.2. The Tent as Iconographic Paradigm

The theme of the tent - traditionally linked to nomadism or, in some cases, to the temporary nature of living - is depicted in the fourth, seventh and eighth squares.

If analysed in relation to the forms of vernacular architecture, tents share the same structure with huts and differ from them only in their covering, which in the former is characterised, not only by its value, but also by the fact that it can be reused several times to cover the same structure, after it has been moved or built from scratch, with the same shape and size.



Fig. 10. Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Gates of Paradise*, fourth panel (gilded bronze, about 80x80 cm, 1425-1452, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo di Firenze).



Fig. 12. Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Gates of Paradise*, eighth panel (gilded bronze, about 80x80 cm, 1425-1452, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo di Firenze).



Fig. 11. Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Gates of Paradise*, seventh panel (gilt bronze, about 80x80 cm, 1425-1452, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo di Firenze).

In the panel *The Stories of Abraham* (fourth panel - Fig. 10), a single tent is depicted near the left margin, that's where the prophet and his wife Sarah live. It is not a temporary shelter, but a real dwelling with attention to the smallest details and finely decorated, despite representing their nomadic life. In this case, the wooden structure supports a heavy fabric that has been cut and sewn on the roof to support its conical shape.

In *The Stories of Moses* (seventh panel - Fig. 11) Ghiberti depicts on the left side of the panel the camp that the people of Israel set up at the foot of Mount Sinai, where they arrived after crossing the Red Sea. In this case there are five tents, three circular and two rectangular, alternating with each other. The structure is covered with fabric and, only in one case, is it supported by ropes that act as tie-rods, that extend from the roof to the ground. At the top there is a sphere, a reminder of the tufts of straw which in ancient times protected the tips of the poles, but since having lost its function, have an eminently decorative value. The same two types of tents are depicted in *The Stories of Joshua* (eighth panel - Fig. 12); this panel shows twelve artefacts (the same number as the tribes of Israel), ten circular and two rectangular, which were part of the camp erected in Gãlgala, a settlement near the city of Jericho.

There is no direct or indirect evidence of the use of tents in the Tuscan countryside in the early 15th century, at least not for agricultural or forestry purposes. On the contrary, these artefacts are often encountered in paintings depicting battles, in this case with the function of temporary accommodation for troops and nobles, or in scenes of idleness in the countryside (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13. Paolo Schiavo (Florence, 1397 - Pisa, 1478), *An allegory of Love* (Tempera on panel, 38.7×146.3 × 1.4 cm, around 1440, Yale University Art Gallery).



Fig. 14. Piero della Francesca, *Madonna del parto* (fresco, 260x203 cm, 1455-1465, Monterchi - Arezzo).

The best known contemporary work by Ghiberti in which a curtain is depicted is probably "The Madonna del parto" by Piero della Francesca (Borgo Sansepolcro, 1412-1492 - Fig. 14). It is likely, therefore, that Ghiberti used a known and shared figurative code, which made it possible to grasp its symbolic value (the temporary accommodation) independently of having a direct knowledge of the depicted object.

The persistence of this representational paradigm is testified by the repetition of the same reference in later works, such as the fresco in the *Sala di Clemente VII* in *Palazzo Vecchio* depicting the Siege of Florence (1529-1530) by Giovanni Stradano (Bruges, 1523 - Florence, 1605), in which the troops stationed outside the City of the Lily are organised in a multitude of light structures surrounding the city walls (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15. Giovanni Stradano, *Siege of Florence* (fresco, 240x480cm, 1556-1562, room of Clement VII in Palazzo Vecchio - Florence).

4. Conclusions

The works of art generally constitute an invaluable iconographic source, which in many cases enables us to grasp the identity of landscapes that took shape in distant times. The study of paintings, for example, is probably the most effective method to document the origins of the past rural landscape, in this regard, in fact Emilio Sereni's studies are famous, he considered the analysis of the landscape depicted in various works of art at different times to be the best path for reconstruction of the history of agriculture (Zangheri, 1977, pp. 111-112; Bonini, 2018).

The same operation had never been attempted when analysing the panels of Lorenzo Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise, which set the most salient events of the Old Testament in landscapes that closely resemble the same Florentine countryside he spent time in and appreciated. Once it is accepted that, in these works, the master deliberately depicted the landscapes and the architecture style that were contemporary to him and interpreted them according to the language of art, the analysis of the traditional forms of housing, clearly reveals a countryside that is by now "domesticated", populated by both temporary and permanent structures, functional for the work in the fields and pastures, which will remain almost unchanged until the first decades of the twentieth century, and which an attentive eye is still able to discern today.

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